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Proposal for a

# COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

## on reversing the decline in basic skills

{SWD(2026) 795 final}

(Text with EEA relevance)

# EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

## 1. CONTEXT OF THE PROPOSAL

### • Reasons for and objectives of the proposal

Too many young people across the European Union (EU) are not acquiring the strong basic skills – literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills[1] – that they need to fulfil their potential, participate fully in society and adapt to a rapidly changing world. The latest international evidence reveals a deepening human capital challenge[2]. Around one in three 15-year-olds in the EU underachieve in reading and mathematics and one in four in science, while the share of top performers is falling and the EU is lagging behind other major economies[3]. Underachievement in digital skills is above 40%[4] and an estimated 68% of eighth graders have an adequate level of civic knowledge[5].

The consequences of the decline in basic skills extend far beyond educational attainment and extend well into adulthood[6]. Basic skills are the foundation for further learning, employability, adaptability to changing labour market needs, critical thinking and active citizenship. For individuals, weak basic skills mean fewer opportunities to develop their talents and progress in education and employment. For children in poverty who are likely to underachieve, they mean fewer opportunities to break the transmission of disadvantages across generations. For society, they deepen inequalities, weaken social cohesion and make citizens more vulnerable to disinformation and manipulation. For the economy, they constrain productivity, innovation and the supply of advanced skills needed for competitiveness and long-term growth, in particular in disadvantaged areas and regions that already struggle with fostering, attracting and retaining talent. Ensuring that every young person acquires strong basic skills is therefore not only an educational priority and a social right, but an investment in Europe's human capital, societal resilience and strategic autonomy.

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1 COM(2025) 88.

2 The most recent quantitative, cross-EU comparative evidence is drawing on three international large-scale assessments: the 2025 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2025) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); the 2023 International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS 2023) by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA); and the 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2022), also by the IEA.

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

4 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.

5 Caution is warranted as this indicator has limited country coverage (until 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.

6 The OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) reveals that these challenges extend well into adulthood, with around one in five adults in the EU having low proficiency in both literacy and numeracy. OECD (2024), *Do Adults Have the Skills They Need to Thrive in a Changing World?: Survey of Adult Skills 2023*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/b263dc5d-en.

The accelerating digital and artificial intelligence (AI) transformation is making the need for action more urgent. People need strong foundational skills to understand information, assess evidence, recognise bias and make informed choices in an increasingly complex information environment. Digital distractions and the design of online services can also have a negative impact on children's well-being, mental health, development and learning. The challenge is not to reject technology. It is rather to ensure that it is safe, unbiased and age-appropriate, and that it serves human development, human rights and learning. When used purposefully, digital technologies and AI can also support learning and teachers.

Schools and education policies alone cannot reverse the decline in basic skills. Learning is shaped not only by teachers and schools but also by families and communities; the digital environment; individuals' health and well-being; and wider social and economic conditions. Reversing the decline will therefore require a whole-of-government approach, with sustained and coherent action across all levels of government (local, regional, national, EU) and society, with education at its foundation and schools at the centre of implementation.

The objective of this proposal is to help the Member States to halt and reverse the decline in basic skills by strengthening the capacity of education and training systems to translate agreed priorities into concrete policy action and tangible improvements in basic skills. It will do so by addressing the main constraints to effective implementation: setting clear priorities for basic skills; strengthening cooperation between schools and increasing their capacity to identify, develop and spread effective approaches; reinforcing the links between evidence, policy and educational practice[7]; and improving the system-level conditions that enable schools and teachers to act effectively[8]. On this basis, the proposal promotes targeted, evidence-informed basic skills improvement measures[9], complemented by adequate, flexible and needs-weighted investment, with particular attention to disadvantaged schools and learners. The proposal further seeks to improve the efficiency and impact of these efforts through EU cooperation, mutual learning, policy experimentation and the wider dissemination and uptake of effective approaches. The intervention logic is to strengthen the capacity of education systems to identify what works; enable its effective implementation where learning takes place; direct resources towards where they can have the greatest impact; and support the uptake and scaling-up of effective approaches.

- **Consistency with existing policy provisions in the policy area**

The proposal forms part of the broader 'Education and Skills Package'. The Commission's policy framework and longer-term vision are set out in the 2026 Communication 'Stronger education foundations for all in the age of AI'[10]. The Education and Skills Package includes two proposals for Council Recommendations on basic skills and on teachers. It also includes the creation of a European Digital Infrastructure Consortium on Education, with complementary European actions to support its implementation (including strengthening cooperation through the European School Alliances, the EU Network of Advisory and Support Services, the new generation of Teacher Academies and an AI-ready education initiative[11]). These actions will complement the measures recommended to the Member States

7 Part 3 of the underlying Staff Working Document titled 'Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services' (SWD(2026) 795).

8 Part 2 of the underlying Staff Working Document titled 'Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services' (SWD(2026) 795).

9 Part 1 of the underlying Staff Working Document titled 'Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services' (SWD(2026) 795).

10 COM(2026) 770.

11 COM(2026) 770.

under the present proposal by strengthening the EU's infrastructure for cooperation, knowledge-sharing and capacity-building[12].

The Education and Skills Package also includes the 2026 Commission Communication on a European Strategy for Vocational Education and Training[13]. The Communication builds on and complements the Council Recommendation of 24 November 2020 on vocational education and training (VET) for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience[14]. The Communication strengthens the EU's VET policy framework. It focuses on three main objectives: promoting high-quality VET with strong basic skills; supporting skills development for the EU's strategic sectors and labour market transitions; and fostering an open and connected European VET area. Learners with strong basic skills are more likely to advance and successfully complete their apprenticeship programmes. Those skills also enhance their performance in the workplace and boost long-term employability after the apprenticeship ends. The Centres of Vocational Excellence and the European Alliance for Apprenticeships demonstrate the added value of structured cooperation and mutual learning across borders in supporting educational quality and skills development.

The proposal builds upon the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area[15] (EEA) and its 2030 EU-level targets for the share of underachievement among 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, science and digital skills to be below 15%; the share of top performance in reading, mathematics and science to be at least 12%; and the share of good achievement in at least one area (reading, mathematics or science) among learners from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds to be at least 25%. The proposal is also aligned with ongoing work under the European Education Area on evidence-informed policymaking, mutual learning and the exchange of good practices (including activities carried out through the Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training, the EEA strategic framework working group and its sectoral groups, peer learning and peer counselling activities and the European School Education Platform). It seeks to reinforce these efforts by creating more systematic feedback-loops between educational research, policy development and classroom practice.

The proposal is consistent with the EU's broader objectives on skills development, competitiveness and social cohesion, particularly those pursued under the Union of Skills[16] (including the Action Plan on Basic Skills[17] and the STEM Education Strategic Plan[18]). The proposal's support for higher levels of basic skills proficiency and the reduction of persistent educational inequalities will help lay the foundations for advanced skills development, lifelong learning, labour market participation and active citizenship.

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12 The Commission will launch the European School Alliances and the EU Network of Advisory and Support Services. It will support Member States in establishing the European Digital Infrastructure Consortium on Education and the participation of European School Alliances therein. The Commission will assess progress on basic skills in the annual country reports under the European Semester and, where relevant, propose country-specific recommendations, in line with the Council Recommendation of 9 March 2026 on human capital in the European Union (OJ C, C/2026/1687, 13.3.2026). The Commission will report annually on progress towards reaching the EU-level targets through the Education and Training Monitor, and report on the implementation of this Recommendation.

13 COM(2026) 805.

14 OJ C 417, 2.12.2020, p. 1.

15 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

16 COM(2025) 90.

17 COM(2025) 88.

18 COM(2025) 89.

The European Parliament, in its resolution of 8 October 2026 on European School Alliances[19], supported the creation of European School Alliances to build lasting cooperation between schools across the Union, with targeted support for rural, remote and disadvantaged schools.

The proposal complements the European Semester, which provides a framework for identifying and addressing structural challenges in Member States, including those affecting education, skills and human capital. The 2026 European Semester further underlines the importance of strengthening education and skills to support competitiveness, strategic autonomy and economic and social resilience. The 2026 country-specific recommendations provide tailored guidance to Member States on relevant structural challenges, while the Council Recommendation of 9 March 2026 on human capital in the European Union[20] calls for urgent action to address structural challenges in skills and education that hamper competitiveness. The present proposal complements these instruments by setting out a common framework of evidence-informed measures to strengthen basic skills and improve performance in school education, while allowing implementation to reflect national circumstances.

The proposal complements the Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success[21]. This Recommendation promotes a comprehensive and integrated approach to improving educational outcomes, reducing underachievement and supporting learners' well-being. The Pathways to School Success Recommendation focuses on the longer-term system-wide strategies and reforms that are intended to promote equity, inclusion and educational success. By contrast, this present proposal places greater emphasis on school level, evidence-informed measures with a more direct effect on learning and on strengthening the mechanisms that connect policy, research and practice. It therefore supports the implementation of the Pathways to School Success Recommendation by facilitating and accelerating the translation of strategic objectives into effective action in schools.

The proposal is consistent with the Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning of 22 May 2018[22]. This Recommendation emphasises literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship competences as some of the essential competences needed for personal fulfilment, employability, social inclusion and active participation in democratic life.

The proposal is consistent with the Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on Individual Learning Accounts[23]. This Recommendation emphasises the importance of lifelong learning for employability and social inclusion, and of ensuring that adults have access to quality learning opportunities to develop and update their skills. By strengthening basic skills in initial education, the proposal can help prevent skills gaps from persisting into adulthood, while complementing efforts to address existing basic skills among adults and support their continued upskilling and reskilling.

The proposal complements the Digital Education Action Plan 2021–2027[24]. This aims at strengthening digital competence and promoting the effective use of digital technologies in education and training. It is also consistent with the 2023 Council Recommendations on digital education and skills[25], recognising the growing importance of AI in education and

19 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0338_EN.html.
20 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/1687/oj.
21 OJ C 469, 9.12.2022, p. 1.
22 OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1.
23 OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 26.
24 COM(2020) 624.
25 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1115/oj; http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1030/oj.

society and the unprecedented opportunities it offers for personalisation and innovation – when developed and deployed in a safe, ethical and responsible manner and when used to promote human agency. It emphasises the importance of purposefully engaging with AI tools in daily life and educational practices. It also acknowledges that strong literacy, mathematical, scientific, digital and citizenship skills remain the essential foundation for the critical, safe and responsible use of such technologies.

The proposal contains a set of initiatives that are to be implemented through EU funding instruments in the current and next multiannual financial framework, without prejudice to the outcome of the on-going negotiations. These include Erasmus+ and the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans (which will bring together all EU funds implemented by the Member States and regions, including the European Social Fund), by inviting Member States to leverage them for basic skills support. It seeks to connect and reinforce existing national, regional and local initiatives, support mutual learning between Member States and improve the dissemination and uptake of effective practices across education systems. Additionally, Horizon Europe supports research into best practices, pilots and tests in citizenship education as a basic skill, to inform practitioners and policymakers[26]. The proposal promotes evidence-informed approaches and facilitates the dissemination of effective practices, in order to maximise the impact of public investment in education and training across the EU[27].

The proposal contributes to the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights[28] (particularly Principle 1 on education, training and lifelong learning and Principle 11 on childcare and support to children). The proposal promotes strengthening basic skills and reducing persistent inequalities in educational outcomes. It will thereby support equal opportunities and help prevent the intergenerational transmission of disadvantages – in turn contributing to the objectives of the Anti-Poverty Strategy[29] and the strengthened European Child Guarantee[30], including the 2030 poverty reduction targets.

The proposal does not replace existing policy frameworks. It focuses on strengthening cooperation, knowledge-exchange and evidence-informed action to improve basic skills proficiency across the EU.

- **Consistency with other Union policies**

This proposal is consistent with the EU's broader political priorities and contributes to several key initiatives under the current Commission's agenda.

The proposal is also aligned with the Competitiveness Compass for the EU[31] and its objective of strengthening the EU's competitiveness and long-term prosperity. The current context is one of rapid technological change, demographic pressures and increasing global competition. The 2026 report "Demographic transformation in the EU: understanding change and adapting to its consequences"[32] highlights how investments in education, training and adult learning

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26 https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/docs/2021-2027/horizon/wp-call/2026-2027/wp-5-culture-creativity-and-inclusive-society_horizon-2026-2027_en.pdf.

27 European Commission: Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, *Investing in our future – Quality investment in education and training*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2766/45896.

28 COM(2021) 102.

29 COM(2026) 538.

30 COM(2026) 539.

31 COM(2025) 30.

32 European Commission: Joint Research Centre, *Demographic transformation in the EU – Understanding change and adapting to its consequences*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2026, https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/9943353.

can boost productivity and innovation, potentially offsetting the impact of lower birth rates on the workforce. In such a context, sustained economic growth depends on the availability of a highly skilled workforce capable of innovation, adaptation and lifelong learning. Improving basic skills proficiency is therefore an important investment in the EU's human capital and future productivity.

The proposal supports the EU's digital and technological ambitions (including skills and talent priorities of the AI Continent Action Plan[33] and the Apply AI Strategy[34]) by emphasising the need to equip young people with the competences for an AI-driven world of work. This also complements the broader activities on AI literacy in the scope of Article 4 of the AI Act[35].

The proposal is consistent with the EU's objective of empowering citizens and businesses through digital transformation (as laid out in the 2030 Digital Compass[36]). Education systems can promote digital competence and critical thinking in order to ensure that students are ready for the labour market and can navigate and engage safely and responsibly in the digital sphere.

The proposal is consistent with the proposal for an EU KIDS Act[37] of 17 September 2026 and the EU approach to online child safety[38] in response to the final report of the special panel on child safety online[39]. Excessive screen time, digital distraction and addictive design features have a substantial impact on children's well-being, development and learning. The Commission investigated the impact of digitalisation on youth mental health in a dedicated Eurobarometer[40], the results of which informed Commission President von der Leyen's Special Panel on child safety online as well as the proposed EU KIDS Act. Tackling distractions and promoting a safer, age-appropriate and purposeful use of digital technologies contributes to creating better conditions for learning and strengthening basic skills.

The proposal is aligned with the EU's Financial Literacy Strategy[41] and its objective of addressing low levels of financial literacy, in order to empower citizens to make informed decisions regarding their personal finances and improve their financial resilience.

The proposal is consistent with the Council Recommendation of 18 December 2023 on a European framework to attract and retain research, innovation and entrepreneurial talents and with the new European Charter for Researchers[42]. By strengthening the acquisition of basic skills from an early age, notably in literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills, the proposal contributes to the foundations on which Europe's future research, innovation and entrepreneurial capacity depends. In synergy with the Union of Skills and the STEM Education Strategic Plan, it supports the longer-term development of talent, competitiveness and innovation in Europe.

The proposal is consistent with the Council Recommendation of 26 November 2013 on promoting health-enhancing physical activity across sectors[43]. This highlights the important contribution of education and school settings to increasing physical activity among children

33 COM(2025) 165.
34 COM(2025) 723.
35 https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/ai-talent-skills-and-literacy.
36 COM(2021) 118.
37 COM(2026) 681.
38 COM(2026) 680.
39 https://commission.europa.eu/topics/digital-economy-and-society/special-panel_en.
40 https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3686.
41 COM(2025) 681.
42 https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:C_202301640
43 OJ C 354, 4.12.2013, p. 1.

and young people. The proposal recognises and takes into account the strong synergies between physical activity, health, well-being and educational outcomes. It thereby supports a whole-school approach that promotes active lifestyles alongside the development of key competences. This will help create learning environments that foster students' physical, mental and social well-being, and support their academic achievement and lifelong participation in healthy, active lifestyles.

The proposal is consistent with the EU Strategy on the rights of the child[44], which recalls children's right to have a say in decisions that affect their lives and to quality and inclusive education.

The proposal contributes to the European Democracy Shield[45] and its efforts to strengthen democratic resilience and active citizenship. Citizenship competence, critical thinking, media literacy and the ability to engage constructively in democratic processes are increasingly important in an evolving information environment that is characterised by disinformation; foreign information manipulation and interference; and rapidly changing digital technologies. The proposal supports the acquisition of strong basic skills (including citizenship competences) in order to reinforce the foundations of democratic participation, social cohesion and shared EU values. In this context, the proposal is aligned with the EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027)[46] with a view to strengthening youth participation in democratic life and continuing to support their social and civic participation.

The proposal is consistent with the Union of Equality strategies[47] that create the conditions for everyone to live, thrive and lead regardless of differences based on gender, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics. For example, it complements the EU Anti-Racism Strategy 2026-2030 and the Council Conclusions of 2 October 2026 on combating racism and related forms of hatred and discrimination in the European Union, which underline the importance of education, awareness-raising and prevention in combating racism and strengthening social cohesion. By fostering critical thinking, challenging stereotypes and promoting inclusive learning environments, education can contribute to preventing racism and discrimination and ensuring that all learners can develop their basic skills and participate fully in society. The Council Recommendation of 12 March 2021 on Roma equality, inclusion and participation[48] also called on Member States to ensure effective equal access to inclusive, quality mainstream education for Roma, to eliminate segregation, and to prevent the wrongful placement of pupils in special education.

The proposal is also consistent with the European Preparedness Union Strategy[49]. Strong basic skills enable individuals to understand complex information, adapt to change and respond effectively to crises. The Preparedness Union Strategy has identified preparedness in school education curricula and training of educational staff as a key action.

The proposal will contribute to economic, social and territorial cohesion supported by the Commission's territorial strategies[50] and the upcoming Right to Stay Strategy. Addressing territorial disparities in the development of basic skills by ensuring quality education and

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44 COM(2021) 142 final.

45 JOIN(2025) 791.

46 OJ C 456, 18.12.2018, p. 1.

47 Equality and inclusion: key actions - European Commission.

48 OJ C 93, 19.3.2021, p. 1.

49 JOIN(2025) 130.

50 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.

training in disadvantaged areas can help unlock the human capital potential of regions and enhance the attractiveness of territories. When coordinated with improvements in access to quality essential services, opportunities and infrastructure, such action can ensure people live, work and thrive in the place they call home.

The proposal uses these synergies to help achieve the EU's overarching objectives of competitiveness, technological leadership, social fairness, territorial cohesion, democratic resilience, preparedness, equality and non-discrimination – while also respecting the Member States' responsibility for the content and organisation of their education systems.

## 2. LEGAL BASIS, SUBSIDIARITY AND PROPORTIONALITY

### • Legal basis

A proposal for a Council Recommendation must link its content to one of the Treaty's policy areas, so that it is possible to determine whether the Council must adopt it by unanimity or can do so by qualified majority.

Settled Court of Justice case law requires the legal basis to be chosen on the basis of objective criteria that can be judicially reviewed. These criteria include the aim and content of the measure in question[51].

Article 292 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) sets out the Council's mandate to adopt recommendations:

'The Council shall adopt recommendations. It shall act on a proposal from the Commission in all cases where the Treaties provide that it shall adopt acts on a proposal from the Commission. It shall act unanimously in those areas in which unanimity is required for the adoption of a Union act. The Commission, and the European Central Bank in the specific cases provided for in the Treaties, shall adopt recommendations.'

The EU's competence to act in matters of education and vocational training stems from Article 165(4) and Article 166(4) TFEU.

Article 165(1) TFEU states that the EU is to 'contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of their education systems'. Article 165(2) further specifies that the aims of EU action in education include 'promoting cooperation between educational establishments' and 'developing exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the education systems of the Member States'.

Article 166(1) TFEU states that the EU is to 'implement a vocational training policy to support and supplement the action of Member States, while fully respecting the responsibility of Member States for the content and organisation of vocational training'. Article 166(2) TFEU further specifies that the aims of EU action in vocational training policy include to 'stimulate cooperation on training between educational or training establishments and firms' and to 'develop exchanges of information and experience on issues common to the training systems of the Member States'.

[51] See for instance the judgment of the Court of Justice of 26 March 1996, C-271/94, *Parliament v Council*, paragraph 14.

Article 292 TFEU is therefore to be read together with the appropriate legal basis for the substance of the proposal (i.e. Article 165(4) TFEU and Article 166(4) TFEU).

The initiative does not propose any extension of EU regulatory power or binding commitments on Member States. The Member States will decide, according to their national circumstances, how they implement this Council Recommendation.

- **Subsidiarity (for non-exclusive competence)**

This proposal respects the principle of subsidiarity provided for in Article 5(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU).

The proposal is for a Council Recommendation that will fully respect the Member States' responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity. However, it also reflects the supplementing and supporting role of the EU and the voluntary nature of EU cooperation in education and training. In the context of the European Education Area and the Union of Skills, the initiative will support Member States' efforts to develop and implement policies and mechanisms that are appropriate for their national systems and structures.

The proposal delivers clear EU added value by acting within the EU's supporting competence in education under Articles 165 and 166 TFEU. It does not introduce any binding obligations, harmonisation measures or regulatory requirements. It instead provides a framework for voluntary cooperation, mutual learning and evidence-informed action. The challenges addressed by this initiative are shared across the EU and require stronger collaboration in order to maximise the effectiveness of national efforts. Many national, regional and local initiatives exist, but knowledge about effective approaches to improving basic skills remains fragmented. There are insufficient links between research, policy and classroom practice and only limited opportunities to scale up successful interventions across borders. EU action adds value by connecting existing efforts; facilitating the exchange of proven practices; strengthening cooperation between Member States; and supporting the development of common tools, data and evidence. The proposal complements existing frameworks and moves beyond problem identification towards implementation support. It thereby helps to maximise the impact of public investment, accelerate the uptake of effective measures and contribute to achieving the EU's objectives on basic skills. It also enables Member States to benefit from shared expertise, peer learning and coordinated support that would be more difficult to achieve through isolated national action alone.

- **Proportionality**

This proposal complies with the principle of proportionality in Article 5(4) TEU.

The content and the form of this proposed Council Recommendation do not exceed what is necessary to achieve its objectives. The measures that are recommended to the Member States are not legally binding and leave Member States free to decide which approach to take.

- **Choice of the instrument**

To contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in Articles 165 and 166 TFEU, that Treaty provides for the adoption by the Council of recommendations, on proposals from the Commission.

Council Recommendations are an appropriate instrument within the field of education and training, where the EU has a supporting competence. They have often been used for EU action in these fields. As legal instruments, they call for the commitment of the Member

States to carry out the measures presented and provide a stronger political basis for cooperation in this area, while fully respecting the Member States' competence in the field of education and training.

## 3. RESULTS OF EX-POST EVALUATIONS, STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

### • Ex-post evaluations/fitness checks of existing legislation

Not applicable.

### • Stakeholder consultations

The proposal is based on input gathered during a consultation process including:

– a call for evidence[52] (running from 30 July to 8 September 2026) and a meeting of the EU Youth Stakeholders Group that was organised within the framework of the Youth Check process (12 June 2026). The feedback is summarised in the underlying staff working document on 'Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services';

– discussions at the meetings of the EEA strategic framework working groups on Schools (the sub-group on pathways to school success) and on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (comprising national ministry representatives and stakeholder organisations); and at meetings of the Directors-General for School Education ('DG Schools') and the High-Level Group on Education and Training (HLG).

### • Collection and use of expertise

The proposal is based on:

– lessons learnt from the implementation of the strategic framework for cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (reports from working groups and peer learning activities[53]; the peer counselling cluster on basic skills[54]; and the interim evaluation of the 2021-2030 European Education Area strategic framework[55]);

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52 https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/18873-Quality-education-for-all-a-2040-roadmap_en.

53 The working group on Schools has produced the following: the' 2025 Roadmap for ensuring school success for all, ; its 2026 final report (Pathways to School Success - key conditions and considerations); and a related series of nine 2026 policy briefs (Whole-school and whole-system approaches to school success; Early identification of learner needs; Pedagogical approaches for inclusion; Social and emotional learning; Nurturing educational excellence; Local governance for inclusion; Authentic learner engagement; Key role of parents; and A systemic approach to teacher well-being) and its five thematic reports (Blended learning for inclusion: exploring challenges and enabling factors, Assessing learners' competences - Policies and practices to support successful and inclusive education, How to support schools in their journey towards more inclusive education for all? Building school leaders' and teachers' capacity as key agents of inclusion, How to promote mental health and well-being at school as key for better learning? The role of social and emotional education, and Engaging parents and learners as key actors in education - Building meaningful partnerships for school success).

54 The peer counselling cluster brings together experts from 10 Member States on a voluntary basis to exchange experiences and advice regarding their ongoing basic skills reforms.

55 COM(2025) 340, SWD(2025) 169 (https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/interim-evaluation-confirms-added-value-of-european-education-area).

– the expertise of academics and other external experts who have contributed evidence-informed knowledge and advice through the Expert Network on Economics and Sociology of Education and Training (ENESET)[56];

– an analysis of reports and studies from the European Commission (Education and Training Monitor[57], EU PISA 2025 Policy Brief[58], EU International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) 2023 Policy Brief[59], Study on Promoting STEM education in schools[60] and JRC publications on taking stock of STEM education in Europe);

– Eurydice comparative reports[61] and Cedefop publications[62];

– OECD reports[63];

– IEA reports[64];

– EASNIE's 'Ten pillars Shaping the Future of Inclusive Education'[65];

– an internal mapping of Erasmus+ projects relating to promoting better educational outcomes, fighting underachievement and early leaving from education and training and supporting well-being at school.

The accompanying staff working document on 'Basic skills improvement measures, enabling factors and advisory services'[66] reviews the evidence base and summarises input received during the call for evidence.

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56 In particular the reports: Effective measures to promote excellence in basic skills; Factors influencing STEM participation and effective intervention strategies; Effective practices for literacy teaching; Leading through uncertainty: A model for effective school leadership in times of crisis Mobile phone bans in schools across the EU; Learning from high-performing extra-EU systems (forthcoming); Effects of digital distractions on learning outcomes (forthcoming); Impact of Curriculum Design (forthcoming).

57 https://op.europa.eu/etm.

58 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.

59 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.

60 Promoting STEM education in schools.

61 Addressing underachievement in literacy, mathematics and science: Policy changes in European school education since 2020; Increasing achievement and motivation in mathematics and science learning in schools; Digital education at school in Europe 2026: bridging gaps in access, teaching and learning; Citizenship education at school in Europe 2026 (forthcoming).

62 Professional Development for VET Teachers and Trainers: Thematic Perspectives – Inclusion and Digitalisation; Community Lifelong Learning Centres: Key Policy Messages; What Role for Community Lifelong Learning Centres?

63 PISA 2025 Results (Volume I): Future-Ready Students; Every Day Counts - Understanding, Preventing and Responding to School Attendance Problems; Results from TALIS Starting Strong 2024 - Strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care; OECD, UNESCO and Commonwealth Secretariat (2024) The price of inaction: the global private, fiscal and social costs of children and youth not learning.

64 IEA (2026), *Teaching and Learning Mathematics with Meaning: Using and Applying TIMSS*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-35352-8; IEA (2024), *Young Citizens' Views and Engagement in a Changing Europe: IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2022 European Report*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68631-3.

65 Ten Pillars Shaping the Future of Inclusive Education | European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

66 SWD(2026) 795.

- **Impact assessment**

The proposed activities would complement Member State initiatives. An impact assessment has not been carried out, given the non-binding nature of the instrument. The accompanying staff working document reviews the evidence on the recommended measures, including conditions for effectiveness and relative costs[67]. The development of the proposal has been informed by previous studies and through the consultation of Member States and experts.

- **Regulatory fitness and simplification**

Not applicable.

- **Fundamental rights**

This proposal for a Council Recommendation is consistent with the fundamental rights and principles recognised by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, particularly the rights to the protection of personal data (Article 8), academic freedom (Article 13), education (Article 14) and non-discrimination (Article 21), as well as the rights of the child (Article 24).

The measures will be carried out in accordance with EU law on the protection of personal data, particularly the General Data Protection Regulation[68].

## 4. BUDGETARY IMPLICATIONS

This initiative will not require additional resources from the EU budget.

## 5. OTHER ELEMENTS

- **Implementation plans and monitoring, evaluation and reporting arrangements**

Implementation of this proposed Recommendation will be supported through the governance framework for the European Education Area (2026–2030). This includes the EEA strategic framework working group, peer counselling activities and the Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training. These cooperation mechanisms will facilitate mutual learning and the exchange of evidence-informed practices. They will also support Member States in implementing the proposed Recommendation according to their national contexts.

The Commission will monitor progress using existing EU-level indicators and data collections (including, where appropriate, international large-scale assessments and the agreed European Education Area targets). The annual Education and Training Monitor[69] remains the Commission's flagship report for monitoring progress made in reaching these targets and for distilling the latest evidence from prominent quantitative and qualitative sources across the EU and beyond. The Commission will support the dissemination of evidence, practical tools and examples of effective practice through existing EU platforms and communities of practice.

No dedicated reporting mechanism is envisaged. The implementation of this proposed Recommendation will be monitored within the strategic framework for EU cooperation in education and training, and challenges and relevant policy developments will be monitored under the European Semester – thereby avoiding unnecessary administrative burden while enabling regular assessment of progress and exchange of experience among the Member

67 SWD(2026) 795.
68 OJ L 119, 4.5.2016, p. 1–88.
69 https://op.europa.eu/etm.

States. The Commission will report to the Council on the implementation of this Recommendation within five years of its adoption.

- **Explanatory documents (for directives)**

Not applicable.

- **Detailed explanation of the specific provisions of the proposal**

The proposal establishes a practical framework to help Member States halt and reverse the decline in basic skills by strengthening the capacity of their education systems to translate agreed objectives[70] into improved learning outcomes. It addresses the main constraints to better performance in the following sequence: set clear national priorities; create mechanisms for schools to access and exchange effective practice and evidence to inform implementation; strengthen the system conditions that enable schools and teachers to act; apply targeted measures where they can have the greatest effect; and ensure that resources and EU cooperation support the sustainability and wider uptake of effective approaches.

The first provisions establish the direction for national action. Provisions 1-7 set the reversal of the decline in basic skills as a national priority (linked to the agreed 2030 EU-level targets[71]) and call for action across literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills. They strengthen the foundations for learning by ensuring the professional and organisational autonomy of schools. Early childhood education and care is recognised as a foundational stage for subsequent learning.

Provisions 8 and 9 address a key implementation constraint: the limited capacity to identify, develop and spread effective approaches across schools. They promote structured and sustainable cooperation between schools and school authorities (including through European School Alliances) to facilitate mutual learning, joint development and testing of approaches, mobility and professional collaboration, and the adaptation and scaling-up of effective practices. European School Alliances are thereby positioned as a framework for longer-term and more systemic cooperation rather than as a collection of short-term projects.

Provisions 10 and 11 address a second critical constraint: the weak transmission of evidence into educational practice. They seek to strengthen advisory and support services; reduce fragmentation among the bodies supporting schools; improve the use of learner-outcome data; and establish feedback loops between schools, policy and research. The EU Network of Advisory and Support Services adds an EU layer to this infrastructure to allow Member States to exchange evaluated practice and strengthen support to schools (including in non-pedagogical areas that affect their capacity to improve).

Provisions 12-16 establish the wider system-level conditions required for these mechanisms and for school-level action to translate into sustained improvements in learning. They promote a whole-of-government approach; earlier and more effective identification of learners' needs; curricula, assessment and pedagogical guidance that support high-quality and inclusive teaching; stronger professional capacity among teachers, school leaders and other educational staff; and stronger data, monitoring, evaluation and knowledge exchange. Taken together, these provisions address the institutional and capacity constraints that can prevent effective measures from being implemented consistently and at sufficient scale.

Provisions 17-19 focus on the point at which improvements ultimately have to materialise: teaching and learning. They support evidence-informed measures that have a demonstrated

[70] http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.
[71] http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

potential to improve basic skills, thereby complementing longer-term system-level reforms. These include better assessment and targeted support; tutoring and mentoring; additional learning time and enrichment; and measures to address the wider ecosystem in which learning takes place. These last measures include action on non-academic barriers; family and community engagement; school leadership; and educational transitions.

Provisions 20-23 address the allocation and sustainability of resources. They call for adequate and sustained national and regional investment, with a shift towards proactive, flexible and needs-weighted approaches and towards interventions with a clear theory of change. They pay particular attention to disadvantaged schools and connect school-level equity strategies with broader social investment. EU funding is complementary and is intended to reinforce (rather than replace) national and regional investment, taking advantage of greater synergies across instruments and using Erasmus+ to support cross-border cooperation, mobility and policy experimentation (including through European School Alliances). This links the allocation of resources more closely to identified needs and to the capacity of interventions to generate measurable improvements.

Provision 24 reinforces implementation through EU collaboration. It supports implementation through mutual learning and exchanges with other Member States and all relevant stakeholders, and by supporting capacity building and policy learning on basic skills proficiency.

Taken together, the provisions in the proposed Council Recommendation would, if implemented, establish a coherent transmission mechanism from objectives to outcomes. National priorities would set the direction. Cooperation and advisory capacity would improve the supply and diffusion of effective practice. System-level conditions would enable schools and teachers to implement this. Targeted measures would translate these capabilities into changes in teaching and learning. Needs-weighted investment would direct resources towards where the need is greatest. EU cooperation, monitoring and dissemination support learning, scaling-up and sustained implementation. The proposal focuses not only on what education systems should achieve, but also on the implementation capacity and resource allocation required to achieve it – while fully respecting the Member States' responsibility for the content and organisation of their education and training systems.

2026/0347 (NLE)

Proposal for a

# COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION

## on reversing the decline in basic skills

(Text with EEA relevance)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and in particular Article 292 in conjunction with Article 165(4) and Article 166(4) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the European Commission,

Whereas:

(1) The Council Resolution of 29 June 2026 on the second cycle of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (2026-2030)[1] established six strategic priorities in the field of education and training. Among those strategic priorities are: (i) the promotion of literacy, mathematics and science for all; (ii) the development of digital skills and citizenship education; and (iii) making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all[2]. Agreed 2030 EU-level targets include reducing underachievement in reading, mathematics, science and digital skills (to below 15%), increasing top performance in reading, mathematics and science (to at least 12%), and increasing good achievement in reading, mathematics or science among those from a disadvantaged socio-economic background (to at least 25%). That Resolution emphasised the importance of cross-border cooperation between education and training institutions and authorities and envisaged European School Alliances as a means of strengthening cooperation, mobility and the European dimension of education.

(2) The Council Recommendation of 9 March 2026 on human capital in the European Union[3] recommended that Member States strengthen the acquisition of literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship skills (‘basic skills’) from an early age and throughout adulthood across all levels and types of education and training, and take steps to reach the above-mentioned EU-level targets, promoting effective and efficient public spending on education and skills commensurate to the identified challenges and agreed objectives and targets.

(3) The Commission Communication of 29 January 2025 on a Competitiveness Compass for the EU[4] identified skills as an enabling condition for European competitiveness and highlighted the importance of investment in education and skills development to support productivity, innovation, resilience and social cohesion. It announced the

1 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

2 The remaining three priorities are: (iv) enhancing attractiveness, competences and motivation in the education and training profession; (v) fostering excellent and attractive European vocational education and training (VET); and (vi) promoting competitive European higher education.

3 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/1687/oj.

4 COM(2025) 30.

Union of Skills, including an Action Plan on Basic Skills and a STEM Education Strategic Plan, as part of a broader approach to strengthening the EU's human capital.

(4) The Commission Communication of 5 March 2025 on the Union of Skills[5] stressed the urgency of improving learners' achievement in basic skills and called for strengthened cooperation, evidence-informed approaches and mutual learning between education systems and schools across the Union. It introduced the concept of European School Alliances to increase pupil and teacher mobility, cross-border cooperation between schools and school authorities and innovation in education.

(5) The Commission Communication of 5 March 2025 on the Action Plan on Basic Skills[6] announced various strands of basic skills support as part of the Union of Skills, including the launch of an EU literacy coalition to promote literacy skills, foster a culture of reading and put into practice a whole-of-government approach that brings together ministries, businesses, libraries and other stakeholders. It also announced guidance on curriculum development in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), as well as on basic skills teaching and learning for initial vocational education and training (VET) and apprenticeships.

(6) The Commission Communication of 5 March 2025 on the STEM Education Strategic Plan[7] set out measures to strengthen science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and training as part of the Union of Skills, with a view to increasing STEM talent and supporting competitiveness and innovation. It envisaged, among other things, the development of a European STEM competence framework covering learners at all stages of education and training and the pilot STEM education centres for school education.

(7) The Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success[8] called on Member States to develop comprehensive, system-level approaches to improving educational success for all learners, combining universal measures with targeted and/or individualised support for vulnerable learners and a stronger focus on prevention. The approach was further reinforced by the Council Conclusions of 21 May 2025 on inclusive, learner-centred practices in ECEC and school education[9].

(8) The Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning[10] reaffirmed that literacy, mathematics, science, digital, and citizenship skills are among the foundations for personal fulfilment, employability, active citizenship and social inclusion, and stressed the need for innovative learning environments, cooperation among education stakeholders and exchanges of good practice across the EU.

(9) In its Communication of 30 September 2025 on a Financial Literacy Strategy for the EU[11], the Commission recognised financial literacy as an essential life skill that can strengthen the financial resilience of individuals and households and, by promoting financial inclusion and civic engagement, contribute to a more resilient society. The joint EU/OECD-INFE financial competence framework for children and youth provides a reference for age-appropriate financial education initiatives.

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5 COM(2025) 90.
6 COM(2025) 88.
7 COM(2025) 89.
8 OJ C 469, 9.12.2022, p. 1.
9 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/2796/oj.
10 OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1.
11 COM(2025) 681.

(10) The Council Recommendation of 16 June 2022 on Individual Learning Accounts[12] provides a complementary policy framework for supporting lifelong learning. This initiative underlines the importance of enabling adults, including those with low basic skills, to access quality learning opportunities, develop and update their skills, and improve their employability and social inclusion. Strengthening basic skills in initial education complements these efforts by helping to prevent skills gaps from persisting into adulthood, while adult learning provides opportunities to address existing skills gaps throughout life.

(11) The Council Conclusions of 14 June 2024 on promoting evidence-informed policy and practice in education and training to achieve the European Education Area[13] recognised the value of European cooperation, peer learning and the sharing of evidence and practice to improve educational outcomes and support effective reforms. They invited the Commission to support partnerships between researchers, policymakers and educational staff, and to support an EU network of intermediary organisations bridging educational research, policy and practice. They also invited the Commission to further develop the Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training.

(12) The proposal for a Regulation of 17 September 2026 on an EU KIDS Act[14] and the Commission Communication of 17 September 2026 on an EU approach to online child safety[15] highlighted the impact that excessive screen time, digital distraction and addictive design features can have on children's well-being, development and learning. Tackling such distractions and promoting safer, age-appropriate and purposeful use of digital technologies can contribute to creating better conditions for learning and strengthening basic skills.

(13) The Commission Communication of 30 September 2020 on the Digital Education Action Plan[16], the Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 on the key enabling factors for successful digital education and training[17], the Council Recommendation of 23 November 2023 on improving the provision of digital skills and competences in education and training[18], and Decision (EU) 2022/2481 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 establishing the Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030[19] highlighted the need to strengthen digital capacity, digital pedagogy and digital skills through cooperation and exchange of expertise between education institutions and authorities across Member States.

(14) The European Union and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) joint publication 'Empowering Learners for the Age of AI: An AI Literacy Framework for Primary and Secondary Education'[20] set out a reference framework for (artificial intelligence) AI literacy in primary and secondary education, and supports education systems in helping learners understand, critically assess and use AI responsibly and ethically. The framework contributes to the development of digital competences, critical thinking and citizenship competences and provides guidance for

12 OJ C 243, 27.6.2022, p. 26.
13 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/3642/oj.
14 COM(2026) 681.
15 COM(2026) 680.
16 COM(2020) 624.
17 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1115/oj.
18 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/1030/oj .
19 http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec/2022/2481/oj.
20 https://ailiteracyframework.org.

educators, school leaders and policymakers in integrating AI literacy across teaching and learning.

(15) The Council Conclusions of 12 May 2026 on teachers in the era of AI[21] underlined that the responsible integration of AI in education and training requires the continuous development of digital skills and competences, and reaffirmed the central role of teachers in supporting learners' acquisition of knowledge and skills, fostering critical thinking and digital citizenship, and ensuring that the use of AI serves pedagogical purposes and contributes to high-quality, inclusive and learner-centred education.

(16) The Council Conclusions of 29 November 2023 on the contribution of education and training to strengthening common European values and democratic citizenship[22], as well as the Commission and the High Representative Joint Communication of 12 November 2025 on the European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies[23], highlighted the role of schools in fostering democratic participation, critical thinking, media literacy, active citizenship and resilience against disinformation through cooperation and exchange at EU level. The Joint Communication announced an EU citizenship competence framework, along with guidance to strengthen citizenship education in schools.

(17) The Council Recommendation of 14 June 2021 establishing a European Child Guarantee[24] recommends that Member States guarantee an effective and free access for children in need to ECEC, education and school-based activities, and at least one healthy meal each school day. Ensuring access to these and other services covered by the Guarantee contributes to equipping children in need with the basic skills necessary to thrive in life. The Commission Communications of 6 May 2026 on the European Union's Anti-Poverty Strategy[25] and on Breaking the cycle of child poverty – strengthening the European Child Guarantee[26] underline basic skills acquisition as key to preventing and addressing poverty and achieving progress towards the EU poverty reduction targets for 2030.

(18) The Commission Union of Equality Strategies[27] underline the need to take an inclusive approach to education, such as the need to address gender imbalances in the sector, tackle stereotypes, fight inequalities and discrimination, promote diversity, and ensure accessibility. The Council Conclusions of 19 October 2026 on equality as a driver for economic growth and competitiveness underlined that inequalities and discrimination weaken educational participation and attainment, with a negative impact on economic potential and social cohesion, and stressed that inclusive and accessible education is key to a skilled workforce, in particular in areas such as STEM.

(19) Strong basic skills are essential for Europe's economic prosperity, competitiveness and social cohesion, and for the effective functioning of its democracies. They underpin further learning, employability, active citizenship and informed participation in society, while strengthening Europe's capacity to innovate, adapt to economic and technological change, and safeguard its strategic autonomy.

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21 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/2826/oj.
22 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2023/1419/oj.
23 JOIN(2025) 791.
24 http://data.europa.eu/eli/reco/2021/1004/oj.
25 COM(2026) 538.
26 COM(2026) 539.
27 Equality and inclusion: key actions - European Commission.

(20) International large-scale surveys show that basic skills continue to deteriorate in most Member States, with underachievement reaching record-highs in literacy (31.3%), mathematics (33.9%), science (25.9%)[28] and 42.5% in computer and information literacy[29] – all far from the 2030 EU-level target of less than 15%[30]. Around 1 in 3 eighth graders lacks an adequate level of civic knowledge[31]. The share of top performance[32] in literacy (4.8%), mathematics (6.8%) and science (6.4%) remains far below the 2030 EU-level target of at least 12%[33]. Only 15.6% of 15-year-olds with a disadvantaged socio-economic background performs well in at least one domain (literacy, mathematics or science)[34], against a 2030 EU-level target of at least 25%[35]. Compared with other major economies, the EU has the highest share of low achievers in literacy and science, and the second highest in mathematics[36].

(21) Schools are understood for the purposes of this Recommendation to comprise educational institutions at ISCED levels 0-3 (ECEC, primary and secondary education, including school-based initial VET). Measures should be adapted to the age and developmental stage of learners. For learners in initial vocational education and training, implementation should, where relevant, involve work-based learning providers.

(22) AI literacy[37], which is understood as a core part of digital skills (as outlined in the DigComp 3.0 framework[38]), should not be equated with the mere use of AI tools. As

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28 These are 15-year-old students (attending educational institutions in grade 7 of compulsory education or higher) who do not reach level 2 on the proficiency scale in the respective domain (reading, mathematics or science) in the 2025 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). 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. European Commission's *2026 Education and Training Monitor* (forthcoming).

29 These are students in their eighth year of schooling (age 13-14) performing below the level 2 threshold on the computer and information literacy achievement scale in the 2023 International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). 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.

30 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

31 These are students in their eighth year of schooling (age 13-14) reaching at least competence level B in the 2022 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). Caution is warranted as this indicator has limited country coverage (until ICCS 2027) and does not capture the breadth of citizenship competences. No EU-level target has been set. 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.

32 Learners who reach level 5 or higher on the PISA proficiency scale (1-6). 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.

33 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

34 Based on PISA 2025. European Commission's 2026 Education and Training Monitor (forthcoming).

35 http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2026/3720/oj.

36 See, for instance, 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. European Commission's *2026 Education and Training Monitor* (forthcoming).

37 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.

with digital skills more broadly, AI literacy entails an age-appropriate understanding of the capacities and limitations of AI, critically evaluating its opportunities and risks, and the capacity to make informed decisions on whether and how to use them responsibly, while retaining individual judgment. Its development should build on, and not substitute, basic skills.

(23) Educational disadvantage may arise from intersecting individual, social and environmental factors, including socio-economic background, migration or ethnic minority background, limited proficiency in the language of instruction, disability and special educational needs, gender and geographical disadvantage. These factors may increase the risk of underachievement and reduce opportunities to reach high levels of proficiency. They should be considered without labelling learners or treating their backgrounds as determinants of their potential.

(24) Inclusive education is a systemic approach that caters to all learners to ensure their universal right to education. This goes beyond providing access to education by removing barriers, whether physical, systemic or pedagogical. The goal is to offer meaningful, high-quality educational opportunities and continuous support to every learner. This means adopting sensitive and adaptable teaching, learning and assessment practices (including differentiated instruction, collaborative learning, inquiry-based approaches) that recognise learners as active participants in their own learning, treat learner diversity as a resource and accommodate diverse needs.

(25) By acknowledging that all learners have diverse educational needs and by looking at intersecting factors, inclusive education ensures that those who are at risk of disengagement and/or underachievement are timely identified without stigma and receive tailored and proportionate support before difficulties become entrenched, while those who are high-achieving or have high potential are recognised, adequately challenged and supported so that they can develop their talents and reach excellence.

(26) Investing in universal access to quality and affordable ECEC is essential to support later learning success, as research has consistently shown that the early years are a critical period for brain development and lay the foundations for future cognitive, social and emotional outcomes.

HEREBY RECOMMENDS THAT MEMBER STATES:

*Make basic skills a national policy priority*

(1) Treat the reversal of the decline in basic skills (literacy, mathematics, science, digital and citizenship) as a key governmental priority to deliver on competitiveness and strategic autonomy in order to achieve the 2030 EU-level targets agreed in June 2026 (underachievement below 15%, top performance at least 12%, and good achievement among disadvantaged learners at least 25%). Set out, in the proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans, measures that contribute to reversing the decline in basic skills, in accordance with local, regional and national circumstances.

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[38] Cosgrove, J. and Cachia, R. (2025). *DigComp 3.0: European Digital Competence Framework - Fifth Edition*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/0001149.

(2) Address the specific challenges in each basic skill area. Measures are exemplified in the annex and may include the following:

(a) literacy, which underpins learning in all other areas: strengthening language development, reading fluency and comprehension, and learners' ability to interpret and critically evaluate information across different formats;

(b) mathematics: building secure numeracy and conceptual understanding, developing learners' mathematical reasoning and problem-solving in meaningful contexts, including financial literacy, which draws on other basic skills as well;

(c) science: fostering scientific knowledge, curiosity and inquiry, enabling learners to use evidence and scientific reasoning to investigate questions and address real-world challenges;

(d) digital: developing learners' digital and AI literacy, including the ability to use technologies safely, responsibly and critically, and to recognise disinformation and other online risks;

(e) citizenship: strengthening democratic understanding, critical thinking, respect for others and active participation in school and community life.

(3) Provide schools with the professional and organisational autonomy to (i) prioritise basic skills against the background of growing demands on schools; and (ii) adapt and implement measures improving learners' acquisition of basic skills, adjusted to local needs, while holding schools accountable for progress through self-assessment, monitoring and evaluation.

(4) Assess the implications for teachers' workloads and working conditions, minimise administrative burdens and reinforce support to the profession, including through multi-professional teams, in line with the Council Recommendation on an attractive teaching profession.

(5) Enhance the capacity of education authorities to address system-level conditions and ensure access to quality education and equitable support to lower performing schools and students.

(6) Ensure that early childhood education and care (ECEC) acts effectively as the foundational stage of basic skills, nurturing language development, including proficiency in the language of instruction, socio-emotional skills and curiosity. Consider the appropriate degree of curricular development, aligned to the quality framework for ECEC. Support educators in the early identification of developmental and support needs, in partnership with families, and in ensuring follow-up support.

(7) Develop learning-to-learn competences (such as metacognition, critical thinking and self-regulation), through explicit teaching and practice of learning strategies, and foster sustained attention, persistence and collaborative learning.

*Foster cooperation between schools on basic skills*

(8) Foster structured and sustainable cooperation between schools and school authorities, within and across Member States, including through the development of European School Alliances, to strengthen basic skills and improve educational quality. Such cooperation should:

(a) bring schools and school authorities together in sustained partnerships for mutual learning, peer learning and the development and exchange of effective approaches;

(b) enable them to identify common challenges, exchange evidence, and jointly develop, test, evaluate and adapt evidence-informed approaches;

(c) give priority to schools facing persistent challenges in basic skills, providing proportionate administrative support, coordination time and staff cover to enable participation by schools with limited capacity;

(d) support the dissemination and uptake of effective practices beyond participating schools, including by strengthening schools' capacity to learn from one another;

(e) promote joint learning activities and professional collaboration, including through protecting time for such cooperation for participating teachers, digital and hybrid forms of cooperation, with a view to strengthening pedagogical practice, professional competences and the European dimension of school education;

(f) build on national school improvement programmes and networks;

(g) involve the competent school authorities in planning and implementation, so as to ensure the sustainability and impact beyond individual projects;

(h) encourage the participation of disadvantaged schools, for instance in underserved rural and remote areas, to address specific challenges in reversing the decline in basic skills.

(9) Promote the European School Alliances as a framework for long-term cooperation between schools and school authorities across countries, linked to national improvement programmes, including by facilitating networking, mutual learning, capacity-building and the exchange and dissemination of evidence-informed practices on basic skills. Ensure the adequate support of European School Alliances through multiple funding instruments (including EU and national funds) to ensure their long-term and systemic impact.

*Reinforce the links between evidence, policy and educational practice*

(10) Reinforce the links between evidence, policy and classroom practice by ensuring that advisory and support services effectively help all schools and teachers improve basic skills, taking into account national circumstances and institutional arrangements and avoiding additional administrative burden. In particular:

(a) ensure that basic skills policies, programmes and support are monitored, evaluated and adjusted on the basis of results, strengthening knowledge transmission between research and schools;

(b) facilitate advisory and support services to schools and teachers, ensuring coordination between the bodies and services responsible for supporting schools on such issues as research, assessment, curriculum, teacher professional development, quality assurance, school improvement and digital education, and strengthen actors at regional and local governance levels, based on clear mandates and long-term funding for coherent and targeted support;

(c) ensure that advisory and support services are accessible to all schools, while giving particular attention to schools and regions facing persistent challenges in the acquisition of basic skills;

(d) ensure that data on learner outcomes (from assessment, monitoring or diagnostics) is usable, and that schools, school leaders and teachers have the support and data literacy to translate it into timely improvement.

(11) Participate in the new EU Network of Advisory and Support Services, bringing together national intermediary and support bodies to strengthen capacity in areas such as school leadership and management, socio-emotional support, digital and AI readiness, and parent relations, by sharing evidence-informed, evaluated practice among Member States and strengthening feedback loops between policy, research and practice.

*Strengthen system-level conditions*

(12) In line with the strategic importance to reverse the decline of basic skills, ensure highest level of responsibility and accountability covering a coordinated approach among the relevant policy areas concerned and stakeholders involved.

(13) Improve needs identification mechanisms and early warning systems to identify learners' multidimensional learning and support needs early, accurately and in a non-stigmatising way, enabling timely, targeted support.

(14) Ensure that curricula, including in initial VET, assessment frameworks and pedagogical guidance are aligned around clear, sequenced learning objectives, building learners' knowledge, and accommodate diverse needs, supporting inclusive and evidence-informed teaching.

(15) Strengthen the professional capacity of teachers, school leaders and other educational staff to teach for basic skills, through high-quality initial education, induction and mentoring, continuing professional development (including on working with diverse groups of learners), collaborative learning, access to centres of expertise, appropriate resources and support services.

(16) Step up capacity for data collection, monitoring, evaluation and knowledge exchange.

*Improve basic skills in the classroom*

(17) Support schools in implementing evidence-informed measures that have demonstrated potential to improve learners' acquisition of basic skills, complementing longer-term system-level reforms.

(18) Support schools and teachers in reviewing classroom practices with a view to improving basic skills performance, with targeted actions both addressing underachievement and fostering top performance. Pedagogical basic skills improvement measures may include:

(a) promoting evidence-informed pedagogies such as explicit instruction, and testing promising approaches before scaling them up;

(b) supporting the safe, age-appropriate and pedagogically justified use of digital and AI-enabled personalised learning tools under teachers' pedagogical control and as a complement to teaching, to strengthen basic skills through adaptive

learning, timely feedback and differentiated instruction, while protecting personal data;

(c) strengthening assessment and screening of learners' basic skills to identify strengths and learning needs early, using the results to adapt teaching and targeted support and designing assessment so that it reflects learners' own skills where AI tools are available;

(d) stepping up targeted tutoring – frequent, small-group or one-to-one instruction – to give struggling learners additional support and top performers greater depth, complexity and challenge. Promote mentoring to support engagement and confidence;

(e) providing additional learning time and catch-up and enrichment opportunities to strengthen basic skills or recover lost learning, again for both underachieving and top performing learners.

(19) Ensure that measures address the broader ecosystem in which learning takes place. Non-pedagogical basic skills improvement measures may include the following:

(a) addressing school attendance problems, non-academic barriers, poor well-being, discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage through structured cooperation between schools and health, social and other support services, including free healthy school meals for learners in need in line with the European Child Guarantee; adopting evidence-informed school policies on the use of personal digital devices, including smartphones, to protect learners' attention and learning time, adapted to learners' age and involving teachers, learners and families;

(b) strengthening partnerships with families to reinforce the development and regular practice of learners' basic skills beyond the classroom, for instance through family liaison staff and educational mediators, or brief workshops on specific basic skills;

(c) promoting cooperation between schools, civil society organisations, cultural institutions, sport associations, local authorities and businesses, including through chambers of commerce and sectoral business organisations, to provide real-world opportunities for learners to apply their basic skills;

(d) empowering school leaders to drive whole-school improvement in basic skills through strategic planning, reallocation of resources, use of school-level data and monitoring of progress, collaborative professional learning, and community outreach/relations;

(e) ensuring continuity in the development, assessment and targeted support of learners' basic skills across key educational transitions to sustain learning progress and prevent setbacks, including appropriate transfer of relevant information and continuity of support, for instance when moving into primary education or initial VET.

*Invest*

(20) Ensure adequate, sustained and predictable investment from national, regional and local budgets into the measures set out above, allocated on the basis of transparent indicators of learners' needs and school context, combining predictable core funding with targeted additional support that reaches the intended learners, and favouring

longer interventions with a theory of change and realistic implementation capacity. Where needed, complement with targeted infrastructure and equipment investments that meet current and future pedagogical needs.

(21) Prioritise disadvantaged schools, including in rural and remote regions, and deprived urban areas, for additional support, with selection criteria dependent on available data and local, regional and national circumstances. Prioritise the right to stay, in particular by pooling resources and cooperation among schools, and providing incentives for teachers to take up positions in remote or disadvantaged schools. Selection criteria may include: low performance in national assessments, high shares of disadvantaged learners, a challenging school climate, high rates of school attendance problems or grade repetition, or major teacher shortages. Ensure that such selection criteria or support measures do not reinforce continued underperformance or school segregation.

(22) Connect school-focused equity strategies with broader social investment, including childcare and poverty reduction under the European Child Guarantee.

(23) Ensure the sustainability of the above interventions by mobilising complementary funding from Union instruments, when appropriate, seeking greater synergies between EU programmes within the current and next multiannual financial framework. In particular:

(a) reflect basic skills priorities identified in the European Semester and other documents of the policy reference framework (such as the Digital Decade recommendations) in the programming of proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans to support education reforms and investments across the stages of policy design, implementation and results;

(b) make use of shared management funds to support targeted measures for disadvantaged schools and learners, advisory and support capacity, and digital infrastructure;

(c) make use of Erasmus+ to support cross-border cooperation, learning mobility and policy experimentation, supporting advisory and support capacity and the European School Alliances. Support the further roll-out of those measures, where relevant, through proposed National and Regional Partnership Plans and the Interreg Plan;

(d) make use of Horizon Europe and Europe and Euratom Research and Training programmes, where relevant, to support research and innovation on basic skills, including the generation of robust evidence on effective educational policies and practices; the testing and evaluation of innovative approaches; the development and validation of new pedagogical and digital solutions; and the transfer and scaling-up of successful approaches across education systems;

(e) promote and facilitate the procurement frameworks for research and development (R&D) proposed under the European Innovation Act and the Public Procurement Act to support the research, development and uptake of next-generation educational technologies targeting basic skills;

(f) support coherence of actions across programmes including through cooperation between the relevant stakeholders, such as managing authorities and national agencies.

*Reinforce implementation through EU cooperation*

(24) Further support the implementation of this Recommendation through mutual learning and exchanges with other Member States and all relevant stakeholders, through:

(a) the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area (2026-2030), including the EEA strategic framework Working Group, peer counselling and the Learning Lab on Investing in Quality Education and Training;

(b) reporting on the implementation of this Recommendation, drawing on the Education and Training Monitor, within the existing arrangements of the European Semester;

(c) discussing progress towards reaching the 2030 EU-level targets, including on underachievement and top performance in basic skills, equity in school education, early leavers from education and training and participation in early childhood education and care;

(d) sharing successful practices, policy guidance and practical tools to support system-level and school-level actors, using the online platforms and communities of practice for education and training, in particular the European School Education Platform, including eTwinning.

Done at Brussels,

*For the Council*
*The President*