

## Executive summary

**T**he Flemish Community shows strong overall achievements in international student assessments, with both a high share of top performers and a small proportion of low performers. But international assessment results also confirm the persistence of profound inequities within the Flemish school system, with socio-economic factors influencing students' educational trajectories and achievements. Paying attention to equity challenges will remain highly relevant in the context of current demographic growth and shifting enrolment patterns. The Flemish school age population is increasing, but not all parts of the Flemish Community are affected by demographic changes to the same degree. While urban areas are characterised by an above average and growing share of immigrants and young people, some rural areas are experiencing declining student enrolments, which results in the demand for places being unequal across the system.

The Flemish Community has one of the OECD's most devolved education systems with schools enjoying a high degree of autonomy and parents benefiting from free school choice. School autonomy is grounded in the principle of "freedom of education", which gives the right to any natural or legal person to set up a school, recruit staff and determine the educational and other principles of the school. Officially recognised schooling is organised within three educational networks and each school is governed by a school board. In principle, funding "follows the student", which lays the foundation for potentially strong competition among schools to attract students. At the same time, the Flemish authorities are encouraging school collaboration through collaborative partnerships between schools in the same geographical area.

This report analyses the use of resources in the Flemish school system, with a particular focus the funding of school education, the provision of school places, and the management of the teaching workforce. The following policy priorities were identified to improve the effectiveness of resource use in the Flemish Community.

### **Monitor and review the effectiveness of school funding strategies**

The Flemish school funding system would benefit from the development of a Community-wide reporting framework bringing together financial indicators and student outcome indicators. To maintain high standards and to narrow the equity gap are goals that require Community consensus regarding fiscal effort and social inclusiveness. To build this consensus would gain from periodic in-depth public reporting both of resource distribution and student learning outcomes. Given the important share of public resources devoted to schooling, it is important to make transparent the funding machinery – design principles, structure and expenditure outputs.

Transparency could also be enhanced at the level of schools, by introducing a school-level reporting framework which enables schools to examine the fiscal impact of their resource and curriculum decisions. In particular, the costs of delivery of school programmes and the budget impact of resource and programme decisions should be made more transparent. This is in the context of the autonomy that Flemish schools enjoy and the limited accountability that balances this. To understand socio-economic gaps in the ability of schools to raise resources, it is essential that schools and education authorities have good data, both on social need and on locally-raised income.

Given the current imbalance of spending between elementary and secondary education, the Flemish authorities should also examine the potential advantages of shifting to more equal spending per student between elementary and secondary education. Policies of rebalancing spending in primary and secondary school are supported by research demonstrating that the rate of return on investment in human capital is greatest in the early years of school and lowest in the later years. If more progress is to be made in closing the equity gap, the Flemish authorities need to start a discussion about the potential benefits of stronger investment in tackling low achievement at the earlier stages of education. In this context, it would also be advisable to consider harmonising approaches to equity funding in elementary and secondary schooling along with consistent approaches to evaluate how schools use additional resources, and developing a repertoire of effective intervention strategies to guide schools in good practice.

### **Address inefficiencies in the provision of school places**

This report identifies a number of priorities in addressing inefficiencies in the provision of school places and the organisation of the school offer. First, in a context of fiscal constraints, it appears difficult to maintain a school system which offers both small schools *and* multiple and complex course options. A central level analysis of the distribution of schools, especially small schools, across the Flemish Community would help policy makers obtain a more complete picture and reveal the scope and potential for school consolidation. Incentives for collaboration should be complemented with incentives for mergers between small schools, or at least the removal of financial disincentives for schools to operate at a larger scale and ensure an efficient provision of classes. In addition, the distribution and availability of programme options, especially in the vocational education and training sector, needs to be closely monitored in collaboration with social partners and local stakeholders. If patterns over time indicate limited interest in and relevance of specific study programmes, decisions could be made to phase these out.

Second, the distribution of school infrastructure is the result of historical developments, autonomous decisions by the educational networks and efforts to ensure parental choice, but it does not optimally accommodate the current distribution of students. More co-ordinated – and perhaps more centralised – infrastructure planning might be needed to ensure that decisions about investments in school facilities prioritise the needs of local communities. This should be combined with incentives for schools to share facilities across networks at a local level, including for special education. Regarding the structure of school networks and boards, the potential merger of the two public networks deserves review and serious consideration as it would help reduce overhead and administration costs across the two smaller networks. Within each network, it would also be beneficial to review the size of school boards to ensure each school is supported by a board with adequate professional capacity.

Third, an important source of inefficiency appears to be linked to a portion of students not progressing through the system as anticipated, moving to less demanding study programmes, repeating a year and exiting the system with insufficient competencies. There is a need to introduce a better Community-wide system to monitor the characteristics of students going into different tracks and avoid a disproportionate orientation of specific student groups in the vocational education programmes. This should be coupled with strengthened early diagnosis and response to language learning needs to prevent students being oriented to vocational tracks due to language difficulties. Reforms of the first stage of secondary education to create a more comprehensive stage of schooling, as planned with the Master Plan for Secondary Education, should be complemented with strategies to reduce under-achievement in elementary education and to attract and retain greater numbers of students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in the general study programmes.

Fourth, although an increasing number of students have been enrolled in inclusive settings in recent years, concerns remain about the current provision of schooling for students with special educational needs. Special schools may be necessary for some students with moderate or severe disabilities, but the enrolment of high functioning students with mild disabilities in these schools appears both stigmatising and inefficient. New legal provisions for inclusion (the “M Decree”) state the right intentions, but their implementation needs to be pursued carefully and gradually, as it requires infrastructure adjustments, specialised staff, changes to the funding system and adequate preparation and training of all teachers, as well as other players at the school level.

### **Ensure effective preparation, distribution and support of the teaching workforce**

In light of the current demographic trends, it is important to ensure that well qualified candidates enter the teaching profession at an adequate rate. Even if there appears to be no overall shortage of teachers, it is important for the school system to ensure a given rate of teacher renewal so the school system is continuously provided with new ideas and perspectives. It is also important that effective beginning teachers are retained in the profession. Responding to future teacher needs does not necessarily involve hiring a greater number of teachers but instead finding ways to better match teacher resources to student needs, improving the retention of effective beginning teachers, and enhancing the mobility of teachers across the system so that instances of shortage are more easily addressed.

In order to make initial teacher education attractive to high achieving graduates from secondary education, it is important to develop targeted strategies, such as information, assessment and counselling for prospective students; incentive schemes to recruit candidates with suitable competencies and flexible programme structures that provide teacher students with school experience early in the course. In the longer term, it would also be beneficial to improve the status of teachers in pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education by raising the qualification requirements for teaching at these levels. There is no reason, from the perspective of professional roles and responsibilities of teachers, for qualification requirements of upper secondary teachers to be higher.

Greater effort should also be directed to ensuring that all schools have a chance to build a diverse teaching body in terms of experience and background. In the current system, beginner teachers are much more likely than experienced teachers to be employed

in schools with many students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As beginner teachers have lower salaries, this also means that schools in disadvantaged circumstances will receive less “teacher resources” in terms of government money invested in salaries. To ensure a more equitable distribution of teaching staff, incentives could be provided to attract high achieving and experienced teachers to disadvantaged schools. It would also be important to create greater transparency regarding teacher salary costs and stimulate a debate around the need to move towards a fairer distribution of teacher resources across schools.

Finally, further on-the-job support will be required to allow all teachers to work effectively in increasingly diverse and inclusive classrooms. Moving teacher employment under a workload system, whereby teachers would work a specified number of hours per week could help recognise that the teaching profession involves a range of other tasks beyond teaching such as whole-school planning and collaboration in professional learning communities. To ensure that all teachers have opportunities for regular feedback and professional learning, it is important to further enhance pedagogical leadership in schools. This would involve both supporting the capacity development of school principals and promoting more distributed leadership and involvement of senior peers in managing the teaching workforce. In addition, establishing a teacher career structure linked to teacher certification or registration processes could serve to formally recognise the varieties of roles and responsibilities that teachers perform at school.



**From:**  
**OECD Reviews of School Resources: Flemish  
Community of Belgium 2015**

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264247598-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

Nusche, Deborah, *et al.* (2015), "Executive summary", in *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Flemish Community of Belgium 2015*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264247598-3-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to [rights@oecd.org](mailto:rights@oecd.org). Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com) or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at [contact@cfcopies.com](mailto:contact@cfcopies.com).