

Conference on Education for All in Europe and North America

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School drop-outs: Falling between the cracks

They have neither a diploma nor a profession, because they left school too early. For thousands of school drop-outs and the education systems they have left, this means failure. Yet no country has ever really resolved the drop-out issue. Each year, too many adolescents fail to finish their basic education. The causes sometimes differ, but the consequences are inevitably the same. When a young man or woman lacks education and qualification, sooner or later, unemployment looms.

Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe emphasize the extent of the drop-out problem, notably among 13 to 15-year-olds. Although it is difficult to put figures on it, this growing trend is closely linked with the economic crisis. Children from poor families in rural areas sometimes participate in farm work instead of going to school.

In the United States, 5 per cent of students leave school at secondary level or do not finish their basic education. Their socio-economic background is a major factor, as proportionally more African-Americans and Hispanics – who must also contend with a language barrier – drop out of school. These teenagers have longer periods of unemployment, lower salaries, and are more likely than others to run into a multitude of social problems.

In Western Europe, where the dilemma also exists, specialists consider the education system to be more at fault than the student. Education in a number of countries is out of phase with socio-economic developments. Technical and vocational education often comes under attack. Perceived as degrading by young people and their families, and inappropriate by employers, its objectives, methods and fields of action need to be overhauled. Curricula should also aim to balance general and professional instruction.

In short the entire relationship between the school and the workplace must be reviewed and revised.

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Press contact:
Teresa Murtagh
UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy
75352 Paris 07 SP
Tel: 33 1 45 68 21 27
Fax: 33 1 45 68 56 29
E-mail:
t.murtagh@unesco.org

