

## **Regulation governing the staff structure in the secondary education system increases the fragmentation of the study offer and results in bigger classes**

*The Court examined the staff structure in the secondary education as a tool designed, according to the Flemish authority, to sustain a quality secondary education. Its aim was also to streamline the study offer and ensure free school choice. The Court found that the differentiation of the resources provided for in the regulation by course cycle, educational type, study option and the number of enrolled pupils is insufficiently accounted for. Several audit indicators tend to show that this regulation does not meet the needs of the schools and does not sufficiently state how to achieve it. Schools often shift the allocated teacher hours to maintain thinly populated study sections. In spite of the erection of cooperating school communities the study offer remains fragmented. This leads to classes of varying size without any connection with the staff structure regulation provisions.*

### **Examination**

According to the regulation concerned the Flemish government allocates full-time ordinary secondary schools a course package of teacher hours per pupil on the basis of which schools appoint teachers. The regulation differentiates the resources by course cycle, educational type, study option, and the number of enrolled pupils. In so doing the vocational and technical secondary education are allocated more teacher hours than the general secondary education. Smaller pupil groups are also allocated more teacher hours per pupil (regulation degressivity rule). Schools are allowed to lump together the teacher hours and are free to break them down across all groups of pupils. The Court examined whether the Flemish authority has accounted for the differentiation provided for in the regulation. It compared the time used by the schools with the time allocated and verified whether the study offer has become more streamlined. Finally, it examined how far the Flemish authority evaluated and monitored the process.

### **General objectives**

In 1990 the Flemish authority issued the regulation to satisfy the needs of the schools and used differentiation primarily as a factor to calculate the number of teacher hours to allocate. It framed the objectives in rather general terms: allocate schools sufficient resources and spur them to provide a streamlined and extensive educational offer based on the right to free school choice. It remained unclear whether the Flemish Government envisaged more specific objectives by using differentiation, for instance, increasing the number of teacher hours for the vocational secondary education. Moreover the decree legislator had to establish the basic criteria for this differentiation. In 2003 the education inspectorate was assigned the task to verify whether the schools did not impair certain groups of pupils (above all in the vocational secondary education) following the introduction of the free use of the regulation

resources. At the time, what the government had exactly in mind was also unclear.

### **Historical basis**

The differentiation made in the regulation is based on historical data: the former class split-up standards and class timetables. It stems from the concept of *class size*. The Flemish authority did not make any additional investigation as to the number of teacher hours required to provide high-quality education or as to the impact of the class size on the educational quality and education output. The degressivity provided for in the regulation has not been accounted for.

### **Allocation and use of hours**

Trends previously found as to how schools used these hours are still prevalent. Schools continue using more hours in the second and, most of all, third cycle of the general secondary education and in the third cycle of the vocational secondary education than what the number of pupils would allow schools to use. Schools in the main cities and Brussels and schools with a wide study offer favour primarily general secondary education. Most of all the third cycle of general secondary education and vocational secondary education are exposed to the fragmentation of the education offer. The indirect benefit with the teacher hours system is all the higher as schools offer a wider range of administrative groups with few pupils. Moreover the differentiation process is adversely affected by the teacher hours arrangements whereby teacher hours are carried forward to another school year or transferred to another school and teacher hours are used for other tasks than teaching (accounting together for about 10% of the total hours allocated). In about 11 years' time the minimum hours package, designed to ensure the continued existence of smaller schools, decreased by about one third. Several schools transferred a part of their minimum hours package in favour of other pupils outside the target group.

### **Staff structure regulation and study offer**

The last 11 years witnessed an increase in school scale size. This together with degressivity led to a smaller staff structure per pupil: the average number of teacher hours decreased by 3,2%. The Court concluded that degressivity and differentiation spurred schools to *maximise* the hours package through restructuring and creating or maintaining administrative groups. In nearly 10 years' time the fragmented study offer of school communities decreased only by 7%. Since school year 2005-2006 there has even been stagnation. One out of seven administrative groups in Flanders has no more than four pupils. Above all the general secondary education schools have many thinly populated groups. The remapping of the school communities in 1998 and the decreased use since 2005 had only a limited streamlining effect. The number of administrative groups provided in duplication by school communities decreased though to a large extent.

### **Bigger class sizes**

The fragmentation of the offer has resulted in bigger classes, because schools had to put together pupils from different administrative groups. These variations in class size not connected with the staff structure issue can reflect an inefficient use of the resources allocated for quality education.

### **Evaluation and monitoring**

The Flemish authority has not yet deeply evaluated the staff structure regulation implementation. The educational inspectorate controls the school class size policy, but overall data are missing as well as recent data about the use of the teacher hours. Streamlining standards for the education types, cycles, study courses or study options have not been set. The Flemish authority is aware of the effects of degressivity and of the minimum hours package on the educational offer, but has not examined them carefully.

### **Minister's response**

The Flemish minister for education agreed to the Court's conclusions. He hinted at the secondary education reform plan, which will be implemented in stages over a longer period than a legislature and will introduce a renewed staff structure regulation as one of the primary innovations.

**The audit report “Staff structure in the full-time ordinary secondary education system” was sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full report and the press release are available on the Court's website: [www.ccrek.be](http://www.ccrek.be).**

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