

School absenteeism: a silent divide that is causing concern among Europe's local authorities

Meeting in Strasbourg on 27 October, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities adopted a report calling for school absenteeism to be addressed. The report sparked keen interest among delegates.

Long considered an individual or family problem, school absenteeism is now seen as a collective challenge affecting all European societies. That was the conclusion reached on Tuesday 27 October, at the 51st session of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe.

Presenting their report, Liesa Scholzen (Belgium, ILDG) and Anita Sollie (Norway, EPP/CCE) warned of the rise in absences since the Covid-19 pandemic. In certain countries, persistent absenteeism has almost doubled compared with the pre-pandemic period. But comparisons across Europe remain unreliable: countries have neither common definitions nor common monitoring methods.

A barometer of social vulnerability

“School absenteeism affects every section of the population,” Liesa Scholzen pointed out. It does, however, affect disadvantaged pupils and those with special educational needs to a greater extent. Housing insecurity, transport difficulties, family problems, illness, bullying and violence at school: the causes are numerous and often cumulative.

The young Bulgarian and Romanian delegates, Elena Nikolova and Lavinia Teodorescu, drew particular attention to absenteeism in Roma communities. Other speakers highlighted the situation in rural municipalities, where children sometimes help with family work to the detriment of their education. Alberto Mazzoleni (Italy, ECR), for his part, spoke of transport difficulties in mountainous regions and the need to keep schools open in isolated communities. The closure of local schools risks further exacerbating regional inequalities.

Living in fear

The report identifies different levels and causes of absenteeism. Bullying, discrimination or a feeling of not belonging at school can fuel this disengagement – something that sanctions alone cannot resolve.

This issue was a recurring theme throughout the discussions. Several speakers identified school violence as a major cause of absenteeism. Gabriela Elin Blomberg McCormack (United Kingdom, youth delegate) spoke of her own fear of returning to class because of pressure from her classmates. Zehra Özyol (Türkiye, SOC) recalled two recent attacks on schools in Türkiye, in which teachers and children were killed. Such violence also fuels anxiety among parents who now find themselves asking the unthinkable: will their children return home from school safe and sound? Safety, therefore, is an essential prerequisite for trust in the school system.

Lastly, the war in Ukraine gives this issue a particularly tragic dimension. Iurii Frintsko (Ukraine, ILDG), chair of a district council in the Transcarpathian region, spoke of the daily lives of children

continuing their education amid the shelling, and of the urgent need to rebuild educational facilities that have been destroyed or damaged. This is a desperate situation, but one that is completely different from the school absenteeism seen in countries that are not at war.

The consequences go beyond academic performance: isolation, weakened social ties and reduced career prospects. Ultimately, democratic cohesion is also at stake. “It’s a ticking time bomb, and the authorities at all levels must work together to defuse it,” warned Liesa Scholzen.

A different approach in Norway

Local authorities are on the front line because they work closely with schools, families and social services. Anita Sollie, deputy mayor of Rana, Norway, described an initiative at the largest school in her municipality, which had been facing alarmingly high levels of absenteeism.

With support from a regional research unit and additional funding, the school began examining relationships between teachers, pupils and parents. The aim was to move from crisis management to a prevention policy based on openness and inter-agency co-operation. Absenteeism has fallen from 7 to 2,5%.

Solutions to be developed together

The report calls for absences to be monitored systematically and early-warning systems to be used before difficulties become chronic. It recommends training education staff to analyse these warning signs, tackling bullying and strengthening pupils’ sense of belonging at school. For pupils who have already disengaged from lessons, it proposes flexible pathways back to education involving families, teachers, social services and health professionals.

The rapporteurs would also like to see a definition of school absenteeism and a comprehensive record of such absenteeism, while urging states to provide financial support to local authorities. “School absenteeism should not be seen as an individual failure, but as a shared challenge,” Anita Sollie stressed. This phenomenon is a wake-up call for European societies. Without measures commensurate with the scale of the crisis, young people will be less able to contribute to their communities and to democratic society as a whole, and to benefit from them.