

# Preventing early school leaving

POLICY DEVELOPMENT

STRATEGY/ACTION PLAN

 NETHERLANDS

## Timeline

2020 Implementation 2021 Implementation 2022 Implementation  
2023 Implementation 2024 Implementation 2025 Implementation

ID number 39951

## Background

Annually more than 25 000 young people drop out of education without a basic qualification (*startkwalificatie*, an upper secondary education or upper secondary VET level 2 qualification). Starting work without obtaining a diploma can be an attractive option for a young person and an employer in the short term, but figures show that young people who do not obtain a basic qualification are less often sustainably employed.

In October 2019, the government expressed the ambition to support young early leavers from education and training to obtain at least a basic qualification, or if they do not succeed after much effort, to follow an alternative route (e.g. a combination of learning and working, care or daytime activities). The Cabinet has, therefore, announced that it will take further steps to fully support young early leavers on their way to sustainable economic independence.

## Objectives

The approach, apart from preventing early leaving from education and training, also has the objective of easing the path of young early leavers from education and training back to school or to work.

## Description

Since March 2020, the education ministry has issued three policy letters discussing the new approach to further combat early leaving from education and training and support young early leavers achieving sustainable economic independence.

In the first letter (March 2020), the government and various stakeholders from education and the labour market (including employers' organisations) expressed their joint intention to focus on apprenticeships (dual pathway) to help working, young dropouts to obtain at least a basic qualification. Apprenticeships (dual pathway) offer young people the opportunity to combine work and obtain a basic qualification. Stakeholders agreed that when schools get signals that learners wish to stop education and start working before having obtained a basic qualification, schools and employers will try to find a way to help

them obtain a basic qualification. For example, by offering the youngster an apprenticeship contract.

In mid-May 2020, the Cabinet announced its decision to invest nearly EUR 500 million extra in education to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Part of this package includes compensating for study delay, supporting students in catching up educational arrears and ensuring sufficient internships and apprenticeships.

The second letter (July 2020) focused on the progress of measures introduced as a response to Interdepartmental policy research (*Interdepartementaal beleidsonderzoek*, IBO) in 2019 on young adults at a distance from the labour market. In this letter, the Minister for Education indicated that she would take further steps to provide young early leavers with integrated support on their way to sustainable economic independence. Parallel to the mid-May announcement, which was mainly aimed at the short and medium-term effects of the crisis, the Cabinet presented its approach to resolve fundamental bottlenecks, identified by the Interdepartmental policy research, that early leavers are experiencing on their way back to education, training or employment. The government's response (issued in 2019) to this survey included 14 measures that are directed at preventing early leaving and tackling youth unemployment. The most significant measures directed at early leaving are:

- (a) enhancing guidance and monitoring of young early leavers up to the age of 27, via a major role for municipalities;
- (b) promoting tailor-made tracks in upper secondary VET, especially in VET level 2 programmes. Courses that start in the school-based pathway and end in the dual one, could offer a solution to the increasing shortage of apprenticeship placements due to the COVID-19 pandemic;
- (c) monitoring early school leaving, based on the plans of the 40 regions for the implementation of the Early school leaving and attendance policy (*Regionale Meld- en Coördinatiepunt*, RMC). Regions have developed plans up to the academic year 2023/24;
- (d) developing a bill, which extends the qualification requirement for support to the age of 21. After online public consultation, it is expected to be formally submitted to parliament in spring 2021.

### 2020 Implementation

Measures aiming to mitigate the effects of the coronavirus pandemic were in implementation phase, as well as regional plans to reduce early school leaving. Long-term measures were in the design phase, such as measures to increase the possibilities for tailor-made tracks.

The bill to extend the qualification requirement for support to the age of 21 was open for public consultation in July-September 2020. The reactions emphasise that force and urgency are not effective, because the young need intrinsic motivation to obtain the qualification requirement. By extending the requirement, students will be forced to school, which may lead to negative atmosphere in the classroom.

### 2021 Implementation

In the third letter (February 2021), the government reported on the progress of the approach to combat early leaving from education and training. EUR 24.5 million has been made available for VET institutions to provide final-year students and graduate students, who have a high risk of youth unemployment, extra guidance and aftercare. In this letter, the minister discussed some measures to provide support to regions in tackling early school leaving. Important measures are to harness the power of parents in reducing dropout, to map out factors which are related to early school leaving so that regions can recognise signals of early school dropout, and to identify young people who leave school without the requirement qualification.

The following measures are currently being implemented to combat early leaving during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- (a) vulnerable learners may attend level 1 VET programmes at school instead of

- through distance learning as much as possible;
- (b) schools and municipalities keep close communication with young people despite distance learning;
- (c) local VET stakeholders (e.g. schools, attendance officers, municipalities, etc.) are helped to work well together.

Extra support is provided to regions to address challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. First, schools will receive financial support to continue providing education in lockdown, which should prevent and combat student education arrears (this scheme is called *Extra hulp voor de klas*). Second, they have received further financial support to carry out their own regional plans (RMC) for tackling early school leaving for 2020-24. In addition, regions will receive extra resources to combat youth unemployment.

The Association of Dutch municipalities (VNG) and the Council for upper secondary VET schools (MBO raad) formed an alliance to achieve more sustainable cooperation in terms of preventing early leaving in times of COVID 19 pandemic. In the future, the alliance may continue cooperating on other topics.

The bill on extending qualification requirement has not yet been passed.

### 2022 Implementation

In March 2022, the education ministry issued a policy letter on the number of early leavers. During the previous academic year (2020/21), 24 385 students left education without a basic qualification. This is 1 619 more than the year before (2019/20). Consequently, the goal of a maximum of 20 000 new early school leavers annually has not been achieved yet.

The education ministry and the unemployment coordinator of each region discussed the effects of their early school leaving approach, the extent to which they were achieving their own goals, what success factors and bottlenecks they experienced, and the improvements they saw, both locally and nationally. Based on these discussions, the education minister intends to strengthen the existing approach and to integrate it into a school-to-work approach. Together with the Minister of Poverty, Participation and Pensions, they are preparing a joint bill, which will be available for online consultation in the summer of 2023.

### 2023 Implementation

According to the latest figures from the education ministry, approximately 30 000 students left VET (upper secondary vocational education) without obtaining a diploma in the 2021/22 academic year. This marks an increase of 5 000 students compared to the previous year. While there is an established strategy to address early school leaving, the positive outcomes achieved so far remain insufficient due to a variety of underlying causes.

The Council for Upper Secondary VET Schools (MBO Raad) identifies three primary reasons for the rise in dropout rates:

- (a) mental well-being issues: Many young people face challenges related to their mental health.
- (b) poor education choices: Limited opportunities to attend information sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic led to students making unsuitable education choices.
- (c) labour market tightness: The current demand for labour makes leaving school without a basic qualification more appealing, as students can find jobs easily.

To address these issues, the Council for Upper Secondary VET Schools (MBO Raad) advocates for a broader, collective approach involving civil society organisations to improve mental well-being. Additionally, they propose postponing the timing of students' education choices to reduce the likelihood of poor decisions. Finally, the VET Working Agenda includes agreements aimed at encouraging young people to complete at least a basic qualification before entering the workforce.

## 2024 Implementation

In March 2024, the Minister of Education issued a policy letter on the number of early school leavers. During the academic year 2022/23, 30 246 students left education without a basic qualification. This is almost the same as the previous year. This figure remains significantly higher than the target of a maximum of 18 000 new early school leavers by 2026.

To tackle early school leaving, the Minister of Education submitted the Early school leaving action plan to the parliament. The Action plan focusses on the three main causes of early school leaving and emphasises collaboration between schools and municipalities. To support these efforts, the Minister of Education has allocated additional funding.

## 2025 Implementation

In a policy letter from March 2025, the education minister gave an update on the number of early school leavers from VET and on the Early school leaving action plan. The number of new early school leavers in VET dropped with almost 2000; from 24 286 in 2022-2023 to 22 308 in 2023-2024. However, it will remain a challenge to reach the aim for a maximum of 18 000 in 2026.

To further lower this number, the Dutch government is intensifying efforts to reduce early school leaving and improve sustainable employment outcomes for young people, especially those facing multiple challenges. The 2024 adopted Law on the integrated school-to-work approach (*Van school naar duurzaam werk*), that will enter into force on 1 January 2026, is an effort towards this direction. The law targets youth up to 27 years old who are at risk of dropping out or are not in education or employment. The goal is to help them obtain a basic qualification or, if that's not feasible, to support their development through practical learning routes. Regional programmes are central to this approach, with over EUR 90 million annually allocated. Schools, municipalities, and transition services must collaborate and tailor their efforts to local needs. Special attention is given to youth with multiple problems, who are at higher risk of dropping out or unemployment. Regions must ensure accessible support, ideally within schools, and involve partners from youth care, social services, debt assistance, and public safety. Nationally, the government is also improving support through the VET Inclusive Education Improvement Agenda, including better information and guidance tools. Monitoring shows that students with support needs are rarely denied access to education.

The transition from special secondary education (vso) to VET is a critical point, with high dropout rates. Regional programmes must include agreements to improve this transition, such as using transition coaches. Research is underway to identify effective interventions, with results expected in late 2025.

To address early exit into the labour market without a diploma, the government promotes work-based learning (BBL) and flexible pathways, including switching from school-based (BOL) to BBL after a year.

## Bodies responsible

- Ministry of Education, Culture and Science

## Target group

### Learners

Learners in upper secondary, including apprentices  
Young people (15-29 years old)  
Learners at risk of early leaving or/and early leavers

# Thematic categories

## Governance of VET and lifelong learning

Engaging VET stakeholders and strengthening partnerships in VET

## Modernising VET offer and delivery

Reinforcing work-based learning, including apprenticeships

## Supporting lifelong learning culture and increasing participation

Permeability between IVET and CVET and general and vocational pathways, academic and professional higher education

Ensuring equal opportunities and inclusiveness in education and training

# European priorities in VET

## VET Recommendation

VET promoting equality of opportunities

# Subsystem

IVET

# Further reading

[Policy letter: declaration of Intent to bring undergraduate young people to basic qualification, education ministry, 12 March 2020](#)

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[Policy letter on progress of measures of interdepartmental policy research into young people at a distance from the labour market, education ministry, 8 July 2020](#)

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[Policy letter on progress on the approach to early school leaving, education ministry, 12 February 2021](#)

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[Annex to policy letter on the National education programme, support programme recovery and perspective, education ministry, 17 February 2021](#)

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[News item, education ministry, EUR 500 million extra for education \(May 2020\)](#)

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[Publication on the cooperation between the MBO-raad and the VNG, 22 April 2021](#)

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[Policy letter on the number of early school-leavers and progress of the program \(April 2022\)](#)

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[Policy letter on the future of the program \(November 2022\)](#)

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[News item, tackling early school leaving remains important \(April, 2023\)](#)

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[Policy letter on the number of early school-leavers and progress of the program \(March, 2024\)](#)

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[Early School Leaving Action Plan, Education Ministry, 2024](#)

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[Policy letter on the number of early school-leavers and progress of the program \(March,](#)

## Related policy developments

### 2025 Implementation

#### Tackling youth unemployment

In the Cabinet's response, 14 measures were announced that focus on tackling youth unemployment and preventing early leaving from education and training. The most significant measures that focus on employment are:

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##### Type of development

Strategy/Action  
plan

##### Subsystem

IVET CVET

### 2025 Implementation

#### Changing funding provisions in dual VET

The existing subsidy scheme for companies to cover the costs of offering learning places to apprentices (BBL students, and also applicable to VMBO, MBO and higher professional education - HBO VET programmes) was extended in 2017/18 to cover the costs related to learners enrolled in secondary spec

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#### “ ... ” Cite as

Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). Preventing early school leaving: Netherlands. In Cedefop, & ReferNet. (2026). *Timeline of VET policies in Europe* (2025 update) [Online tool].

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/tools/timeline-vet-policies-europe/search/39951>

