Position paper

Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

On the 30th of September 2020 the European Commission launched its new Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027. This ambitious document is currently being reviewed by the Education Committee of the European Parliament. This position paper is meant to raise key concerns among MEPs and the wider public. From our perspective, the plan lacks a holistic pedagogical vision for education in the digital era and its narrow focus on "digital education" is a severe limitation with unintended side-effects. This policy paper highlights important limitations and concrete policy responses to address them.

7 Limitations of the Digital Education Action Plan

1. The plan provides a narrow one-size-fits-all approach to mainstreaming digital education

It is disturbing that instead of the wider notion of education in the digital era, the plan promotes the narrow and illogical vision of "digital education". Education involves humans and is never digital in itself. It can only be supported with digital technology. Besides that, the narrow idea of mainstreaming an exclusively "digital" education from an early age does not sufficiently reflect the diversity of Europe, the subsidiarity principle, and the value of pedagogical freedom and diversity.

2. The plan lacks a vision for a development-oriented ICT- and media education

The demand to introduce digital technology in education from an early age does not reflect the developmental needs of young children. It fails to address the importance of media maturity and the mastery of basic transversal skills, such as numeracy, critical thinking and social communication skills as fundamental prerequisites for the acquisition of digital skills and competences in later years.

3. Emergency distance learning should not serve as a prototype for mainstreaming digital education

Contrary to exaggerated claims of its potential, the current crisis revealed the various limits of technology-based emergency distance learning and the need to safeguard as much in-person learning as safely possible, particularly for young children. One limit is the additional communication need that puts a substantial burden on both pupils, parents, teachers and schools raising questions to the effectiveness of technology-based distance learning. The emergency distance learning during the

EUROPEAN COUNCIL FOR STEINER WALDORF EDUCATION

Rue du Trône 194, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Phone: +32 2 644 00 43, Mobile: +32 485 668 230
Email: info@ecswe.eu, Website: www.ecswe.eu

COVID-19 pandemic only showed that digitally facilitated education is better than no education at all.

4. The plan wrongly assumes that the digitalisation of education is a value in itself

The Hattie Study has shown that educational quality first and foremost depends on high quality teaching, not on the tools and the media used in the teaching and learning process. Instead of pushing digital tools and technology-based education, Europe needs a broad strategy on how to provide adequate quality in education in the digital era.

5. The plan does not reflect the real training needs of teachers

The plan promotes a top-down approach to defining training needs instead of consulting teachers with regards to their own views and experiences on how to best develop learners' digital competence and media maturity. The complexity of the digital era and its implications for successful teacher training are not sufficiently reflected in the plan.

6. The plan lacks clear scientific evidence supporting its key premises

The implicit assumption that implementing the plan will yield mostly positive results is not backed-up by scientific evidence. The EU will therefore invest in mainstreaming "digital education" without understanding the impact of introducing digital technology with regards to student performance across the eight key competences and at the various levels of education.

7. The plan's focus on providing access might deepen the digital divide

Unsupervised access to digital technology at a young age deepens the digital divide by reinforcing problematic patterns of use as socially disadvantaged groups are more frequently exposed to risks connected with digital technology (addictive use, cyber-bullying, exposure to violent content) and frequently lack well-informed parental guidance and supervision at home.

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10 Ideas for a Policy Response

In order to make education systems, schools, teachers and learners ready for the digital era, we suggest the following:

1. Prioritise an age-appropriate and development-oriented approach

Policy makers should prioritise the need to develop digital competence by means of a development-oriented approach that introduces digital technologies in a learner-focused and age-appropriate way. Such an approach builds on the good experience with using unplugged solutions to teach computational thinking and computer science before introducing digital technology in classrooms. It also emphasises personal contact between students and teachers, prioritises the well-being and healthy development of children and adult learners at all times.

2. Develop media maturity ahead of introducing digital technology in classrooms

A truly age-appropriate and development-oriented media education only introduces digital technology in classrooms after children demonstrate a significant degree of media maturity and are thus developmentally ready. We consider the healthy physical, emotional, social and mental development of a child to be the prerequisite for autonomous use of digital technology. A healthy development lays the foundation for an active, responsible and reflective life and consequently for skilful and independent use of digital media.

3. Ensure a mastery of basic and social skills as a prerequisite for developing digital competence

The development of digital skills and competences also largely depends on the mastery of basic transversal skills, such as numeracy, critical thinking and social communication skills. Their thorough development in primary education should therefore precede the comprehensive development of digital competence in later years.

4. Empower schools to develop their own approach to ICT and media education

While policy-makers set the general framework of learning outcomes to be reached by the end of compulsory education, schools need autonomy to decide on when and how to introduce specific content and technology in classrooms. They should be encouraged to develop their own approach to ICT and media education, involving school leaders,

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teachers, parents, pupils and external experts.

5. Empower teachers by means of adequate training

In order to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the digital era, teacher training and CPD need to provide teachers with a thorough understanding of when and how digital competence and media-literacy are best developed in the classroom. Instead of a rushed digitisation agenda, policy makers should therefore invest in teacher training programmes with a focus on age-appropriate and development-oriented ICT and media education.

6. Provide teachers with pedagogical freedom to innovate

Instead of forcing digital technology into classrooms from an early age by means of benchmarking, country-specific goals, reporting mechanisms and international assessment, politics should put more trust in a teacher's ability, creativity and professionalism. Within the framework of a school's general strategy and curriculum for ICT and media education, teachers need a high degree of pedagogical freedom to choose the right timing, teaching methods and material in order to develop the digital competence and media literacy of their students sustainably. Pedagogical diversity can then act as a catalyst for educational dialogue among teachers.

7. Make EU funding conditional upon scientific impact assessment of educational quality at different education levels

Before spending large amounts of money on implementing the Digital Education Action Plan, the assumption that an early use of digital technology in classrooms will significantly improve educational quality and student performance needs to undergo a reality check. So far, there is a lack of clear scientific evidence in this regard; Such research should compare the performance of learners enrolled in "digital education" with the results of the performance of an equally well-funded "analogue" control group over an extended period of time.

8. Conduct research on physical, mental and social health effects of the use of digital technology in education

There is a clear need to invest into independent large-scale and long-term research into the various health effects of digital technologies. Education sciences, pedagogy, psychology, sociology, neuroscience and computer science need to be linked in order to achieve as deep an understanding as possible of how children's and adults' physical, mental and social health and well-being are affected by a digital learning environment, with a view to minimising the physical, mental and social health risks of using digital technology in education.

9. Promote a flexible response to the digital and social divide

The best way to reduce the digital and social divide across the EU is to avoid a

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one-size-fits all approach or curriculum. Flexibility and diversity of approaches are needed. They need to be tailored to the needs of different school communities and classrooms and delivered by competent and well-trained teachers. Policy makers and school leaders must be reminded that the European values of freedom and diversity enshrined in DigComp 2.1. for citizens do not foresee prescriptive implementation and allow for such flexibility.

10.   Provide transparency on profit-driven corporate influence

Ahead of undertaking large-scale educational reform in Europe, policy-makers should systematically map and better understand the nature and depth of profit-driven IT lobbyists and companies influencing school leaders and policy-makers and how this is rapidly transforming educational systems in Europe. It needs to be investigated how the peddling of high hopes is based on unsubstantiated claims and primarily fuelled by commercial interests.

Feel free to contact us with questions and suggestions!

Georg Jürgens
Managing Director
Email: georg.juergens@ecswe.eu

Dora Šimunović
Policy and Advocacy Coordinator
Email: dora.simunovic@ecswe.eu

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