2 Education interventions

This chapter discusses education policies and interventions that could reduce the rate of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) by preventing early school leaving and dropout as well as by promoting labour market integration through increased achievement and attainment. The first section provides an overview of existing policies to prevent early school leaving in Australia. The second section summarises direct prevention interventions including early warning systems, the provision of additional support for at-risk students, and curriculum interventions. The last section reviews indirect prevention interventions focusing on promoting a whole school approach, supporting transitions between educational levels, and inclusive teaching environments. The chapter concludes detailing policy lessons.

Acting early while students are in compulsory schooling can help mitigate the chances that young people will become NEET in their late teenage years and early adulthood. This chapter summarises existing measures to reduce NEET rates in Australia through the education system at the junior secondary level, and then explores measures taken in other countries that might be relevant to the Australian context. Educational strategies aimed at preventing early school leaving and student dropout can cover a wide range of areas, including system-wide interventions, measures at the school level, and strategies implemented outside of schools (Lyche, 2010[1]). In addition, by promoting educational achievement and attainment, educational policies and interventions indirectly support transition into employment since education is a key predictor of labour market outcomes. The 12-16 year-olds age group is particularly important for early interventions as it includes students transitioning from primary to secondary school and entering adolescence. In these years, individual, social, and systemic factors can all affect the way young people are socialised, feel like they belong inside and outside of school, and progress in learning.

Supporting transitions between primary and lower secondary education as well as between lower and upper secondary education can improve educational attainment, chances in the labour market, and social inclusion. Ensuring that all students, including more disadvantaged students, feel included and supported is equally important. This can be done by strengthening students' achievement and early educational success through targeted academic support or tutoring and mentoring programmes. Moreover, supporting sports and extra-school activities gives students the opportunity to develop different talents and soft skills, which are not always taught at school, yet are just as important. These activities also promote positive physical and mental health as well as positive social relations and enhance parental engagement in their child's learning. For students who prefer practically oriented learning, attractive and equally valid vocational education and training (VET) programmes should be easily accessible (see Chapter 4). Preventing, identifying, and addressing risky behaviour can also be effective in preventing early school leaving and student dropout. This can involve the introduction of, among others, substance-abuse awareness in curricula as well as comprehensive sexuality education. As the causes of early school leaving and student dropout are often complex, preventive measures also require interrelated and simultaneous interventions within and outside of the school environment.

This section provides an overview of existing educational policies and interventions to prevent early school leaving and student dropout in Australia, followed by a review of effective and promising policies and practices implemented in OECD countries. As strategies can directly prevent early school leaving and student dropout or more indirectly prevent this by promoting student inclusion and learning, the section divides interventions into two broad categories: (i) direct prevention interventions and (ii) indirect prevention mechanisms. These interventions can be universal (addressing all students) or targeted (addressing at-risk students).

2.1. Background: Existing policies to prevent early school leaving in Australia

This section provides an overview of educational policies to prevent early school leaving and student dropout in Australia. The overview includes both national directives and policies as well as policies and practices at the State or Territory levels to prevent young people from experiencing NEET status. It is primarily the State and Territory Governments' responsibility to regulate schools within their states and territories, which includes, amongst others, funding, overseeing course accreditation, and student assessment (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018[2]).

2.1.1. Introducing youth participation requirements and conditional financial support

In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)[1] agreed to implement a Compact with Young Australians to ensure that all individuals under the age of 25 have the education or training they need to successfully take part in the labour market (Ministers' Media Centre, 2009[3]). As part of the Compact, all

Australian States and Territories agreed to implement the National Youth Participation Requirement, which stipulates that all young people must participate in schooling, or an approved equivalent, until they complete year 10 (Council of Australian Governments, 2009[4]). Once they complete year 10, they are required to participate full time (defined as at least 25 hours per week) in education, training, or employment, or a combination of these activities, until the age of 17 (Australian Government, 2009[5]).

Under the Compact with Young Australians and the National Youth Participation Requirement, the Australian Government strengthened the requirements necessary to obtain financial assistance for young people and their families. Social security legislation is consistent with the agreement and stipulates that generally anyone under the age of 22 who does not have a year 12 or equivalent qualification, or who is not participating in 25 hours or more of education, training or other approved activities is not eligible for Youth Allowance (Other) (Australian Government, 2009[5]). Youth Allowance (Other) is a social security payment that provides financial support to young people aged 16-21 who are unemployed and looking for work or are temporarily unable to work, and who meet other parental or partner income tests (Services Australia, 2022[6]).[2] In addition, parents of young people aged 16-19 who do not meet the National Youth Participation Requirement are not eligible under family assistance legislation to receive Family Tax Benefit Part A for those young people (Australian Government, 2009[5]). Family Tax Benefit Part A is a family assistance payment to parents to help with the cost of raising children (Services Australia, 2022[7]).

Lamb et al. (2004[8]) found that in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, students indicated that the desire to get a job and earn money was a major reason for leaving mandatory school early (Lamb et al., 2004[8]; Lyche, 2010[1]). At the same time, a study in the United Kingdom found that conditional cash transfers for staying in full-time education are effective in reducing the number of students that drop out of school (Dearden et al., 2009[9]). Therefore, making financial assistance conditional on engaging in education or training or other approved activities, as is the case with the Youth Allowance (Other) and Family Tax Benefit Part A, can help prevent Australian young people from disengaging from education to earn money.

A goal set out in the Compact with Young Australians was to lift the attainment rate of students in year 12 or equivalent to 90% by 2015 (Australian Government, 2009[5]). Through policies such as mandatory schooling and conditional financial support, retention rates did increase across Australia from 70% in 2010 to a peak of 79% in 2018 (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022[10]).

However, if financial support for at-risk youth is conditional on meeting school participation requirements and is not accompanied by programmes to screen for other underlying reasons for lack of participation, then such programmes may increase vulnerabilities. Screening is important because students may not go to school for reasons other than lack of motivation or lack of financial incentives. In such cases, removing funding could compound vulnerabilities. Students would then not be able to go to school due to underlying reasons, such as mental health issues, challenging family circumstances, chronic illness, lack of school supplies, or poor transportation to and from school, and, on top of that, they would have lost their financial aid, thereby increasing marginalisation.

2.1.1. Enhancing school and teacher quality

Across Australia, efforts are being made to improve school and teacher effectiveness because there is strong evidence that students' attitudes towards school, the value they ascribe to it, their relationships with teachers, and their sense of achievement at school strongly influence whether or not they will complete their education.

In an effort to provide more high-quality and equitable education to students, the Commonwealth, States, and Territories jointly developed the National School Reform Agreement that came into effect in 2019 (OECD, 2019[11]). The Agreement includes a requirement for States and Territories to report annually on their progress in implementing national policy initiatives (Council of Australian Governments, 2018[12]). In

addition, as part of the agreement, States and Territories have signed bilateral agreements with the Commonwealth that set out state-specific policies and actions that will be undertaken to improve student outcomes. As a result, States and Territories have different policies in place. For example, under the reform Direction A – Support students, student learning and achievement, Victoria has highlighted that it aims to strengthen teacher practice by "establishing a Digital Assessment Library, an online resource that will develop and make available new digital student assessment tools and teacher resources to improve student learning assessment" (Department of Education and Training, 2022[13]). New South Wales aims to "implement the refreshed curriculum post 2019 review, ensuring teachers are supported to implement a streamlined curriculum, including timely and formative assessments" (Australian Government: Department of Education, 2022[14]). In 2022, the Australian Government Productivity Commission undertook a review of the National School Reform Agreement and found that it does not include sufficient clear, measurable targets to drive reform and hold jurisdictions to account for their performance. The Commission recommended that the next agreement should feature firmer targets to strengthen the focus on achieving outcomes (Australian Government: Productivity Commission, 2023[15]).

Efforts have also been undertaken to improve the quality of the curriculum. In 2020, Ministers of Education asked the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to review the Foundation to year 10 Curriculum (The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020[16]). The updated curriculum was endorsed by Education Ministers on 1 April 2022.

The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) has worked to improve teacher quality by clarifying in the 2013 Australian Professional Standards for Teachers what constitutes teacher quality and what teachers should know and be able to do at different career stages (OECD, 2019[17]). Furthermore, in 2020, in an effort to increase quality teaching and leadership, AITSL reviewed the compliance and regulatory burden that teachers and principals face, strengthened the teacher accreditation system, and helped develop evaluation tools to measure teaching effectiveness (The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020[16]).

There are also programmes that focus specifically on increasing the number of qualified teachers. With its High Achieving Teachers programme, Australia has put in place two alternative employment-based pathways to broaden the ways in which individuals who are committed to pursuing a career in teaching can enter the profession (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022[18]). Both pathways (Teach for Australia and La Trobe University's Nexus Program) proactively recruit high achieving university graduates with the knowledge, skills, and experience that schools need (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022[18]). Once selected, the participants are placed in teaching positions in secondary schools with teacher shortages and are given training as well as support while they complete an accredited teaching qualification. Independent evaluations of one of the pathways (Teach for Australia) have indicated that it produces high-quality teachers and has a positive impact on participating schools (OECD, 2019[17]).

2.1.2. Culturally responsive teaching and support for at-risk First Nations peoples youth

Studies have found that Australia's First Nations peoples population has considerably lower completion rates than non-First Nations peoples populations (Lamb et al., 2004[8]; Lyche, 2010[1]). As such, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has set out to close the gap between First Nations peoples and non-First Nations peoples for key socio-economic targets. In 2008, for example, COAG pledged to halve the gap in First Nations peoples youth's year 12 or equivalent attainment by 2020 (Gardiner-Garden, 2012[19]; The Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2020[20]). In July 2020, there was a new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, which was developed in partnership between Australian Governments and the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisation, so that together, the stakeholders can overcome the inequality experienced by First Nations peoples (Closing the Gap, 2020[21]). The Agreement has 19 socio-economic targets across areas that have an impact on life outcomes for First

Nations peoples, one of which deals specifically with youth engagement in education and employment. Target 7 lays out the goal to "increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (15 to 24 years) who are in employment, education or training to 67 percent by 2031" (Closing the Gap, 2020[22]) from a 2016 baseline of 57.2% (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2022[23]).

In an effort to close the gap, First Nations peoples Histories and Cultures have been introduced as a cross-curriculum priority, adding depth and perspective to what students learn in English, mathematics, science, arts and humanities, as well as health and physical education (Australian Curriculum, 2022[24]). Two distinct needs in First Nations peoples education are also being incorporated in the Australian Curriculum: (1) "that students are able to see themselves, their identities and their cultures reflected in the curriculum of each of the learning areas, can fully participate in the curriculum and can build their self-esteem"; (2) "that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures cross-curriculum priority is designed for all students to engage in reconciliation, respect and recognition of the world's oldest continuous living cultures" (Australian Curriculum, 2022[24]). Furthermore, AITSL, in consultation with First Nations peoples education experts, students, families, and communities, developed a professional learning toolkit, which aims to help teachers become more culturally responsive in their teaching practices (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2022[25]).

The Australian States and Territories have also put in place different measures to provide additional support and guidance for First Nations peoples students. For example, in Victoria, schools and parents can contact Koorie[3] Education Co-ordinators (KEC) to obtain assistance with Koorie cultural inclusion and education guidance (Government of Victoria, 2022[26]). Furthermore, KECs can assign Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) – members of the local First Nations peoples community that are based in the same area and that have an understanding of First Nations peoples culture and history in the community – to go to schools where there are Koorie families. KESOs can provide advice to schools about culturally inclusive learning environments and co-ordinate services in order to improve the learning outcomes of Koorie youth.

Similarly, in New South Wales, the First Nations peoples community in Broken Hill invites new public school teachers in the area to join them for a day out in the bush so that these teachers can be introduced to local First Nations peoples culture and history (Volkofsky, 2019[27]). In addition to learning about the local culture, teachers can hear stories first-hand from First Nations peoples elders about the impact of government policies that "included separate education for Aboriginal children, lower wages for [Aboriginal people], and state guardianship of Aboriginal children". The idea behind this initiative is that by being exposed to First Nations peoples history and culture, new teachers can improve school experience of First Nations peoples children and be more culturally sensitive in their teaching.

Generally, efforts to halve the gap in First Nations peoples youth's year 12 or equivalent attainment by 2020 appear to be successful, but First Nations peoples attainment rates in very remote areas remain low. The 2020 Closing the Gap report (Australian Government: National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2020[28]) finds that the attainment gap between First Nations peoples and non-First Nations peoples narrowed from around 40 to 25 percentage points between 2008 and 2018-19. However, it is important to acknowledge that there are differential outcomes for metropolitan and regional First Nations peoples youth. The 2020 report notes that the proportion of First Nations peoples attaining year 12 or equivalent level of education decreases with remoteness – with year 12 attainment rates at 85 percent in major cities, compared to 38 percent in very remote areas. Low attainment rates in remote areas may be in part explained by the lack of job opportunities in remote areas and so individuals may find little purpose in obtaining a qualification unless the First Nations peoples student is willing to leave the remote community.

2.1.3. Supporting students with special education needs and disabilities

The Australian Government also works with the States and Territories to support students with special education needs (SEN) and disabilities. It does so by collecting data on students with disabilities (Nationally

Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability) in order to better understand the needs of the students and how they can be best supported at school (Australian Department of Education, 2022[29]) as well as through programmes, such as Positive Partnerships that specifically support students with autism (Australian Department of Education, 2022[30]). Addressing disabled students' needs is also explicitly laid out in the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (Standards), which state that education providers must consult with the student or a career of the student to identify reasonable adjustments that allow the student with the disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2022[31]). The Standards are reviewed for effectiveness every five years, and the recommendations from the last review, held in 2020, are currently being implemented by the Australian Government in close partnership with states, territories and non-government education authorities.

2.1.4. Engaging parents in their children's educational outcomes

Research shows that parental involvement in middle school is positively associated with achievement (Hill and Tyson, 2009[32]). In fact, parental engagement in children's learning has been found to be a bigger predictor of how children do in school than a family's socio-economic background (Deloitte Access Economics, 2017[33]; The Smith Family, 2016[34]). As such, the Australian Government supports and promotes parental engagement through a number of initiatives, such as the Family-School Partnerships Framework. The initiative focuses on parent engagement in learning and aims to shift attitudes, so that school and families build a relationship where they see each other as allies in the education of students (Australian Government: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2017[35]; Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau, 2022[36]; The Australian Government: Department of Education, 2020[37]).

The Smith Family, an Australian charity focused on eliminating educational inequality, has also worked to engage parents in their children's long-term educational outcomes. The Smith Family's Learning for Life Program is an early intervention, long-term approach that targets disadvantaged children and responds to their changing educational needs (The Smith Family, 2016[34]). One of the key features of the programme is that upon being recruited into the Learning for Life Program, families enter into an agreement with the charity, which formally acknowledges the value of parental engagement in children's learning and underlines a shared goal and mutual responsibility of supporting the student's long-term participation in education.

There are also organisations such as the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations that represent parent and community views on public education in Australia by (1) consulting with public school parent and community groups to identify issues and ideas for improving public education and by (2) communicating with decision-makers and contributing to policy development (ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, 2022[38]).

2.1.5. Preventing homelessness

Australia has adopted The Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model to prevent homelessness and simultaneously assist with school retention and completion. Interim outcome evaluations from Geelong, where the model was first piloted, found a 40% reduction in the number of young people entering homelessness services. The evaluations also showed that early school leaving was reduced by about 20% for the three pilot schools. The approach of the model is to have schools and community services identify students and families that may benefit from support, and, together, support these students and families (MacKenzie, 2018[39]).

2.1.6. The COVID-19 Pandemic

The number of youth not in education, employment or training (NEET) had been declining across OECD countries for a decade, however the pandemic and the resulting school closures and distance learning reversed that trend (OECD, 2021[40]). In Australia, "the proportion of young people not in education or employment rose from 8.7% in May 2019 to 12% in May 2020 and has since decreased to 11% in February 2021, a similar rate to February 2020 (10%)" (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021[41]). The return to pre-pandemic NEET levels may be due to the relatively short school closures in Australia (Patrinos, Vegas and Carter-Rau, 2022[42]), indicating that students were less exposed to distance learning and this may have prevented students from becoming disengaged. In addition, a McKinsey and Company survey of teachers in eight countries found that teachers in Australia found remote learning relatively effective – they rated the effectiveness of remote learning as 6.6 (compared to the average of 4.8) on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being 10 "most effective, and equal to in-person instruction" (OECD, 2021[40]). Australia also put in place several schemes in an effort to prevent a rise in youth not in education, employment or training. For example, Australia introduced the Coronavirus Supplement, which "provided income support for 16-21 year-olds receiving the Youth Allowance and looking for full-time work, studying part-time, or temporarily unable to work" (OECD, 2021[43]).

2.2. Direct prevention interventions.

Across OECD countries, a range of policies and interventions are being used to prevent early school leaving and student dropout. These include early warning systems, the provision of additional support to at-risk students, and curriculum interventions.

2.2.1. Early warning systems

Across OECD countries, a considerable number of students drop out early from education systems – meaning that they leave education without having completed upper secondary qualifications – or fail to reach academic milestones. Upper secondary education is seen as critical for a smooth transition of young people from school to work, but graduation rates vary strongly across countries. On average across OECD countries, by age 25, 80% of young people have completed upper secondary education. However, this 2019 attainment rate ranges from 53% in Costa Rica to 96% in Korea in 2019 (OECD, 2021[44]).[4] Among those who attained upper secondary education, 17% are neither employed, nor in education or training (NEET),[5] and 78% are employed[6] (OECD, 2020[45]; OECD, 2021[44]). In contrast, among those who did not obtain upper secondary education, 39% are NEET and just 61% employed, respectively.

Early warning systems have been implemented in various OECD countries to prevent students from dropping out early. These systems aim to identify students at risk of school dropout before completing their basic education and support them with targeted interventions (OECD, 2021[46]). While Box 2.1 explains one selected Early Warning Indicator System in more detail, a summary of the general key components of Early Warning Systems is provided in the following:

- *Quantitative indicators:* Risk assessment of students is based on selected quantitative indicators. Literature identified key indicators that are strongly associated with school dropout, while they remain malleable through school practices. Among these are academic achievement, behaviour, and absenteeism (Allensworth and Easton, 2007[47]; Allensworth, 2013[48]; Balfanz and Byrnes, 2019[49]; Mac Iver and Mac Iver, 2009[50]). There are examples where the primary source of data stems from administrative records on grades and absences (Sletten, Tøge and Malmberg-Heimonen, 2022[51])
- *Statistical model:* Statistical models are employed to assess the accuracy of indicators and calculate the risk level of students (OECD, 2021[46]). With advances in artificial intelligence and

machine learning, some studies rely on sophisticated models to predict at-risk students (Balfanz and Byrnes, 2019[49]; Plak et al., 2021[52]). This option illustrates well how digitalisation and technology can be applied in education systems.

- *Intervention:* The analytics of student learning and progress provide valuable information to schools that needs to be acted on (Vincent-Lancrin, 2022[53]). Upon identification of students at risk, schools need to take effective interventions (including the allocation of school resources) in form of different actions. Interventions vary by programme but are mostly determined locally by the school and tailored to the needs of students. Interventions implemented as part of an early warning system in the United States, for example, include conversations between school staff and at-risk students on their absenteeism (Mac Iver et al., 2019[54]), assignment to academic support if indications for class failure exist (Faria et al., 2017[55]; Mac Iver et al., 2019[54]), mentoring programmes, or provision of mental and physical health support (Faria et al., 2017[55]).

Early warning systems are among the policy efforts countries have taken during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide support for targeted groups of students to mitigate effects brought by school closures (OECD, 2022[56]). During the pandemic, upper secondary schools were closed longer than schools at other educational levels, raising concerns of interrupted pathways and non-completion of education (OECD, 2020[57]). In the school year 2021/2022, nine countries implemented early warning systems as a recovery policy to identify students at risk (Schleicher et al., 2022[58]). Among those countries are Chile, Colombia, and Costa Rica, representing the Latin American and Caribbean region (OECD, 2022[56]).

Box 2.1. Case Study: Massachusetts' Early Warning Indicator System

Massachusetts established an Early Warning Indicator System (EWIS) in 2011 to identify students in Grades 1 to 12 who do not meet certain academic milestones. As EWIS is not mandatory for districts and schools, efforts are made to spread the knowledge. For example, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education publishes a monthly newsletter shared with districts and schools to increase general knowledge about EWIS and a website with resources about EWIS as well as how data can be used and accessed. Similarly, no strict rules on how districts should implement EWIS exist, although a six-step process is recommended, which is structured as follows:

Preparatory steps at the beginning of the school year.

- Step 1: Putting a team together.
- Step 2: Reviewing existing EWIS data at the beginning of the school year.

Repeated steps throughout the school year.

- Step 3: Combining information provided by EWIS data and the experience and knowledge of educators to explore underlying causes for the poor performance of a student.
- Step 4: Implementation of additional support measures for the specific student.
- Step 5: Evaluation of additional support measures.

Toward the end of the school year.

- Step 6: Summarising the successes and challenges of the early warning process and refining the process based on insights gained throughout the school year.

Various stakeholders are involved in the establishment, administration, and implementation of EWIS: at the state level, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (data collection and model development) and, at the substate level, school districts (decision on data access) and schools (implementation of early warning cycle).

During the early development, variables were identified using multilevel models that best predict the likelihood of students failing key academic benchmarks in collaboration with the American Institutes for Research (for a summary of results see (American Institutes for Research, n.d.[59])). Risk levels are calculated based on a regression model using different indicators. Three risk levels are provided (low, moderate, high), and student risk is organised by four grade levels (early and late elementary, middle grades, and high school). Academic requirements differ by grade level. For example, being able to read by the end of Grade 3 is a requirement for early elementary, while passing grades on all Grade 9 courses is a requirement for middle grades.

Based on EWIS data, schools identify appropriate interventions to support students, groups of students, or entire schools. The Early Warning Implementation Guide provided by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education suggests a systematic approach to assigning interventions and support, following the Massachusetts Tiered System of Support (MTSS) (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, n.d.[60]; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2022[61]). MTSS offers a structure to provide students along a continuum of services that provides increasing levels of support organised in three tiers: Tier I (universal support to all students), Tier II (targeted support provided in small groups), and Tier III (intensive support occurring individually or in very small groups).

Source: OECD, (2020[62]), *Strengthening the Governance of Skills Systems: Lessons from Six OECD Countries*, https://doi.org/10.1787/3a4bb6ea-en.

Literature provides evidence that early warning systems show promise in supporting dropout prevention and, thereby, both directly and indirectly, of lowering the risk of a young person being NEET at the time of dropping out or later. However, the evidence on the impact of early warning systems is scarce, and findings are ambiguous, often lacking robust evidence. Table 2.1 provides an overview of rigorous evaluation of early warning systems, and Box 2.2 provides more details about the interpretation of rigorous impact evaluations. The last column of the table lists all outcome variables that are evaluated in each study, including an indication whether they differ significantly between control and treatment group. The overview in the table shows that positive effects are found on chronic absence (Faria et al., 2017[55]; Mac Iver et al., 2019[54]) and course failure (Faria et al., 2017[55]), while, for other outcomes, evidence is missing. However, the lack of clear empirical evidence on all outcome factors does not negate the potential usefulness of early warning systems.

Table 2.1 Selected rigorous impact evaluations of early warning systems

Intervention and Country	Study	Evaluation details	Evaluation Outcome
IKO model (IKO is a Norwegian acronym for identification, assessment, and follow-up) Norway	Sletten, Tøge, Malmberg-Heimonen (2022[51]), "Effects of an early warning system on student absence and completion in Norwegian upper secondary schools: a cluster-randomised study"	Evaluation took place two years after implementation. Evaluation of first year of upper secondary schools.	**Outcome indicators:** Grade point average (GPA), Completion, Absence, Days of absence. No significant effects found.
Diplomas Now model United States	Corrin, Sepanik, Rosen, Shane (2016[63]), *Addressing Early Warning Indicators: Interim Impact Findings from the Investing in Innovation (i3) Evaluation of DIPLOMAS NOW*	Evaluation took place two years after implementation. Evaluation of Grades 6 and 9.	**Outcome indicators**: Attendance, Behaviour (suspension), Course performance, ***ABC composite (combination of Attendance, Behaviour, and Course performance).** **Significant effects found for ABC composite indicator.**

Intervention and Country	Study	Evaluation details	Evaluation Outcome
Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System (EWIMS) in 73 high schools across three states United States	Faria, Sorensen, Heppen, Bowdon, Taylor, Eisner, Foster (2017[64]), *Getting students on track for graduation: Impacts of the Early Warning Intervention and Monitoring System after one year*	Evaluation took place 14 months after implementation of an EWS system in grades 9 and 10.	**Outcome indicators: *Chronic absence, *Course failure,** GPA, Suspension. **Significant effects found for chronic absence and course failure.**
Early Warning Intervention (EWI) Team United States	Mac Iver, Stein, Davis, Balfanz, Fox (2019[54]), *An Efficacy Study of a Ninth-Grade Early Warning Indicator Intervention*	Evaluation conducted during the second year after the implementation of an EWS system in Grade 9.	**Outcome indicators**: Attendance, Course performance, ***Chronic absence (missing no more than 10% of school days)**, Course failure **Significant effects found for chronic absence.**

Note: Outcome variables marked by * and in bold denote that the respective variable differed significantly between control and treatment group.
Source: Own compilation of selected studies.

Box 2.2. Interpretation of results from rigorous evaluation of early warning systems

Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are perceived as the most rigorous form of evaluation and often referred to as the gold standard when studying causal relationships. In RCTs, participants are randomly assigned to a control or to a treatment group, and differences in outcomes are attributed to the treatment they receive.

Early warning systems are complex, consisting of three different components. The studies mentioned in Table 2.1 evaluate early warning systems as a whole. From a policy perspective, the evaluation of a whole early warning system is sufficient to decide whether the system should be implemented or continued. Learning and understanding the effectiveness of single components would require cross-cutting designs to disentangle the effect of different components (Duflo, Glennerster and Kremer, 2006[65]).

The following points should be emphasised: First, each early warning system evaluated potentially differs in the three components mentioned above. It makes the comparison of different early warning systems complex. Second, ineffectiveness of an early warning system means that the system as a whole is ineffective. The underlying reasons for failure in the effectiveness of a system could therefore lie in the failure in any of the three components. Third, effectiveness of early warning systems reflect that the system and its components as a whole are effective.

2.2.2. Additional support to at-risk students

Providing additional support to students at risk of falling behind on key academic milestones and dropping out is an important direct preventive strategy to foster inclusive learning environments. There are different dimensions of diversity that can affect educational performance and thereby characterise students who are at risk of early school leaving and student dropout, resulting in an increased risk of being NEET. These dimensions include socio-economic characteristics, their identity (e.g. migrants, ethnic groups, First Nations peoples people, linguistics minorities, or gender identity), or students with special education needs (SEN) (Balestra and Fleischer, 2018[66]; Santiago and Cerna, 2020[67]).

The rate of students leaving education and training early is higher among foreign-born and ethnic minorities than among native-born students and majority populations in many European Union countries. For example, 64% of foreign-born students in Türkiye leave education and training early, compared to 32% of native-born students (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, Eurydice, 2019[68]). Among

Roma communities, forming Europe's largest ethnic minority, early school dropout rates are higher as well (Rutigliano, 2020[69]). In Portugal, for example, about 90% of Roma students were early school leavers, compared to 14% among the general population (OECD, 2022[70]).

While there is consensus on the importance of inclusive education, including for students with SEN, there are differences in the understanding and recognition of special education needs across OECD countries. The definition of SEN is controversial and far from consistent across OECD countries. While some countries provide only broad definitions (e.g. Austria and Norway), others provide more granular categories (e.g. the United States). In an effort of comparative analysis of policy approaches and practices, the OECD adopted an operational definition that includes three main areas of SEN: learning disabilities, physical impairments, and mental disorders (Brussino, 2020[71]). Evidence shows that students with SEN face considerably lower educational and labour market prospects. They lag behind in achievement in elementary school, have lower graduation rates, are more likely to be neither in employment nor in education, or training, and receive lower wages (Brussino, 2020[71]). Among students with SEN in Portugal aged 18 to 24, 20.3% were early school leavers compared to 9.9% for people without SEN (OECD, 2022[70]).

Across OECD countries, various policies and practices are implemented to assist at-risk students (see examples provided in Box 2.3). Approaches vary from governing diversity (e.g. how concerns about diversity, inclusion, or equity are influenced by education systems), to development of skills and competences to address individual at-risk students, and school-level interventions. One policy area linked to governance arrangements includes approaches to providing education to at-risk students and arranging their educational curricula. For example, individual education plans[7] (IEP) are one way to providing suitable education to at-risk students by making the necessary modifications, differentiations, and adaptations in the school context. IEPs set out short- and long-term learning targets for pupils and determine degree and type of adaptations to be made to the curriculum (European Commission, 2013[72]).

School-level interventions refer to the distribution of financial and human resources to support students, engagement of families and the local community, and the use of assistive technology. For example, the usage of information and communication technologies is one means to support the inclusion of students with SEN (Hersh, 2020[73]). Assistive technology can be designed with the aim of improving, increasing, or maintaining the capabilities of a person with disability (LD@school, 2014[74]; UNICEF and WHO, 2015[75]). Such technologies can help students learn how to complete a task, but they can also help the students navigate an area of difficulty (LD@school, 2014[74]). For example, products provide support on, among other factors, communication, mobility, vision, or hearing impairments. Concrete examples for technologies encompass text-to-speech or speech-to-text software (LD@school, 2014[74]). The effective use of information and communication technologies requires adequate training of educational staff (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, n.d.[76]).

Box 2.3. Selected initiatives to provide additional support to at-risk students

Governing diversity through inclusive education curriculum

Early assessment of academic knowledge and individualised study plans is one of the pathways **Sweden** is taking to respond to the learning needs of newly arrived students. Upon arriving, and within two months after the start of school, the knowledge and language skills of refugees are assessed in the students' mother language. Principals and headteachers determine on the best educational trajectory. Individual study plans, for example, determine the extent to which students participate in regular teaching groups or preparatory language groups, including voluntary participation in mother tongue education or study guidance in their mother tongue before, during, or after lessons (Berglund, 2017[77]).

Since August 2018, it is mandatory to map students so that newly arriving students starting with Grade 7 all have an individual study plan (Cerna, 2019[78]).

In **Greece**, individual education plans are used to monitor the progress and development of students with SEN (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, n.d.[79]). Local Diagnostic Assessment and Support Centres assess each learner's special education needs and develop individual education plans in co-operation with the learner's teachers and their parents or guardians (Van Hove, De Schauwer and Kasimatis, 2017[80]).

There are many other countries that use individual education plans for inclusive education and especially students with SEN, among these are **Portugal** (Alves, Campos Pinto and Pinto, 2020[81]) and **Norway** (Gøranson, Ochoa and Zoeller, 2020[82]).

School interventions through assistive technology

As part of **Portugal's** inclusive education strategy, 25 Communication Technology Resource Centres for Special Education (CRTICs) were created in 2007/2008 that assess student needs and provide adaptive technologies to students with SEN (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2011[83]; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2016[84]; Liebowitz et al., 2018[85]). The CRTICs serve as an example of how teachers in mainstream and inclusive settings can be supported in using specialist technology. The centres are located in mainstream schools and are responsible for schools in neighbouring district areas. The main task of the Centres is to recommend assistive technology for pupils. Besides this, the centres have a range of other responsibilities, such as the training of education staff in getting familiar using assistive technology to establish a routine in using them. In addition, the CRTICs are raising awareness of the benefits of assistive technology among schools and parents. As such, they serve as a platform for exchange of practices and resources among special education teachers.

2.2.3. Curriculum interventions

At its core, curriculum is defined as a "plan for learning" (Taba, 1962[86]; van den Akker, Fasoglio and Mulder, 2008[87]), i.e. it is a set of guidelines for what should be taught in schools and what students should take away from their studies (Gouëdard et al., 2020[88]). Curriculum interventions consist of measures or reforms that are implemented to modify such guidelines and, therefore, what students are expected to learn in class. More specifically, curriculum interventions involve changes in the objectives of learning, such as which competencies, knowledge, values, and attitudes students take away (Gouëdard et al., 2020[88]). Curriculum interventions can involve introducing new subjects, adding new content to old subjects, varying the sequencing or timing of courses, or changing how the students are taught (Kärkkäinen, 2012[89]).

Curricula can be thought of in various ways. A common distinction is between the intended curriculum, the implemented curriculum, and the attained curriculum (van den Akker, Fasoglio and Mulder, 2008[87]). The intended curriculum outlines the vision and rationale underlying the curriculum and is specified in the curriculum documents. The implemented curriculum is the way in which the curriculum is interpreted by its users and the way it is actually taught, while the attained curriculum is the learning outcomes of the students. The majority of interventions take place at the level of the intended curriculum, but efforts to change classroom practices to reduce disciplinary problems or the use of different pedagogical approaches could act on the implemented curriculum.

This section focuses specifically on intended curriculum interventions that have been introduced to prevent NEET status among young people. Such interventions can involve introducing new material to teach

students about risky behaviours and their subsequent impacts, introducing more information about mental health, or developing tailored curricula.

Introducing new subject material: Substance abuse, sexuality education, and mental health

Introducing subjects such as substance abuse and sexuality education in the school curricula of students who are transitioning from their late childhood to their teenage years can be particularly important to prevent and address risky behaviours. For children and young people, the two main networks for substance use prevention are the family and school (EMCDDA and ESPAD, 2020[90]). Similarly, family, school, and peers play an important role in how students learn about sexuality and relationships (Brussino and McBrien, 2022[91]). Studies have found that young people who are NEET are more likely to report smoking and using drugs, and NEET women are more likely to report unplanned pregnancies (Tanton et al., 2021[92]). As seen in section 1.2, in Australia in 2019, the share of teenage mothers was about 20 times as elevated among young people aged 15 to 19 who were NEET than among those who were not considered NEET. In addition, research from the United States has found that teenage pregnancy is the leading cause of dropping out of school for female teenagers (Freudenberg and Ruglis, 2007[93]). Introducing new or improved sexuality education could help prevent risky sexual behaviours, which can lower the likelihood that young women are NEET due to early pregnancy.

An example of a policy that introduces comprehensive substance abuse and sexuality education in the curriculum is the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in Ireland. In its junior cycle, SPHE includes four strands that tackle different but related areas of social, personal, and health education: “Who am I?” “Minding myself and others,” “Team up,” and “My mental health.” For each strand, the learning outcomes outlined in the SPHE curriculum can be used to support student learning and teacher planning. In particular, the SPHE focuses on promoting student agency and engagement in the learning process as key to supporting learning in the affective sphere (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2016[94]). As part of the SPHE, there is a specific module on Relationships and Sexuality Education that provides students with the opportunity to learn and think about relationships and sexuality (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2022[95]). Such additions to the curriculum appear to have led to tangible outcomes. For example, between 2002 and 2017, teenage pregnancies in Ireland fell by 64%, and changes made to the sexual health education curriculum were considered to be a factor leading to such decline (Ryan, 2017[96]).

Another example is the Physical and Health Education curriculum in New Zealand, which covers, among other matters, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education as well as mental health education, drug and alcohol education, and safety and violence-prevention education. To implement the Physical and Health Education curriculum, primary and secondary school teachers receive professional development in these areas and are often supported by specialised staff from the Ministry of Education when teaching Physical and Health Education in the classroom. The curriculum is developed and implemented taking into account diversity in the student population (e.g. ethnic diversity, Indigeneity, or gender) (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022[97]).

Many students who drop out before graduating suffer from mental health conditions (Freudenberg and Ruglis, 2007[93]). For example, research conducted in Denmark found that the dropout incidence was significantly higher among students with poor mental health (Hjorth et al., 2016[98]). At the same time, research from Canada found that teenagers who struggle with depression are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school in comparison to their peers who do not suffer from mental illness or who have recovered from depression earlier in life (Haynes, 2002[99]; Platzman Weinstock, 2017[100]).

The programme Breaking the Silence: Teaching the Next Generation About Mental Illness in the United States includes teaching packages with lesson plans, games, and stories on serious mental illnesses and was introduced to middle school students in 1999 (Wahl et al., 2011[101]). A study evaluating the impact of the curriculum found that students who were exposed to the programme and learned about

the warning signs of mental illness had improved attitudes towards mental illness and were more willing to interact with individuals with mental illness (Wahl et al., 2011[101]). Introducing programmes that consider mental health in the curriculum can help students with a mental illness feel more understood and accepted by their peers, and it can also help them gain greater self-understanding and acceptance (Haynes, 2002[99]; Wahl et al., 2011[101]). Moreover, it can help them feel less marginalised and isolated at school and potentially reduce the likeliness of them dropping out of education without clear plans for integrating into training or the labour market.

To successfully introduce substance abuse and sexuality education as well as mental health education in curricula and in teaching, teachers need to be appropriately trained and prepared to address the subject. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2018 report found that, on average across OECD countries, 94% of teachers participated in at least one type of professional development per year (OECD, 2019[102]). However, although training participation is high, more emphasis needs to be placed on training teachers on how to teach diverse classes. The report indicates that among lower secondary teachers across the OECD, the highest levels of training needs are for "teaching students with special needs" (22%), "ICT skills for teaching" (18%), and "teaching in a multicultural or multilingual setting" (15%) (OECD, 2019[102]).

Developing tailored yet flexible curricula

When designing curriculum interventions, it is important to strike the right balance between depth (the amount of focus a certain subject/topic is given) and rigour, with flexibility embedded in the system to ensure that instruction takes into account individuals' learning needs and pace. On the one hand, if curricula are too rigorous, students, especially those of disadvantaged backgrounds, can be at risk of falling behind and dropping out because they lack pre-requisites to be able to keep up with the expected learning progress (OECD, 2020[103]). Mandatory curricula that are not designed with flexibility run the risk of forcing teachers who are not able to cover the intended material in class to assign homework and expect that such material will be covered independently by students at home. This can result in homework overload, which can have an adverse impact, and can also result in increased inequalities as students from socio-economically disadvantaged households may not be able to rely on the support of their parents or guardians if and when they struggle with the material because their parents may be working overtime (OECD, 2020[103]). Furthermore, if homework becomes too complex, students are more likely to become disengaged, especially those that do not have enough support at home (OECD, 2020[103]).

On the other hand, some students may drop out because they are not engaged and do not find the classes interesting. For example, a report released by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in 2006 found that nearly half (47%) of dropouts surveyed said they left school because they were bored and disengaged from school (Bridgeland, DiIulio and Burke Morison, 2006[104]). In the same study, two-thirds of respondents said that they "would have worked harder if more was demanded of them" (Bridgeland, DiIulio and Burke Morison, 2006[104]). Similarly, Tony Wagner, the author of "The Global Achievement Gap," argues that the United States' system of multiple-choice assessments leads to student boredom and ensuing dropouts. He suggests teaching students how to reason and analyse in order to keep them engaged and interested in school.

Another reason why some students drop out of school is because they find the course material irrelevant – they do not see a connection between what they are learning and the skills they will need in the job market. In 2015, America's Promise Alliance and the Center for Promise at Tufts University surveyed nearly 3 000 young people, drawn from all 50 states, of which nearly 2 000 students took at least a semester off of school. Survey responses from those nearly 2 000 students revealed that 20.3% stopped going to school because they believed that "school wasn't relevant to my life" (America's Promise Alliance and its Center for Promise at Tufts University, 2015[105]). If students can see the purpose and relevance of what they are learning in the classroom and how that translates to real-world demands, they are more likely to feel

motivated to learn (OECD, 2020[103]). As discussed in Chapter 3, integrating career education components into different subjects can be one way to raise this sense of purpose and relevance among students.

Given that students are sensitive to the rigour, relevance, and focus of curricula, it is important for countries to give schools the flexibility to design and adapt their curricula to meet the learning needs of their students and to reflect changes in society and the subsequent skills needed, such as digital literacy, financial literacy, literacy for sustainable development. and computational thinking (OECD, 2020[103]; OECD, 2021[106]). In Estonia, for example, each school can design the content of its curriculum based on the national curriculum (International Bureau of Education (IBE-UNESCO), 2007[107]; OECD, 2021[106]). By allowing schools to design their own curricula while factoring in pre-defined guidelines, the schools can take into account the contexts that they are operating in, such as the region they are in, the skills of the teachers, and the demands of both parents and students.

Tailored curricula can go beyond the school level to the group level. In the United States, the School of Life Foundation (SOLF) curriculum was introduced to provide students who are deemed to be at-risk through information on their absenteeism or tardiness, grades, whether they have enough credits to graduate, and behavioural issues (Wayman et al., 2021[108]). The intervention includes two-hour sessions for four weeks, during which the selected students learn basic social and life skills with the goal of developing school connectedness and student motivation. Evaluations of the SOLF programme suggest that students who have participated in this intervention have seen positive results, including higher rates of graduation (Baggaley, 2015[109]; Wayman et al., 2021[108]).

Tailored curricula can also be implemented at the individual level. In Finland, for example, there is the National Core Curriculum, which is mandatory and provides the foundation for local curricula (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022[110]). However, the syllabi can be personalised and adapted for individual students to allow for grade-independent studies and flexible basic education, which can help reduce dropout rates and prevent exclusion (OECD, 2021[106]). Finland's learner-centred approach, which focuses on students taking responsibility for their own learning, is considered one of the reasons why Finland's secondary school students are among the world's best academic performers (OECD, 2010[111]). Tailoring syllabi to individuals is also a practice in Norway, where both the Education Act and the National Curriculum contain a number of guidelines on how schools can develop individual learning plans (OECD, 2021[106]).

Research has found that personalising educational experiences and encouraging students to develop their interests and talents is important in order to keep them engaged and motivated in their learning and to improve both their educational attainment and performance (Redecker and Punie, 2013[112]; Schleicher, 2018[113]; UNESCO, 2019[114]). Personalising curricula can therefore help address some of the reasons why students drop out, notably because they are unmotivated, find the course material too challenging, or find the subject irrelevant. A 2013 foresight study, which involved a series of structured stakeholder consultations to predict how and what European citizens will learn in 2020-30, found that "future strategies to fight early school leaving include personalizing school education to better meet individual needs and interests" (Redecker and Punie, 2013[112]; UNESCO, 2019[114]).

2.3. Indirect prevention interventions

Several approaches and interventions can be implemented to promote student engagement, motivation, and learning and, therefore, decrease, at least partially, the chances that young people leave school early. These include promoting an inclusive whole school approach, which addresses the needs of all students and promotes active co-operation between the school, parents, and the community. Supporting transitions among school levels is equally important, as it can promote student learning and inclusion at the new educational level. Across educational levels, inclusive teaching is key, as the way students learn and are engaged in the classroom can support their inclusion and learning, especially for at-risk students.

2.3.1. Promoting a whole school approach

According to UNESCO (2022[115]), a whole school approach "involves addressing the needs of learners, staff and the wider community, not only within the curriculum, but across the whole-school and learning environment. It implies collective and collaborative action in and by a school community to improve student learning, behaviour and well-being, and the conditions that support these". Introducing a whole school approach also entails making sure that the academic and broader well-being of all students, including students belonging to diverse student groups, is promoted (Cerna et al., 2021[116]). The approach, therefore, recognises that all aspects of the community have an impact on learning and, as such, involves all parts of the school through partnerships between principals, teachers, school staff, parents, carers, and the wider community (Goldberg et al., 2018[117]; Mentally Healthy School, 2022[118]). Whole school approaches not only target all members of the broader school community, but they also use multiple components of policy and practice to create a positive and protective school environment, teach explicit social and emotional skills, engage parents, and develop targeted interventions for students with special educational needs (Pearce et al., 2022[119]).

The opposite of a whole school approach is a targeted policy that focuses on a specific group or issue. For example, in addressing mental health, a "regular" approach could focus on introducing mental health in the curriculum, training teachers to better understand and recognise the signs of mental health conditions, or providing training to parents. However, these interventions would operate in isolation – there would be no holistic action to tackle mental health. Targeted policies are not necessarily a problem. However, the evidence to date finds "that taking a whole school approach is more likely than individual classroom-based interventions to result in enduring positive change" (Goldberg et al., 2018[117]). In fact, a meta-analysis carried out in order to determine the effectiveness of adopting a whole school approach to enhance social and emotional development found significant but small improvements in participants' social and emotional adjustment, behavioural adjustment, and internalising symptoms (Goldberg et al., 2018[117]). Similarly, a report published by the European Commission indicated that interventions to promote students' mental health and well-being are more likely to be effective if they are organised as part of a systemic, whole school approach (Cefai, Caravita, and Simões, 2021[120]). Fundamentally, whole school interventions targeting social and emotional development tend to have long-term benefits on a range of mental health, social, emotional, and behavioural issues (Poulou, 2007[121]). Adopting a whole school approach to mental health and well-being not only helps decrease mental health problems, substance use, anti-social behaviour, and violence, but it also has positive impacts on students' sense of belonging in school, increases their motivation to do schoolwork, and enhances their academic performance (Cefai, Caravita, and Simões, 2021[120]; Durlak et al., 2011[122]).

In the context of NEET prevention strategies, a whole school approach requires taking a multi-dimensional and cross-sectoral approach and promoting tight co-operation with diverse stakeholders inside and outside of the school environment to ensure that students do not drop out of school early. A whole school approach is particularly important in the case of young people at risk of becoming NEET, as there are many factors that are intertwined, all of which can lead to students dropping out of school. These include mental health issues (Freudenberg and Ruglis, 2007[93]), pregnancies (teenage pregnancy) (Tanton et al., 2021[92]), curricula that are either too difficult or too boring (Bridgeland, Dilulio and Burke Morison, 2006[104]; OECD, 2020[103]), or household factors (Huisman and Smits, 2015[123]). For this reason, the solutions should involve all aspects of school and family life.

Evaluations of whole school interventions have indeed found that they can successfully address risk factors for early school leaving, such as mental health problems and absenteeism. By reducing these risk factors and, therefore, potentially the number of adolescents who leave school early, the interventions can thus boost educational attainment and lower the risk of older teenagers and young adults being NEET.

The whole school approach has been found to have a significant impact on reducing mental health conditions and bullying. For example, in Denmark, the Up intervention uses a whole school approach with

the goal of promoting mental health by strengthening social and emotional competence among school children (Nielsen et al., 2015[124]). Consisting of four components (namely, education and activities for students, development of staff skills, involvement of parents, and initiatives in everyday life at school), the intervention was successful in increasing "high" levels of social and emotional competence from 33% to 41% (Nielsen et al., 2015[124]). At the same time, seven out of ten studies found that a whole school approach decreased bullying across the board (Vreeman and Carroll, 2007[125]; Weare and Nind, 2011[126]).

In addition, the adoption of a whole school approach has been found to improve attendance. Studies have found that children's attendance difficulties are complex and often related to the child, family, and school factors, and, therefore, interventions are most successful when they rely strongly on collaboration between parents, school staff, and other agencies involved (Cunningham, Harvey and Waite, 2022[127]). In fact, findings indicate that family-school-community partnership practices predict an increase in daily attendance, a decrease in chronic absenteeism, or both (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002[128]). Therefore, a whole school approach could ensure that students who are prone to absenteeism attend school. Respondents to a study conducted in England recognised that some attendance difficulties could be related to school factors, such as learning difficulties, social issues, or anxiety about particular aspects of school, and, therefore, interventions are needed to address school-based factors instead of only emphasising the role of parents (Cunningham, Harvey and Waite, 2022[127]). Overall, these findings highlight the need to develop an approach that involves creating a community, making the school and staff accessible, and building relationships with families in order to prevent problems from materialising and also to make it easier to intervene if problems arise (Cunningham, Harvey and Waite, 2022[127]).

Whole school approaches have been adopted in several OECD countries. For example, the Portuguese Priority Intervention Educational Areas Programme (*Territórios Educativos de Intervenção Prioritária*, TEIP) is a programme first implemented in the 1996-97 academic year and currently in its fourth generation of implementation with 146 school clusters involved (about 18% of the total of Portuguese school clusters). The TEIP involves schools located in disadvantaged areas with high levels of poverty and social exclusion. With the support of the Ministry of Education, schools in the programme implement a three-year improvement plan focused on four main intervention areas: (i) improving teaching and learning; (ii) preventing early school leaving, absenteeism, and indiscipline; (iii) school management and organisation; and (iv) promoting the relationship between school, families, and the local community. Regional teams from the Ministry of Education support and monitor the implementation of the programme in schools (OECD, 2022[70]). A paper exploring the impact of the TEIP programme found that it has played an important role in "guaranteeing higher school achievement rates at the end of compulsory schooling (ninth grade)" and in reducing school dropout in Portugal (Dias, 2014[129]).

Similarly, Wales published a new framework in March 2021 that is intended to support schools in their efforts to embed their own whole school approaches (Welsh Government, 2021[130]). The framework recognises that a school alone cannot meet all the needs of young people or teaching staff, so therefore it provides instructions on how to promote collaboration between schools and key partners, such as parents or carers, local authorities, education groups, health and social care providers, as well as the police (Welsh Government, 2021[130]).

In addition, the School Education Gateway, an initiative of the European Commission, recently published the European Toolkit for Schools: Promoting inclusive education and tackling early school leaving, which outlines key intervention areas to prevent early school leaving: (i) school governance; (ii) teachers; (iii) support to learners; (iv) parental involvement; and (v) stakeholder involvement. These areas include systematic, within-school, and outside-of-school features. Along with these areas, the European Toolkit for Schools provides different examples of strategies implemented across European countries that can be effective in preventing early school leaving and student dropout, with evaluations of the projects (School Education Gateway, 2022[131]).

2.3.2. Supporting transitions between educational levels

The transition from primary to secondary school is considered to be one of the most stressful events adolescents experience (Chung, Elias and Schneider, 1998[132]; Coelho and Romaõ, 2016[133]; Zeedyk et al., 2003[134]). Children and adolescents often worry about finding their place in a new school setting, making friends, getting bullied, and coping with an increased workload. All of these factors can negatively affect their psychological well-being and academic achievement when transitioning to another educational level (Akos, Rose and Orthner, 2014[135]; Evans, Borriello and Field, 2018[136]; Zeedyk et al., 2003[134]). Adjustment to secondary education is often measured by assessing children's academic, emotional, and social adaptation (Duchesne, Ratelle and Roy, 2011[137]; Hall and DiPerna, 2017[138]). These three components tend to be interdependent, meaning that a deterioration in peer relationships is often associated with a decline in mental health, which, in turn, can result in lower academic performance. However, a causal relationship between these variables has not been established yet (Evans, Borriello and Field, 2018[136]; Mundy et al., 2017[139]; Rahman et al., 2018[140]; Reijntjes et al., 2010[141]).

Socio-economically disadvantaged students appear to be at higher risk of poor transitions between educational levels, mainly because they are less likely to receive the external support (e.g. at home, in school, or in the neighbourhood) they need. Moreover, as they often do not receive the same level of external support after transitioning (e.g. because classes become bigger, the student-teacher relationships become more anonymous, and family members might find it more difficult to help with school work), they are more likely to encounter problems when transitioning and stagnate in their academic progress (Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]; Evangelou et al., 2008[143]; Kim et al., 2014[144]). These socio-economic inequalities in educational attainment even seem to widen within the first three years of secondary school (Caro, McDonald and Willms, 2009[145]; Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]). Reasons for this increase in inequality include the disruption caused by the transition, a potentially negative influence of peer groups, or different learning environments at home but also because once fallen behind and missing the basics, the educational attainment gap is likely to rise over time (Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]). Moreover, data from the Millennium Cohort Study suggests that disadvantaged students tend to be less confident in their academic abilities, are less likely to receive support at home, and are more likely to have peers who are less hard-working (Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]; University of London, 2020[146]; University of London, 2020[147]; University of London, 2020[148]). Similarly, these gaps tend to either appear when transitioning to secondary education or widen within the first years after transitioning (Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]).

Helping students transition as smoothly as possible not only pays off for their well-being and learning success but can have longer-term impacts on their educational attainment and, as a result, their risk of being NEET as an older teenager or young adult. Students who fall behind academically or do not feel like they belong at their new school may be more likely to drop out of school several years down the line. This, in turn, lowers their chances of returning to education and of finding a stable job.

Questionnaires to measure students' adjustment

Whether students have successfully transitioned to the next educational level can usually be seen in how well they are academically and behaviourally involved in school and whether they feel a sense of belonging. One way to measure students' adjustment is the use of questionnaires. For instance, within the School Transition and Adjustment Research Study (STARS) based at the University College London (UCL) and Cardiff University, a Secondary Transition Adjustment Research Tool (START) questionnaire has been developed to predict how well students will settle into secondary school (Rice et al., 2015[149]). START is a four-item questionnaire designed for primary school teachers, which asks them how well they expect their students to adjust: i) academically, ii) socially (with peers), iii) socially (with teachers), and iv) to the new routine. In addition, primary school intervention questionnaires tailored to parents', students', and teachers' perspectives have been developed to assess the efficiency of interventions aimed at supporting all

students, including students with special educational needs. In order to evaluate commonly reported concerns about secondary school, STARS has designed a school concerns questionnaire for pupils, which has also been used by researchers in Australia and the United Kingdom (University College London, 2022[150]). The study has shown that the START questionnaire has been particularly helpful in predicting both students' adjustment in terms of academic and behavioural involvement in school as well as their sense of belonging while questioning parents has been valuable in estimating their children's sense of belonging to school (Rice et al., 2015[149]). All questionnaires, as well as transition support booklets for students, parents, and teachers, can be downloaded from the UCL website (University College London, 2022[150]).

Interventions to support a smooth transition

Different intervention programmes have been developed to smooth the primary-to-secondary school transition. Box 2.4 describes two examples in greater detail. While some of these interventions target students who are at the end of primary school, others focus on supporting them once they start secondary school or try to create a stronger link between primary and secondary schools. For instance, the implementation of "bridging units" between primary and secondary schools can uphold continuity between school levels and is associated with lowering children's school anxiety (Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]; Neal et al., 2016[151]; Rice et al., 2015[149]). Bridging units are usually projects or topics that start at the end of primary school and are continued in secondary school. They can also entail group projects with future classmates. Another strategy that allows primary school students to familiarise themselves with the language used in early secondary school work is the organisation of cross-phase visits or observations that also enable primary and secondary school teachers to exchange ideas on how to create a smoother transition for their students (Cook, Shaw and Morris, 2020[142]).

Box 2.4. Intervention examples in OECD countries

United States: School Transitional Environment Program

In the United States, the School Transitional Environment Program (STEP) has been created to support the transition from primary to lower secondary school by intervening in three areas: i) easing the adaption to complex and large school settings, ii) providing access to emotional and academic support and guidance from teachers and peers, and iii) promoting students' sense of belonging at school (Felner et al., 1993[152]). These areas cover within-school, outside-of-school, and systematic intervention features and include emotional counselling and academic guidance to students.

A key component of STEP is learning groups of various sizes that provide continuity in the learning environment and promote a sense of belonging. Learning groups of between 65 to 100 students are located in classrooms next to each other. Students remain together in the same learning groups to attend some core classes, including Mathematics and English, to avoid constantly changing classmates. STEP sub-groups of 20 to 30 students are assigned a homeroom teacher who takes on the roles of the students' teacher, counsellor and administrator. Homeroom teachers help students with their class selection and are available to discuss any personal problems the students may have. In addition, they act as the primary connection between parents and the school by explaining to their students' families how STEP works, following up with them on their children's absences, and generally promoting communication between their students' families and the school. STEP homeroom teachers regularly meet with other homeroom teachers and school guidance staff to exchange their experiences and discuss any concerns they might have (Felner et al., 1993[152]).

While STEP has originally targeted at-risk students from lower socio-economic statuses, it has since expanded to include at-risk students from all levels of socio-economic status. The evaluation of the

programme showed that the student dropout rate was halved compared to the control group and that teacher satisfaction and well-being increased significantly among participants in the programme (Felner et al., 1993[152]).

Italy, Portugal, and Spain: DREAMS – Fostering Diversity in Primary to Secondary School Transition to Prevent Early School Leaving

DREAMS, a project co-funded by the European Commission and implemented in Italy, Portugal, and Spain, aims at fostering diversity and inclusion in the primary-to-secondary school transition to prevent early school leaving. By putting a special emphasis on cultural diversity, gender, and minority groups and focusing on bullying, discrimination, and any type of violence, DREAMS wants to explore students' and the school communities' needs in relation to transition. Within the project, a new methodology based on Process Work and Theatre of the Oppressed[8] has been created, in which transitions are seen as opportunities to develop one's skills and in which diversity is understood as an asset in acquiring these skills (DREAMS, 2020[153]).

Through different activities (which include transnational partner meetings, staff and teacher training for them to learn the newly developed DREAMS methodology, pilot workshops at primary schools to try and evaluate the DREAMS methodology and further disseminate the resources, local open orientation fora as well as a conference to present project results, and continuous project quality and impact evaluations), the project is aimed at supporting students, their families, teachers, and the school community in ensuring a smooth primary-to-secondary school transition (DREAMS, 2020[153]). On the DREAMS website, one can access their Smooth Transition Toolkit, which includes different output products, such as several videos, a handbook for teachers and counsellors, a family booklet, a best practice report, and an online course for teachers, school staff, and educators (DREAMS, 2020[154]).

2.3.3. Inclusive teaching environments

The classroom environment is becoming increasingly diverse and heterogeneous (Brussino, 2021[155]; Forghani-Arani, Cerna and Bannon, 2019[156]). Developing an inclusive teaching environment is therefore critical to promoting equitable and inclusive learning opportunities by aligning education and school systems with students' needs. While the concept of inclusive education has traditionally been applied to promote the mainstreaming of students with special education needs, its understanding has gradually expanded to include other student groups, such as students with an immigrant background or ethnic groups, national minorities, and First Nations peoples (Brussino, 2020[71]). Inclusive teaching environments depend on how teaching is developed and carried out but also on building capacity of a diverse pool of teachers equipped with knowledge and skills to implement inclusive teaching.

Promoting inclusive teaching can help support the academic and broader well-being of all students, including at-risk students, and decrease the chances that students will leave school early and become NEET. Inclusive teaching can be conceptualised as the engagement of all students in learning through three key elements, which largely contribute to promoting or hampering diversity and inclusion in the classroom. These comprise the curriculum (what is taught), pedagogy (how it is taught), and assessment (how student learning is monitored). Inclusive pedagogies are important, as the way in which students are taught affects what and how students learn (Brussino, 2021[155]).

Teachers play a fundamental role in this by designing and implementing inclusive teaching practices that adequately meet diverse student needs and learning styles. Empirical evidence suggests that teacher-student congruence (e.g. shared belonging to ethnic groups and national minorities) is associated with higher academic performance as well as lower student absences, suspensions, and early dropouts (Brussino, 2021[155]). Yet, TALIS data from 2018 reveals that Australian classrooms are more diverse than the OECD average – they have "more students with special needs and migrant backgrounds, and more

non-native speakers and refugees than the OECD average" (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019[157]) Therefore, designing and implementing policies and practices to build teacher capacity for diversity and inclusion is important. Attracting and retaining diverse teachers is one key area to counteract the misalignment of diversity among teachers as well as students in initial teacher education and training (ITET) (European Commission, 2016[158]). More diversity in the teaching profession can be promoted through awareness-raising campaigns of the profession, supportive environments for student teachers from minority backgrounds, or financial incentives. Furthermore, it is essential to prepare prospective teachers for inclusive teaching, for instance, by making diversity and inclusion central objectives within the ITET and embedding diversity and inclusion as competences in the ITET and part of the curriculum. Learning does not stop when teachers qualify for classroom teaching. Instead, teacher development should be acknowledged as a lifelong learning process through continuous on-the-job learning to adapt to the changing needs of students and schools.

There exist various programmes across OECD countries that serve as examples on how teacher capacity for diversity and inclusion can be fostered across the different key areas. In the following, examples on attracting diverse teachers (Box 2.5) and examples on preparing teachers for inclusive teaching and teacher development (Box 2.6) are provided.

Box 2.5. Case study: Building teacher capacity for diversity and inclusion in Germany

Attracting diverse teachers

Awareness-raising campaigns in Germany seek to attract teachers from diverse backgrounds (e.g. immigrant background). The aim is to attract a more diverse teaching workforce, which is seen as an important prerequisite for promoting diversity and inclusion among teachers and overcoming the widespread under-representation of diverse groups.

In 2008, the nationwide campaign, implemented in collaboration with local universities, "Campus for pupils – More immigrants become teachers (*Mehr Migranten werden Lehrer*)" provided information to upper secondary students having a migrant background on the teacher training programme and opportunities of the profession. The first campus for pupils was initiated in 2008 in Hamburg, one of the German states (*Länder*), and the last one in March 2015. During the existence of the programme, courses were organised in ten of the 16 German states, reaching more than 770 upper secondary students, of which many have enrolled in an initial teacher education and training programme.

As part of the campaign, a four-day workshop was organised to foster the exchange between students and educators, trainee teachers, student teachers, and teachers with a migration background. The workshop included, among others, individual and group activities as well as practical work experience in schools and information on the formal requirements needed to access study programmes or the expected salary. This allowed upper secondary students to explore the opportunities and requirements for becoming a teacher to make an informed career decision.

Source: European Commission (2016[158]), *Study on the Diversity within the Teaching Profession with Particular Focus on Migrant and/or Minority Background*, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/873440.

Box 2.6. Preparing prospective teachers for inclusive teaching

Embedding of diversity and inclusion competences in initial teacher education in Sweden

Sweden offers courses that prepare prospective teachers for teaching and learning in multicultural school environments. Malmö University, for example, offers the course Learning and Teaching in Multicultural Schools, which seeks to prepare student teachers for their professional task of teaching within the context of diversity in pre-schools and schools and is part of the teacher training programme. The course provides prospective teachers with strategies and methods for teaching and learning in multi-ethnic and multilingual settings, language and concept development, such as second language acquisition, and reflecting on teaching and learning with regard to the perspectives of ethnicity, gender, and social class. The course combines theoretical studies with practical learning experiences in school (Malmö University, n.d.[159]; Malmö University, n.d.[160]).

Sensitisation of pedagogy students for dealing with different students in Switzerland and Catalonia (Spain)

Nightingale is a mentoring project which aims to contribute to the integration of student mentees, for instance, of disadvantaged or under-represented groups, and provide social insights to mentors. It also fosters cross-cultural understanding and intercultural learning (Leutwyler, Meierhans and Aegerter, 2014[161]; The Nightingale Mentoring Network, n.d.[162]). It was established in 1997 at the University of Malmö, Sweden, but has expanded nationally and internationally. The University of Teacher Education in Zug, Switzerland, implements the Nightingale mentoring project as part of its teacher training. Prospective teachers are paired with 8- to 12-year-old children, most of them having an immigrant background. Mentors and mentees informally meet over a period of nine months, between two to three hours per week (Leutwyler, Aegerter and Meierhans, 2014[163]). Qualitative evidence of the Nightingale project implemented by the University of Teacher Education in Zug, Switzerland, stresses that the unique one-on-one setting is helpful in providing prospective teachers insights into the mentees' and their families' social and cultural contexts (Leutwyler, Meierhans and Aegerter, 2014[161]). The evaluation of a similar Nightingale mentoring project implemented in Catalonia, Spain, provides quantitative evidence of higher educational aspirations and expectations of mentees compared to students with a similar profile who did not participate in the mentoring project. In Catalonia, mentees between 10 and 16 years-old and of foreign origin as well as students from various universities participated in the Nightingale project with three-hour weekly meetings over a period of nine months. While in the Nightingale programme in Zug mentors were exclusively students in teacher training, this was not the case for mentors in Catalonia (Feu Gelis, 2015[164]).

Mentoring programmes for teachers in New Zealand

A comprehensive induction and mentoring programme is an essential part of New Zealand's teacher education to accelerate the learning and expertise of newly qualified teachers (Forghani-Arani, Cerna and Bannon, 2019[156]). The Guidelines for Induction and Mentoring and Mentor Teachers provided by the Education Council were developed to provide nationally consistent, high-quality, and comprehensive support to provisionally certificated early-stage career teachers in the first few years of practice. The guidelines also take into account guidelines for new teachers in supporting Māori students (Education Council, 2015[165]). Induction refers to all support and guidance provided to newly graduated teachers and comprises ongoing professional development and support, access to external professional networks, as well as evaluations of professional practice. The programme provides the opportunity for new teachers to receive formative and progressive feedback on their professional learning. The focus of the mentoring is educative based on a relationship of trust and collegiality, building on mentors being able to work comfortably and supportively in a co-constructive relationship with the mentee.

Key policy lessons on education interventions

Educational interventions can help lower the chances of young people becoming NEET by strengthening their skills, improving their attitudes towards school and learning, and lowering the chances they will leave school early and without viable pathways to enter employment or training. Educational interventions can cover a wide range of areas, including system-wide interventions, school-level interventions, and co-ordination between school and non-school actions.

Educational interventions can be universal and targeted to support and incentivise the participation in school of young people who are at an especially high risk of leaving education early or of having a difficult transition into the labour market or training. Direct prevention interventions include early warning systems, the provision of additional support for at-risk students, and curriculum interventions. Indirect prevention interventions include promoting a whole school approach, facilitating the transition between different educational levels, and inclusive teaching.

Direct empirical evidence on the impact that different types of educational interventions have on the likelihood of individual students becoming NEET in their late teens or mid-twenties is relatively limited. However, indirect evidence shows positive associations between such interventions and the channels through which they could impact either the likelihood of staying in school until obtaining an upper secondary degree or of effectively transitioning into employment and/or training. This suggests that these interventions can have a long-term preventative effect against being NEET through educational and non-educational pathways.

Ensure that students finalise their education pathway. School completion is comparatively high in Australia, but nonetheless, in 2017, the share of early leavers from education ranged from 6% to 16% of the 18 to 24 age group across Australian States and Territories. Supporting students to finish their education pathway is critical for ensuring a smooth transition from school to work and to reduce the share of students who are neither employed, nor in education or training. Monitoring and identifying students at risk of dropping out early from the education system and providing relevant support are important components to ensure that students reach academic milestones. In Australia, the state of Victoria introduced the “Student Mapping Tool” which helps teachers identify students at risk of dropping out, choose the appropriate intervention and programmes for the student, and then monitor their progress. Other Australian States and Territories could consider introducing similar monitoring tools.

Provide additional support to at-risk students. Taking into account various dimensions of students’ diversity, including their socio-economic and identity characteristics and special education needs, is important to ensure that no one falls behind on key academic milestones and drops out. Interventions should be put in place by taking into account increasingly diverse and heterogeneous classrooms by for instance providing inclusive education curricula, such was the case with the introduction of First Nations peoples Histories and Cultures as a cross-curriculum priority or by providing the necessary technological assistance. The new National Agreement on Closing the Gap is a key opportunity for stakeholders to work together to overcome the inequality experienced by First Nations peoples by putting forward new policies to provide support to First Nations peoples students.

Support teachers to create an inclusive learning environment. Teachers are a fundamental element of creating inclusive teaching environments that adequately meet diverse student needs and learning styles. Building teacher capacity for diversity and inclusion is key: attracting diverse teachers can be very helpful but needs to be accompanied by a general policy of fostering, preparing, and supporting teachers to develop diversity and inclusion competences. Efforts have been undertaken in Australia to enhance teacher quality, for example with the High Achieving Teachers Programme. However, more

emphasis could be placed on training teachers to teach diverse classes. For example, as part of the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, States and Territories could be encouraged to develop formal programmes where teachers learn from Aboriginal Leaders about Aboriginal history and culture, thereby becoming more culturally sensitive in their teaching and improving the school experience of Aboriginal children.

Use questionnaires to predict who will struggle with the primary-to-secondary school transition. The transition from primary to secondary school is considered to be one of the most stressful experiences young adolescents have to go through. Whether students have successfully transitioned to the next educational level can usually be seen in how well they are academically and behaviourally involved in school and whether they feel a sense of belonging. One way to predict students' adjustment is the use of questionnaires tailored to primary school teachers, such as the Secondary Transition Adjustment Research Tool (START) questionnaire.

Support a smooth primary-to-secondary school transition. Interventions that are aimed at supporting students when they transition to the next educational level can target students who are at the end of primary school, focus on supporting them once they start secondary school, or try to create a stronger link between primary and secondary schools. For instance, the implementation of "bridging units" or the organisation of cross-phase visits or observations allow primary students to familiarise themselves with early secondary school work and potentially meet their future classmates, both of which are associated with lowering children's school anxiety.

Use "partnership brokers" to foster stronger partnerships among stakeholders and to support smooth transitions. Strong partnerships between education and training providers, business and industry, parents and families, and community groups are important to foster a strategic, whole-of-community approach to support young people's learning, development, and transition across grades and into the workforce. The Australian Government's School, Business and Community Partnership Brokers Program (2010-14) was one such programme that aimed to improve education and transition outcomes for all young people by using a national network of providers to broker sustainable partnerships between various stakeholders. Due to lack of funding, the programme was discontinued. However, with renewed political interest, such a programme could be reintroduced to enhance the whole school approach and support a smooth primary-to-secondary school transition.

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Notes

[1] In 2020, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) was replaced by the National Cabinet and the National Federation Reform Council (NFRC) (The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2020[16])

[2] Note: financial support for young people undertaking full-time study is available via Youth Allowance (Student or Apprentice).

[3] Koorie is the name for Aboriginal Australians that come from the region of southern New South Wales and Victoria.

[4] Upper secondary first-time graduation rates of people younger than 25 years. A first-time graduate at a given level of education is a person who, during the reference school or academic year, successfully completed an education programme at the given level for the first time. First-time graduates only include those who have never graduated from programmes at the same ISCED level before. The number of first-time graduates is in general smaller than the total of all graduates in the reference year. First-time graduates normally graduate from the first degree or qualification level in the national degree structure. In

some countries, however, students may also graduate for the first time from second or further degrees (OECD, 2021[44])

[5] Referring to the age group 25-29.

[6] Referring to the age group 25-34.

[7] Policy interventions and the literature use various synonyms to refer to individual education plans, among these are the inclusive education plans, individual study plans, and individualised education programs.

[8] "Process work is a method which facilitates the transformation and growth of individuals and groups based on a deep understanding of diversity. It is used to redistribute power in groups, address conflict as an opportunity, challenge the hopelessness of achieving change, improve group processes, and transform conflict into spaces for reflection and action. (…) Forum Theatre is a basic tool within the Theatre of the Oppressed methodology. It seeks the staging of conflicts, so that the audience can propose alternatives and try them out on stage in order to rehearse real life situations. It provides a safe and participatory space for reflection and action with inclusion of all voices where diversity is a basic key for creation and searching for alternatives." (DREAMS, 2020[153])