REPORT 5:
EDUCATION: EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS – RUSSIA

This report is based on the discussions of two focus groups and on responses to five individual interviews examining the situation of early school leavers. The discussions and interviews aimed to draw out the reasons why young people drop out of school, what they are doing now, and whether they regret their decision to leave education. This report is a copy-edited version of material provided to the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre by Oxford Research International. The views expressed are the views of the young people who took part in these discussions. All those participating did so on a confidential basis and all names have been changed.

About the Focus Groups

The discussions were conducted in and around the city of Pushkino, a Russian city about 50 km from Moscow, on 11 November 1999. Both groups consisted of eight early school leavers aged 15-17. Those in Focus Group One were recruited from rural villages around Pushkino. Those in Focus Group Two were urban, living in Pushkino itself. Both groups met in the reading room of the Pushkino public library.

Focus Group One (FG1)

| Location: | Pushkino, public library reading room |
| Date of focus group: | 11 November 1999 |
| Details on selection of participants: | The headmaster of the school in Pushkino helped to contact the headmasters of schools in adjacent villages, who contacted young people matching the selection criteria and invited them to the focus group. |
| Participants (name, age, gender) | Gennady, 17, Male
Alexei, 17, Male
Trava, 16, Male
Olga, 16, Female
Katerina, 16, Female
Vera, 15, Female
Dmitry, 16, Male
Valery, 17, Male |
| Start time: | 12:00 pm |
| End time: | 13:20 |
| Comments from facilitator on group dynamics: | There were three particularly active participants: Gennady, Alexei and Valery. Trava and Dmitry commented from time to time. The females were very quiet and it was not possible to make them talk. A very difficult and non-talkative group |
| Problems encountered: | Most questions were unclear to the participants. In particular from Q9 onwards participants found the questions very difficult to understand perhaps because their concentration level dropped. They were merely saying “yes” or “no” to the alternatives offered by the moderators, while spontaneous answers were rare. |
Focus Group Two (FG2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Pushkino, public library reading room</th>
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<tr>
<td>Date of focus group:</td>
<td>11 November 1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Details on selection of participants:</td>
<td>The local school headmaster helped to contact young people from urban areas in Pushkino matching the selection criteria.</td>
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| Participants (name, age, gender) | Margarita, 17, Female  
Masha, 16, Female  
Natasha, 16, Female  
Viktor, 17, Male  
Boris, 16, Male  
Andrey, 17, Male  
Slava, 16, Male  
Lesha, 16, Male |
| Start time: | 14:30 |
| End time: | 15:55 |
| Comments from facilitator on group dynamics: | There were two particularly active participants: Viktor and Lesha. Ania did not participate in the discussion at all. The others were active to varying degrees. At the beginning of the discussion the atmosphere was rather tense, but by the middle of the discussion participants settled down and the females joined in the discussion. |
| Problems encountered: | The group was not really interested in the subject of the discussion and did not see any point in it. The participants are not used to sitting and talking for long periods of time. They were tired by the middle of the discussion. |

**About the individual interviews**

Individual interviews were also carried out with the following people:

- Karina, aged 15, female, an early school leaver
- Nikita, aged 16, male, an early school leaver
- Lida, aged 56, female, a school principal
- Irina, aged 38, female, the mother of an early school leaver
- Leonid, aged 36, male, a social worker
A summary of responses from the Focus Groups

This report reflects the order in which topics were discussed, following the discussion guidelines on this subject. As a general observation, the participants in the focus groups and individual interviews had similar reasons for dropping out. These included difficulties in following the curriculum, interpersonal problems with teachers and classmates, financial and other problems at home, and a general lack of motivation to study.

2.1 Attitudes to education

Most of the school leavers associate good education with formal educational institutions. Typically early school leavers define good education in the following way:

- ‘To have good education means to be a specialist in your field and to study it for a long time’ (Viktor, FG2, male 17)
- ‘Of course it is necessary to study for a long time in order to have a good education’ (Slava, FG2, male 16, Andrey, FG2, male 17)

Yet all the rural and half of the urban school leavers agreed that having many years of education did not necessarily equal having a good education.

- ‘It is not necessarily many years of education. It is possible that you have years of education but you cannot do anything’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

Most of the school leavers would not regard 9 grades of schooling as ‘lack of schooling’ – they regard it as adequate.

- ‘For some people even a university degree is not sufficient education, and for others 9 classes are more than enough’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

2.1.1 Diplomas

As far as formal certificates are concerned there was some disagreement between participants from different backgrounds. The rural participants tended to have faith in diplomas.

- ‘I think to get a document is the most important thing in studying’ (Gennady, FG1, male 17)

Urban participants did not agree with this:

- ‘No, the document that helps to get a job does not necessarily mean good education … Even if you get a school diploma, there is no guarantee you'll get a future.’ (Boris, FG2, male 16),
- ‘You can have a diploma saying that you have a degree in something. But if in reality you cannot do the job, the diploma will not help’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)
2.1.2 Work skills

Participants were not convinced that simply gaining the skills required in the world of work necessarily constitutes a good education.

- ‘On the whole the documents we could get would not help us to get a job’ (Masha, FG2, female 16)
- ‘Good education in physics or mathematics may not at all be connected with things that can be used in life, but this education will be good.’ (Viktor, FG2, male 17)

2.1.3 Personal development

Early school leavers from rural areas were quite indifferent about the idea of developing their personality. Urban participants, however, found personal development of importance.

- ‘Of course having an opportunity to develop your personality is important for good education’ (Boris, FG2, male 16)
- ‘If you really wish to develop your personality you will always find a way to do so’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

2.1.4 Talking with adults

Neither urban nor rural adolescents dismiss the idea that talking with adults - particularly teachers - is helpful. However, most of them commented that it requires the goodwill of adults including teachers - something that they rarely found. In most cases, discussants had no opportunity to talk to their teachers.

- ‘I used to have problems with teachers - they were often shouting at me and punishing me, both for what I had done and for what I hadn’t done. It was not too difficult to study though’. (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16)

2.1.5 Friends

Some rural school leavers find that a ‘good time with friends’ and ‘good education’ are synonymous.

- ‘Having a good time with friends and ‘good education’ are the same thing’ (Trava, FG1, male 16)

The urban participants saw things differently.

- ‘Having a good time with friends is not associated with ‘good education’’ (Viktor, FG2, male 17)

2.1.6 Sport or club facilities
Participants insisted that access to sport or club facilities contributes to good education. Those from urban areas, however, were not convinced that this could work without the support of teachers.

- ‘It depends on the teacher. If the teacher is eager to support students, then the clubs can contribute to good education’ (Masha, FG2, female16)

2.1.7 Extra tuition

Rural school leavers did not comment on the possibility of receiving extra tuition. Urban participants found it appropriate only for the last two years of secondary education.

- ‘If you study at school in the 10th and 11th grade it is important - otherwise you cannot get through’ (Slava, FG2, male 16)

2.1.8 Pleasant classrooms

The general opinion of young school leavers is that pleasant classrooms are welcome but are not crucial for good education.

2.1.9 Making parents happy

All those taking part felt that it is important to parents that their children do well in school.

- ‘All parents are happy if their children study well’ (Viktor, FG2, male 17).

2.2 Access to education – Personal experiences

2.2.1 Deciding to leave school

Some of the early school leavers discussed dropping out with their parents or other close friends or family prior to the event. In some cases, their parents actually advised them to leave school:

- ‘I have discussed it with my mother and she said she does not want me to go on with school after 9 classes. She has advised me to leave the school.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)
- ‘We used to have these discussions, it was important for both of us. The decision to leave school was made during one of these discussions. There was a period when he was doing rather well at school, but later on he started having problems with teachers and he got completely disenchanted with school. I have supported this decision. In fact it was me who first suggested it.’ (Irina, mother of early school leaver, 38, individual interview)
- ‘School leavers often do not know whether the decision they took was the right one. On the one hand, it would be good to finish 11 classes and obtain a high school diploma, but on the other hand one just needs a vocation and a job.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)
However, despite some cases of joint decision-making, in most cases the decision to leave school was made unilaterally by the young person concerned. Nikita, interviewed individually, spoke for many:

- ‘I have finished 9 classes and have repeated one year. Then I entered technical school, but I left it because I could not follow the classes.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)

### 2.2.2 Reasons for dropping out

Typical reasons for dropping out of school were problems with studying and bad interpersonal relations with teachers and classmates.

- ‘On the whole I felt as if I was doing time when I had to go to school every day. I didn’t feel comfortable there. I don’t know. This is largely due to the teachers’ attitude. They didn’t treat me well. They were shouting at me and calling me stupid. I didn’t get on well with my classmates either.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)
- ‘Some teachers were not willing to teach at all. Others used to dislike me personally’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)
- ‘They [teachers] do not explain. They say: ‘Give me money and I will help you to pass the test!’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)
- ‘I think all my problems are because I misbehaved several times at the beginning of the year and the teachers decided that if something went wrong it was because of me’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)
- ‘There are some good teachers who understand us and will help if you have problems. Others, the bad ones, don’t care. Even if you turn to them for some extra assistance on a difficult topic, they’ll send you away, saying you should have worried about it earlier’ (Gennady, FG1, male 17)

The School Principal felt that attitudinal problems are the decisive factors why people drop out of school:

- ‘The major reason for the dropouts, and I can confirm this as a mother, is the attitude towards students at school. In our school we have a different attitude towards kids. Usually if someone decides to leave school, they simply do not come to class. If they are willing to study but also encounter some problems, we discuss this with them and can help them either with advice or with money.’ (Lida, School Principal, 56, individual interview)

However, the social worker was perhaps less unicausal in his explanation and presented a more comprehensive view:

- ‘The major problem for them is their lack of motivation - they do not see any sense in studying. That is why they leave school. Another reason is the lack of control and support from their parents who do not pay attention to the problems of their children. If parents do not care and the child has no motivation, then we find him leaving school. I would also mention that today most schools do not pay enough attention to each and every pupil. The students are very different, but the school is aimed at ‘average’ or ‘gifted’ pupils. Those who do not fit this standard feel uncomfortable there and most of
the dropouts are not particularly smart or clever. That’s the problem we haven’t dealt with so far. If a child’s intellectual level is below average, we should do something to compensate for it. Instead of doing this, we keep on shouting at them and pretending they will do something they’re not capable of. This is the root cause of frustration for many dropouts. We are trying to do something about it, but there are no funds for it’.

(Leonid, social worker, male 36, individual interview)

The cost of education did not surface in the discussions until trips were mentioned:

• ‘They used to organize some excursions or trips to the theatre, but it cost a lot. You pay 40 roubles for the bus and another 20 for the tickets’ (Valery, FG1, male 17)

2.2.3 Returning to education

Some participants were convinced that school is important for succeeding in life and are planning to return to school:

• ‘I will have to finish school one way or another. Without school education, one will never get a decent job. Of course, I must finish school [technical] and then study to be a driver.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)

Others may agree with the importance of school but do not necessarily think they need to study more. In fact, some shuddered at the thought of returning to school:

• ‘I do not think it would be useful to finish school. Probably some training courses would do just as well. I do not know which courses I might need. I have never thought about it. Maybe some computer skills.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)

• ‘I do not feel any attraction to that place’ (Valery, FG1, male 17)

• ‘There is nothing to do at school. It is useless’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)

Only two of the 18 young people involved in the group discussions and interviews would not mind returning to school. They have some good memories of their time in education:

• ‘The atmosphere there was not bad. There are some friends there’ (Viktor, FG2, male 16)

2.2.4 Assessment of personal experiences

Not surprizingly, none of the early school leavers, urban or rural, were content with their experience of school education. However, their evaluations varied:

• ‘It depends on how you evaluate it. If we judge it by the headmaster, our time at school was terrible.’ (Dmitry, FG1, male 16)

• ‘Some things were good, others were bad. It all depended on the teacher’ (Olga, FG1, female 16)

• ‘It was bad. All you thought about was how to get a good mark.’ (Gennady, FG1, male 17)
2.3 Access to employment

Participants were aware of the difficulties of finding a job. Some of them felt that these were mostly due to lack of information:

- ‘It is difficult to search for jobs. There is not enough information. To find a job I go around and knock at every door, but it does not help much’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)

Most early school leavers do not have regular jobs. Some do odd or seasonal jobs, work on the plots of land belonging to their family or others. Some seek practical experience through jobs that pay little or nothing.

- ‘I am trying out some trades. I go there at about 5 or 6 to help out and learn some skills. They don’t pay me for it’ (Trava, FG1, male 16)
- ‘I work at the petrol station. I help people who are getting petrol and if they find me useful they give me some money. I also help my mother about the house. It gives me some money to make ends meet and at the same time it does not take up all my time’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)
- ‘I work in summer, helping to build dachas’ (Viktor, FG2, male 16)
- ‘I help the cooks in the cafeteria with some simple tasks: making salad or peeling vegetables’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)
- ‘He is working as an assistant to a welder. He is planning to attend an evening school’ (Irina, mother of early school leaver, 38, individual interview)

2.4 Attitudes and aspirations

Many participants were not entirely happy with what they were doing. Others are completely satisfied.

- ‘I can’t say that I am completely satisfied with what I am doing.’ (Masha, FG2, female 16)
- ‘It’s better than going to school’ (Trava, FG1, male 16)
- ‘I am working with my father, we repair tyres. I enjoy doing it’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)

Most of the young people involved in the study were unsure about their future or preferred not to think about it.

- ‘I have never thought about the future’ (Andrey, FG2, male 17)
- ‘It is difficult to say what I will be doing in five years’ (Dmitry, FG1, male 16)
- ‘It is not possible to make any plans’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

Others were quite confident:

- ‘I am sure I will make many mistakes, but everything will be ok.’ (Viktor, FG2, male 16)

However, the School Principal was pessimistic about the future of students who dropped out from the educational mainstream. In her view, these young people prefer to spend more time with friends, stay at home, and watch TV:
• ‘Some kids don’t do anything – they simply sit at home and watch TV. Many of them spend all their time wandering around with their peer groups.’ (Lida, School Principal, 56 individual interview)

The social worker split the school leavers into two basic categories with different future prospects:

• ‘There are two basic types of early school leavers. One of them is the ‘street kid’. This type of early school leaver usually does not have any goals or interests other than hanging around and spending time with friends. This type is the majority, and we know what they do – they drink, they steal, they use drugs. They do not have any positive way of spending time – they do not study, they do not play sports. Another type of dropout is the ‘psychological dissenter’. These young people, typically, have some psychological problems: problems in communicating with teachers and/or classmates and they leave school for these reasons. This type is more positive, they either stay at home assisting parents, or get some professional skills to find a job.’ (Leonid, Social worker, male 36, individual interview)

2.4.1 Finding a job

Many of the participants are, however, willing to go out and earn a living:

• ‘I would like to work with my brother to start a family business’ (Slava, FG2, male 16)
• ‘After military service I will start working. Maybe if I have enough time I will attend some training’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)
• ‘I think I will come back from my military service, become a driver, get a job. I will be working and I will have my own family. What am I to do? There is nothing else to do.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)
• ‘I will get some training as a cook’s assistant, then I will probably finish school. At the end of it all, I’ll find a job, get married, bring up kids, and keep on working.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)

However, not all participants are keen to rely on themselves for the provision of solutions for their future, some expect government provision. They would like the state to provide jobs, salaries and other forms of financial support.

• ‘They should assign us work placements.’ (Trava, FG1, male 16)
• ‘If we could be sure that they will provide a job where you will get a decent salary, we would do well’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)
• ‘The government should provide us with a secure and guaranteed place of work, even if they pay almost nothing’ (Boris, FG2, male 16)
• ‘Private enterprises are insecure, but they might pay more’ (Valery, FG1, male 17)

2.4.1.1 Access to Information

Some were aware of a lack of information. But in many cases they believe that it is enough to go to Moscow – information sources are better there:
• ‘There are enough sources of information and vacancies in Moscow – not here’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)
• ‘If you live in a remote village, the lack of information can affect you. But if you live in Moscow, there is enough information there.’ (Slava, FG2, male 16)

In most cases informal channels such as friends and parents remain the major sources of information about jobs, education or leisure for early school leavers.

• ‘I find out about these things from my parents. They in turn find out at work, from friends or relatives. I have never come across any information on it in the mass media so far’. (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)
• ‘We read local newspapers, some friends share what they have heard, we go around and ask whether they have any jobs, we ask our ex-school teachers about technical schools.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)

2.4.1.2 Military service

Military service was a worry for all the male discussants.

• ‘I would like to start working rather than do military service’ (Andrey, FG2, male 17)
• ‘I would like to do sport’, not do military service (Slava, FG2, male 16)
• ‘I would prefer not doing military service. If I have to do it, I would like to get a driving licence there’ (Masha, FG2, female 16)

Yet there were also some positive views about military service:

• ‘If you don’t do military service, you’re not a man. When you do your military service you will learn a lot. They won’t accept me for military service, but I would like to do it.’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

2.4.1.3 Money

As far as money was concerned participants had quixotic ideas of wealth and prosperity. Most seemed eager to earn as much money as possible - and to spend it as they pleased.

• ‘Of course we need a job that is well paid. Who wants to work and earn little?’ (Alexei, FG1, male 17)
• ‘It is better to have a good job and get more money for it’ (Natasha, FG2, female 16)

However, participants also felt that job satisfaction relied on more than money:

• ‘It is possible to earn a lot of money, but that doesn’t mean that a job will be better’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

2.4.1.4 Social benefits
Most participants said they would prefer to secure a job that also provided social benefits and security, even if it paid less. Thus many would prefer to work in the state sector. However, they did not understand the term ‘social benefits’:

- ‘What do you mean by social benefits?’ (Slava, FG2, male 16)

### 2.4.1.5 Motivation

Rural participants appeared motivated to work. Whether they enjoy the job was less important. Urban school leavers, however, found it acceptable to be unemployed or to work as little as possible.

- ‘I would like, as long as I have the opportunity, not to do military service, not to work, but to practise sports. As long as my parents support and feed me, it’s good’ (Boris, FG2, male 16)
- ‘I have a good job now. If I want, I go to work. If I don’t want to work, I give it a miss. If I want to go away with friends, I can do it. I am an assistant to a butcher.’ (Slava, FG2, male 16)
- ‘At present I don’t want to work at all’ (Masha, FG2, female 16)

### 2.4.2 Getting married

Both urban and rural participants had the same opinions on the subject of marriage. However, females were more reluctant to air their views.

Males made the following comments:

- ‘I will get married by the age of 30. Not earlier’ (Andrey, FG2, male 17)
- ‘If I have a job and enough money, there is nothing bad about having a family’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

### 2.4.3 Going abroad

None of the early school leavers are considering the possibility of emigrating.

- ‘I was born in Russia. This is my home - there is no sense in going abroad’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

However this view was not shared by everyone. Some thought it might be possible to go somewhere, work, earn some money and then come back.

### 2.5 A supportive environment

The idea of a supportive environment was defined by early school leavers as their families, peers and, perhaps surprisingly, their former school. On the whole, they appeared unsure about the type of support they actually wanted but were sure they needed it:
• ‘I wish I could have some support but I don’t know what exactly. I think any type of support would do.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)

Some also believed that nobody could help them:

• ‘I do not know. I do not think anyone could help.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)

2.5.1 Family

Generally, participants were positive about their relations with their parents:

• ‘I am living with my mum. On the whole I get on with her quite well. We do not have any particular problems.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male 16, individual interview)

• ‘I am living with my parents. My sister lives on her own with her family. Yes, I do get on well with my parents. They understand me well and they support me a lot.’ (Karina, early school leaver, female, 15, individual interview)

• ‘I think my mother is interested in what I am doing’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male 16, individual interview)

In some cases parents appeared to be on good terms with their children:

• ‘I have very good contact with my son and our relationship is just perfect. My son really loves me, though he is trying hard to hide it so as not to feel like a ‘mummy’s boy’. He listens to me and asks for advice. He tells me a lot about his life and his interests. Of course, I am happy about it. I have brought him up alone, without any assistance from his father. He is very kind and very helpful – I have many more problems with my older daughter’. (Irina, mother of early school leaver, 38, individual interview)

In the opinion of the social worker, the family background of early school leavers is typically as follows:

• ‘To a certain degree these families are similar. A typical family would have a low income, would not consist of both parents, or both parents would drink. There are some parents who are concerned with the situation, but they are the minority.’ (Leonid, Social worker, male, 36, individual interview)

The School Principal held a similar view on this issue.

• ‘There are some similar characteristics. The families of the students who drop out are the problem families (low income, substance abuse, alcoholism, single parents). Some of these kids come from good and well-off families but they just do not want to study’ (Lida, School Principal, 56, individual interview)

At the same time she confirmed that the school is in contact with parents.

• ‘We are in close contact with parents. We discuss any problems with parents. We find parents ‘on our side’. We try influencing the kids together’. (Lida, School Principal, 56, individual interview)
Government service providers tend to see the roots of the problems of early school leavers in their families.

- ‘Most of the parents we meet do not listen to any of our words or advice. If the kid wants to study, we can assist, but if he does not want to do it and his parents support him in this stance, there is nothing we can do. We can assist those kids who want to study but have some interpersonal or psychological problems at school to change to another school. It helps in many cases. If the problem is related to their parents who do not want them to study, there is very little we can do. It is very difficult to oppose the parents whatever they do … According to my experience, the family is usually the cause of children leaving school early - they push their kids to go and earn money. We come across these so-called parents who do not do anything which is considered parental care. The only thing we can do is make them pay a fine amounting to 1/10 of the minimal wage rate (ca. US$0.30). We need to be able to do something with them. It is very important to invest money in reconstruction of stadiums, organizing sport clubs, soccer fields. This would take the kids off the street over to physical activities instead of alcohol and drugs.’ (Leonid, Social worker, male 36, individual interview)

2.5.2 School

Parents, the social worker and the headmistress all support early school leavers when they claim to have been mistreated by their teachers.

- ‘I had several discussions with his teachers and was referred to GORONO (government authority in charge of schools). Unfortunately, it did not help. My son had lost contact with his teachers completely. I would say that he has a special character. That is due to the fact that I have brought him up without a father. He is very touchy and sensitive. His teachers could not make contact with him.’ (Irina, mother of early school leaver, 38, individual interview)

Yet school representatives insist that schools have little power to influence early school leavers:

- ‘We do not have any means to influence them other than talking to them and trying to convince them’. (Lida, School Principal, 56, individual interview)

2.5.3 Social workers

The social worker regretted that by the time early school leavers were referred to him many were beyond re-integration and even reform. He felt it was important that his corrective work could be assisted and preceded by the efforts of schools and other organizations.

- ‘As a rule we come across these kids at the point when it is already too late to discuss the matter of schooling. This is entirely the responsibility of the school and it is the school which should do it. Of course, family, peer groups and mass media can influence teenagers as well, but this influence is rather limited. We come across these kids once the school refuses to deal with them – when they do not show up for months and refuse to react to any advice or requests. The best we can do is to make this
teenager go back to school, but usually such solutions are temporary. On the whole, the problem is not resolved this way. However, sometimes it is enough to move the kid to another school and the problems do not appear again. There are some district youth organizations, which are headed by people who work with youth. They organize some interest clubs, sport competitions etc., but there are very few of these clubs'. (Leonid, Social worker, male 36, individual interview)

Neither the School Principal nor parents mentioned any type of support from the social services. Early school leavers are not even aware of the existence of social services. Yet the social worker claimed that these services exist but that no one actually uses them.

- ‘It depends on what we mean by assistance. School can help in certain ways. A committee for young people’s rights can help in the case of problems with parents. Most of these kids do not turn up for any assistance even if they could come along. Generally speaking we can provide assistance for the protection of their rights and psychological help, but many do not accept it.’ (Leonid, Social worker, male 36, individual interview)

2.5.4 Society

Most of the young people involved are rather sceptical about society. Some griped that they do not expect anything from anyone. They claimed not to trust others and often rely only on themselves. While much of what was said is inconsistent with their remark about family and friends, their contributions illustrated a degree of alienation.

- ‘I do not know what I can expect from society. I have no idea’. (Karina, early school leaver, female 15, individual interview)
- ‘All the people are very angry now, their lives are difficult. I do not expect any good from anyone in this life’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)
- ‘... I don’t know [whether society expects something from me]. I have never thought about it.’ (Nikita, early school leaver, male, 16, individual interview)
- ‘Nothing and nobody but yourself can influence you on your way to your goals’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)

2.5.5 Government

There was little doubt that government support does not exist as far as these young people’s are concerned. Typical opinions included:

- ‘Government? Who is the government? Boris? They don’t give a shit about us’ (Lesha, FG2, male 16)
- ‘The government is not helping, it is stealing from us... they do not pay wages.’ (Boris, FG2, male 16)
- ‘In the past the government used to support people. They provided secure jobs. And now all the factories are shut down and we cannot find a job’. (Andrey, FG2, male 17)

2.5.6 Suggestions for NGOs and UNICEF
Education professionals and social workers have clear ideas about the roles played by NGOs in general and UNICEF in particular. They proposed a number of concrete ideas of how to re-enfranchise young people with social and/or behavioural difficulties.

• ‘It is difficult to say. I think we should start off by organizing some clubs for special interests and sport clubs at school. This way, the kids will find something to involve them in the school. Now there are only a few of these clubs left. There used to be about 15. These clubs contribute to the development of the students’ personality. We should begin by reviving them. The clubs broaden the outlook and the sphere of interests of the kids.’ (Lida, School Principal, 56, individual interview)

• ‘I do not think they should assist us financially – this is simply futile. The more you give, the more will be stolen. UNICEF should push our government to approve the most important legislation – that would really be helpful. UNICEF could organize some homes and/or refuges for kids who experience problems at home. UNICEF could also organise some special training courses for teachers, for example, on child psychology and teach them more modern communication techniques. Some programmes against drugs, which have proved to be effective in other countries, could be implemented in Russia too. The list is long. What UNICEF should not do is give money.’ (Leonid, Social worker, male 36, individual interview)

2.6 What is necessary

Early school leavers suggested the following types of support for reaching their goals.

2.6.1 Knowing the right people

• ‘Money is not that important now. Knowing the right people – that counts for everything.’ (Boris, FG2, male 16),

• ‘If you understand something and you know the right people, everything in your life will be OK’ (Andrey, FG2, male 17)

2.6.2 Money

• ‘Money is necessary. If you stay at home, do not work and have no money, you will not reach any of your goals.’ (Boris, FG2, male 16)

• ‘If you have money you can do everything’ (Boris, FG2, male 16)

• ‘Financial support is the first thing. After that I might consider starting to study’ (Slava, FG2, male 16)

• ‘If I get some money and some emotional support, I am sure to achieve what I want’ (Viktor, FG2, male 16)

2.6.3 Support from parents and other people

• ‘At the beginning support is very essential. At least emotional support from your parents.’ (Masha, FG2, female 16)

• ‘It depends on your character. If nobody supports you, you still have a chance to achieve something, but it would be better at least to get support from your parents’ (Andrey, FG2, male 16)
• ‘You have to choose a partner who supports you. Otherwise it does not make any sense’ (Viktor, FG2, male 16)

Yet some of the early school leavers agreed that they have to support their families rather than be supported by them.

• ‘It is not our parents who should support us – we should support them’ (Gennady, FG1, male 17)
Responses to individual interviews

1. Karina, aged 15, female, an early school leaver

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Pushkino, cafeteria, a kitchen assistant matching the selection criteria was interviewed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of interview:</td>
<td>8 November 1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee (name, age, gender)</td>
<td>Karina, 15, F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start time:</td>
<td>16:15</td>
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<td>End time:</td>
<td>16:45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comments from facilitator:</td>
<td>The respondent answered all the questions very thoroughly and precisely. She thought carefully about each word she said. Q18, Q21, Q24, Q26, Q27, Q28 were difficult to understand and to answer. After a long pause hints were given.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q1. Please tell us about your family background first. How many family members do you have and what are they doing?

My family consists of my mother (36), my father (41), elder sister (23), and myself. My father is working on a plant, my sister is living with her husband and bringing up a child (she is not working now), my mother has no job, she is a housekeeper.

Q2. Are you living with your parents?

Yes, I am living with my parents. My sister with her family is living on her own.

Q3. Do you generally get on well with your parents?

Yes, I do get on well with my parents, they understand me well and they support me a lot.

Q4. Please tell how much schooling you had.

I have finished 9 classes (no repeated years).

Q5. Why did you choose not to pursue your education?

I used to have serious problems both with my classmates and with the teachers. My mother does not want me to go on studying either.

Q6. Did you have a chance to discuss your intention to stop going to school with an adult before you left school?

Yes √ No ➔ go to Q8

Q7. Who was this adult? Did you get good advice from him/her?
Yes. I have discussed it with my mother and she said she does not want me to go on with school after 9 classes. She has advised me to leave the school.

Q8. Do you think it was a good choice to leave school?

On the one hand it was the right thing to do, on the other hand - no.

Q9. Why/Why not?

On the one hand it would be good to finish 11 classes and get a high school diploma, but on the other hand one only needs a profession and a job to do.

Q10. Did you feel well when you were at school?

Well, it depends. On the whole I felt like doing some penal servitude when I had to go to school every day. I did not feel comfortable there.

Q11. Why/Why not?

I don’t know. Mainly this is due to the teachers’ altitude. They didn’t treat me well. They were shouting at me and calling me stupid. I did not get on well with my classmates either.

Q12. Do you think school is important for success in life?

On the whole, I think it is important.

Q13. What are you actually doing now to make ends meet?

I do not know. My parents support me.

Q14. What is your main source of income?

My parents give me some money.

Q15. Do you have a job?

| Yes ✓ | No  | ➔ go to Q19 |

Q16. What kind of job do you have?

I am helping the cooks in the cafeteria with some simple tasks: making salad or peeling vegetables.

Q17. Are you happy with this job?

Yes, at the moment I am happy with it.
Q18. Why/Why not?

I do not know. I like it. I enjoy the process of cooking and I like the fact that people eat it and that they like it.

Q19. Are you satisfied with your current situation?

Yes, I can say I am satisfied.

Q20. Do you have plans for the future? What would you like to do with your life?

I would like to finish training for an assistant cook. After that I will probably start working. Maybe later on I will come back to school to get a diploma because people say you will never get a job without a high school diploma. If I succeed I will get a job and will be do it.

Q21. What type of support or information would you most need to realize your plans?

I do not know. I do not think anyone could help.

Q22. Do you think it would be useful for your future to restart school or have some training courses?

I do not think it would be useful to finish school. Probably some training course would do well. I do not know which courses I might need. I have never thought about it, it could be some computer literacy.

Q23. Where do you generally learn about existing job, education or leisure opportunities?

I got to know about it from my parents. They got to know it at their work places, from some friends or relatives. I have not come across any mass media information on it so far.

Q24. Do you generally feel that your parents are interested in what you are doing?

Yes, I think they are interested. (no further comments)

Q25. Who else provides you with emotional and material support?

I got some emotional support from my friends and some from older relatives, only parents help me with money.

Q26. What would you expect from society?

I do not know. I have no idea.

Q27. What do you think society expects from you?

I think they expect me to do my job well.
Q28. Are you optimistic about the future?

Yes, I am rather positive about my future. I will get some training for assistant cook, then I will probably finish school, at the end of all, I will find a job, I will get married, bring up kids, and keep on working.

Thank you very much.
2. Nikita, aged 16, male, an early school leaver

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<tr>
<th>Location:</th>
<th>Pushkino, bar in the shop adjacent a petroleum station</th>
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<tr>
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<td>8 November 1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee (name, age, gender):</td>
<td>Nikita, 16, male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Start time:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comments from facilitator:</td>
<td>Many male school leavers earn their living by working at petroleum stations or washing cars. Q26 and Q27 were very difficult to answer. After a long pause hints were given.</td>
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Q1. Please tell us about your family background first. How many family members do you have and what do they do?

My family consists of my mother (38), two younger sisters (15 and 8) and myself. My mother works on a farm, my younger sister (8) is in the second grade, another sister (15) has finished 9 classes and could not get a place in technical school, so she is doing nothing at the moment.

Q2. Are you living with your parents?

Yes, I live with my mother. (Father never been mentioned)

Q3. Do you generally get on well with your parents?

On the whole I get on quite well with my mother. We do not have any particular problems.

Q4. Please tell how much schooling you had.

I have finished 9 classes and have repeated one year. Then I entered technical school, but I left it because I could not follow the classes.

Q5. Why did you choose not to pursue your education?

I could not study, I had too many bad marks, I missed many classes and had some problems with teachers.

Q6. Did you have a chance to discuss your intention to stop going to school with an adult before you left school?

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Q7. Who was this adult? Did you get good advice from him/her?

Q8. Do you think it was a good choice to leave school?
I know that I need to finish school, but I could not go on either. I had no other choice.

Q9. Why/Why not?

It is difficult to say. At that moment I thought that that was the only way to go. I know I need to finish school somehow, so it was not very good to leave.

Q10. Did you feel well when you were at school?

I used to have problems with teachers - they were often shouting at me and punishing me, both for what I had done and for what I hadn’t done. It was not too difficult to study though

Q11. Why/Why not?

I think all my problems are because I misbehaved several times at the beginning of the year and the teachers decided that if something went wrong it was because of me

Q12. Do you think school is important to be successful in life?

I will have to finish school one way or another. Without school education, one will never get a decent job.

Q13. What are you actually doing now to make ends meet?

I work at the petrol station. I help people who are getting petrol and if they find me useful they give me some money. I also help my mother about the house. It gives me some money to make ends meet and at the same time it does not take up all my time’

Q14. What is your main source of income?

Some change drivers give to me for helping them at the petrol station.

Q15. Do you have a job?

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Q16. What kind of job do you have?

See Q13, Q14

Q17. Are you happy with this job?

Yes, at the moment I am happy with it.

Q18. Why/Why not?
It gives me some money to make ends meet and at the same time it does not take up all my time

Q19. Are you satisfied with your current situation?

Yes, I can say I am satisfied. But I will have to finish school anyway.

Q20. Do you have some concrete plans for the future? What would you like to do with your life?

I think I will come back from my military service, become a driver, get a job. I will be working and I will have my own family. What am I to do? There is nothing else to do

Q21. What type of support or information would you most need to realize your plans?

I wish I could have some support but I don’t know what exactly. I think any type of support would do

Q22. Do you think it would be useful for your future to restart school or have some training courses?

Of course, I must finish school [technical] and then study to be a driver

Q23. Where do you generally learn about existing jobs, education or leisure opportunities?

We read local newspapers, some friends share what they have heard, we go around and ask whether they have any jobs, we ask our ex-school teachers about technical schools

Q24. Do you generally feel that your parents are interested in what you are doing?

Yes, I think my mother is interested. (No further comments)

Q25. Who else provides you with emotional and material support?

It depends. My grandmother helps with money, and sometimes with advice but I don’t really listen to her advice. In the most cases I do everything according to instinct.

Q26. What would you expect from society?

All the people are very angry now, their lives are difficult. I do not expect any good from anyone in this life

Q27. What do you think society expects from you?

I don’t know. Never thought about it.
Q28. Are you optimistic about the future?

I think I will come back from my military service, become a driver, get a job. I will be working and I will have my own family. What am I to do? There is nothing else to do.

Thank you very much.
Q1. Please tell us briefly about your school. What kind of school is it?

Our school is a vocational school. It provides students with basic skills for 8 professions without providing a high school diploma.

Q2. Are there any particular problems you face in your school?

Our problems are very similar to any other school. The only particular thing about our school is that we do not award a high school diploma; thus our students are in a way special--most of them have some problems.

Q3. Did school dropouts rise in recent years?

The percentage of dropouts has increased noticeably in recent years.

Q4. Do these dropouts have any specific family backgrounds and activities?

There are some similar characteristics. The families of the students who drop out are the problem families (low income, substance abuse, alcoholism, single parents). Some of these kids come from good and well-off families but they just do not want to study.

Q5. What do you believe are the main reasons for teenagers dropping out of school?

The major reason for the dropouts, and I can confirm this as a mother, is the attitude towards students at school. In our school we have a different attitude towards kids.

Q6. Do you usually have a chance to discuss with a teenager his/her decision to leave school? Is he/she interested in getting your advice?

Usually if someone decides to leave school, they simply do not come to class. If they are willing to study but also encounter some problems, we discuss this with them and can help them either with advice or with money.

Q7. Do you also usually have a chance to discuss with his/her parents? Are they willing to discuss with you?
We are in close contact with parents. We discuss any problems with parents. We find parents ‘on our side’. We try influencing the kids together.

Q8. Do you know what those dropouts do once they leave school?

No. I do not know what they are doing.

Q9. Do they sometimes turn up at the school?

Yes. They turn up from time to time. They come for our parties, dances and other entertainment events. They never come to talk to me once they have left.

Q10. To what extent are these dropouts welcome to come back to your school once they have left? Are there any efforts to bring them back?

We are ready to welcome them back. We work with the dropouts, and 10-15% of them come back. If they come back we can offer them a choice – continuing to study for the same profession, or transfer to another.

Q11. How do you try to prevent young people from dropping out?

We do not have any means to influence them other than talking to them and trying to convince them.

Q12. How many of those young people who graduate pursue further education?

Once graduated from our school with a profession, some consider returning to a regular school and getting a high school diploma.

Q13. What happens to those who do not pursue further education?

Some kids don’t do anything – they simply sit at home and watch TV. Many of them spend all their time wandering around with their peer groups.

Q14. How would you describe them?

There are some similar characteristics. The families of the students who drop out are the problem families (low income, substance abuse, alcoholism, single parents). Some of these kids come from good and well-off families but they just do not want to study.

Q15. What do you think the government or the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) could do to help dropouts?

It is difficult to say. I think we should start off by organizing some clubs for special interests and sport clubs at school. This way, the kids will find something to involve them in the school. Now there are only a few of these clubs left. There used to be about 15. These clubs contribute to the development of the students’ personality. We should begin by reviving them. The clubs broaden the outlook and the sphere of interests of the kids.
Some further comments:

The orphans are the richest among regular kids! This is because the town authorities pay them allowances; schools get some money towards their nutrition and maintenance. On the contrary, the kids whose parents work for government organizations and should be paid from the state budget are the poorest ones—they are simply hungry. I am doing my best to provide the students with some food and to do so I have asked their parents to pay 100 roubles (4$) per year. You know, only 40% have paid, others do not have 100 roubles per year for food for their kids. I cannot even collect 10 roubles (0.4$) per year to get some medicine!

Thank you very much.
4. Irina, aged 38, female, the mother of an early school leaver

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<th>Location:</th>
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<td>Date of interview:</td>
<td>11 November 1999</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviewee (name, age, gender)</td>
<td>Irina, 38, female</td>
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<td>Start time:</td>
<td>17:05</td>
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<td>End time:</td>
<td>17:30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comments:</td>
<td>The participants in the focus groups were asked for an opportunity to talk to their parents. One of the participants gave the phone number of his mother's work place. Irina is an intelligent person with a degree in education. She works as an accountant to earn her living. She is really concerned about the future of her children. She is not blaming or judging anybody. She is trying to do her best to help her kids to get through life.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Q1. Please tell us briefly about your family: with whom do you live with and what do they do?

My family consists of three members – myself – my daughter, Irina (18) and my son, Volodia (16)

Q2. How did you learn that your son had left school?

It was not really that he had left it – we decided together that he should not go on studying at school after the 9th grade. We had too many problems at school, so we decided that instead of going to school he should get a profession and start working.

Q3. What was your initial reaction to this? Did you support his decision to leave school?

I have supported this decision. In fact it was me who first suggested it.

Q4. Prior to that did you have discussions with him about education and jobs?

We used to have these discussions, it was important for both of us. The decision to leave school was made during one of these discussions. There was a period when he was doing rather well at school, but later on he started having problems with teachers and he got completely disenchanted with school. I have supported this decision. In fact it was me who first suggested it.

Q5. Prior to that did you have discussions with his teacher?

I had several discussions with his teachers and was referred to GORONO (government authority in charge of schools). Unfortunately, it did not help. My son had lost contact with his teachers completely. I would say that he has a special character. That is due to the fact that I have brought him up without a father. He is very touchy and sensitive. His teachers could not make contact with him

Q6. Do you think the more education one has the better it is?
I think it is correct for our current situation. It would be better to get training in different sectors because we have a very difficult life and everything changes rapidly. (She didn’t really mean “more education” as University, Ph.D. etc. She sees it as broadening knowledge, but not going into depth.)

Q7. What is your view on your son’s school and teachers?

I think, there are some teachers who do really care for the kids and are trying to communicate with them. Unfortunately for us, most of these teachers have left our school and those who stay keep on saying the same thing: “I want him to obey! I do not want to take into consideration his personality, I am not going to seek contact with him – he MUST obey me and that’s all!” It used to happen frequently that teachers would call their pupils “stupid, cads, idiots etc”. And I hear from other kids’ parents that this practice persists. Parents are afraid to go to school and talk to these teachers because they might start mistreating kids to get revenge for their parents’ complaints. Very often teachers deliberately humiliate pupils especially “problem kids” while asking a question. Those who are sensitive, as my son, refuse to answer and keep silent even if they know the answer to the question.

Q8. Do you know what he is now doing instead of being at school?

Yes, I do. My son is training as a welder. He plays soccer with his friends and likes computer games too.

Q9. What is his main activity now?

He works as an assistant to a welder. He plans to attend an evening school.

Q10. Does he plan to move away from your home?

We now all live together in one room in a communal apartment (sharing kitchen and facilities with two other families) therefore there is no possibility for him to go on living with us for long. On the whole, he should now be able to cope on his own

Q11. Are you happy about living with him?

Of course, I am happy about it. I have brought him up alone, without any assistance from his father. He is very kind and very helpful – I have many more problems with my elder daughter.

Q12. Please tell us briefly about your current relationship with your son. Is he listening to you?

I have very good contact with my son and our relationship is just perfect. My son really loves me, though he is trying hard to hide it so as not to feel like a ‘mummy’s boy’. He listens to me and asks for advice. He tells me a lot about his life and his interests.

Q13. Who else provides advice, support or services to him?
Recently his father has started helping him. He has bought a car and they often spend
weekends together. His father is teaching him to drive the car and to repair it. They do it
together and my son is learning some useful skills.

Q14. Are you happy with his friends? How would you describe them?

Well, I am happy with some of his friends and would prefer him to stay away from others.
Some of his friends come from problem families, but I do not find it possible to limit his
contacts with them. These kids are not guilty for being born into these families and we
cannot cross them out of this life for that reason. Most of his friends are males who have
left school. Despite that, they are motivated, and are now trying to get some skills. Of
course they are a bit rough, but they are polite with me.

Q15. Would you support your son’s decision to seek further education?

I hope he will finish school. If he decided to do this, I would support him to further his
education. I would do whatever possible, but my daughter is attending an Institute and I
am paying for that. I am afraid I would not be able to pay for both of them. It is true that
his experience at school has discouraged him a lot. But should he decide to seek further
education, I would be happy to assist.

Q16. Why/Why not?

First of all, I think that if one has enough brain capacity to seek a degree, he should do it
because education broadens one’s mind. University education is much more solid and
secure. More than that, it is true that now there is demand for workers on the labour
market, but I am sure it is temporary. One needs good education to get a good job. On
the whole, higher education is a different standard of thinking. Our environment changes
rapidly, better education makes one’s future much more secure.

Q17. Are you worrying for him?

Of course, I am worrying for him!

Q18. Why/Why not?

We live in difficult times. Our kids are left behind in this life. Nobody cares that they get an
education. Nobody cares for them at all: their parents are either too busy earning money
or are alcoholics and do not care about anything. Society does not bother either. There
are plenty of serious problems – drugs, alcoholism, etc. Those young people who are
strong enough to resist them survive, otherwise they simply degenerate, use drugs and
drink. Another problem is unemployment. It is very difficult to find a job - with or without a
university degree. The only sector offering vacancies is sales – we do not produce
anything – we just sell and resell. That is why I am concerned whether my son will be able
to find a rewarding job, which could satisfy him. If he will not manage to find one, his life
will not progress properly.

Thank you very much.
5. Leonid, aged 36, male, a social worker

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<th>Location:</th>
<th>Pushkino, office of the committee for the ‘affairs of people under 18’</th>
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<td>11 November 1999</td>
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<td>Interviewee (name, age, gender)</td>
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<td>18:00</td>
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Comments: There are no social workers with specific responsibility for helping early school leavers, as leaving school early is illegal. After consultation with UNICEF the local authority responsible for those under 18 was contacted. Leonid was selected because he was concerned with this issue and devotes a lot of his time to it. He said that ‘strictly speaking’ he is not a social worker, but he is in practice. He was very careful in everything he said and was careful not to say anything that could harm his position.

Q1. Please tell us briefly about your responsibilities. What kind of tasks do you have?

I am a member of a commission responsible for young people under legal age. This is a public commission. My major responsibilities include various types of assistance to young people under legal age.

Q2. To which main groups of young people do you provide service/support?

The commission deals with the problems of young people, including children not attending school (they are officially on the school lists, but they do not go) and children committing crime.

Q3. Do you think that the numbers of school dropouts and those who do not continue studies after basic education have risen over the recent years?

I think that the peak of dropouts in schools is over. The situation has become relatively stable. At the same time it is not possible to say they there is a trend indicating a decrease in number of dropouts. Anyway, there is no doubt that the number of dropouts is much higher than it was before transition. It also depends on the age of the children we speak about. By law, it is not possible for a child of 14 not to study, I have never heard of these cases. From the age of 15, the child has the right to stop his/her education. We are doing our best to offer him/her various other means of tuition, but we do not have the right to force them to study. There are some children of this type and their number has stabilised recently.

Q4. Are you also doing something for those young people who do not continue some secondary education after finishing their basic education?

Our commission does not deal with these children; we work with those who have broken the law. I cannot say that we are taking some preventive steps with these children, though I think we should. In my opinion it is not the duty of school any more since the child has left it. We get information on the children who drop out and try to introduce them to alternative education. Nevertheless, we do not have any legal right to influence them or to make them doing anything.
Q5. Could you tell us about the specific family backgrounds and activities of the different groups of youths aged 14-16 years who do not seek any secondary education?

To a certain degree these families are similar. A typical family would have a low income, would not consist of both parents, or both parents would drink. There are some parents who are concerned with the situation, but they are the minority.

Q6. Do you know what dropouts do once they leave school?

There are two basic types of early school leavers. One of them is the 'street child'. This type of early school leaver usually does not have any goals or interests other than hanging around and spending time with friends. This type is the majority, and we know what they do – they drink, they steal, they use drugs. They do not have any positive way of spending time – they do not study, they do not play sports. Another type of dropout is the 'psychological dissenter'. These young people, typically, have some psychological problems: problems in communicating with teachers and/or classmates and they leave school for these reasons. This type is more positive, they either stay at home assisting parents, or get some professional skills to find a job.

Q7. In your opinion, what are the main reasons for dropping out?

The major problem for them is their lack of motivation - they do not see any sense in studying. That is why they leave school. Another reason is the lack of control and support from their parents who do not pay attention to the problems of their children. If parents do not care and the child has no motivation, then we find him leaving school. I would also mention that today most schools do not pay enough attention to each and every pupil. The students are very different, but the school is aimed at 'average' or 'gifted' pupils. Those who do not fit this standard feel uncomfortable there and most of the dropouts are not particularly smart or clever.

Q8. Do you usually have a chance to discuss with a teenager his/her decision to leave school? Is he/she interested in getting your advice?

As a rule we come across these children at the point when it is already too late to discuss the matter of schooling. This is entirely the responsibility of the school and it is the school which should do it. Of course, family, peer groups and mass media can influence teenagers as well, but this influence is rather limited. We come across these children once the school refuses to deal with them – when they do not show up for months and refuse to react to any advice or requests. The best we can do is to make this teenager go back to school, but usually such solutions are temporary. On the whole, the problem is not resolved this way. However, sometimes it is enough to move the child to another school and the problems do not appear again.

Q9. Do you also usually have a chance to discuss it with his/her parents? Are they willing to discuss it with you?

We have the chance to meet them (parents) only at the point when the school has refused to work with the child and the child is sent to our commission to decide on what
he is going to do in future. Most of the parents we meet do not listen to our advice. There are some parents who are concerned with the situation, but they are the minority. They are used to having problems with their children, but the most we can do is offer their children some educational alternatives. Theoretically, we could offer them some psychological assistance, but only if they were interested in it. Usually they are not.

Q10. How do you get in contact with the young dropouts?

Most contact is established at school. We have a ‘Committee for the Rights of Young People’ working within our organisation. They get information on the problem children from the schools and try to set up contact with their families, and influence parents. In some drastic cases they may appeal to the authorities to withdraw the parents’ rights and move the children to institutional care. We have just established a centre for medical, social and psychological support for problem children. The schools can send problem children and/or their families for assistance there.

Q11. Are these dropouts welcome to come back to school once they have left? What efforts are made to bring them back?

The term “to leave school” can be treated in different ways. If the child has been missing classes and/or had to repeat the year but does not show up at all, the school does not have the right to expel him at least up to the time he is 15. If the child under 15 does not attend school, the school tries to make contact, and they try to convince the child and/or parent to continue his education. If they fail to do so, they turn to us. Our current legislation obliges every child to finish 9 classes. After that no one can make them study if they do not want to. I must mention that the schools have a habit of doing their best to get rid of some children after the 9th grade. All the children theoretically leave school after the 9th grade, but they can write a request and they have the right to continue their education. If they do not come up with the request by the first of September, nobody will look for them, their studies get interrupted and the school is not obliged to accept them back. These children can then go to evening school.

Q12. How do you try to prevent these young people dropping out?

Most of the parents we meet do not listen to any of our words or advice. If the kid wants to study, we can assist, but if he does not want to do it and his parents support him in this stance, there is nothing we can do. We can assist those kids who want to study but have some interpersonal or psychological problems at school to change to another school. It helps in many cases. If the problem is related to their parents who do not want them to study, there is very little we can do. It is very difficult to oppose the parents whatever they do.

Q13. Which groups of ‘school dropouts’ are most at risk of behavioural problems?

Another reason is the lack of control and support from their parents who do not pay attention to the problems of their children. If parents do not care and the child has no motivation, then we find him leaving school. I would also mention that today most schools do not pay enough attention to each and every pupil. The students are very different, but the school is aimed at ‘average’ or ‘gifted’ pupils. Those who do not fit this standard feel uncomfortable there and most of the dropouts are not particularly smart or clever. That's
the problem we haven’t dealt with so far. If a child’s intellectual level is below average, we should do something to compensate for it. Instead of doing this, we keep on shouting at them and pretending they will do something they’re not capable of. This is the root cause of frustration for many dropouts. We are trying to do something about it, but there are no funds for it

Q14. What other service providers are helping you with these young people?

These are some district youth organizations which are headed by people who work with youth. They organise some interest clubs, sport competitions etc., but there are very few of these clubs. It is the department for the prevention of crime who should be doing something about it. But they are very busy and, as a rule, deal with the dropouts only when they have committed crimes. We have a department responsible for youth problems which co-ordinates the activities of the district clubs and organise some events for teenagers. But I would not say that the problem children are involved in any of them. The Red Cross does provide some assistance but they are oriented toward orphans.

Q15. How would you briefly describe the assistance and services provided to those young people?

Long pause.

It depends on what we mean by assistance. School can help in certain ways. A committee for young people’s rights can help in the case of problems with parents. Most of these kids do not turn up for any assistance even if they could come along. Generally speaking we can provide assistance for the protection of their rights and psychological help, but many do not accept it.

Q16. What do you think the government could do to help your work?

According to my experience, the family is usually the cause of children leaving school early - they push their kids to go and earn money. We come across these so-called parents who do not do anything which is considered parental care. The only thing we can do is make them pay a fine amounting to 1/10 of the minimal wage rate (ca. US$0.30). We need to be able to do something with them. It is very important to invest money in reconstruction of stadiums, organising sport clubs, soccer fields. This would take the kids off the street over to physical activities instead of alcohol and drugs.

Q17. What do you think the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) could do to help your work?

I do not know much about the capacities of this organization. I do not think they should assist us financially – this is simply futile. The more you give, the more will be stolen. UNICEF should push our government to approve the most important legislation – that would really be helpful. UNICEF could organize some homes and/or refuges for kids who experience problems at home. UNICEF could also organize some special training courses for teachers, for example, on child psychology and teach them more modern communication techniques. Some programmes against drugs, which have proved to be effective in other countries, could be implemented in Russia too. The list is long. What UNICEF should not do is give money.
Thank you very much.