

## Tallinn's Implementation Journey with Stay Tuned

### What was the starting point?

The starting point for our team, which consisted of the experts from Tallinna Haridusamet (*Tallinn Education Department*), the representatives from project schools and project's expert of Tallinn University, was **the lack of support specialists** in schools. Thus, it was more problematic to take into account pupils' individual differences and needs. Furthermore, it was more challenging to do preventive work in schools and provide systematic support frameworks as an early stage as possible.

As the present project had been a follow-up to the URBACT II Programme project „Involving parents in the prevention of early school leaving – PREVENT“, the special focus had been on parents. Hence, the team wished to address **the issue of uncooperative parents**, which had been a problem as well in many areas. Many parents' attitudes towards school were uncaring and their participation rate in schools' activities, training and programs were relatively low.

Due to demographic, social and economic changes, the schools are experiencing new challenges. As the role of the teacher is

### What were we working to implement?

The team was clear that early leaving from education and training (ELET) is a multi-faceted and complex problem requiring an integrated and holistic approach and involving different stakeholders from different levels.

Therefore, the measures to tackle ELET at school level couldn't only be addressed to students who are considered to be dropping out. Support measures for teachers and other

becoming more demanding, teachers are expected to develop new skills and competencies in their work. Nevertheless, there was **a lack of training to school staff and parents** as well as **a lack of knowledge, skills, and resources for the work with SEN (special educational needs) pupils**. Therefore, it was more problematic to develop supportive learning environments and identify the first signs of misbehavior and learning difficulties that might lead to early leaving from school.

In addition, good communication skills are needed to work efficiently with pupils, parents, other school staff and stakeholders in order to give timely help and support to pupils. However, there was **a lack of communication and cooperation skills between parents and school staff**.

It became also clear that **feedback to pupils was mostly negative and unregulated** in schools. Thus, it didn't motivate and encourage the pupils to improve on their performance and they didn't actually learn from the feedback.

school staff should also be highlighted and include continuous professional development of staff with a focus on the knowledge and skills needed to properly help students' educational disadvantages as well as to improve psychological wellbeing of teachers.

Research has shown that pupils are more successful in school when their parents are involved in their education. Thus, building

effective family-school partnerships and engaging parents in school was also emphasized.

Setting up efficient evaluation and monitoring systems in order to analyze activities and performance was also highlighted.

## Key Policy Themes for Tallinn:

Training and Development of Teachers  
Informal Learning & Schools as Communities  
EWS & Systematic Intervention

### What were the challenges and barriers to implementation?

There was a challenge about achieving the whole school approach, where family and community involvement in schools was encouraged. When parents are involved and community resources are engaged, the schools are more effective in supporting pupils' well-being, needs and learning. However, promoting a close collaboration between schools and families, where parents would have a positive attitude towards the school as the cooperation partner, was needed.

Schools have an essential role in tackling pupils' learning difficulties, misbehaviour and prevent dropout. Furthermore, there is a

demand for schools to become learning organizations where the needs of all actors (pupils, staff, parents) are taken into account. Yet, there is a challenge in supporting a move towards "teacher as a mentor", introducing the core skills for different ways of working and creating complementary learning in and out of the classroom.

In addition, there was a need to understand the dynamics of ELET in order to apply the most relevant intervention methods and thus offering families timely and competent support for the solution of the educational problems of their children.

## Key Implementation Challenges for Tallinn:

IC1- Integrated Working  
IC2 – Stakeholder Engagement

### What was our delivery approach? How did we tackle the barriers?

The plan for our team was to work with teachers from project schools (*Tallinna 21. Kool, Tallinna Kunstigümnaasium, Tallinna Mustamäe Humanitaargümnaasium, Tallinna Pae Gümnaasium, Tallinna Pääsküla Kool, Tallinna Südalinna Kool and Tallinna Ühisgümnaasium*) with the aim of enhancing

personal and professional development within the schools. The plan was to set up a system where small groups of teachers from each project school met regularly with specialists from Tallinn Education and Counselling Centre (TECC) to discuss and explore key topics relating to relevant professional issues and

challenges being faced, with the aim of looking jointly for solutions. TECC is a new structure created by Tallinn City in 2017, which offers educational counselling to the teachers, schools, parents, students and specialists to meet the needs of a child.

The team started with a small number of project schools as then the approach could be refined and adapted more easily before rolling it out across the whole city straight away. It also allowed for easier communication and a greater chance of buy-in, as the schools were part of the local group already and familiar with the project and its aims.

The intention was to initiate regular meetings, to carry out work in groups with the teachers and TECC professionals to discuss the professional challenges they were experiencing. They would explore the difficult cases and look for new interventions and solutions collaboratively within the group. The idea was that by working collaboratively, using essentially an open innovation type approach, they would be able to bring more ideas and experience to bear on the specific problems they were trying to tackle.

Furthermore, by looking at the genuine, real-world problems that individual teachers were facing, the process would not just be purely theoretical but would enable the teachers to develop their skills and experience by working on actual scenarios. This would make it more tangible for them and also hopefully help to solve some of the challenges being faced at the same time.

This was designed to be more engaging than a pure one-way “training” session, where the teachers are just given methods and examples of good practice. This would be “learning by doing” and therefore more effective.

Besides, An Early Identification Model of ELET (Early Leaving from Education and Training)

was going to be developed for teachers for the purpose of improving schools’ capability to support teachers and parents as well as to enhance teachers’ professionalism in order to minimize the impact of an insufficient number of support specialists in Tallinn schools. The model was going to be created by project schools’ SEN coordinators and TECC’s specialists over regular group meetings and later introduced to school staff and parents. The training courses about giving effective feedback were planned to be offered for the teams of schools involved with the intention to improve teachers’ skills to give pupils and parents feedback, which was constructive and motivative to the learner. In addition, new dedicated vocabulary for feedback was going to be generated (“A Book of the Good Word”) in order to support creating a positive feedback culture.

The project schools’ teams decided to involve parents in school work more diversely (i.e. teaching curriculum and career-related lessons, participating in charity activities) for the purpose of improving cooperation and communication skills between schools and parents. It was also agreed to collect the suggestions and feedback from parents to the “ideas bank” by using development discussions and surveys among parents and students to carry out training, discussions, and events, which would be interesting and motivate to parents and would help to increase parental engagement in school activities.

Furthermore, it was planned that project schools share information systematically about their activities on social media (FB, blogs) and schools’ homepages in order to give relevant information about school life more efficiently and systematically as well as to build a positive school image among parents and pupils.

For the purpose of evaluating and monitoring the implementation of activities and performance, the qualitative and quantitative

researches in schools were planned to perform by the project's expert, who is a PhD student at Tallinn University.

### Key Implementation Themes for Tallinn:

#4 – Project Monitoring, Evaluation and Decisions

#5 – Open Working and Stakeholder Involvement

#6 – Joint Delivery of Projects

#### What worked? (and what didn't..?!)

The teachers' group meetings were supposed to be the workshops where necessary topics were talked about in each school. However, in implementing the action, it was discovered that there were a misunderstanding and unclarity of the objectives of the meetings among the teachers and the specialists of TECC and Tallinn Education Department. At first, teachers expected to participate in a thematical training where new knowledge and skills would be given rather than to work in a group and discuss the professional challenges, difficult cases and find new interventions and solutions within the group. In addition, as TECC was in the phase of development, the specialists had insufficient information and experience with the method. Besides, the objectives of the teachers' group meetings were also unclear among the specialists of TECC.

In developing an Early Identification Model of ELET, it was realized that there was a misunderstanding about the objectives of the model. In the beginning phase of implementing this action, it was found out that going more in-depth with the topics covered in the model was required. Furthermore, it became clear that additional experts were needed in developing the model. Besides, the preliminary draft wasn't easily understood and applicable among the teachers as the specialists, who created the draft, didn't think through how teachers would use the model in practice.

In improving the parental involvement in school activities and collecting their suggestions and feedback, the individual needs, circumstances and preferences of the schools were taken into account. The main challenge for the schools was to engage those parents, whose child was not doing so well in school. Though all schools managed to increase parental involvement in school activities, some schools were more successful in it.

Nevertheless, the training courses were offered to project school teachers. As the topics of interest were collected from school staff, it became clear that developing and improving teachers' communication skills generally was needed. Thus, an intensive 3 days course with video training was offered by a family therapist to project schools' teachers in spring 2018. The aims of the course were to give teachers the tools to give effective feedback as well as to manage stressful situations, control emotions and set clear boundaries. In implementing the action, it was realized that there was a need to offer this kind of training to all the project schools' teachers.

Since October 2018, the schools' teams started to work during the regular project meetings on the development of „A Book of the Good Word“. It was originally planned to be a comprehensive resource, which would support teachers in giving more positive and

effective feedback to pupils, parents and other school staff. In addition, the development of this action didn't go very smoothly. The main problem in implementing this action was the inability to agree on the objectives and content of the book due to the rather wide scope of the topic and various needs of each school.

At the same time, schools were successful in sharing information about schools' activities on social media and schools' homepages.

In order to find out factors influencing early leaving and best measures for tackling or contributing to reducing ELET, a qualitative study based on semi-structured focus group interviews with project schools' teachers, support specialists and schools' management

### What did they learn?

As the objectives and expectations of the group meetings were reconsidered between Tallinn Education Department, TECC and schools' teams, it was decided to start using the peer group supervision method. In addition, TECC was restructured and new experts were employed, who started to facilitate the meetings among teachers. As school staff had insufficient information about the method, the process, and structure of it was introduced to them more clearly.

The meetings became well-organized and productive, the teachers' motivation to participate in group meetings increased as during the group sessions they found new professional solutions to their problems/cases, which as the actual expectation in the beginning.

As the objectives of an Early Identification Model were re-evaluated and re-defined, additional specialists and experts from different fields were engaged in creating the model. Thus, the specialists from Tallinn Education Department and TECC, project

staff was conducted in spring 2018. The results indicated that parents play a key role in their children's academic success. At the same time, there is evidence that family related issues (i.e. dysfunctional families, lack of support, health issues, low level of parents' education, difficult relationships between parents etc.) are more and more increasing the likelihood of pupils' school dropout.

For the purpose of analyzing and monitoring the implementation and the results of project's activities, a quantitative survey was carried out with school staff in February 2019. Besides, feedback from project school teams was given at regular project meetings during the period of February 2017 to March 2019.

schools' teachers, support specialists and SEN coordinators, the representative of kindergarten administration, the specialist from the school of special educational needs, and project's expert met regularly over the period from October 2018 through April 2019. Furthermore, the preliminary draft of the model was adjusted to be clear, easily understood and used by teachers.

Besides, the objectives and the content of „A Book of the Good Word“ were redefined and rearranged during the project team meetings. While conducting the brainstorming sessions, multiple ideas and concepts were suggested. The book became as a summary of the most relevant information in it and with the possibility for each school to complete it in a way, which would be most beneficial for them.

In addition, the objectives of the training courses about giving effective feedback were also re-evaluated. The family therapist made interviews in project schools for the purpose to find out the most acute and important topics to be covered in training courses. Thereafter,

the 2-days courses with video training about enhancing the communication skills were offered in each project school for all staff during the academic year 2018- 2019.

The training courses were very efficient, beneficial and interesting for the teachers and they were highly motivated to participate in this activity. Teachers' knowledge and skills about giving effective feedback improved by a great extent. Besides, the need to give more positive feedback to pupils and parents was systematically encouraged and emphasized among teachers.

The challenge of engaging parents in school didn't solve completely. Nevertheless, during the project meetings, the teams had a possibility to share their schools' best practices and experiences with engaging uncooperative parents in school activities. In some schools, an acknowledgment system for parents was developed. In all schools, it was enabled for parents to be teachers and in some schools, they had a possibility to give lectures to other parents.

### What did they change as a result? What difference has it made?

Peer group supervision meetings for teachers, the development of an Early Identification Model and the training courses about giving effective feedback turned out to be very successful, practical and efficient actions. Teachers' knowledge and skills about giving effective feedback and dealing with professional challenges improved by a great extent.

It was realized that there were communication challenges and a mismatch in approach between different parties. Besides, there was a need to work even more closely with the various stakeholders in order to get the design of the actions right and to ensure a shared

The focus group interviews gave the project schools' staff the opportunity to evaluate their schools' activities, reflect on their strengths and areas for development as well as to vent emotionally about the problematic issues in their work. Due to interviews and regular feedback, the schools had the possibility to achieve the purpose of preventing pupils' dropout in a more practicable and effective manner. In addition, the results from the focus group interviews and received feedback helped to develop and implement the project's activities more efficiently. Furthermore, the survey showed that the project contributed to exchanging experiences between project schools, including visiting each other's schools, improving collaboration between schools and families and enhancing teachers' communication and teaching skills. Besides, the results indicated that the project schools benefited mostly from TECC's peer group supervision meetings and training courses provided by the family therapist.

understanding of what was required. It is worth emphasizing that the collaboration needed to be about tackling both the design and communication challenges.

Regarding the development of „A Book of the Good Word“ the needs of each school were prioritized. It was realized that as schools have different expectations and requirements towards the book, it was necessary to be flexible in this process.

As schools' teams shared their best practices about how to engage uncooperative parents in school as well as to support pupils who have learning difficulties and behavior problems,

they started to apply those tools and practices also in smaller or larger extent in their schools.

There are also more activities in schools where pupils and parents are engaged and where more responsibility is given to them. It was discovered that it was easier to engage uncooperative parents in schools when a personal approach was used with them and more responsibility in decision-making processes was given. More parents are taking part in school activities through participating and helping to organize the events, teaching classes or being involved in school governance. Besides, some schools started to give more responsibility also to pupils. For example, the pupils were given a possibility to add

information about school activities on the school's homepage and social media.

It was also realized that keeping the topic of early leaving from education and training consistently in focus helped schools to address the issue of ELET in a better way. Schools started to pay more attention to developing collaborating practice and making better targets for their action plans.

Nevertheless, systemic and continuous monitoring and analyzing of the activities, the flexibility and willingness to frequently re-evaluate and make readjustments were the keys for being successful in implementing different actions.

### What do we plan to change in the future?

The peer group supervision method became a very productive and successful tool in dealing with professional challenges and difficult cases. As a result, it is planned to implement this method across the city and roll it out to all schools in Tallinn. There will be training courses for teachers to learn about how to moderate peer group supervision sessions. In addition, TECC plans to offer peer group supervision sessions as part of its core services to schools and communities in the future.

As ELET is usually more of a process where disengagement from school starts already in the first school years, the most effective preventive and interventive measures are the

ones that provide systematic support at as an early stage as possible. During the project meetings and focus group interviews, it became particularly clear that there is a need to start with interventions already in preschool education. The Early Identification Model will be introduced to Tallinn schools, parents and preschools during next school year.

In schools, it is planned even more to promote collaboration among parents, schools, and community, improve best practices in preventing early leaving from school and pay attention to identifying learning difficulties and misbehaviour at an early stage.