

BRIEFING PAPER 3: BUILDING BRIDGES FOR RELATIONAL DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL SYSTEMS: FOSTERING DIALOGUE BETWEEN KEY STAKEHOLDERS, STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS

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INTRODUCTION: DEMOCRATIC SYSTEMS OF RELATIONAL COMMUNICATION

A major recommendation in the PREVENT Policy Report (Downes 2014) is for promoting democratic systems of communication in schools. This recognises that municipalities are in an ideal position as a mediating space for dialogue between schools, parents and students. Such a dialogue, targeting schools especially in areas of high poverty, nonattendance and early school leaving, would include student surveys of their needs and school experiences, including open-ended questions and also focus groups of students and parents.

This report recommended that municipalities develop a 'Quality Mark for Democratic School Systems for Parents' and Students' Voices' for participating schools, as an incentive to participate in this process. The recommended process of dialogue to promote democratic systems in schools is not an expensive commitment and is central to a strategic commitment to parental involvement in schools.

EU Commission Thematic Working Group on early school leaving report (2013):

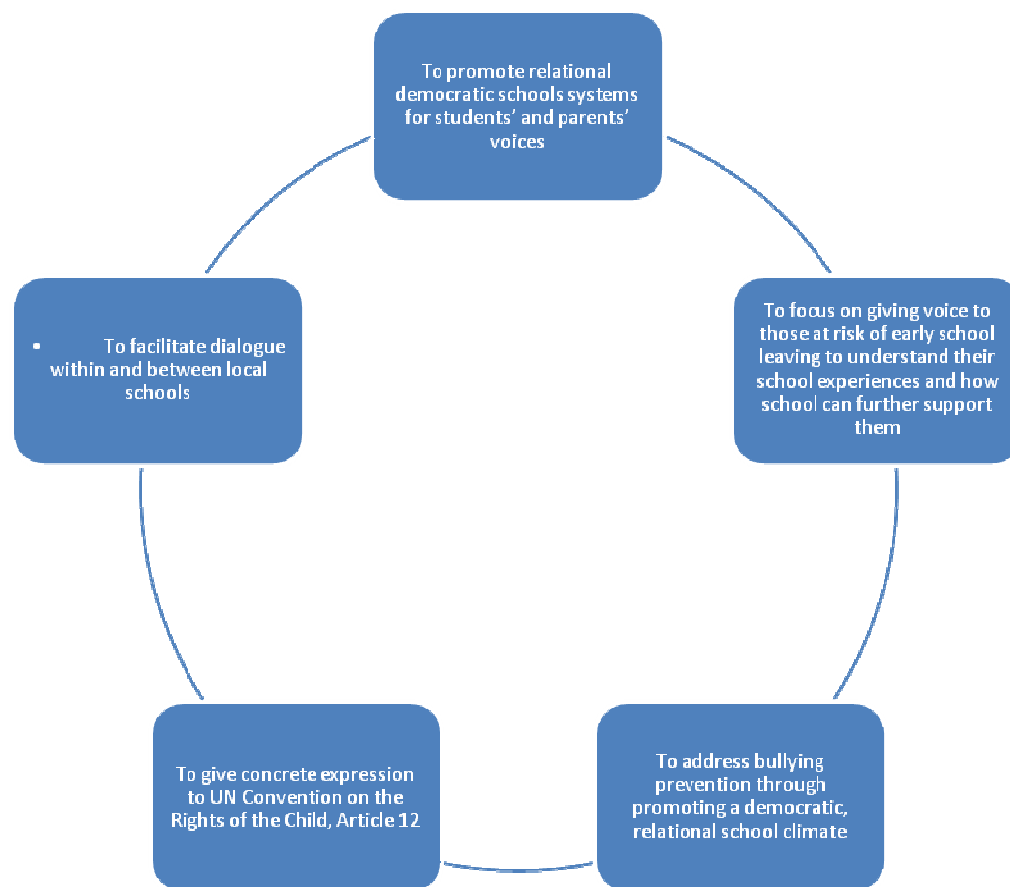
Ensure children and young people are at the centre of all policies aimed at reducing ESL. Ensure their voices are taken into account when developing and implementing such policies.

Article 12 (1) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which declares: *'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'*.

AIM:

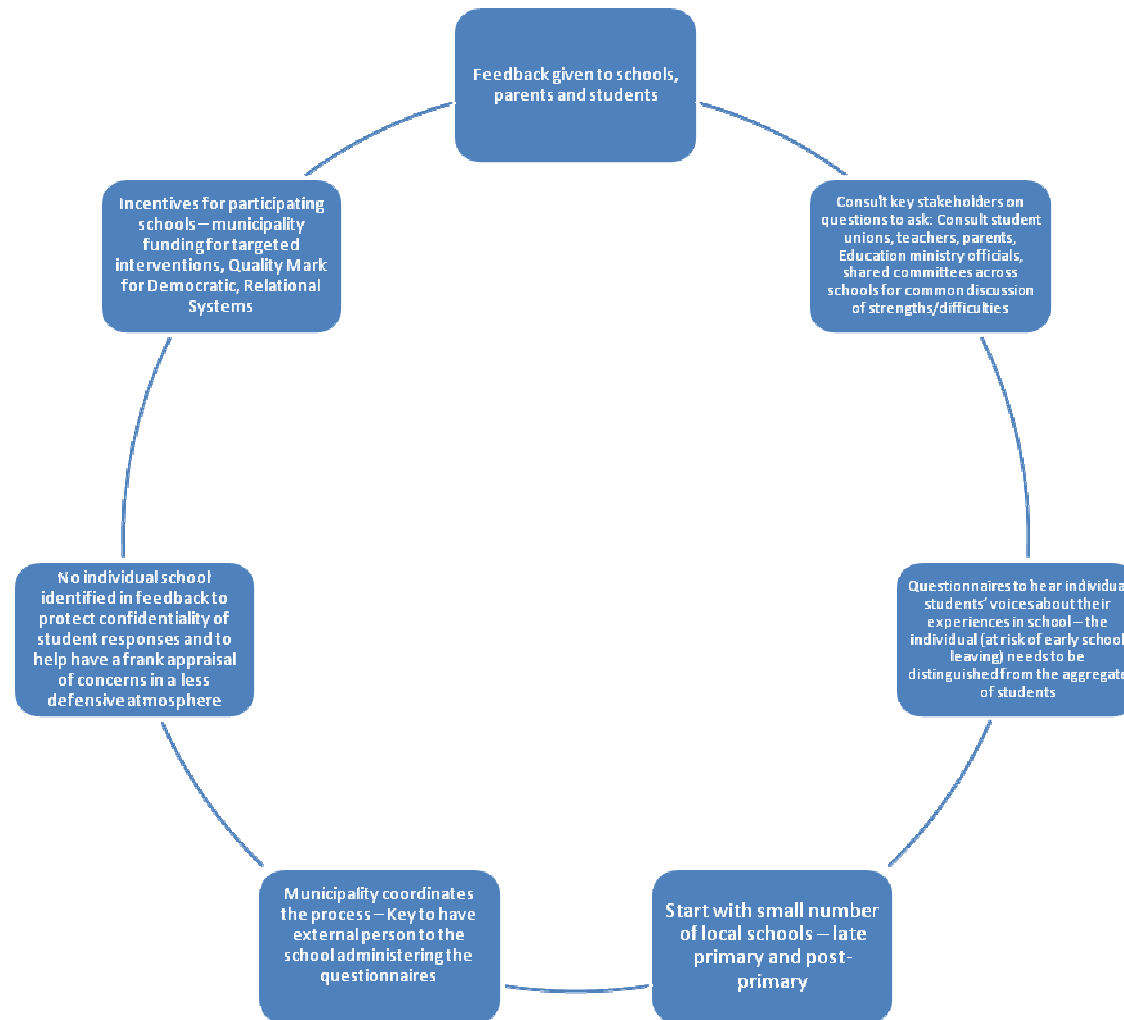
- To promote relational democratic schools systems for students' and parents' voices
- To focus on giving voice to those at risk of early school leaving to understand their school experiences and how school can further support them
- To address bullying prevention through promoting a democratic, relational school climate
- To give concrete expression to UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12
- To facilitate dialogue within and between local schools
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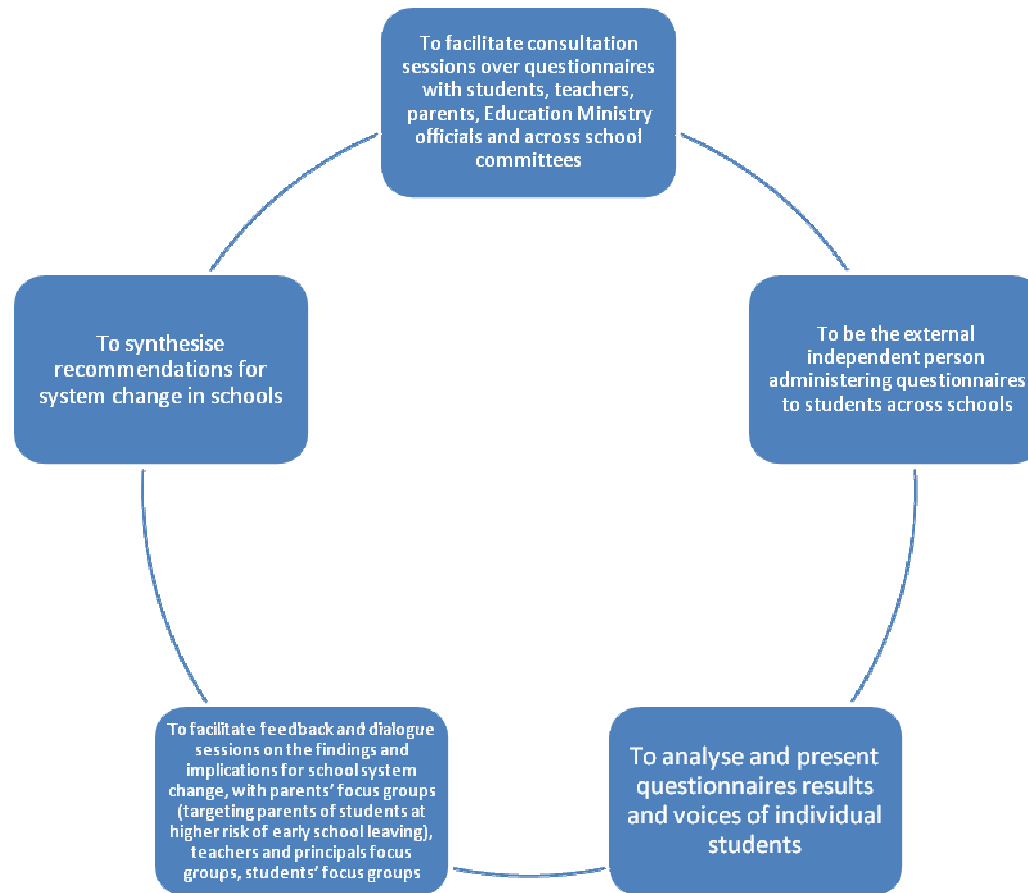
PROCESS:

- Questionnaires to hear individual students' voices about their experiences in school – the individual (at Risk of early school leaving) needs to be distinguished from the aggregate of students
- Consult key stakeholders on questions to ask: Consult student unions, teachers, parents, Education ministry officials, shared committees across schools for common discussion of strengths/difficulties
- Start with small number of local schools – late primary and post-primary
- Municipality coordinates the process – Key to have external person to the school administering the questionnaires
- Incentives for participating schools – municipality funding for targeted interventions, Quality Mark for Democratic, Relational Systems
- Feedback given to schools, parents and students
- No individual school identified in feedback to protect confidentiality of student responses and to help have a frank appraisal of concerns in a less defensive atmosphere



COORDINATING ROLE OF MUNICIPALITY STAFF MEMBER

- To facilitate consultation sessions over questionnaires with students, principals, teachers, parents, Education Ministry officials and across school committees
- To be the external independent person administering questionnaires to students across schools
- To analyse and present questionnaires results and voices of individual students
- To facilitate feedback and dialogue sessions on the findings and implications for school system change, with parents' focus groups (targeting parents of students at higher risk of early school leaving), teachers' and principals' focus groups, students' focus groups
- To bring together recommendations for system change in schools





EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE QUESTIONS:

STUDENTS' QUESTIONNAIRE (Late Primary and Post-Primary)

The answers you give are private; no one knows who wrote them. They do not go to your school, your family, your friends or the police. There is no right or wrong answer. We are not trying to judge you

- 1) Do you think you want to stay on at school until the Leaving Certificate/Final School Exam (age 18)?
- 2) If you had a problem with your schoolwork would you tell your teacher(s) about it? Why/Why not?
- 3) Are you treated fairly by teachers in school? Why/Why not?
- 4) If you did not have to go to school would you still go? Why/Why not?
- 5) If you have ever been absent from school without telling your family, what were your reasons for this ? What would make you want to go to school more often?
- 6) Do you have anyone you can talk about your stresses to?
- 7) If you had a younger sister or brother, what would be the 3 most important pieces of advice you would give to her/him?

- 8) If you had the power, what would you change in your school ?
- 9) Do you think your parent(s) would like to visit your school more often?
- 10) Would you like your parents to talk to your teachers more?
- 11) What are the biggest problems your friends have? How can they be helped?
- 12) How many in your class have been victims of bullying?
- 13) What would you really like to learn in school that you don't already learn?
- 14) When you do your best, how is this noticed at school?
- 15) Is there any school rule which you feel is the most unfair? Why?
- 16) Do you take part in a student council? Why/Why not?
- 17) What time do you usually go to sleep at on a weekday ?
- 18) What needs to be done to keep more students in school in your area?



TEACHERS' QUESTIONNAIRE (Primary and Post-Primary)

- 1) Please rank (in descending order) the 5 most important services you would like to see established in your particular school
- 2) What are the biggest difficulties facing a teacher in your school?
- 3) Is bullying a significant problem in your class? Why/Why not? What strategy on bullying, if any, do you employ in your classroom?
- 4) What are the obstacles to and/or supports needed for the establishment of a programme for increased parental involvement in your school?
- 5) What strategies do you employ to engage with more marginalized parents?
- 6) What strategies do you employ to engage with children at risk of early school leaving generally?
- 7) What strategies do you employ with regard to the support of ethnic minority or migrant pupils' in your class?

8) Are there any examples of good practice in your class/school for working with pupils who fall behind the rest of the class -models that could potentially be transferable to other schools?

PRINCIPALS' QUESTIONNAIRE

1) Please rank (in descending order) the 5 most important services you would like to see established in your particular school.

2) What are the biggest difficulties facing a teacher in your school?

3) Does your school have any links, formal or informal, with services in the community? If yes, please indicate which ones and how you would rate the strength/quality of these links.

Child Services:

Youth Services:

Family Support Services:

Social Welfare Services:

Other: Please outline.

4) What is your whole school strategy, if any, on bullying? Is bullying a significant problem in your school? Why/Why not?

- 5) What are the obstacles to and/or supports needed for the establishment of a programme for increased parental involvement in your school?
- 6) What strategies do you employ to engage with more marginalized parents?
- 7) What strategies do you employ to engage with children at risk of early school leaving generally?
- 8) What strategies do you employ with regard to the support of ethnic minority or migrant pupils in your school?

References

Downes, P. (2014). Towards a Differentiated, Holistic and Systemic Approach to Parental Involvement in Europe for Early School Leaving Prevention. Policy Recommendations Report for the EU Urbact, PREVENT project involving 10 European City Municipalities. European Union, European Regional Development Fund, Urbact Programme, Paris.

European Commission (2013). Reducing early school leaving: Key messages and policy support Final Report of the Thematic Working Group on Early School Leaving. Brussels: Directorate General, Education and Culture.



