

Brussels calls for 'universal' child care ^[1]

Author: EurActiv.com

Source: EurActiv.com

Format: Article

Publication Date: 17 Feb 2011

EXCERPTS

The European Commission is encouraging member states to invest more resources in making pre-school education available to all children from an early age.

"Investing in early education and care is one of the best investments we can make for our children - and for Europe's future," said Androulla Vassiliou, EU commissioner for education, culture, multilingualism and youth.

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The Commission is calling on member states to ensure universal access to pre-school education.

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"Investing in quality pre-school education is much more effective than intervening later," insisted the commissioner.

"It gives our youngsters a better chance in life and actually saves money in the long run," she added.

Vassiliou believes that focusing on the needs of young children is a good way to prevent problems in later life, and reduce the risk of students dropping out of school before they have completed their secondary education.

"Breaking the cycle of poverty and disadvantage also means lower costs for the taxpayer for health and hospital services, remedial schooling, welfare and policing," said the Cypriot.

Elements of an action plan

The Commission is asking the member states to work together on improving their early childhood education and care policies.

It wants to ensure that education and care is accessible for all young children, including those from disadvantaged groups and ethnic minorities, such as the Roma.

Improving the quality of pre-school education is seen as a key priority. This includes looking at the training and qualifications of staff, as well as their pay and working conditions.

At EU level, the Commission said it will work with the member states to promote the exchange of good policies and practices, whilst also supporting the development of innovative approaches by funding transnational projects and networks.

The Commission said it will encourage member states to invest in these areas via the EU's structural funds, in particular by support for staff training and for developing accessible infrastructure.

Wide differences in services

In most member states, compulsory full-time education starts at the age of five or six. For those children who are too young to attend school, there are wide differences in the availability and provision of pre-school education and care services.

In 2009, education ministers agreed on a target that 95% of four year-olds should have access to pre-school education. The current EU average is 92.3%, but there are wide variations in the number of hours per week as well as the quality of services.

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