

1-minute warmup:

Until recently, the provision of publicly funded education and care for children below compulsory school age was a matter for local decision. Many local authorities provided nursery schools and nursery classes for children over the age of 3 and admitted children to primary school at the age of 4. They were not obligated to do so. Provision of this preschool education was not consistent among the Member States. Outside the public sector, some children attended private nursery schools. However, private schools require the payment of fees. (148 syllables)

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Many more attended play groups, which kept fees affordable by relying on volunteer and community support. Full-time daycare, where available, was provided mainly by the private sector and paid for by parents.

Recently a statutory duty was placed on local authorities to ensure the provision of preschool education. This aimed to raise the number of childcare places available and to make childcare more accessible and affordable.

An entitlement to part-time preschool education was introduced for all 4-year-olds and later for all 3-year-olds. The funding was provided by the Member States. This ensured that the public sector and the funded voluntary and private sectors were working to the same curricular goals. Under these arrangements, working parents were now able to access a free early education place. Parents were able to supplement it with additional fee-paying hours.

The new framework for early learning and childcare is now mandatory. It brings together learning and development and welfare requirements regardless of the type, size, or funding of the setting. It forms a single

framework of requirements from birth to ages 5 and 6. There is now no distinction between education and care.

Europe's future will be based on smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth. Improving the quality and effectiveness of education systems across the European Union is essential to all three growth dimensions. In this context, early childhood education and care is the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning. It also affects social integration, personal development, and later employability. Complementing the central role of the family, the education of very young children has a profound and long-lasting impact which measures taken at a later stage cannot achieve. Children's earliest experiences form the basis for all subsequent learning. If solid foundations are laid in the early years, later learning is more effective and is more likely to continue for life. This lessens the risk of dropping out of school. It also increases the equity in educational outcomes. It reduces the costs for society in terms of lost talent and of public spending on social, health, and even justice systems.

Against this background, it underlines that we must offer all our young people the chance to develop their talents to the fullest possible extent. The education of our youngest citizens has the potential to give all young people a good start in the world of tomorrow. We can break the cycle which transmits disadvantage from one generation to another.

The benefits of high-quality early education are wide-ranging. The benefits are not only social, but economic and educational as well. Early childhood education and care has a crucial role to play in laying the foundations for improved talents of future European Union citizens. It will enable us to meet the medium- and long-term challenge. We will create a more skilled workforce capable of contributing and adjusting to technological change. There is clear evidence that participation in high-quality early education and care leads to significantly better attainment in international

tests on basic skills. It is the equivalent of between one and two school years of progress.

Educating very young children enables parents to better reconcile family and work responsibilities. When parents have access to reliable childcare, that boosts employability. Education given to 3-year-olds supports children, not only in their future education but also in their integration into society. It generates well-being and contributes to their employability when they become adults.

It is also particularly beneficial for the disadvantaged, including those from migrant and low-income backgrounds. It can help to lift children out of poverty and family dysfunction.

High-quality early education can make a strong contribution by enabling and empowering all children to realize their potential. In this way the European Union can achieve two of its top targets. We can reduce the number of students who leave school early and lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Up until now, the focus of most action at the European Union level has been on increasing the quantity of childcare and pre-primary places to enable more parents, especially mothers, to join the labor market. Member States agreed to provide full-day places in formal childcare arrangements to at least 90% of children aged between 3 and compulsory school age. They have agreed to provide places to at least a third of all children under 3. Progress in the Member States has been uneven.

There remains an important challenge to extend coverage of preschool education. It isn't enough to provide early education. It is important that when we provide it, the quality must be high. In recent years Member States have stated their wish to cooperate more closely at the European Union level on issues relating to increasing the quality of care.

Quality early learning can bring the highest rates of return over the lifelong learning cycle, especially for the disadvantaged. Member States agreed on a series of priorities for cooperation on school policy issues. These include how to ensure accessible, high-quality preschool education. They adopted a strategic framework for cooperation in education and training. The framework included goals to promote equitable access and reinforce the quality of the provision and teacher support in pre-primary education.

Given its role in reducing the number of students leaving school early and promoting social inclusion in learning, educating very young children will be a priority.

The European Union can add value to this process by facilitating the exchange of good practices and by supporting research on all aspects of the impact of early education.

(Total syllables, in English: 1632)

Extra text, if needed:

This communication responds to the requests from Member States to launch a process of cooperation. This process will help them address the two-fold challenge outlined above. It will provide access to childcare and education for all and will raise the quality of their provision through well-integrated services. A joint vision will ensure the most effective curricular framework and the professional staff necessary to deliver it.

Examples of some of the best practices in the world in these areas can already be found within European Union Member States. The Commission intends to use the open method of coordination to help Member States identify, analyze, and spread effective policy approaches and transfer them to their own contexts. It will use existing programs to support innovation, staff development, and infrastructure. Member States will be required to support research and the development of the most effective approaches to educating young children in the European Union and elsewhere in the world.

Access to universally available, high-quality, inclusive education and care services is beneficial for all. It not only helps children to unlock their potential but can also contribute to engaging parents and other family members with related measures to improve employment, job-related training, parent education, and leisure-time activities.

Early childhood is the stage where education can most effectively influence the development of children and help reverse disadvantage. Research shows that poverty and family dysfunction have the strongest correlation with poor educational outcomes. There are already big differences in cognitive, social, and emotional development between children from rich and poor backgrounds at the age of 3. If not specifically addressed, this gap tends to widen by the age of 5.