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ETUCE Statement on EU strategy on the rights of the child (2021-2024)

(adopted by ETUCE Bureau on 3 November 2020)

Building upon the 2006 Communication "[Towards an EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#)" and the 2011 [EU Agenda for the Rights of the Child](#), the European Commission is preparing a new strategy on the rights of the child for 2021-2024 and launched a public consultation to collect the views of various stakeholders. The consultation is open until 8 December 2020 via [this link](#).

According to the European Commission's [Roadmap](#), 'the new Strategy will provide a comprehensive policy framework for children's rights, bringing all existing and future EU actions and policies on children's rights under one single umbrella'. The strategy will focus on several thematic areas, including child participation to the democratic and political life in the EU; children's rights in the digital and information society; violence against children; health, welfare and social inclusion; education, leisure and culture; child-friendly justice; migration; and children affected by armed conflicts. It will also include horizontal actions to foster mainstreaming and coordination.

The following Statement represents the views of ETUCE* and its member organisations on the key points that should be addressed in the upcoming EU Strategy on the rights of the child.

1. In the light of UN Sustainable Development Goals, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, European Pillar of Social Rights, and other international and European instruments for the rights of the child, ETUCE reminds that **high quality and inclusive public education is one of the key fundamental rights** of every child, regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, abilities and educational needs, economic status, ethnic origin, language, religion, and migratory and citizenship status. The **key role of education** is not only to prepare children 'to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market' as stipulated in the 1st principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, but also to realise the full potential of every student regardless of their cultural or socio-economic background, providing them with equal opportunities and fair chances for a good life, decent employment, housing and participation in the democratic life of Europe and their country.¹ Furthermore, equality can and has to be learned through specific classroom activities at all level (from early childhood education to vocational and higher education) to fight against violence and discrimination.
2. This fundamental right can be fully realised only if the education system is based on **sustainable and sufficient public funding, an attractive teaching profession, and strong and effective social dialogue** involving education trade unions in decision-

¹ See [ETUCE Statement on European Skills Agenda "Skills development must respect holistic education"](#).

making². Teachers, trainers and other education personnel are key to ensuring that every child's right to high quality and inclusive education is fully realised and to preparing open-minded and responsible citizens with solid democratic values. Therefore, **decent working conditions and attractive career opportunities, relevant and sustainable initial and continuous professional development, professional autonomy and safe and inclusive working environments**, provided for all teachers, trainers and other education personnel are fundamental requirements for implementing the rights of the child.

3. In the '[Position on Public Consultation on a European Child Guarantee Initiative](#)', ETUCE already highlighted the crucial importance of ensuring the right to high quality and inclusive public education to every child from a very early age, **including from birth until the starting of compulsory schooling**, as numerous [studies](#) show that the first years of children have a profound impact on their future life chances. Early schooling allows students who are least familiar with the school culture to develop language and social skills. It also strengthens the links between school and families and contributes to reducing inequalities. ETUCE demands that Member States find sustainable solutions and increase public investment to guarantee that all children have equal access to **quality and inclusive early-childhood education** '*structured around a play-based learning method that allows children to healthily develop their emotional and cognitive abilities and their social identity*'. The EU Strategy on the rights of the child should include early childhood education as a **universal and free entitlement to all children** in Europe.
4. Ensuring that every child has equal access to high-quality and inclusive public education also requires taking into account **specific needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups**, including migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, socio-economically disadvantaged groups, ethnic minorities, and others, and providing them with targeted support. The European Commission's roadmap singles out the specific situation of migrant children³ and children affected by armed conflicts. ETUCE demands that the Strategy also focuses on combatting gender stereotypes and **ensuring gender equality** in education and society as a whole; inclusion of **children with disabilities and special needs**⁴ and support to their families; and inclusion of **children from socio-economically disadvantaged and ethnic minority (e.g. Roma⁵) backgrounds** in education and society as a whole.
5. **Violence against children**⁶ is a significant challenge for ensuring the equal rights for all children, especially regarding the right to high-quality education. One of the key elements of inclusive education is **safe physical and social learning environments free of violence, bullying and discrimination** and where the freedoms of opinion and expression are respected. The issue is especially relevant for LGBTI children who often encounter difficulties due to policies, prejudices, bullying and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Many times, these encounters force LGBTI children to hide their identity or even drop-

² See [ETUCE Campaign 'Shape the Future of Europe with Teachers'](#).

³ See [ETUCE Statement on the European Action Plan on the integration and inclusion of migrants and people with a migrant background](#).

⁴ See [ETUCE Statement on the public consultation on the implementation of the European disability strategy 2010-2020](#).

⁵ See [ETUCE Statement on the EU post-2020 Roma equality and inclusion policy](#).

⁶ See [ETUCE Guidelines on 'How to Prevent and Mitigate Third-Party Violence and Harassment in Schools'](#).

out from schools. The Strategy on the rights of the child should demand a clear commitment from Member States to **fight homophobia, biphobia and transphobia** in the education institutions, media and society at large to ensure that LGBTI children can fully enjoy their rights and are not discriminated against.

6. In the light of the **current COVID-19 crisis** and distance teaching measures linked to it, Europe was strongly reminded that provision of education is central to maintaining a sense of normality for students, parents and communities and that distance and online education cannot and should not replace face-to-face education.⁷ The transposition of the pedagogical relationship from the classroom to the family circle risks reinforcing educational inequalities correlated with social inequalities. The devastating effect that the pandemic and remote schooling had on **equal access to high-quality and inclusive education** for all children must be taken into account by the future EU Strategy on the rights of the child, including the risk of losing children from disadvantaged backgrounds from education to child labour, child marriages, trafficking, etc. Learning from COVID-19 lessons, the Strategy should suggest sustainable solutions, including the rights of children in digital and information society, to ensure that no child is left behind at any moment because of not having access to **appropriate digital and communication devices and tools** or because of facing specific individual and/or social barriers.⁸
7. The digital revolution is quickly transforming the world and society at large, bringing many benefits but also challenges to the implementation of the rights of children, including the dangerous impact of commercialisation, skills gap, online bullying, and others. ETUCE supports the **use of digital tools for inclusion**⁹ as a tool for supporting personalised learning needs and promoting individual learning opportunities as well as for enhancing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, e-safety and digital democratic citizenship. However, to ensure that the rights of all children are respected, digitalisation of education must be supported by **public investment in developing technologies**, digital tools, and teaching content for education, as well as by the **provision of sufficient training on digital skills** for teachers and for students, taking into account the **digital gender gap**.
8. While Internet and communication technologies open many possibilities for young people, expanding their perspectives and providing opportunities to learn and participate in society, they also bring along exposure to risks, such as inadvertent release of private information, cyberbullying or online harassment. Furthermore, it could lead to excessive individualisation of learning instead of active pedagogy and social interactions necessary for learning. Therefore, **digital citizenship, critical thinking and e-safety** are crucial for supporting children to participate safely, effectively, critically and responsibly in a world with social media and digital technologies. It is also important to allow the necessary professional debates and further research to develop on the aims and uses of digital technology in educational institutions.
9. Regarding the participation of children in the democratic and political life in the EU, ETUCE believes that education plays a crucial role in **preparing open-minded, critical thinking, reflective and active citizens** who care about their society, the

⁷ See [ETUCE Statement on “Achieving the European Education Area”](#).

⁸ See [ETUCE Statement on the road to recovery from the COVID-19 crisis](#).

⁹ See [ETUCE Position Paper on the new EU Digital Education Action Plan 2020](#).

world and environment they live in, and future generations.¹⁰ That is why supporting policy frameworks on **democratic citizenship education as a transversal subject**, based on adequate resources (time, staff, financial, technical) and the full commitment of all stakeholders, including education employers and school leaders, are prerequisites for active participation of children in the social and democratic life in Europe and their countries. Furthermore, there is a growing need for high quality pedagogic leisure time facilities to children and young people **outside school hours**.

10. Even though the proposed EU strategy on the rights of the child is focused mainly on EU countries, ETUCE highlights the importance of ensuring the protection of the rights of the child not only in EU's internal but **also external actions**, supporting countries outside the EU on protecting and supporting children.

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

¹⁰ See [ETUCE's views on European Democracy Action Plan](#).