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NOTE

From: General Secretariat of the Council

To: Permanent Representatives Committee/Council

Subject: Reading and its importance for learning, equity and active participation in society
– *Policy debate*

Following consultation of the Education Committee, the Presidency has prepared the attached background note, which is submitted as the basis for the policy debate to take place at the Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council meeting on 16 May 2023.

Reading and its importance for learning, equity and active participation in society*Presidency background note*

Reading is fundamental for people's lives at a personal level, but also for educational, employment and social integration purposes. Being able to read is crucial to the individual's capacity to acquire new knowledge, learn and utilise written information. It is a prerequisite for active participation in society and is therefore ultimately a question of democracy. From that perspective it is essential that everyone is given the opportunity to develop adequate reading skills.

The recently adopted Council Recommendation on Pathways to School Success¹ states that socio-economic background is the strongest predictor of educational outcomes. In most EU countries, learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are overrepresented among those who leave education and training without an upper secondary qualification. Results from the Education and Training Monitor 2022 reveal that students from a disadvantaged socio-economic background are almost six times more likely to underachieve in school education compared to those from a privileged socio-economic background. Special attention also needs to be paid to support learners with disabilities and/or special educational needs. Starting from an early age, the ability to read and access to language is of great significance for the quality of people's lives and for an inclusive European Education Area. It is also essential for the language development of children and young people with a mother tongue different from their language of schooling that reading in their first language is actively promoted.

¹ Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on Pathways to School Success and replacing the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving, OJ C 469, 9.12.2022, p. 1.

Literature and reading are also valuable in their own right. The ability to read is a precondition for finding pleasure in recreational reading of different kinds. In this respect, widespread digitalisation in our societies may present a challenge by opening up a wider variety of activities for children's and young people's leisure time, though it does also provide new pathways to reading.

On 27 March 2023, the Commission launched 'The Day of European Authors'. The objective of the initiative was both to promote European authors through activities in all Member States and to encourage reading, in particular in schools.

The results of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 reveal that over the 2009–2018 period, performance in science and reading deteriorated at EU level, while remaining stable in mathematics². Today, one in five 15-year-old Europeans still lacks adequate competences in reading, mathematics or science.

Consequently, most Member States recognise the need to strengthen the ability to read and increase interest in reading among learners of all ages. It is also an essential building block for achieving the European Education Area and laying the ground for a competitive Union. In the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)³, Member States have jointly agreed on the target of reducing the share of low-achieving 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science to less than 15 percent by 2030. Although some Member States show a positive trend for reading, there is still a lot to be done to reach the set EU-level target.

² PISA 2018 and the EU: Striving for Social Fairness Through Education, European Commission, Publications Office of the European Union, 2019.

³ Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030), OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1.

PIRLS, the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, is recognised as the global standard for assessing trends in reading achievement in the fourth grade, providing internationally comparative data on how well children in primary education read. The PIRLS 2021 International Report and Results will be released on 16 May 2023. These results, together with the PISA 2022 results, which will be released by the OECD on 5 December 2023, will be important for charting our path towards the European Education Area.

In light of the above, the Presidency invites Ministers to consider the questions below for a discussion on the topic.

Questions for the discussion:

- What do you consider to be the biggest challenges to raising the levels of reading among learners?
- What could be done, in both national and European contexts, to raise the levels of reading among learners of all ages?