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ETUCE Statement on the European Strategy for the Rights of Persons with disabilities

(adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 7 June 2021)

On 3 March 2021, the European Commission put forward [the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(2021-2030\)](#) (later: Strategy). The new policy plan reviews the previous [European Disability Strategy 2010-2020](#), following a process of [public consultation](#) to which ETUCE contributed. The new strategy is linked to the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (CRPD) and the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), in particular, Principle 17 on the rights of people with disabilities. The Strategy sets goals and actions to be implemented within the next 10 years. Among the priority areas, the Strategy includes “Equal access to education”.

The following Statement represents the views of ETUCE* and its member organisations regarding the new Strategy and key aspects of its implementation in the education sector:

1. ETUCE welcomes that the EU Commission’s Strategy acknowledges the urgency to put the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education as a priority on the political agenda. ETUCE reminds that **quality education is a fundamental human right** enshrined in the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#), [Sustainable Development Goal 4](#), [the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), and [the European Convention on Human Rights](#). Nevertheless, in the practice, **inclusion of education personnel and students with disabilities and special needs in education remains far from being a reality**. Under-representation of people with disabilities in the teaching profession, absence of appropriate accommodations and psychological support in the workplace, as well as increased privatisation and the lack of public funds, inadequate infrastructures, shortage of expert teachers and supporting staff are just some of the challenges that hinder the quality of life of people with disabilities and undermine inclusion and equality in education. Furthermore, inclusion of persons with disabilities and special needs is not a stand-alone issue, it requires an overall concept and philosophy of education being inclusive and taking into account an intersectional approach.
2. **Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis inflicted a hard backstep to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education, exacerbating existing challenges and creating new ones**. Across Europe, equal access to online and remote learning remained an unsurmountable issue. At all levels of education, numerous students with disabilities and special needs remained excluded from the educational activities, left without the support they needed. As a result, high non-returning rates were [recorded](#), and a serious long-term impact is expected on the students’ learning outcomes and their social and economic inclusion in the societies. Furthermore, being more exposed to major health risks, teachers with disabilities

are among the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic being exposed to precarious working conditions and fewer career opportunities. **ETUCE requests that the EU Commission and Member State make more efforts to closely monitor and assess the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on inclusive education. The EU Disability Strategy implementation should include addressing the long-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the people with disabilities and special needs through effective measures and sustainable public budget.**

3. **Targeted and focused on actions legislation is fundamental to ensure the inclusion of persons with disabilities in education.** The European Commission rightly acknowledges that “A gap exists in EU law to ensure equal treatment of persons with disabilities outside the field of employment, such as social protection, healthcare, education.” Recalling [Principle 17](#) of the European Pillar of Social Rights protecting the rights of persons with disabilities, **ETUCE urges that the European Union institutions and the Member States remove any physical, legal, pedagogical barriers that impede equal access to learning and teaching environments for teachers and students with disabilities and special needs.** It is important to adopt coordinated measures in compliance with the national competencies in education, to support national governments in implementing inclusive education. In this regard, ETUCE echoes the [European Parliament](#) and European Commission calling on Member States to adopt the [Horizontal Anti-discrimination Directive](#) to extend the protection against discriminations to all economic and social sectors, including education.
4. However, policies and legislation frameworks remain a mere declaration of rights and lead to implementation gaps if they are not supported by **adequate public investment that is able to provide increased support to schools, teachers and students with disabilities, and their families.** At the moment, scarcity of public funds prevents the creation of inclusive learning and teaching environments for students and education personnel with special needs and disabilities. The situation was **further exacerbated by budget cuts in the public sector and the COVID-19 pandemic.** ETUCE welcomes the European Commission ‘inclusion measures’ in the European Union funding. ETUCE also request that the European Commission demands from Member States to make fostering inclusive education one of the key goals of national plans within the **Recovery and Resilience Facility.** Indeed, this stands as an important opportunity to develop inclusive schools, through the renovation of infrastructures and equipment with up-to-date technologies (including digital technologies) for inclusive education.
5. Furthermore, detailed **actions plans and implementation monitoring mechanisms** need to be set in order to develop meaningful and effective inclusive teaching and learning environments. ETUCE calls on the European Commission and the Member States to define concrete targets, benchmarks and a timeframe, as well as to ensure clear responsibilities for the implementation of the strategy. Moreover, it is crucial that social partners are fully involved in the design, implementation and assessment of these action plans and monitoring mechanisms (e.g. the forthcoming initiative of the European Commission ‘[Pathways to Schools Success](#)’). Inclusive education cannot be implemented with a top-down approach. **ETUCE emphasises that**

effective implementation of inclusive education requires meaningful social dialogue at all levels and regular consultation with education trade unions.

6. **Equal opportunities and inclusion in education should not only be oriented on the needs of the labour market.** Adopting a **holistic approach in education based on the positive concept of disability and special needs** ([*“There are no disabilities. Just different abilities”*](#)) is of utmost importance to address the learners’ needs’ and ensure the development of their full potential and their wellbeing. The European Commission’s Strategy proposes **micro-credentials** as tools to improve employability and the lifelong learning process for people with disabilities. ETUCE warns that **micro-credentials can lead to a marginalising approach thus deepening the exclusion of persons with disabilities and special needs from education and exacerbate inequalities, pushing them out of the full education programmes.** Meaningful inclusive education should take into account the wellbeing of learners rather than promoting short-term solutions to the mere benefit of the labour market. Therefore, **ETUCE calls on the European Commission and the Member States to implement the first principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights and ensure equal access to and inclusion of people with disabilities in full degree programmes.**
7. ETUCE welcomes that the European Commission commits to *“support Member States to further develop their teacher education systems to address shortages of teachers in Special Needs Education and competences of all education professionals to manage diversity in the classroom and develop inclusive education”*. **Teachers, trainers, and other education personnel play, indeed, a crucial role in promoting the inclusion of persons with special needs in education and their wellbeing.** However, the [ETUCE study](#) on inclusive education shows that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to work in inclusive environments. Therefore, **is it of utmost importance that the Strategy supports teachers’ high-quality initial education and continuous professional development** as part of their working time and free of charge to develop the right skills, effective tools and pedagogical methods to foster inclusion of people with special needs in education.
8. **Implementing inclusive education requires targeted measures to address the specific needs of students with disability and special needs.** However, the current challenges such as the disproportioned size of classes, the lack of support personnel and special needs teachers at all levels of education are detrimental for inclusive education. It is also important that teachers are supported by multidisciplinary teams of specialised professionals such as psychologists and social and health professionals. **The implementation of the EU Strategy should ensure the provision of special needs education staff and support personnel in every education institution and include legal provisions regarding class/group sizes (depending on number of students with special needs).** Sustainable public budget is also essential to **renovate school infrastructures and remove physical barriers** that hinder the inclusion of education personnel and students with disabilities and special needs.
9. **Digital technologies and ICT tools (in particular, assistive technologies) can be useful tools to enhance the inclusion of education personnel and students with disabilities and special needs in education.** At the same time, if not carefully

guided, the digital transition can worsen the digital gap and push persons with special needs into further isolation. The impact of emergency online teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 crisis on equality and inclusion is a clear evidence of these challenges. It is of utmost importance to provide teachers with adequate and up-to-date training and ICT skills to use digital tools and ICT devices to effectively support inclusive education. In addition, due to the emergency situation, numerous governments pushed forward commercialisation and privatisation policies, cutting the public budget to education and leaving increasingly more space to EdTech companies to the detriment of the public value of education. **ETUCE calls on the European Commission to create closer integration between the Strategy and the [European Digital Education Action Plan \(2021-2027\)](#) to address the challenges of digitalisation and support inclusive education through digital technologies and media literacy.**

**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.*