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COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Stronger education foundations for all in the age of AI

{SWD(2026) 775 final}

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1. Introduction

Europe's ability to prosper and compete, to protect its democracy and to give every young person a fair start in life is being tested by three simultaneous challenges and a persistent decline in basic skills. How Europe responds will increasingly be decided in its classrooms.

First, **a new industrial revolution driven by artificial intelligence (AI)**[1] **is creating a skills gap in the EU**. Yet 40% of EU citizens still lack very basic digital skills. At the specialist end, the shortfall is just as pronounced[2] and AI adoption generates a need for new talent in key strategic sectors[3]. AI is not only creating new occupations and industries, it is changing the tasks, skills and ways of working associated with existing jobs, outpacing education and training systems. European competitiveness relies on a solid human capital built on strong basic skills.

Second, **democracy in the EU is increasingly under threat from disinformation and foreign interference**. As many as 87% of EU citizens agree that online manipulation – including AI-generated content and deepfakes – poses a threat to democratic processes[4]. Education has an essential role in equipping citizens with the skills needed to assess information and to develop the competences that enable learners to participate constructively in democratic life.

Third, **too many children are being exposed too early to an online world they are not ready to navigate**. While digital technologies create opportunities for civic engagement and learning, large numbers of 13-to 18-year-old Europeans report facing hard-to-recognise AI-generated content (39%), false or misleading information (35%), or hate speech (25%)[5].

These challenges share one common requirement: people must have the knowledge and skills to flourish in today's complex digital world, competitive labour market and democracies. However, the latest PISA results and other international surveys confirm a persistent decline in basic skills among young people (literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills). Around one in three 15-year-olds in the EU now underachieve in literacy and mathematics, and one in four in science[6], while the share of top-performing pupils is falling[7]. Socio-economic background retains its outsized impact[8] and the EU is

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1 European Commission (2025), *Shaping the Future of AI Talent in Europe: Strategies for Growth and Retention*.

2 European Commission (2026), *State of the Digital Decade 2026: Closing structural gaps and mobilising investments for 2030 and beyond*.

3 Ibid.

4 European Commission (2026), *Digital decade, Special Eurobarometer 572*, February-March 2026, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3682.

5 European Commission (2026), *Impact of excessive screen time and social media on young people's mental health, Flash Eurobarometer 579*, April 2026, https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3686.

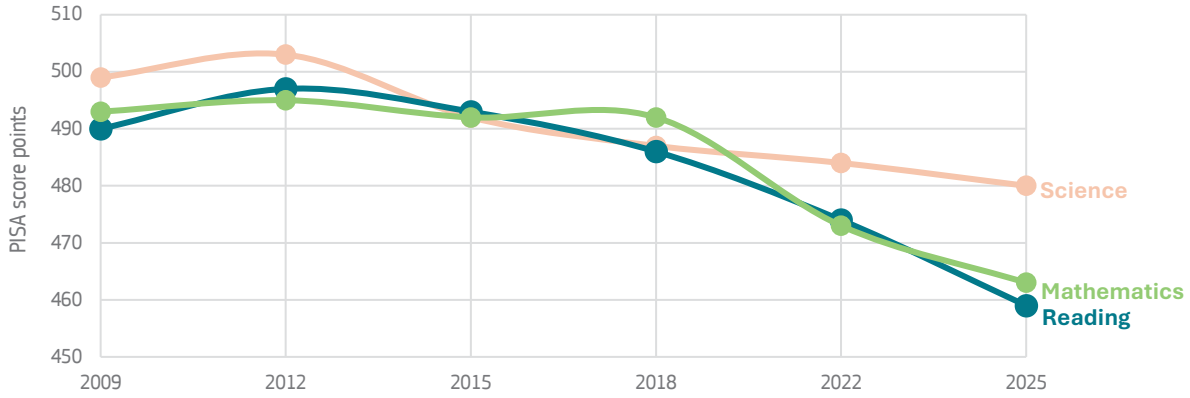
6 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *EU PISA 2025 – First results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/1115282.

7 The share of top performance among 15-year-olds in literacy stands at 4.8% (down from 6.5% in 2022), mathematics at 6.8% (down from 7.9% in 2022) and science at 6.4% (down from 6.9% in 2022). European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *EU PISA 2025 – First results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/1115282.

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trailing other major economies in educational performance[9]. Underachievement in digital skills exceeds 40%[10], while an estimated 68% of eighth graders (age 13-14) demonstrate an adequate level of civic knowledge[11].

Figure 1. The EU is on a downward trend for reading, mathematics and science.



Source: European Commission calculations based on OECD PISA.

Multiple factors are associated with the decline in basic skills[12]. Such factors include overloaded curricula, with insufficient time earmarked for sustained reading and writing, as well as insufficient uptake of efficient, evidence-based practices and measures, including evaluation methods. Furthermore, teacher shortages are particularly concerning and exacerbated by the ageing of the teaching workforce, with only 8% of teachers being under the age of 30[13]. Limited support for teacher collaboration and professional development combined with high administrative burden, reduce teachers' capacity to focus on effective teaching and student support. Competing demands on schools, limited resources to support both underperformers and high achievers, over-reliance on, and uncritical use of, digital

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8 Only 15.6% of 15-year-olds with a disadvantaged socio-economic background performed well in at least one domain (literacy, mathematics or science) in PISA 2025. European Commission's *2026 Education and Training Monitor* (forthcoming).

9 Compared with non-EU G7 countries (US, UK, Japan, Canada), the EU has the highest 2025 underachievement rate in reading and science, and the second highest (after the US) in mathematics. As regards top performance, the EU has the lowest rate in all three subjects. European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *EU PISA 2025 – First results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/1115282.

10 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) in Europe, 2023 – Main findings and educational policy implications*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2024, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/5221263.

11 Caution is warranted as this indicator has limited country coverage (until The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2027) and does not capture the breadth of citizenship competences. European Commission's *2026 Education and Training Monitor* (forthcoming); Damiani, V. et al., editors. *Young Citizens' Views and Engagement in a Changing Europe: IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2022 European Report*, Springer Cham, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68631-3.

12 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *EU PISA 2025 – First results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/1115282; OECD (2026), *PISA 2025 Results (Volume I): Future-Ready Students*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/73451bc5-en.

13 The share of teachers under the age of 30 (8%) is far smaller than the share of those aged 50 or above (around 40%) and notably 11% of teachers are aged 60 or over (Eurostat).

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technologies, waning family engagement with learning, and outdated facilities[14] also impact on schools' and pupils' performance. Weak school-level rules on the use of digital technologies are other important factors. Learning gaps build up from the earliest stages of education and are often identified and responded to too late.

Low basic skills carry high economic and social costs. Basic skills are essential for individual fulfilment and a sense of agency throughout life. Young people with stronger skills also enjoy better employment prospects, and this translates into higher earnings. Each additional year of education is associated, on average, with about 7% higher earnings[15]. Estimates suggest that improving young people's basic skills could increase the EU's GDP by up to 30% in the long term[16]. Conversely, for children growing up in poverty, weak basic skills mean fewer opportunities to thrive and to break the transmission of disadvantages across generations, which already costs our societies 3.4% of GDP each year[17]. Without stronger education foundations for all, the EU risks missing its poverty targets[18], weakening social and territorial cohesion, democratic resilience and strategic autonomy. Without quick action, these risks could snowball into rapidly rising costs.

Education must be a cornerstone of the EU's response to the declining basis skills and current challenges. Education equips people with the skills that drive competitiveness, fosters informed, engaged citizens, and it empowers the youngest in society to prepare for and shape their own future. Schools and teachers help learners develop basic skills and key competences, foster active citizenship and a sense of belonging, and nurture a lifelong commitment to learning.

2. A whole-of-government vision for future-proofing education

The EU needs education systems that are future-proof: systems which (i) provide every young person with strong basic skills, (ii) have enough well-prepared teachers, (iii) govern technology so that it serves education safely and effectively; and (iv) offer vocational education and training (VET) that keeps pace with a changing economy.

To realise this ambition, education must be a top political priority at EU and national level, as competitiveness, strategic autonomy and defence all depend on it. Action is needed at several levels at once: from investment and reforms of education systems to the conditions in schools and the adoption of technology. This requires clear decisions and political leadership at the highest level, to set the direction, mobilise all relevant policy areas and ensure that commitments translate into action.

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14 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2022. Investing in our future – *Quality investment in education and training. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Investing in our future* - Publications Office of the EU.

15 Psacharopoulos G. and Patrinos H.A. (2018). Returns to investment in education: a decennial review of the global literature. *Education Economics*, 26(5), pp. 445-458.

16 Hanushek E.A. and Woessmann L. (2019). *The Economic Benefits of Improving Educational Achievement in the European Union: An Update and Extension*. EENEE Analytical Report No 39.

17 Clarke, C. et al. (2022), "The economic costs of childhood socio-economic disadvantage in European OECD countries", *OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities*, No. 9, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/8c0c66b9-en; UNESCO, OECD and Commonwealth Secretariat (2024), *The Price of Inaction: The global private, fiscal and social costs of children and youth not learning*, https://doi.org/10.54675/CLQR7114.

18 The EU has committed to a 2030 target of reducing the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion by at least 15 million, including at least 5 million children – a target welcomed by the European Council on 25 June 2021. The recently adopted Anti-Poverty Strategy also aims to help eradicate poverty by 2050.

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This Communication proposes action to improve the structural conditions for effective education and training policies with targeted measures to accelerate implementation and the uptake of evidence. It focuses on four mutually reinforcing priorities:

- first, **raising achievement in basic skills** faster for struggling and high performing learners alike, with autonomy for teachers and schools to act and adapt to specific contexts, empowered school management, clearer focus on basic skills with fewer competing demands and faster uptake of evidence-based measures in the classroom;

- second, **strengthening the teaching profession**, by enhancing its attractiveness, addressing shortages, and ensuring that teachers have the training, access to professional development, working conditions and support, and relief from administrative tasks, needed to respond to increasingly diverse classrooms and rapid technological change;

- third, **building the capabilities to deploy and govern digital and AI-enabled education effectively**, ensuring that technology strengthens learning and learners' own basic skills rather than replacing them, and is human-centred, inclusive, and compliant with European law, while contributing to the EU's strategic autonomy through open standards and an interoperable EdTech market;

- fourth, **making vocational education and training in the EU more agile, more strategic and better connected with employers** to bolster its central role in equipping people with the skills needed in a rapidly changing economy.

This Communication is part of a wider Education and Skills Package, that includes the proposal for a **Council Recommendation on reversing the decline in basic skills**[19], the proposal for a **Council Recommendation on an attractive teaching profession**[20] and the establishment of a **European Digital Infrastructure Consortium on Education**. It is accompanied by a **European Strategy on vocational education and training**[21], focusing on the specific role of VET in meeting changing skills needs. Coordinated actions are needed to connect the EU, national, regional and local levels, so that strategic priorities, investment and evidence are translated into an effective and efficient implementation where learning takes place. Together, these initiatives will contribute to the EU's wider human-capital, competitiveness, digital and social policy agenda.

Quality, inclusive education and training make cities and regions more attractive places to live, work and thrive. The Commission addresses territorial challenges linked to basic skills, human capital and quality education through its territorial strategies[22] and in the upcoming Right to Stay Strategy.

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19 COM(2026) 785.

20 COM(2026) 795.

21 COM(2026) 805.

22 EU strategies for islands and coastal communities; A new strategic vision for the EU's outermost regions: Strengthening the Union's global reach; EU Agenda for Cities; Communication on the EU's eastern regions bordering Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.

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The Package also has an external dimension. It will help gradually integrate candidate countries into relevant EU education initiatives[23]. It will also reinforce the EU's international outreach and cooperation, including in the context of the Global Gateway strategy[24], by providing new opportunities to exchange knowledge and good practices, support progress towards UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education[25], and help build the skills needed to support and sustain EU investments.

3. Governance and investment

Future-proofing education requires effective governance and sustained investment. Education and training should be central to national economic, reform and investment strategies, with a focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of spending and governance structures. The four priorities identified above should help to inform reform and investment choices.

The EU Member States have jointly set clear targets for basic skills. In June 2026, Member States agreed EU-level targets for 2030: (i) to bring the share of 15-year-olds with low achievement in reading, mathematics and science, and the share of eighth graders (age 13-14) with low achievement in computer and information literacy, to below 15%; (ii) to increase the share of 15-year-olds with top performance in reading, mathematics and science to at least 12%; and (iii) to increase the share of 15-year-olds from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds with good results in at least one skill (reading, mathematics or science) to at least 25%[26]. The Commission calls on Member States to set out how they intend to contribute to meeting these targets through structural reform measures, to make them a national priority and to follow up within the European Semester.

The EU can support national efforts. The **European Semester** provides the framework for integrating education and skills into broader national and regional reforms and investments in line with common EU priorities. The 2026 Council Recommendation on human capital[27] strengthens this approach by drawing attention to the need to address bottlenecks in human capital formation and improve the effectiveness of investment, including through stronger links between skills, productivity, employment and social inclusion. The next Recommendation on Human Capital should set out shared EU-wide priorities for tackling the structural challenges in education, skills and training and provide an overarching framework for pursuing the whole-of-government approaches.

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23 Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: *Preparing for a wider Union*, COM(2026) 705 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52026DC0705&qid=1792673948619 .

24 European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2021), Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank: the Global Gateway, JOIN(2021) 30 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021JC0030&qid=1792674746089.

25 United Nations General Assembly, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UN Doc. A/RES/70/1, 25 September 2015, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3923923?v=pdf. Goal 4: 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all'.

26 Council Resolution on the second cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (2026-2030), http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

27 Council Recommendation of 9 March 2026 on human capital in the European Union, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/1687/oj/eng.

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The **European Education Area (EEA)** strategic framework and its instruments will be fully mobilised to assist Member States and accelerate identification of efficient, evidence-based policy measures and reforms, in alignment with the two proposals for Council Recommendations brought forward in this Package. The country-specific recommendations adopted in the European Semester–cycle can then translate these priorities into targeted reform guidance for individual Member States, where relevant. The results of cooperation under the European Education Area will continue to feed into the European Semester. Together, these frameworks can help Member States identify effective measures to reach agreed targets, strengthen implementation capacity and make better use of comparable data and evidence.

National reforms and investments should follow. While expenditure per student increased from EUR 7,600 to EUR 9,000 at EU level between 2019 and 2023, the share of public expenditure devoted to education and skills remains below pre-pandemic levels in no fewer than 23 Member States[28]. National, regional and local budgets provide the largest share of education investment and therefore remain the main lever for strengthening systems. In 2024, these education budgets amounted to around EUR 860 billion, equivalent to 4.8% of GDP and 9.7% of total public expenditure[29]. In a context of limited public resources, it is important that governments prioritise growth-enhancing expenditure on the next generations. In some instances, falling pupil numbers will bring about reorganisation needs for education systems that could allow the Member States to achieve efficiencies and raise investment per pupil, in particular for disadvantaged pupils.

Higher spending per student can contribute to better learning outcomes but it is not sufficient on its own. PISA 2025 shows that science performance improves when cumulative expenditure per student[30] increases – but only up to EUR 75 000 and not beyond it, highlighting that **how resources are used matters as much as how much is spent**. In addition to curricula, assessment and teacher workforce, analysis under the European Semester identifies teacher quality (qualifications and professional development), early childhood education and care and tutoring as effective levers for improving education outcomes. Teacher compensation accounts for 65% of total public education expenditure. But this investment is justified: teachers are the most critical school-related factor determining student outcomes. Reforms increasing school autonomy and active learning time also have potential benefits. Other factors – such as the working environment – play an important role[31] with well-maintained infrastructure having positive effects on learning outcomes[32]. Approximately EUR 45 billion go to investment in infrastructure in EU countries, representing 7% of expenditure on schools[33].

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28 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Montanari, M. and Gambi, L. (2026), *Investing in education 2026 – Focus on the teaching profession*, Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/4146282.

29 Behind spending on social protection, health, economic affairs and general public services.

30 From the country-specific start of compulsory education to age 15 (typically 9-10 years of cumulative expenditure).

31 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, Montanari, M. and Gambi, L., *Investing in education 2026 – Focus on the teaching profession*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/4146282.

32 Fack, G., Agasisti, T., Bonal, X., De Witte, K., Dohmen, D., Haase, S., Hylen, J., McCoy, S., Neycheva, M., Pantea, M.C., Pastore, F., Pausits, A., Poder, K., Puukka, J., and Velissaratou, J. (2022). *Investing in our future: quality investment in education and training*, Final report of the Commission expert group on quality investment in education and training.

33 Measured as the share of gross capital formation in general government expenditure on pre-primary, primary and secondary education in the Eurostat COFOG database. All data refer to 2024.

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Investment therefore needs to address identified bottlenecks and be accompanied by reforms that strengthen implementation and improve the effectiveness of spending, taking into account the diversity and complexity of education systems and their broader contexts. Greater use of evidence, monitoring and evaluation should help direct resources towards measures with the strongest potential impact[34].

EU funding complements national investment. Around EUR 150 billion is allocated to education and skills under the 2021–2027 EU budget. Under the next multiannual financial framework (2028-2034) support will continue strengthening Europe's human capital, address skills shortages, and improve preparedness for economic and technological change, through instruments including Erasmus+, Horizon Europe[35], the European Competitiveness Fund[36], and the National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs)[37]. In particular, the NRPPs can accelerate structural reforms in education and training in Member States, mobilise investments aligned with these reforms, and monitor progress through measurable results and outcomes. By embedding education reforms as part of a broader package of country-specific investments and reforms, NRPPs could help to ensure that measures address identified structural challenges - consistent with national education policy objectives - while addressing the shared EU priorities identified in the Recommendation on Human Capital and advancing joint progress towards the EEA targets.

With regard to industry, the Commission will launch an initiative to support industry in securing a high-quality talent pipeline in the EU, in view of the AI transformation and European strategic autonomy. Moreover, EU instruments such as the European Competitiveness Fund can support skills and in strategic sectors and help leverage private investment, notably in the EdTech sector.

Better coordination between economic governance, investment decisions and sectoral cooperation is essential. EU support should contribute to reform priorities, implementation capacity and measurable progress, helping Member States turn investment and evidence into better education outcomes. In addition, successful implementation requires action also at regional and local level. To this end, the Commission will work towards a Memorandum of Understanding with the European Committee of the Regions to mobilise local and regional authorities in the implementation of this Package.

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34 A common methodology is provided by the '*Voluntary Guiding Principles for EU Member States for evaluating economic effects of reforms and investments in the labour market, skills and social policy domains*', endorsed by the Council in June 2024, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10779-2024-INIT/en/pdf. The rollout of Satellite Accounts for Education and Training will improve the measurement of returns on investment in human capital. The Social Investment Knowledge Hub (https://employment-social-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies-and-activities/coordination-employment-and-social-policies/social-investment-knowledge-hub_en) and the Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training (https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/learning-lab) can help.

35 The current Horizon Europe already supports the contribution of basic skills to productivity, innovation, competitiveness and economic growth. This support may continue as relevant. The programme will also continue to support the development of researchers' skills and talent and the responsible use of AI in producing knowledge. See https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/news/all-research-and-innovation-news/horizon-europe-2028-2034-twice-bigger-simpler-faster-and-more-impactful-2025-07-16_en.

36 https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/access-finance/european-competitiveness-fund_en.

37 EU budget 2028-2034.

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Education is also a right as set out in the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. Its first principle states that everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and lifelong learning. This package contributes to putting that principle into practice, through stronger basic skills, an attractive teaching profession and vocational pathways into quality jobs. The upcoming 2027 Summit on the European Pillar of Social Rights could provide political momentum to embed education firmly across the core policies advancing its implementation.

4. Delivering on the four priorities

Achieving a shared vision of future-proof education systems requires action at two complementary levels. First, the Member States need to strengthen the structural conditions in which education systems operate, through sustained investment, reforms and capacity-building, with EU support. Second, this needs to be complemented by targeted action at the point of learning to support schools, teachers and learners to put change into practice and to scale up what works. The actions below connect these two levels, combining structural investment and reforms to strengthen education systems with targeted EU actions.

4.1. Strong foundations for every learner

Every young person needs to be equipped with literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills[38] to navigate a rapidly changing world. These **five basic skills** enable learners to think critically, understand the world around them, learn independently and with others, develop their talents and participate fully in society and democratic life. They are the foundation for more advanced knowledge and skills.

Reversing the decline in basic skills requires education reforms which are embedded in every Member State's broader economic and societal strategies and policies. Strategic direction and reforms at system level[39] should be accompanied with appropriate support systems helping schools translate them into concrete actions. Such support can be found in high-performing education systems[40]. Schools need to have the operational autonomy and flexibility[41] to focus on basic skills and to direct effort where it is most needed, while remaining accountable for progress.

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on reversing the decline in basic skills

It proposes to strengthen the capacity of education and training systems to translate agreed priorities into concrete policy action and tangible improvements in basic skills, guided by

[38] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Action Plan on Basic Skills, COM(2025) 88, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0088.

[39] For an overview of recent education reforms, see European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency (2025), *Addressing underachievement in literacy, mathematics and science – Policy changes in European school education since 2020*, Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/1883015.

[40] Yan, Y., Sakata, N., Choi, T., and Bell, S. (forthcoming), Learning from high-performing extra-EU systems, ENESET report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

[41] International evidence suggests that greater autonomy can be associated with stronger student outcomes, but particularly when it is accompanied by strong leadership, teacher capacity and quality-assurance mechanisms. OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/a97db61c-en.

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needs and potential impact. It is backed up by evidence-based measures[42], anchored in the right system-level conditions and inclusivity[43] needed for their success. It sets out how to link the system level with the school level, ensuring faster translation of policy into school environment, through closer collaboration between schools and stronger advisory and support services for schools[44].

The challenge facing education systems is no longer only to identify successful practices, but in particular to scale them up: faster, more widely and with clear evidence of impact and results. Inside the classroom, evidence consistently points to effective approaches, including better teaching methods, formative assessment and early identification of learning needs, targeted tutoring and additional learning time[45]. School leaders and teachers need the capacity, time and resources to adapt teaching and organise targeted support, with clear quality assurance arrangements.

The EU can help schools, teachers and school authorities to work with education experts to test proven approaches, adapt them to their context and practices and scale up what works across schools, borders and systems. TALIS 2024 shows that collaboration among teachers helps teachers fulfil their lesson aims. EU-led actions can support adoption of performance-based approaches, with self-reflection at school level and expert advice, while reducing persistent disparities across regions that also affect the capacity of schools and local and regional authorities to engage in European cooperation. In addition, new approaches are required to achieve long-term impact and scale up the results of cooperation, for which schools often lack the capacity[46]. Where school authorities have the mandate and the capacity,

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42 Targeted measures may include more effective teaching methods, early assessment and identification of learning needs, targeted tutoring and mentoring, additional learning time, the safe and age-appropriate use of digital and AI-enabled tools, closer cooperation with families and other stakeholders, stronger school leadership, and continuity of support across educational transitions. See Part 1 of the European Commission 2026 staff working document '*Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services*' (SWD(2026) 795).

43 System-level conditions should be built on an inclusive approach, which actively supports pupils facing discrimination and additional barriers. Attention to differences between boys and girls can help tackle the disparities in basic skills between them, while learning in mainstream settings with appropriate support is essential for every child to learn and thrive. This will particularly benefit pupils with disabilities and Roma pupils. Enabling factor at system level are summarised in Part 2 of the European Commission 2026 staff working document '*Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services*' (SWD(2026) 795).

44 For a mapping of advisory and support services across all Member States, see Part 3 of the European Commission 2026 staff working document '*Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services*' (SWD(2026) 795). For its work on Strengthening the Impact of Education Research, the OECD has explored the gap between educational research and practice, including a failure to translate research findings into tangible improvements in teaching and learning. The work highlights the pivotal role of knowledge intermediaries, organisations facilitate engagement with research among policy makers and practitioners, supporting evidence-informed decision making and practices in education: OECD (2025), *Everybody Cares About Using Education Research Sometimes: Perspectives of Knowledge Intermediaries, Educational Research and Innovation*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/5ef88972-en.

45 Part 1 of the European Commission 2026 staff working document '*Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services*' (SWD(2026) 795).

46 Commission staff working document, Evaluation, Interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme; accompanying the document Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on the Interim evaluation of the 2021-2027 Erasmus+ programme and final evaluation of the 2014-2020 Erasmus+ programme, SWD/2025/186 final, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex:52025SC0186.

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they can scale up results to system level, but their participation in European cooperation projects in school education has so far been very limited[47]. To provide schools and school authorities with practical reference points for setting learning goals in basic skills that are both realistic and sufficiently ambitious, the Commission will consider assisting interested Member States in comparing education system's learning goals per grade against the standards used in international large-scale assessments.

European School Alliances

European School Alliances focus on increasing basic skills performance through impactful measures and shared experiences between schools in different Member States. The Alliances develop and exchange effective approaches, by bringing together schools and school authorities in sustained, long-term, strategic partnerships, to improve their pupils' performance in at least one basic skill. The Alliances will pursue defined and measurable goals set out in a joint improvement plan, focussing on addressing the basic skills gaps, and school authorities committed from the start to transfer 'what works' to other schools, reaching schools and pupils also in disadvantaged areas.

Erasmus+ is already preparing for the roll out of the European School Alliances, with dedicated support for school authorities and schools in 2027. Going forward the ambition is to create up to 100 new Alliances yearly, with National and Regional Partnership Plans and other funding able to support further expansion and long-term sustainability, subject to the decisions regarding the next MFF.

Beyond the classroom, learners' school performance is impacted by their **well-being, mental health, online safety, and the support they receive at home and in their wider community**[48]. Barriers such as disengagement, cyberbullying and limited parental involvement[49] cannot be addressed by schools alone. Without a strong, well-resourced intermediary level of accessible advisory and support services, schools can struggle to improve, and effective approaches remain isolated instances of good practice[50]. The EU can help education providers and school leaders by strengthening the capacity of advisory and support services at this level[51] to assist schools in building partnerships with parents and families, businesses, universities, social and health services, and the wider community.

EU Network of Advisory and Support Services

A Network of Advisory and Support Services will strengthen and streamline practical support for schools, focusing on four critical areas: school leadership and management, socio-emotional well-being, AI/digital readiness and parent engagement. Assisted by an EU-level

47 School authorities make up 6% of all organisations taking part in Erasmus+ cooperation projects in school education since 2021. Data extracted from the Erasmus+ operational dashboard, 05.10.2026.

48 Part 1 of the European Commission 2026 staff working document '*Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services*' (SWD(2026) 795).

49 OECD (2026), *PISA 2025 Results (Volume I): Future-Ready Students*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/73451bc5-en.

50 Yan, Y., Sakata, N., Choi, T., and Bell, S. (forthcoming), *Learning from high-performing extra-EU systems, ENESET report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union; Tournier; K. Godwin; E. Cameron; C. Lugaz (2025), *Leveraging the potential of the middle tier to improve education outcomes: The role of a capacity assessment framework*. Paris: IIEP-UNESCO, https://doi.org/10.54673/pmrm1562.

51 Part 3 of the European Commission 2026 staff working document 'Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services' (SWD(2026) 795).

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service point, this Network will be launched in Q1 2027 to connect national support services to jointly develop guidance material and resources and build capacity for tailored, evidence-based advice and support to schools. The Network will pool expertise of its members and identify shared capacity needs. Additionally, regional support services will be trialled in 30 regions with funding support from Erasmus+ starting under the current MFF.

4.2. A strong teaching profession

Persistent shortages of qualified teachers and trainers[52] **across many Member States are concerning.** Insufficient recruitment into initial teacher education[53] and risk of attrition especially among teachers under 30 and older than 50[54] combined with the overall ageing of the workforce, further exacerbate these shortages. Furthermore, there is untapped potential of labour supply, as the teaching profession is highly feminised, especially in earlier grades[55]. There is scope to increase the attractiveness of the profession and its societal recognition, as only 15.4% of teachers feel valued by society.

Teachers are the single most important in-school factor influencing student academic achievement[56]. They are essential to facilitating students' learning, as well as promoting critical thinking and civic engagement. They also have a key role in preventing early leaving from education and training, which in turn could result in fewer young people becoming NEETs ('not in employment, education or training'): a key aspect of the implementation of the reinforced Youth Guarantee. Although over recent years, most Member States have launched initiatives to address teacher shortages, progress has not been sufficient[57] and nearly all EU countries face persistent shortages, varying across subjects, regions, territories, and school settings.

It is not only the quantity of teachers that matters. The quality of teaching is key to achieving high learning outcomes, reducing the achievement gaps driven by socio-economic background and **nurturing talents**. Systems that cultivate high quality apply entry requirements that attract talented students to initial teacher education and high-level

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52 PISA 2025 data suggest that the share of students whose school head reported that the school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered by a lack of teaching staff was considerably higher in 2025 (40.2%) than before the pandemic (28.3% in 2018). For more details on teacher shortages, please see European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, *2023, Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe – 2023: The teaching profession.* Eurydice report. Publications Office of the European Union and OECD (2026), *Education at a Glance 2026: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b4968bbc-en.

53 European Commission: European Education and Culture Executive Agency and Birch, P. (ed.) (2021), *Teachers in Europe – Careers, development and well-being*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2797/997402.

54 The risk of attrition is measured by the intention to leave within the next five years, reported in the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2024. 17.9% of teachers over 50 report they intend to leave, excluding those who are about to retire. Replacing teachers entails financial costs and has an impact of students' learning outcomes.

55 Gender imbalances among teachers are most evident at lower levels of education, with an EU average of 95.3% female teachers in pre-primary education compared to 61.7% in upper-secondary education.

56 The literature shows that differences in teacher effectiveness explain a substantial share of the variation in student achievement, within a country and even within the same schools. European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (2022), *Investing in our future – Quality investment in education and training*. Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/45896.

57 The interim evaluation of the 2021-2030 EEA strategic framework found less progress to enhancing the competences and motivation in the education profession relative to other strategic priorities. See COM (2025) 340 final.

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preparation in both deep subject-matter expertise and pedagogical practice. In addition, as teachers' professional autonomy acts as a crucial catalyst for their own performance, teachers should be given more scope to exercise their professional judgment, under respective national/regional governance arrangements that value trust in the profession. Giving teachers more agency and responsibility to continuously strengthen the quality of their teaching, and to improve the learning outcomes of all learners, should go hand in hand with policies reinforcing teachers' induction and continuing professional development.

Proposal for a Council Recommendation on an attractive teaching profession

Building on the consultation of social partners in education, the proposal – **the "EU Teachers Agenda" – seeks a commitment from Member States** to develop a comprehensive approach that addresses structural factors influencing the shortage of qualified teachers[58]. It focuses on:

- creating more **attractive working conditions** to attract and retain qualified staff, coupled with proper recognition of teachers' various roles and responsibility for quality of teaching and learning outcomes, greater opportunities for career progression, reduced administrative burdens to free up more of their time for direct engagement with learners, and measures to attract underrepresented groups into the profession[59];
- strengthening **initial teacher education, induction and continuing professional development** for increasingly complex educational demands such as teaching in heterogeneous classrooms, fostering individualised learning and supporting students' social-emotional needs, and, when relevant, reinforcing pathways into the profession[60];
- strengthening **teachers' and school leaders' agency to shape the education response to the AI transformation**, involving teachers in the design and evaluation of digital and AI tools, supporting them in developing digital and AI literacy, and facilitating ways to effectively leverage digital and AI tools to reduce administrative burdens[61].

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58 For a state of play and an analysis of key elements of appealing working conditions, teacher preparation for evolving demands, and teacher's agency in the age of AI, see the European Commission 2026 Staff Working Document '*Elevating the teaching profession: evidence and analysis supporting the EU Teachers Agenda*' (SWD(2026) 800).

59 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2026, *The teaching profession in the EU – A comparative analysis building upon the TALIS 2024 results.* Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3841850. While about 90% of teachers in the EU report being satisfied with the profession and with their current work environment, only around two in five report being satisfied with their salaries. Excluding salaries, the most robust positive correlations are between job satisfaction and teacher autonomy and between job satisfaction and supportive leadership.

60 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2026, *The teaching profession in the EU – A comparative analysis building upon the TALIS 2024 results.* Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3841850. For example, only one third of novice teachers report having participated in a formal induction programme. Teachers generally report that their formal education prepared them well in subject content, but they lack additional training on core areas of teaching that address contemporary challenges: 31.3% of teachers feel equipped to teach in multicultural or multilingual settings, 43.4% to handle social and emotional development, and 45.9% to use digital resources and tools for teaching, on average.

61 European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2026, *The teaching profession in the EU – A comparative analysis building upon the TALIS 2024 results.* Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3841850. In 2024, approximately two in three teachers reported not having used AI for teaching, and among those, 74.3% reported lack of knowledge and skills as main barrier.

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Empowering teachers is critical. As less than 20% of teachers believe that their voice is heard and that they can influence education policy[62], the proposal also calls for a stronger dialogue with teachers and their representatives to place teachers, as agents of change, at the centre of shaping the future of education. More structured involvement in education policy of social partners, both employer organisations and trade unions, will help shape appropriate policy actions with the support of the profession. The proposal for a Council Recommendation calls on the Member States to invite the European social partners in education and other representatives of the teaching profession to a meeting of the High-Level Group on Education and Training twice a year, to promote a closer and regular European dialogue with the teaching profession and to discuss key priorities and challenges that need to be addressed to accelerate progress in human capital development.

EU-level policies, funding and programmes can help Member States to speed up adaptation of teacher education in both initial and continuous stages and to support teachers in exercising greater agency in relation to the quality of teaching. Teachers need protected time, practical relevance, appropriate financial support and opportunities to apply learning. Novice teachers should receive structured induction and support from prepared mentors, while school leaders need preparation for instructional leadership and staff development. Fostering the development of targeted programmes for school leaders is also key in this regard. The European approach to **individual learning accounts and micro-credentials** can help education systems to foster continuing learning and professional development that is **flexible, accessible, high-quality and recognised.** The National and Regional Partnership Plans (NRPPs), that will bring together all EU funds implemented by Member States and regions, including the European Social Fund+[63], can complement national and regional investments and reforms to swiftly adapt teacher education to emerging challenges and scale up best practices, including supporting novice teachers.

In addition, to support the above actions, **Teacher Academies 2.0**[64] will be revamped and refocused in 2027 to increase the relevance and quality of initial teacher education in most needed areas, namely child-centred use of digital technologies and AI, along with teaching in diverse classrooms (fostering inclusion and support of learners with different backgrounds and needs). Targeting in particular novice teachers, who are more often exposed to challenging classroom contexts[65], in addition to school leaders, they will support them in managing complex classroom environments, pursuing collaborative leadership, as well as supporting democracy and resilience. In addition, the revision of the online Teacher Dashboard, including a new Early Childhood Education and Care strand could help track progress towards more attractive and sustainable teacher careers by distilling existing evidence into more accessible tools, supporting the planning of investments and reforms.

Finally, cross-border teacher mobility can help match supply and demand, provided it does not deepen shortages in sending Member States. Teacher mobility will benefit from the improvements proposed in the Skills Portability Act and the revision of the Professional Qualifications Directive. This is particularly relevant in border regions, where teachers may live in one Member State and work in another. Targeted incentives to encourage teachers to relocate to underserved and disadvantaged areas can also help address territorial shortages.

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62 TALIS 2024.

63 https://european-social-fund-plus.ec.europa.eu/en.

64 https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/school-education/erasmus-teacher-academies.

65 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and Gambi, L. (2026), *The teaching profession in the EU – A comparative analysis building upon the TALIS 2024 results*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3841850.

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4.3. Better and safer use of technology for education

Teachers' limited use of AI in education in the EU points to more than a digital competence gap[66]. Effective use of AI in education requires appropriate skills, professional confidence, pedagogical justification, and trustworthy tools. The EU must address these barriers if digital technologies are to serve education and training in a way that is safe, inclusive, and human-centred. Access to safe and reliable AI tools should not depend on what families can afford, or what individual schools can negotiate with technology providers.

At the same time, much of the current uptake of digital technologies depends on platforms from outside the EU, raising concerns about sovereignty, contractual lock-in, cyber security exposure, and commercial use of learners' data. Currently, three non-EU cloud providers control over 70% of the European cloud market[67], which also affects EdTech providers, who rely on their cloud storage[68].

This is the moment for the EU to shape the future of digital technologies, including AI, on its own terms, for the benefit of society and industry, as also stated in the EU's Apply AI Strategy.[69] This effort should happen also in the context of education and training, guided by public purpose and professional empowerment. **Shared European capacity can help narrow gaps in access to education technology between schools, widen the range of options open to them, and give public authorities greater control over how learner's data is used**. Member States are already investing in cloud capacity, learning platforms and educational content. Pooled, that investment buys what no Member State can buy alone.

European Digital Infrastructure Consortium on Education

For the first time, Member States themselves are jointly building shared digital foundations of European education, through a **European Digital Infrastructure Consortium on Education (EDU-EDIC),** announced in the Tech Sovereignty Package[70] and established by the Commission on 3 November 2026[71].

The work of this alliance of Member States is led and funded by the participating countries, with the Commission supporting its establishment[72]. It will deliver:

- **shared capacity and trusted AI tools for schools for fostering secure and accessible European AI environments** built according to European standards and existing legislation, so that schools have a real alternative to general-purpose commercial tools;
- **a route to scale for European EdTech** through common requirements, joint testing and, where Member States so wish, joint procurement, so that European EdTech providers can serve schools across borders without re-engineering products for each system and schools can buy European where it exists;

66 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture and Gambi, L. (2026), *The teaching profession in the EU – A comparative analysis building upon the TALIS 2024 results*, Publications Office of the European Union, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/3841850.

67 COM(2026) 502 final.

68 COM(2026) 502 final. The European cloud market has grown, but the market share of European providers has decreased from 29% in 2017 to 15% in 2022 and has since remained stable.

69 COM(2025) 723 final, Apply AI Strategy | Shaping Europe's digital future.

70 COM(2026) 503 final.

71 Placeholder for the OJ reference.

72 Including to ensure compliance with EU State aid rules where applicable.

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- **strengthened interoperability and protection of learners' data** based on common, open standards and governance mechanisms, allowing systems to work together across schools and countries, with learners' data protected by design and not exploited commercially. In this context, European School Alliances can be testbeds for innovative and trustworthy services provided by the EDIC.

Digital and AI literacy have become foundational skills for all learners. In 2025, 63.8% of young people aged 16-24 in the EU used generative AI tools, including for formal education[73]. Education systems must ensure that learners can use AI critically and responsibly, with an age-appropriate understanding of its capabilities and limitations. This will help them recognise and confidently manage AI-related risks, such as overreliance, cognitive offloading, exposure to disinformation, and the uncritical use of AI agents[74], and enable them to make informed decisions on whether and how to use it – including the choice not to - while retaining individual judgement. At the same time, teachers need the skills to teach about and, where appropriate, with AI.

AI-ready education

In alignment with the EU KIDS ACT proposal[75], the Commission will develop age-appropriate reference learning outcomes and assessment guidance for AI literacy by mid-2027, modelled on the EU-OECD AI Literacy Framework for primary and secondary education[76]. On this basis, it will pilot an **AI Literacy Certificate** for learners from the school year 2027/2028.

This initiative will support further EU education systems in mainstreaming AI literacy across schools and educational programmes through: *(i)* capacity building for Member States on the practical implementation of the AI Literacy Framework; and *(ii)* development and dissemination of accessible multilingual learning and training resources for students and teachers. In addition, EU funding will be provided for longitudinal, comparable and robust EU-level research on the impact of AI on cognitive development and educational outcomes. This work also complements the broader activities on AI literacy in the scope of Article 4 of the AI Act[77].

Young people must be empowered to benefit from the digital world. The proposed EU KIDS Act will protect minors from harmful and exploitative practices and strengthen platform accountability. Equally important is equipping children to use technology safely and wisely, through education, prevention and empowerment[78]. Education systems and children's

73 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-statistical-reports/w/ks-01-26-009.

74 OECD / European Union (2026). Empowering learners for the age of AI: An AI literacy framework for primary and secondary education. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/65cd27d4-en; and European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Guidelines on the ethical use of artificial intelligence and data in teaching and learning for educators – Updated*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/7967834.

75 COM(2026) 681.

76 OECD / European Union (2026). Empowering learners for the age of AI: An AI literacy framework for primary and secondary education. OECD Publishing, Paris. https://doi.org/10.1787/65cd27d4-en.

77 AI talent, skills and literacy | Shaping Europe's digital future.

78 European Commission (2025), *Future needs in digital education*, *Flash Eurobarometer 564* (fieldwork: 7 to 14 May 2025, 25 781 online interviews with EU citizens, aged 15 and over, in the 27 EU Member States), https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3352: According to the survey, 90% of EU citizens agreeing that schools should teach young people how to manage the impact of digital technologies, such as social media, on their mental and physical health.

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supporting circles have a crucial role in both teaching children about the risks and benefits as well as in acting as partners in ensuring young people know how to use technology safely and purposefully in and outside of the school environment. This is also consistent with the proposed EU KIDS Act, which envisages Member States' national strategies to support minors through information, digital literacy and access to support, building on the experience and expertise of the Safer Internet Centres. Education initiatives can complement these measures by helping children and families understand age-appropriate access and the available safeguards. Services operated for educational purposes by schools and public authorities fall outside the proposed EU KIDS Act; the EDIC's common requirements can provide safeguards for children in the use of EdTech.

To underpin this effort, the Commission will, in 2027, propose a **European Healthy Screens Pledge,** which will provide a common European engagement model on online child safety that schools can adapt to their national and local contexts. Building on the 2026 Communication on an EU approach to online child safety, and on the recommendations of the Special Panel on Child Safety Online[79], this initiative will provide concrete tools and guidance to schools, parents and pupils on how to cope with harmful content and online safety, how to manage screen time routines, sleep, distraction, and the balance between online and offline activities, complementing the safeguards for school time foreseen in the proposed EU KIDS Act. The **European Digital Education Hub** will help create guidelines for home and school healthy screens agreements, through which schools, parents and pupils can make use of a shared set of principles and practical expectations. The action will also leverage and help promote the extensive resources, tools and expertise already available through the action plan against cyberbullying[80], Better Internet for Kids (BIK+) strategy[81], the BIK platform, the EU co-funded network of Safer Internet Centres[82], EU-funded projects and national initiatives.

At the same time, the EU must invest in alternatives to online activities that are essential for children's development. Sport, culture, and outdoor play offer fundamental spaces for socialisation, resilience, creativity, and well-being. Through Erasmus+ and in the framework of the European Sport Model[83], the Commission will continue to strengthen synergies between education, sport and physical activity, helping to widen access for young people to offline alternatives.

4.4. Agile, strategic, open and connected vocational education and training

Vocational education and training has a central role to play in equipping people with the skills they need in a rapidly changing economy, supporting Europe's competitiveness, resilience and social cohesion. People with vocational qualifications are essential to Europe's strategic sectors, infrastructure and essential services, while demographic change will require millions of workers to be replaced in the coming decade. The VET Strategy accompanying this Communication aims to strengthen the quality and agility of VET, better mobilise its potential for strategic sectors and labour-market transitions and create a more open and interconnected VET.

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79 Special panel - European Commission; Fegert and Melchior, *Protecting and empowering minors in a digital world: Report by the co-chairs of the Special panel on child safety online*. Luxemburg (2026).

80 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/cyberbullying.

81 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/strategy-better-internet-kids.

82 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/safer-internet-centres.

83 https://sport.ec.europa.eu/sport-in-the-eu/the-european-sport-model.

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In relation to digitalisation, the Commission will continue to explore the evolving effects of advanced technologies such as AI on VET, while working to disseminate emerging findings and facilitate policy discussions on how VET can best respond to a rapidly changing technological landscape. The Commission will also continue to promote efforts to increase the attractiveness of VET across the EU.

5. Conclusion

The basic skills that children and young people acquire today will shape Europe's productivity, competitiveness, preparedness, social and territorial cohesion and democratic resilience for decades to come. Strengthening them is therefore not only an education objective, but a core investment in Europe's human capital and strategic autonomy.

The pace of change has accelerated, while progress towards achieving the agreed targets at EU level has been too slow. Europe cannot afford a prolonged gap between changing economic, technological and societal demands and the capacity of education and training systems to respond. Reform needs to be better targeted and more consistently translated into practice, with investment following clear priorities and evidence of what works.

This requires education to be firmly anchored in broader strategies for competitiveness, employment, digital transformation, social cohesion and strategic autonomy. The EU can help the Member States accelerate this process by connecting European cooperation, evidence and investment with implementation on the ground, and by helping scale effective approaches across systems.

The objective is therefore not simply for the Member States to invest more in education and training, but to strengthen the capacity of education and training systems to faster deliver better outcomes. This Communication provides the contribution of education and training to that wider effort: stronger basic skills, an attractive teaching profession, digital technologies and AI that support learning while strengthening Europe's capacity to act, and VET that keeps pace with the changing economy.

Achieving this objective will require sustained commitment and investment at all levels. The Commission calls on the Member States to deliver on this joint mission and report on progress in the European Semester and the European Education Area, including the annual Education and Training Monitor. The Commission also invites EU institutions to support the efforts and actions set in the Education and Skills Package and calls on all stakeholders – regional and local authorities, schools, teachers, social partners, civil society, researchers and the wider education community – to work together in shaping stronger education foundations for all.

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