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ETUCE position on Establishing a European Child Guarantee

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Background

On 24 March 2021, the European Commission published [a Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Establishing a European Child Guarantee](#). This initiative is based on the results of two public consultations to which ETUCE provided its contributions ([October 2020](#); [November 2020](#)).

The aim of the proposal, according to the European Commission is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access to children in need to a set of key services, fostering equal opportunities for children in need, and combating child poverty.

Children in need is understood within this initiative as persons under the age of 18 years who are at risk of poverty or social exclusion including children who are homeless or experience severe housing deprivation; who have a disability; those with a migrant background; with a minority racial or ethnic background (particularly Roma); those being in alternative (especially institutional) care; and children in precarious family situations.

The Proposal for a Council Recommendation is expected to be discussed by ministries of the European Union and to be adopted on **14-15 June 2021** by the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council.

ETUCE's position

The following text is the answer of ETUCE* to the proposal of the European Commission, based on the [ETUCE Position on the Public Consultation on a European Child Guarantee Initiative](#) (October 2020) and the [ETUCE Statement on EU strategy on the rights of the child](#) (November 2020).

Education is a fundamental right of any child that must be protected. According to [Eurostat](#), 23,4% of the children in the European Union, in some EU countries 1 in every 3 children were at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2019. Recent [European data](#) unveils that during the emergency remote teaching and learning, the provision of early childhood education became extremely difficult and the majority of children were “hard-to-reach”. The social and economic crisis also exacerbated existing inequalities and increased the number of people at **risk of poverty and social exclusion** resulting in many children being deprived of their fundamental right to high-quality education. This scenario is expected to worsen as “in around one third of Member States, parents on moderate incomes find costs of early childhood education and care to be very high”, according to the European Commission. Inequal access to quality early childhood education in the COVID-19 crisis had a detrimental effect on children’s life, well being and their future learning possibilities. [OECD data](#) shows that the first years of children have a profound impact on their future life chances and equal access to ECE is essential to reduce child poverty and compensate inequalities in the long-

term. We underline that **all children** should be guaranteed the right to have equal access to high-quality and inclusive ECE from birth until the starting of compulsory schooling and the Child Guarantee should answer to this demand. We remind that 49 countries recently adopted the Rome Communiqué and its [Annex III on Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA](#). In order to ensure the implementation of these principles in higher education, effective education and social policies should guarantee inclusiveness from early age.

The **COVID-19 crisis** sorely compromised addressing children's right to education and their overall well-being. ETUCE highlights that meaningful actions to ensure the right to education is more urgent now than ever. ETUCE underlines that the Proposal for a Council Recommendation must take into account the impact of the COVID-19 on early childhood education. To this aim, it is important to make further effort **to collect data and address the long-term impact** of the COVID-19 on early childhood education through effective strategy and sustainable public funding and to improve children's well-being.

ETUCE welcomes that the Proposal for a Council Recommendation supports the implementation of the [Action Plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights](#) (2020) which set the target to **reduce by at least 5 million the number of children at risk of poverty or exclusion**. However, since the Proposal for a Council Recommendation only mentions the support and childcare to children in need (Principle 11 of the Pillar of Social Rights), ETUCE reminds that **education is a human right and a public good**. Therefore, we request that the proposal guarantees the right to quality and inclusive education for all children with effective implementation of Principle 1 and 11 of the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) and of the **2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development of the United Nations (UN)**, namely the SDG1 which aims to reduce the number of children in poverty, and SDG 4 on quality education. We ask that the initiative should take into consideration the [European Commission's Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#) to which ETUCE actively contributed.

ETUCE welcomes that the European Commission calls on national governments to **guarantee "free access"** to early childhood education (ECE) for children in need. However, we remind that early childhood education must be a **universal and free entitlement** to all children in Europe as it plays a crucial role in developing the full potential of children and countering economic and social inequalities. In order to allow all children to practise this entitlement governments need to ensure appropriate infrastructure, highly qualified staff and quality provision in ECE.

High-quality and inclusive public education must address the specific needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups, and they must be provided by using all the necessary resources to make it possible to meet the needs of these children. ETUCE welcomes that the Proposal for a Council Recommendation focuses on the inclusion of children in need in early childhood education, giving particular attention to children in disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances. We underline the importance of **holistic education and play-based pedagogies**, and the crucial contribution that ECE makes in preparing children to fully participate in society. We believe that ECE is not only a preparation for school, but a beneficial education for the **children's potential**, and being such, it should be seen from the perspective of its value for the children, and childhood in itself, rather than an economic viewpoint. Several studies show that overly academic ECE has a negative impact on children and play should have more of a role in the ECE activities. The ECE curriculum should be structured around a **play-based learning method** that allows children to healthy develop their emotional and cognitive abilities and their social identity. It is important that early intervention in ECE should not be understood as developing specific skills, assessing individual children's performance and measurable competencies, as this approach can stand in the way of the desire

for inclusion. Education that takes culture into account and communicate values as a basis for social integration may be given too little attention when specific skills development becomes the overriding and decisive factor for the individual's future life opportunities. Rather than measuring and mapping specific skills, ECE should work to focus on the **child in play**.

In this respect, ETUCE stresses that it is of utmost importance to provide **ECE teachers and staff** with adequate and up-to-date initial and continuous professional development to respond to the specific needs of children. This should entail training and additional support to develop **pedagogical methods and tools**, including through digital technologies, to address the need of multicultural learning environments as well as classes with children with special needs. We emphasise the importance of educating children within groups to ensure the well-being and development of each child. Within the ECE institutions support to children in need should be provided within children's group as a whole instead of focusing on individualised support. Cooperation with other health and welfare services should also be facilitated. It is essential to support ECE by quality public **research** to improve quality and inclusiveness of learning and teaching methods with the involvement of the ECE teachers and staff.

In addition, ETUCE reminds that an inclusive education also means **ensuring safe physical and social learning environments** free of violence, bullying and discrimination. Therefore, the member states should implement concrete measures to counter the increasing phenomena of racism, xenophobia, as well as homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. Besides, ETUCE points out that only mentioning other existing plans (e.g. Anti-racism Action Plan 2020-2025; EU Roma strategic framework) with the Proposal for a Council Recommendation is not enough to foster inclusion. Conversely, the Proposal for a Council Recommendation must integrate other existing initiatives and ask national governments for clear commitment.

Sustainable public budget, attractive salaries and decent working conditions are of utmost importance to ensure accessible and high-quality early childhood education for all. We remind that ECE should not be seen as a commodity and privatisation trends of the ECE should end. The Commission rightly underlines that barriers can prevent the access to ECE, including "affordability, the lack of proper infrastructure, poor accessibility, or language problems". Therefore, indeed, sustainable public budget is essential to meet the goals set in the proposal (e.g. guaranteeing one free meal per day, educational material, transport, to improve ECE infrastructure and internet connectivity). ETUCE calls on the EU member states and the European Union institutions to ensure sustainable public budget to the early childhood education sector, including through funding within the National Recovery and Resilience Facility.

Sustainable public investment is also crucial to improve the **professional preparation and qualification of ECE staff**. It is essential to support ECE staff in acquiring pedagogical competences and skills for inclusive education as well as for providing support to at-risk children and to learning languages. In addition, the **unattractive salaries and unfair working conditions** in the ECE sector persistently undermine the attractiveness of the profession and the quality of the sector as such. In several countries working conditions are poor, ECE staff has no job security, no health or holiday coverage, no pensions or social benefits etc. and the teachers are often employed part time for short contracts only, resulting in recruitment problems and a high staff turnover rate. ETUCE highlights that more attractive salaries and reliable career pathways are crucial to recruit and retain high-qualified ECE teachers and staff and enhance the recognition of the ECE sector.

Effective implementation requires effective and meaningful social dialogue. ETUCE welcomes that the [EU Parliament](#) and the European Commission asked the EU member states "to invest all possible resources,

including European Union funds” to implement the Child Guarantee. In this respect, the European Commission must require national governments to define how they will spend their national Recovery and Resilience Facility to guarantee access to free, quality and inclusive early childhood education.

Regarding the European Commission’s proposal to ask the EU member states to clarify the “necessary financial resources and timeline” to implement the measures, ETUCE reminds that public investment must ensure free access to ECE for all children, to support quality initial and continuous training to ECE staff, as well as to provide support within the ECE institutions to the children in need. ETUCE welcomes that the Proposal for a Council Recommendation will be implemented through the “policy coordination framework in the context of the European Semester” and the revised Social Scoreboard which are useful tools to recommend to the EU countries to **ensure public budget to high quality and inclusive ECE**. We remind that in many European countries ECE is still underfunded very much privatised, and therefore not available for all children. We underline that it is essential that the right of children to quality and inclusive education are enforced within the countries according to the ***European Pillar of Social Rights and EU strategy on the Rights of the Child***.

Nevertheless, while the Proposal for a Council Recommendation encourages to “strengthen cooperation with non-governmental organisations and other stakeholders”, ETUCE regrets that it does not mention the role of **social dialogue and social partners**. Reminding the Principle 8 of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*, ETUCE reminds the European Commission that social dialogue and collective bargaining at national and European level are essential to ensure effective policies that effectively respond to the needs of children and ensure their wellbeing.

**The European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) represents 127 Education Trade Unions and 11 million teachers in 51 countries of Europe. ETUCE is a Social Partner in education at the EU level and a European Trade Union Federation within ETUC, the European Trade Union Confederation. ETUCE is the European Region of Education International, the global federation of education trade unions.*