

Inclusive Education for all Children

Taken from
*Children's Realities in Europe:
Progress & Gaps*
Eurochild 2024 flagship report
on children in need across Europe.



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On 20 November - World Children's Day - Eurochild released its flagship report on children in need titled "Children's Realities in Europe: Progress & Gaps", which compiles information from 57 Eurochild members in 31 countries across Europe. Members from 30 countries contributed insights into the education of children with inclusive approaches. This sub-report outlines the progress, challenges and recommendations for each country. It also includes examples of good practice and provides nine specific recommendations for national and European Union decision-makers.

Introduction

The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (UNCRC) and the [UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD) provide strong frameworks for promoting inclusive education for children, particularly those with disabilities.

The UNCRC (1989) establishes children's rights to education without discrimination:

- Article 28: Recognises the right of all children to education.
- Article 29: States that education should develop the child's abilities, respect for human rights, and cultural identity.
- Article 23: Specifically addresses children with disabilities, ensuring they receive special care, education, and training to help them achieve the fullest possible social integration and development.

The UNCRPD (2006) builds on the UNCRC, focusing specifically on persons with disabilities:

- Article 24: Explicitly calls for an *inclusive education system* at all levels. It requires governments to:
 - Ensure persons with disabilities are not excluded from education.
 - Provide reasonable accommodations and individualised support.
 - Train teachers in inclusive practices.

How do these frameworks work together? The UNCRC ensures that all children have a right to education. At the same time, the UNCRPD reinforces the importance of *inclusive* education, ensuring children with disabilities can learn alongside their peers with proper support.

Education is the top priority for children in Europe, with 64% calling for change. The 2024 [Our Rights. Our Future. The Europe We Want report](#), based on over 9,200 responses, highlights the need for a more inclusive, engaging, and skills-focused education system.

Findings from Eurochild Members

Drawing from the perspectives of Eurochild members across 30 countries, a common theme emerges: While there are many policies that aim to promote inclusivity at national and

European levels, their effectiveness is often undermined by insufficient funding, weak implementation, and entrenched structural inequalities. The result is a widening gap between privileged and disadvantaged students, limiting social mobility and reinforcing cycles of poverty.¹

This sub-report aims to highlight the key educational challenges faced by European countries. These challenges span areas such as educational inequality, teacher shortages, inclusion of marginalised groups, insufficient resources, and the impact of environmental and social factors on education. While each country has unique circumstances, many share similar barriers to inclusive education that must be addressed through comprehensive policy reforms and investments.

Insufficient investment in education and addressing educational inequality

Despite recognising the challenges, many European education systems suffer from insufficient public investment². Countries such as **Spain, Portugal, and Poland** have made efforts to improve access to education; however, the funding required to support critical reforms—such as infrastructure improvements, increased teacher salaries, and additional support for students with special needs—remains inadequate. This lack of investment exacerbates existing inequalities, making it difficult for schools to provide equitable opportunities, especially for students from rural or low-income areas.

Educational inequality continues to be a significant issue across many European countries, shaped by socioeconomic status, systemic barriers, and inadequate policy implementation. For example, countries such as **Albania, Bulgaria, and Hungary** struggle to ensure equal access to education for racialised communities, particularly Roma children, who face persistent exclusion from mainstream schooling. Similarly, in **Belgium, Greece, and England**, disadvantaged children, including children on the move, encounter barriers to educational achievement due to segregation, limited resources, and exclusionary policies.

Funding disparities further compound the problem. In **Germany**, a 46% increase in education spending over the past decade has not been sufficient to meet the rising demands of early childhood and primary education. In the **Netherlands**, inclusive education policies exist but lack the necessary resources for effective implementation. This mirrors challenges in **Italy**, where systemic obstacles prevent children with disabilities and those from low-income families from accessing quality education.

Spain's digital divide further deepens educational inequalities, with many low-income households lacking internet access and essential digital tools. Despite a 4.94% GDP investment in education in 2021, funding remains relatively low. In **Malta**, a shortage of human resources has left the education system unable to adequately support children with disabilities, migrant children, and those facing poverty and exclusion.

¹ Supported by recent PISA results and official statistics at risk of child poverty and social exclusion rising in European countries, albeit slightly (Eurostat 2024).

² Eurostat, EU [Government expenditure on education](#), data from March 2025.

Inclusion and Special Educational Needs (SEN)

Across various European countries, there is inadequate support for children with special educational needs, highlighting systemic issues that hinder equitable educational opportunities. In **Croatia**, relying on individual efforts due to insufficient funding for teaching assistants creates a fragmented support system, emphasising the need for comprehensive policy reform. Similarly, **Cyprus** does not provide equitable accessibility and quality education for children with disabilities, particularly in relation to the assessment and placement processes, indicating a broader challenge in meeting diverse educational needs.

Denmark is committed to inclusion; however, funding shortages significantly impact support for children with special needs, reflecting a disconnect between policy aspirations and practical realities. **Estonia** faces a stark shortage of specialised teachers, leaving many children without essential support and demonstrating the urgent need for more trained professionals. Meanwhile, although progressive in its inclusive curriculum, **Finland** struggles to implement these policies effectively due to a lack of special education teachers and consistent application, revealing the complexities of translating intentions into practice.

In **Kosovo**, the challenges of teacher training deficits, the absence of inclusive teaching methodologies, and socioeconomic barriers further underscore the collective struggle many countries face. **Northern Ireland** illustrates the high demand for Special Educational Needs services amidst a slow and bureaucratic system, highlighting the frustrations of families seeking timely and effective support for their children.

Teacher Shortages and Training

Teacher shortages have become a pressing issue across several European countries, critically undermining the quality of education and exacerbating existing inequalities in student achievement. In **Belgium**, the lack of sufficient teachers deepens educational inequalities, further disadvantaging already marginalised students. **Estonia** faces a growing demand for teachers and educational support specialists, particularly as student needs become more complex. Similarly, **Finland** struggles to recruit and retain special education teachers, impacting its ability to provide inclusive learning environments.

In **Italy**, challenges in teacher training contribute to high turnover rates among support teachers, making it difficult to ensure consistency and quality in education. **Latvia** reports over 1,000 teacher vacancies, leaving the system heavily reliant on underqualified staff. This dependence threatens educational standards and places an unsustainable burden on the remaining teachers.

Poland faces disparities in resource allocation, particularly in underserved areas, where a lack of teachers compounds existing inequalities. Addressing diversity in education also requires a shift in mindset, making awareness campaigns and diversity training for both students and staff essential. In **Cyprus**, the education system lacks sustained teacher training and competence-based teaching methods, further hindering efforts to improve learning outcomes.

Despite legislation mandating inclusive and quality education for all **Kosovo** continues to struggle with inadequate teacher training, a lack of inclusive teaching methods, insufficient support equipment, and broader socioeconomic barriers. Meanwhile, in **Scotland**, teachers are under significant strain due to high workloads, large class sizes, and increasing demands to support students with additional learning needs, prompting some to leave the profession prematurely.

Children on the Move, Racialised children and Children with a Migrant Background

Countries such as **Cyprus** and **Estonia** face significant challenges in integrating migrant and refugee children into their education systems. In **Cyprus**, children of unregistered parents and unaccompanied minors have limited access to education and social inclusion programmes, leaving them at risk of further marginalisation. Similarly, in **Germany**, refugee children often experience violence, discrimination, and barriers to accessing education.

Estonia's growing refugee population presents another layer of complexity. Many **Ukrainian** families hesitate to enrol their children in local schools, fearing misalignment with Ukraine's curriculum and potential learning gaps. In **Malta**, migrants and refugees encounter systemic barriers to education, further hindering their integration.

In **the Netherlands**, many refugee children are housed in unsuitable temporary shelters without access to education, prolonging their educational disruptions. Meanwhile, in **Northern Ireland**, structural barriers continue to disadvantage marginalised communities, including Roma, Irish Travellers, and children with disabilities, limiting their educational opportunities and social inclusion.

School Early-Leavers and Completion Rates

Educational inequality and school dropout rates remain pressing challenges across several European countries, often disproportionately affecting disadvantaged and marginalised communities. In **Germany**, nearly 50,000 children leave school each year with no qualifications, with early school-leaving rates surpassing the EU average of 12.2% in 2022. Students from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds tend to experience poorer educational outcomes, prompting Germany to introduce an Education and Training Guarantee for young people. Similarly, in **England**, the attainment gap between disadvantaged and privileged students continues to widen, alongside disproportionately high school exclusion rates.

Greece faces challenges in addressing early school leavers due to a lack of disaggregated data on 'dropout' rates and their underlying causes. **Ireland's** Traveller community experiences significantly lower school completion rates compared to the general population, while in **Moldova**, disadvantaged children are at greater risk of leaving school early.

In **Romania**, a 2022 study revealed that 1 in 10 children from rural areas do not attend school, and 1 in 3 teenagers temporarily or permanently leave education due to household

responsibilities, and 1 in 4 young people leave school before completing secondary education. To combat this, the National Programme for Reducing School Dropout identifies at-risk schools through an early warning system, provides targeted intervention plans, and allocates additional grant funding. Despite these efforts, underachievement rates among disadvantaged students remain high, with a persistent gap between native-born and migrant students.

Spain faces similar concerns, with a school dropout rate of 13.6% in 2023, disproportionately affecting children in poverty, socially excluded groups, and Roma children. In **Türkiye**, children from poor neighbourhoods, Roma communities, migrant and refugee backgrounds, and earthquake-affected areas face higher risks of poverty, abuse, neglect, and school dropout.

Italy continues to struggle with preventing early school leaving, particularly among students with a migrant background. Meanwhile, in **Estonia**, an estimated 8% of refugee families with school-age children have at least one child out of school, according to a 2022 survey by the Estonian Refugee Council. Further efforts are needed to improve transport accessibility to ensure students in Estonia can travel to school safely and affordably.

Disparities in Educational Access between Regions

Significant disparities in educational opportunities exist between urban and rural areas in many countries, including **Moldova, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, and Serbia**. Rural schools frequently face significant resource shortages, including inadequate infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teachers, and insufficient educational materials. Additionally, the long distances students must travel to attend secondary school further contribute to high dropout rates, limiting access to continued education.

While urban areas typically have more concentrated resources, challenges persist, particularly in schools serving children from low-income backgrounds. Overcrowded classrooms, limited support services, and insufficient resources hinder these schools' ability to meet the diverse needs of their students. As a result, the achievement gap between urban and rural students remains a stark indicator of broader educational inequalities across many European countries.

In **Latvia**, regional disparities are particularly pronounced, as the quality of education often depends on municipal funding. Many rural schools suffer from chronic underfunding, and frequent school closures force children to travel long distances, negatively impacting their participation and well-being.

Environmental and Social Factors Impacting Education

Environmental and social factors significantly impact children's educational outcomes in countries such as Poland, Ukraine, and Türkiye. In **Poland**, high levels of air pollution, exacerbated by coal burning, lead to health issues that impact student attendance and performance. **Ukraine** faces considerable disruptions due to the invasion by Russia, leading to the destruction of schools and the displacement of students. **Türkiye** has experienced earthquakes, which have disrupted educational continuity, making it difficult for students to

access safe and stable education. These environmental and social factors create additional barriers to education, further hindering the academic success of vulnerable children.

Overemphasis on Academic Performance

Across several countries, including **Slovenia**, **Spain**, and **Scotland**, there are growing concerns regarding the overemphasis on academic achievement and standardised testing. This focus on academic performance often leads to heightened stress and anxiety among students, overshadowing their mental health and overall well-being. The pressure to meet performance standards can be particularly overwhelming for students who require more personalised support, such as those with learning disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Recommendations

By addressing the nine recommendations below, governments can significantly reduce educational inequality and improve the quality of education for all children, ensuring that current and future generations have equal opportunities to thrive.

1. Increase Public Investment in Education

- **Allocate adequate funding** to improve education infrastructure and resources and address the digital divide and support for students with special educational needs. Prioritise investments in rural and low-income areas to reduce regional disparities.
- **Support marginalised communities** by providing targeted financial aid, scholarships, and educational resources, including language support for migrant and refugee students and tailored services for Roma children, children with disabilities, and those from low-income families.

Good practice from Slovenia: the [Slovenian Association of Friends of Youth](#) runs the One Heart programme, which provides financial assistance for children and families in poverty across Slovenia. This includes, among other supports: Ada's scholarship fund, which helps young people achieve their educational goals; support for children's participation in sports and music; and the provision of school supplies at the beginning of the school year.

- **Ensure adequate resources** for inclusive education policies by investing in teacher training for diverse classrooms, providing assistive technology, and equipping schools with the necessary tools to cater to diverse learning needs.
- **Reduce the digital divide** by ensuring that all students, particularly those from disadvantaged households, have access to digital tools and the internet. This could

involve providing subsidised devices and internet access for low-income families, as well as investing in digital literacy programs for students and teachers.

Good practice from Latvia - "[Skola2030](#)", which was conceived as a way to promote digital literacy from an early age by providing learning materials, training for teachers and integrating digital literacy at all stages of education.

2. Promote Student Well-Being and Mental Health

- **Adopt a holistic approach to education** by balancing academic achievement with emotional well-being. Promote social-emotional learning (SEL) to foster self-awareness, empathy, and resilience in students.
- **Integrate mental health education** into the curriculum to teach students effective coping strategies, stress management techniques, and emotional resilience. Increase funding for school counselling services to ensure all students have access to mental health support.
- **Reduce academic stress** by adopting diverse assessment methods, focusing on skills such as creativity and problem-solving, and shifting toward formative assessments that support individual learning progress over high-stakes examinations.

Good practice from Croatia - the [PomoziDa programme](#), which enables the training of teachers and school staff in early intervention for children with mental health issues.

3. Inclusive Education and Support for Marginalised Groups

- **Promote inclusive teaching practices** by ensuring all educators are trained in inclusive methodologies. This includes increasing the number of specialised educators and teaching assistants and ensuring the implementation of policies for students with special educational needs (SEN).
- **Implement anti-discrimination policies** to guarantee that marginalised students—such as Roma children, migrant children, and those from low-income backgrounds—are not excluded from mainstream education. To ensure equitable opportunities, provide tailored support services, scholarships, and outreach initiatives.
- **Address barriers to access** for marginalised groups, including the removal of administrative or legal hurdles preventing migrant and refugee children from enrolling in schools.

Good practice from Bulgaria - The MOGA programme (Model for Early Education, Care and Active Participation), funded by the European Economic Area (EEA) and Norway Grants' Active Citizens Fund, is an innovative approach to Roma community development that supports Roma parents during the critical period of early childhood.

4. Teacher Support and Professional Development

- **Prioritise teacher recruitment, retention, and development** through competitive salaries, professional development programmes, and support networks, particularly in underserved and rural areas. Ensure teachers are equipped to meet the diverse needs of students, including those with special educational needs.
- **Provide ongoing training** for teachers on inclusive education and diversity, including trauma-informed practices, to support students from vulnerable backgrounds. Implement policies that reduce class sizes and ensure manageable teacher workloads to prevent burnout.

5. Promote Community Engagement and Local Solutions

- **Engage local communities**—parents, local authorities, and community organisations—in addressing educational inequalities. Collaborative efforts between government, schools, and communities will help identify barriers and implement localised solutions to improve educational outcomes.
- **Foster social inclusion** by ensuring that communities actively support marginalised students and that schools create welcoming environments for all.

Good practice from Greece - The project Immediate and holistic support of refugee families from Ukraine, funded by EEA grants, provided holistic support to 110 refugee families with children from Ukraine. This included psychosocial support, material support (e.g., food and basic necessities), access to health services, legal support, access to the labour market, and help with children's integration into education and extracurricular activities. It also provided support to child victims, potential victims of trafficking, and victims of domestic violence.

6. Reduce Early School Leaving and Improve Educational Continuity

- **Develop early intervention systems** to identify at-risk students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and provide targeted support to prevent dropouts. This could include scholarships, transportation subsidies, after-school programmes, and mentoring services.
- **Increase access to alternative pathways**, such as vocational training and apprenticeships, for students at risk of dropping out. Ensure that all students,

particularly in rural or low-income areas, have access to the necessary resources and support to stay in school.

Good practice from Malta - The [Adopt-a-Family project](#), provides financial support to disadvantaged families to help them meet their children's health and educational needs. The project also links families to psycho-social services.

7. Address Regional Disparities in Education

- **Increase financial support** for rural and underserved schools, ensuring they have the same educational opportunities as urban schools. Provide resources for infrastructure, educational materials, and digital connectivity.
- **Implement funding models** that address regional disparities, ensuring equitable access to quality education in urban and rural areas. Invest in student support services like academic tutoring, counselling, and after-school programmes to assist students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Good Practice from Romania – A project to [improve the quality of life for families in Odobesti/Dâmbovită and Ploiești/Prahova](#) at risk of social exclusion that supported 230 children with integrated educational and social services to reduce the risk of abandonment and family separation. It was funded by 2014-2020 ESIF.

8. Mitigate Environmental and Social Factors Impacting Education

- **Prioritise environmental resilience** by ensuring that schools are built or retrofitted to withstand natural disasters and health risks (e.g., earthquakes, floods, and air pollution). Provide clean air solutions such as indoor filtration systems in areas affected by pollution.
- **Provide trauma-informed support** to students affected by environmental and social crises, such as displacement from conflict or natural disasters, by implementing emergency education plans, remote learning solutions, and specialised counselling services.
- **Develop crisis education strategies** to ensure continuity of education in conflict-affected areas (e.g., Ukraine) or following natural disasters (e.g., in Turkey).

Summary

The educational challenges faced by European countries are deeply interconnected, reflecting systemic barriers that hinder children's right to education without discrimination. Across the region, many students face inequality, inadequate teacher support, insufficient investment, and environmental factors that limit their access to quality education. To uphold every child's right to inclusive and equitable education, European countries must implement policies that guarantee reasonable accommodations and targeted support for children with disabilities, racialised children, children from migrant backgrounds, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A comprehensive approach is essential, including policy reforms, increased investment in education, and programmes prioritising all children's well-being. By committing to inclusive policies and ensuring adequate school resources, effective and timely teacher training, and student support services, European education systems can be transformed to provide equal opportunities for every child, regardless of their background or circumstances.

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