

# Fighting academic failures

May 28 2019

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Children from undereducated, low-income families face a greater risk of poor academic performance. But schools are capable of decreasing these risks. Experts from the Higher School of Economics have studied international experience in addressing these challenges. The results have presented in *Journal of Modern Foreign Psychology*.

## **Above Barriers**

Many international studies have demonstrated that family context impacts a child's school progress, showing a correlation between parents' socio-economic status and children's achievements. Low levels of education, income and cultural interest in the family often have a negative impact on the progress of school-age children and as a result may hinder their social mobility.

However, strict predetermination is not inevitable. Children may overcome their circumstances and study well, expanding their opportunities in life. It is important to support such students and create a favourable school environment for them. Having studied the experience of Russian schools that achieved high results despite students' family circumstances, as well as similar practices in Great Britain, France, Germany, Spain, Ireland, Portugal, and Belgium, Sergey Kosaretsky, Aleksandra Mikhailova and Evgeny Isaev suggest some support measures in their paper. IQ.HSE selected some interesting ideas to support socially vulnerable students.

## **Subsidies and Monitoring**

Additional funding and remedial education are the most obvious approaches that many countries use to address these challenges.

Schools that teach a large number of kids from families experiencing economic hardship are granted special subsidies or increased funding. It is often up to the schools to decide which areas should be supported. For example, schools can hire additional staff or pay bonuses to teachers who work with underachieving students. These additional funds can also be used to create advisory centres and expert teams. Money can be invested in professional development for teachers or to design language

programmes for migrants' children.

One example of a programme that provides additional funding is the London Challenge in Great Britain. This programme started locally but later evolved to include other regions. It focuses on socially vulnerable demographic groups and aims to prevent underachievement by working with low performers. Schools with mixed-ability students receive additional funding, which stimulates teaching and organization of additional classes.

Remedial education includes programmes to develop basic literacy and arithmetic skills. But it also includes a system to monitor "those who may lag behind and fall out of the system in order to minimize the risks of such students dropping out," the researchers explained.

In addition to these general measures to promote academic performance, different countries have their own national approaches with different areas of focus.

## **Portugal: Preventing Drop-out**

A 2012 programme adopted in Portugal that aims to combat "early drop-out from schools" is completely personalized in that underachieving students receive individual curricula.

Children who risk failing the public exam in 4th and 6th grades receive additional classes and trial exams in order to determine their levels. Classes may be formed depending on academic performance, which allows underachievers to receive more targeted support.

## **Belgium: Success Tutors**

Another country-specific option involves special teachers of success. In Belgium, schools with a large number of socially vulnerable students employ staff members who identify children who are at risk of academic failure and help them. Such support in different subjects is, in fact, a form of free tutoring, the authors explain.

## **Ireland: Fighting Inequality Starting in Preschool**

In Ireland, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme has been in place since 2005. It aims to begin equalizing opportunities for education as early as preschool. Kids are offered a year of free studies before they go on to elementary school.

Another programme, Home School Community Liaison, helps to build a liaison between the school and the family. A programme representative in the school is relieved of routine teaching duties, which allows him or her to focus on working with families that come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This representative is responsible for building relations between parents and the school in order to better integrate the students.

## **France: Psychophysiology Aid**

Priority Education is a programme that aims to improve the performance of students in school who are in difficult situations. The programme offers help not only from teachers, but also from doctors and psychologists. This French initiative bears resemblance to the Russian approach. According to the researchers, Russian teaching practice tends to "detect psychophysiological and psychological (motivational and cognitive) qualities among underachieving school students."

Teachers in French schools covered by the programme communicate

with parents regularly and undertake projects together with the students. They work personally with struggling students in small groups (this is of vital importance for the most troubled schools in the Priority Education Plus programme).

## **Germany: Socialization in Clubs**

A correlation has been established between extracurricular activities and school performance. Teenagers who take part in clubs and other activities after classes feel more confident and study better. For students who come from families experiencing economic hardship and for migrant children, this is also a way to help with social engagement. Germany's federal educational authority has allocated over €30 million annually since 2013 to supporting extracurricular activities in families that come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The "educational package" proposed by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs also supports students from poor and undereducated families who are given an opportunity to attend clubs and excursions.

Since 2004, Germany has actively developed "full day" schools that offer kids after-school activities in an open format where they can do their homework or play.

## **Six Ideas for Russia**

Based on international experience, the researchers suggest the following:

Supporting students and schools of different levels is essential. Financial support should be made a priority, including special-purpose subsidies, bonuses and grants in exchange for schools' obligation to equalize students' performance. Schools should be able to administer funds independently. Focus should be made, for example, on continuing

education for teachers.

A rich educational environment is important: school days should be filled with additional classes on school subjects and extracurricular activities.

Pro-family action is needed and can include granting personal certificates that socially vulnerable students can use to receive additional education.

It makes sense to develop "resilient school" practices, i.e., those aimed at exceeding expectations and that help students from challenging family backgrounds achieve high results. Such schools intensify the educational environment and have the ability to work with mixed-ability classes. Strong students are given optional classes, preparation for competitions, and subject-specific classes, while weaker students are provided supplementary courses. The teaching staff have high expectations of their students, which serves as additional motivation. Additionally, children are involved in the school's non-academic life, which also promotes performance.

Independence and leadership are essential in [school](#) administration. Children study better at schools where headmasters are focused on teaching methods and solving internal challenges rather than following external regulations.

Personalized educational trajectories that consider students' demands and interests are helpful.

**More information:** Sergey Kosaretsky et al. Studies of the psychological well-being of low-performing students in US schools, *Journal of Modern Foreign Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.17759/jmfp.2019080104](https://doi.org/10.17759/jmfp.2019080104)

Provided by National Research University Higher School of Economics

Citation: Fighting academic failures (2019, May 28) retrieved 18 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-05-academic-failures.html>

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