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

on the Action Plan on Basic Skills

Action Plan on Basic Skills

1. Why we need to take action

Europe's competitiveness and social cohesion start with strong basic skills. Basic skills underpin other competences, such as creativity and critical thinking, as well as further learning, upskilling and reskilling among adults. They are crucial for innovation, to generate new knowledge and adapt it to a changing environment. Proficiency in reading, numeracy and science skills[1], but also in digital and citizenship skills is vital for a person to develop as an individual, navigate the complexities of everyday life and a rapidly changing job market and participate fully in society, democratic life and the economy. Basic skills form the foundation for individuals to become independent, better informed and prepared, engaged and active citizens, thus contributing to safeguard our democracy and fundamental values, in a context of rising political polarisation, eroded trust in institutions and increasing information manipulation. Missing out on these skills is not just a loss for the individual but for our European societies.

Too many EU countries have been grappling with declining levels of basic skills among pupils for decades. Approximately one in three 15-year-olds struggles to understand and apply mathematics in real-life situations and learning environments, and one in four fails to understand basic texts or apply simple scientific knowledge[2]. Compared to Canada, Japan, the United Kingdom and the US, the EU has a lower top performance rate in reading and science, and the second lowest in mathematics, seriously threatening the EU's innovation capacity and long-term competitiveness. Problems start early, with too many primary school pupils struggling, and too few excelling in reading, math and science[3]. No less than 43% of eight graders underachieve in basic digital skills[4] and most countries show a decline or no improvement compared to previous years. In global comparison, the EU lags well behind the best-performing Asian economies. Moreover, several EU countries recorded a decline in the civic knowledge of eighth graders from 2016 to 2022[5].

Insufficient basic skills in vocational education and training (VET) and among adults are equally concerning. The gap between VET students and those in general secondary education is pronounced in mathematics and reading. This aggravates the persistent shortage of qualified VET graduates in certain STEM occupations. One in five working-age adults in the EU struggles with reading and writing, and the gap in basic skills between the lowest- and highest-performing adults has widened within countries.[6] Even though 90% of all jobs require at least basic digital skills, only 56% of the EU adult population has that level of digital skills or above[7] – falling significantly short of the 2030 target of 80%[8].

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[1] As measured by the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).
[2] OECD (2023), PISA 2022 Results (Volume I), The State of Learning and Equity in Education, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en.
[3] IEA (2023), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study; IEA (2021), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study.
[4] IEA (2023), International Computer and Information Literacy Study.
[5] IEA (2022), International Civic and Citizenship Education Study.
[6] 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.
[7] Eurostat 2023.
[8] Digital Decade policy programme.

Member States need to take urgent action to address the basic skills gap. In 2024, the Council adopted in the context of the European Semester country-specific recommendations to 15 EU Member States to improve basic skills levels. This Action Plan responds to both the declining performance in basic skills among pupils and adult learners and the calls for a greater emphasis on basic skills in the Draghi[9] and Letta[10] reports, which underline the need to focus on all stages of education and all generations, also in the context of a shrinking labour force due to demographic trends.

The plan is a key initiative of the Union of Skills and complements the STEM Education Strategic Plan. It proposes concrete short- to medium-term steps for the EU and Member States to provide solutions to improve basic skills and promote excellence, from early years to school education and adult learning.

2. The basic skills set

Literacy	The ability to understand, use, evaluate, reflect orally and in writing using visual, audio and digital materials across disciplines and contexts.
Mathematics	The capacity to reason mathematically and to formulate, use and interpret mathematics to solve problems in real-world situations and make well-founded judgements and decisions based on data.
Science	The ability to engage with science-related issues and ideas as a reflective individual. This requires skills such as explaining phenomena scientifically, evaluating and designing scientific enquiries, and interpreting data and evidence.
Digital	The confident, critical and responsible engagement with digital technologies for learning, working and participating in society. This includes information literacy, communication, media literacy, digital content creation, online safety and digital well-being.
Citizenship	The ability to act responsibly and participate fully in civic life, grounded in an understanding of social, economic, legal and political structures. This involves understanding and evaluation of civic and democratic concepts, institutions and processes, including democracy, media literacy, crisis preparedness and respect of others and freedom of speech.

Source: OECD: PISA 2022 Assessment and Analytical Framework, PISA 2018 Assessment and Analytical Framework and PISA 2015 Assessment and Analytical Framework (for literacy, math, and science); 2018 Council Recommendation on key competences for lifelong learning (for digital and citizenship); IEA (2023), International Computer and Information Literacy Study (for digital); IEA (2022), International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (for citizenship).

Basic skills are the foundation of the key competences for lifelong learning.[11] Raising overall basic skills levels is both about increasing top performance, and about ensuring that all

[9] The Draghi report (2024): A competitiveness strategy for Europe.
[10] The Letta report (2024): Much more than a market – Speed, Security, Solidarity Empowering the Single Market to deliver a sustainable future and prosperity for all EU Citizens.
[11] 2018/C 189/01

learners, including those with disabilities and from a disadvantaged background, leave school with sufficient basic skills and that adults reach an adequate level of proficiency.

Literacy is foundational for all learning. Early language development greatly determines future reading ability, yet more and more children start school with limited proficiency in their native language or the language of schooling. Reading is shifting from traditional paper-based, long texts, to digital, shortened content, reducing readers' attention span. Education systems need to consider how different media impact literacy development while actively promoting engagement with more complex texts to foster literacy.

Mathematical skills are essential for everyday life in our technology-rich world. They are the basis of logical and abstract thinking. These skills, including financial literacy, enable individuals to make informed decisions based on data, and help them to develop a measured approach to risk-taking and empower citizens to make well-informed financial decisions throughout life, in addition to improving their prospects in the labour market. Poor proficiency may result in low up-take of STEM studies and careers. Advancements in technology, educational research and societal needs have led to more emphasis on learners' problem-solving abilities and critical-thinking skills, encouraging them to understand and apply mathematical concepts, rather than just memorising formulas. The increasing use of digital tools in mathematics highlights the growing connection between mathematical and digital literacy.

Science skills are essential for critical thinking and problem-solving and are the cornerstone for more advanced STEM education and careers. Developing scientific thinking and capabilities early facilitates later achievement in these strategic domains. Solid scientific literacy is also necessary for a successful green transition. Moreover, in an era of ever-increasing information manipulation, it is crucial for individuals to develop strong science skills to critically evaluate information, separate fact from fiction and draw evidence-based conclusions. Science education should reflect technological developments, as well as emphasise interdisciplinarity, critical thinking and problem-solving through inquiry-based learning and real-world challenges.

A wider notion of basic skills

Widening the basic skills set is essential to address the challenges of our rapidly evolving societies and economies. As technology increasingly impacts life and work, it is essential to give digital skills the same priority as others. At the same time, it is vital to foster citizenship skills early to strengthen and uphold democratic values.

Digital skills are crucial in modern society and everyday life. They are also instrumental in developing more advanced STEM skills, which are crucial for competitiveness, while media literacy is key for active and informed citizenship. There is a growing need for skills in areas such as cybersecurity awareness, artificial intelligence, machine learning and big data. In addition, remote working and learning have raised expectations for proficiency in digital collaboration tools, including effective and safe communication online.

Citizenship skills and civic knowledge are essential for fostering active participation in democratic societies but not equally developed everywhere. Rapid technological advancements coupled with rising polarisation and the spread of dis- and misinformation, make cultivating citizenship skills early on more crucial than ever. Female students consistently

demonstrate higher civic knowledge than males, and students from higher socio-economic status backgrounds score significantly better. Thinking independently, understanding democratic processes, respecting diversity and being aware of sustainability empower people to fully participate in civic and social life and exercise their rights and responsibilities.

3. Focus areas for improving basic skills development

Urgent efforts are needed to tackle the alarming decline in basic skills development. The EU is moving further away from its target of less than 15% of 15-year-olds underachieving in basic skills. Focusing on the critical factors that drive the decline and on strong policy levers is crucial to ensuring meaningful change and swift improvement.

Socio-economic background continues to be the strongest predictor of student performance. Underachievement in literacy, mathematics and sciences is alarmingly high among disadvantaged students (e.g. 48% in math), and the socio-economic gap continues to widen, also in digital skills. Students with a migrant background or with disabilities are particularly vulnerable. In many EU countries, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated educational inequalities and severely impacted students' well-being, which directly affects their motivation and capacity to learn. Additional efforts are needed to strengthen basic skills and promote equity and well-being by keeping grade repetition to a minimum, delaying curricular tracking and limiting ability grouping.

Acute teacher and trainer shortages, in particular in STEM subjects, have a negative impact on learning outcomes. The teaching workforce is ageing, as fewer teachers enter the profession. The profession is unattractive in most EU countries and across disadvantaged territories. Further policy action is required to improve teacher training, raise the attractiveness of the profession and ensure that novice teachers receive the support they need, including to address underachievement.

Declining parental involvement in recent years poses a significant risk to student success, particularly among disadvantaged students. PISA shows that supportive home environments are crucial for fostering positive student attitudes to school. Education systems that maintained or increased parental engagement, e.g. parents who discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative, have seen better performance, notably in mathematics.

Digital distraction is emerging as a major threat to academic performance. The pervasive influence of social media is of particular concern: around 30% of students in OECD countries are often distracted by digital devices during maths lessons, which significantly affects both academic performance and well-being. Although effectively integrating technology through a moderate use of digital resources for learning purposes can improve a student's performance, overuse can have detrimental effects and digital distraction should be minimised.

Prioritising basic skills development often clashes with overloaded curricula. In many systems, curricula have regularly been expanded in response to new societal demands, leading to neglected basic skills. Striking a better balance between curriculum breadth and focus on basic skills is therefore of paramount importance to improving educational outcomes.

Gender differences impact learning outcomes. Girls outperform boys in reading and are more likely to be among the top performers in all EU countries. However, boys tend to be the top performers in mathematics. Societal expectations and gender stereotypes can play a

significant role, leading to gender differences in career expectations and influencing subject-specific attitudes, motivation and academic performance. Additionally, teaching styles and classroom environments can affect boys and girls differently, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive teaching approaches.

Access to quality early education and care varies significantly across and within countries. This has profound individual and societal consequences, particularly for disadvantaged children. Staff shortages, inadequate professional development and poor working conditions remain pressing challenges, especially in disadvantaged territories. A quarter of European education systems still lack a national curriculum for pedagogical work with young children. Early experiences are crucial, in particular for building socio-emotional skills, which are essential for resilience, well-being, motivation, learning outcomes and lifelong-learning capacity. However, socio-emotional difficulties among children are signalled ever more, with attention problems and poor impulse control increasingly hampering school readiness.

In VET, resource shortages and curriculum limitations negatively impact the development of basic skills. Underperforming students often choose or are directed to VET programmes with curricula that tend to privilege vocational skills over basic skills. VET schools frequently have fewer resources, including financing, qualified teachers and technological resources and are not focused on remediation of gaps in basic skills.

Progress on basic skills for adults requires successfully getting to the 'hardest to reach' groups, who are at significant risk of exclusion. Many of these adults have had bad experiences with school-based learning, leaving a 'scarring effect', or face multiple disadvantages. The low level of participation of low-qualified, disadvantaged and unemployed adults in learning activities underscores the need for well-designed policies to support those at the highest risk of exclusion from the labour market. Successful policies often take a holistic approach, bringing together multidisciplinary services to support people, including housing, health, employment services and parental or carer support[12].

4. Tackling the root causes

Urgent efforts are required to support the 18 million underachieving pupils and the 47.7 million low-qualified adults (aged 25-64) in the EU. So far, policy guidance, cooperation opportunities, funding and technical support have consistently supported Member States in improving quality and equity of education and training systems and promoting basic skills. The Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways[13] resulted in some progress, but further efforts are required to tackle the problem more effectively. The Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success[14] provided a policy framework for action. It highlights whole-school approaches, targeted support, supportive learning environments and well-being at school. However, more needs to be done, focusing on three main areas:

i. boosting basic skills teaching and learning.
ii. supporting educators.
iii. enabling supportive environments.

[12] COM(2023) 439 final
[13] 2016/C 484/01
[14] 2022/C 469/01

4.1. Key action: Piloting a Basic Skills Support Scheme

The Basic Skills Support Scheme will aim to address basic skills deficiencies among children. The Commission will work with Member States and regions to define together the right pathway so that every child can reach an adequate level of basic skills by the end of compulsory schooling. The Support Scheme would propose a framework of effective measures, focusing on early intervention and individual, tailor-made support, from school to initial VET.

To pilot the Basic Skills Support Scheme, focus will be on proven measures, tailoring them to the country-specific situation and needs. The measures may include:

- **Early identification mechanisms and regular monitoring** at national, local and school levels, including individual assessment of basic skills and offers of suitable remedial courses, particularly at key transitions in a pupil's educational career, including when transitioning to VET programmes.
- Development of **basic skills improvement plans** at school level, including **extra learning time and personalised support**, with tutoring and mentoring programmes.
- Mainstreaming basic literacy and digital skills teaching in **initial teacher education** across all subjects.
- **Professional development** opportunities **for teachers** in school and vocational education, with focus on pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities; creating **specialist roles**, such as school mediators and home school liaison officers to strengthen collaboration between schools, learners, parents and the community.
- **Programmes to support parents** in promoting and encouraging their children's learning, developed in cooperation with other sectors, such as health, migration and child protection.
- **Partnerships and collaboration between regional and local authorities, educational agencies, professionals, businesses and other stakeholders** to give a structured and real-world exposure to the diverse application of basic skills.

Commission action to pilot a **Basic Skills Support Scheme** in partnership with Member States

- Pilot **a Basic Skills Support Scheme** in 2026.
- Draw up **guidelines for policymakers** in 2025 as a preparatory step for the Support Scheme.

The Commission invites Member States:

- To declare their interest in working with the Commission on **piloting the Basic Skills Support Scheme using available EU funding**.
- To set **national targets** for low achievement and top performance with a focus on disadvantaged pupils.

4.2 Boosting basic skills teaching and learning

Boosting basic skills teaching and learning will improve learners' success, educational outcomes and well-being. Learning from schools and practices that have successfully improved basic skills and educational outcomes is essential for other schools facing challenges with low performance. Innovative approaches increasingly use AI to help, in particular in designing personalised pathways for learning and assessment. This can benefit both underachievers and top performers. Specific attention should be paid to developing strong literacy skills that are closely linked to proficiency in other basic skills and are a foundation for

all learning. Helping all learners develop literacy skills is crucial, including those from disadvantaged and migrant backgrounds and those with disabilities.

Motivating adults to learn is challenging due to reluctance and limited opportunities. This challenge is particularly acute as concerns upgrading basic skills after poor experiences of initial education. However, the rapid pace of change and the fact that people will spend around four decades in the labour market after formal schooling make it urgent to find ways to reach these groups. As outlined in the Union of Skills, the roll out of Individual Learning Accounts (ILA), is essential for adult upskilling and reskilling, including for the low-skilled. ILA aims to become a universal entitlement for all adults, regardless of employment status[15].

Commission action to boost basic skills teaching and learning

- Pilot the first **European School Alliances** through the Erasmus+ programme in 2026. This will boost strategic European cooperation in school education, serving as testbeds for innovative teaching methods, curricula and competence frameworks, particularly for basic skills. The Alliances will support participating schools in becoming learning organisations for effective basic skills teaching, including in cooperation with local authorities.
- Develop **guidelines for curriculum development** in early childhood education and care, which support the acquisition of basic skills early on and facilitate early detection and intervention of developmental delays.
- Develop **guidelines and best practices on advancing the assessment of digital skills in education** in 2026 to help compare standards of digital skills assessments in schools across the EU.
- Pilot innovative approaches for **personalised learning pathways in basic skills development** through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) systems, building on 2026 Erasmus+ policy experimentations, to support top-performing and underachieving learners.
- Update the **Digital Competence Framework** (DigComp) in 2025, taking into account new technologies such as General Purpose AI, to support learners in developing basic and advanced digital skills.
- Develop guidelines on **enhancing basic skills in VET** through: (i) integrating literacy, numeracy, digital, and citizenship skills in VET curricula; (ii) using effective teaching methods such as problem-solving and scenario-based learning; (iii) implementing appropriate assessment and quality assurance measures.
- Create a **toolkit for basic skills**, including basic digital skills, **in apprenticeships** in 2026 to provide hands-on guidance for VET schools and employers to integrate basic skills in their apprenticeship programmes.

4.3. Supporting educators

Educators and school leaders at all levels are key to improving basic skills. Making teaching more attractive and tackling acute shortages is vital for raising basic skills levels. Given the key role of early years development for learning and school success, educators in early childhood education and care need to be trained to support children's oral communication

[15] 2022/C 243/03

and socio-emotional learning to create the foundations for basic skills. It is crucial for teachers at all levels to have access to research-informed initial teacher education and continuous professional development tailored to basic skills and sustained over time. Investing in coaching and mentoring for teachers, especially when they enter the profession, is effective for improving their teaching practice. In addition, school leaders must make further efforts to integrate literacy and digital education into all subjects.

Commission action to support educators

- Set out an **EU Teachers and Trainers Agenda** in 2026. It will focus on improving educators' working conditions, training and career prospects, including in early childhood education and care. It will aim to break the vicious circle of low attractiveness and sustainability of careers, which has led in particular to a shortage of STEM teachers and a drop in basic skills.
- Set up, in 2025, **a new community of practice of Erasmus+ Teacher Academies** – the European partnerships between teacher education institutions and training providers – on the European School Education Platform. The action will foster collaboration among the 43 Erasmus+ Teacher Academies to identify and disseminate relevant, applicable knowledge and share innovative practices to amplify high-quality teacher training, including on basic skills.
- Pilot a **mentoring system for early career teachers in all subjects** by 2026 to effectively integrate basic skills development into their teaching practices.
- Promote **job shadowing for education policymakers** through Erasmus+ in 2026, which will increase their learning mobility, including to countries with high scores in international assessment tests.
- Expand **EU online communities for educators (European School Education Platform, including eTwinning)** in 2025, which reach 400,000 participants, providing better professional learning opportunities, evidence-based tools, material and resources on effective basic skills teaching and assessment. Provide high-quality material for educators, parents, teachers and youngsters, including on cybersecurity, through the **Better Internet for Kids** initiative.
- Promote **high-quality learning material on digital skills** by practicing teachers through the EU Code Week activities, aiming at 100,000 activities per year.

4.4. Enabling supportive environments

Parents, families and the broader community, including employers, play a pivotal role in developing the basic skills of children, young people and adults. Parents and families are a child's first educators, introducing language, numbers and social norms through everyday interactions, shaping children's cognitive and emotional development and instilling habits for further learning. Involving the wider community (including youth organisations, libraries, museums, cultural and sport organisations, after-school clubs and companies) extends learning further by offering experiential learning, real-world uses, observation of role models and access to resources. This multi-stakeholder engagement is particularly crucial given the persistent link between socio-economic background and educational outcomes. Promoting strong

collaboration between stakeholders to support inclusion is a priority in the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion, the EU Roma strategic framework and the Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Further approaches are crucial to stimulate adults to engage in learning activities, in particular in familiar and trusted environments (such as libraries and community, cultural, sports, health and social inclusion centres). The workplace and public employment services, including tailored career guidance, can also play important roles. Ensuring adequate public infrastructure – venues, equipment and appropriate personnel – is essential to boost local initiatives that create more learning opportunities around the needs of low-skilled adults through various partnerships.

Commission action to enable supportive environments

- Engage volunteers under the European Solidarity Corps in 2026 for **mentoring and tutoring activities for underachieving children and adults** as part of the **'Volunteering Teams in High Priority Areas'** strand. The programme will recruit a diverse group of volunteers to assist and inspire children in their academic and social development while also promoting intergenerational solidarity by enriching the experiences of both the volunteers and the children they mentor.
- Launch an **EU literacy coalition** in 2026, involving governments, businesses and libraries, to create a community around literacy, raise awareness about the literacy crisis and encourage young people, in particular boys, to read for pleasure.
- Organise **peer-learning activities** for Member States **on innovative community learning spaces** to help develop adults' basic skills.

5. How we will make it happen

The Action Plan reaffirms the EU's commitment and ambition to support quality education for all. Building on the Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways[16], the Council Recommendation on establishing a European Child Guarantee[17] and the Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success[18], it aims to support Member States in accelerating reforms and driving significant advancements in young people's and adults' basic skills for a transformative leap forward.

Coordination among Member States will be further strengthened including through an additional focus on basic skills in the European Semester's follow-up of education and skills reforms, by setting and monitoring strategic targets on basic skills at EU level and through the future European Skills Intelligence Observatory.

The implementation of the Action Plan will be integrated in the Union of Skills governance structures. As relevant, it will take into account the recommendations of the Digital Decade Board on digital basic skills, as well as of other relevant bodies. Under the current multiannual financial framework, it will continue to draw on the Cohesion Policy Funds, the Recovery and Resilience Facility, Erasmus+, the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), InvestEU and Horizon Europe. **Future EU funding will continue to support investments in education and skills**

[16] 2016/C 484/01
[17] 2021/L 223/14
[18] 2022/C 469/01

at EU level. Leveraging best practices, pilot projects, and lessons learned at the EU level, alongside improved coordination with European policy priorities, will maximise the added value of investments in sectors critical to European competitiveness.

The Commission invites the European Parliament, the Council and social partners to endorse the Action Plan on Basic Skills and to actively support and contribute to delivering on its initiatives.