

SUMMARY

Management of the School Building Fund in the French-speaking Community's educational institutions

The Court of Audit has examined how the French Community's School Buildings Fund is managed.

This Fund was set up as a public department under separate management and decentralized in six regional directorates coordinated by a central administration. It is part of the General Infrastructure Administration (AGI) of the French Community Ministry. The management of the education system organized by the French Community has been separated from the school buildings management and is part of the General Administration of Education and Scientific Research (AGERS).

Staff matters

When analyzing the staff service, the Court of Audit noted that the positions of the Fund's central administration and of the financial and accounting management have not been provided for in the staff establishment.

The evolution in the number of staff employed in the regional directorates responsible for implementing the Fund's missions shows that the situation described in 2006 in an internal audit report of the Ministry is still a matter of concern. The age distribution in 2010 shows a marked peak in the 52 to 55 age group. Moreover, staff reduction has continued and there are persisting difficulties in recruiting technical staff.

As the number of staff necessary for managing the French Community's school buildings has never been determined objectively and precisely, it is impossible to make a meaningful assessment of the adequacy of staff and missions.

Administrative management

The Court of Audit examined the following major aspects of the administrative management: reorganization of the Fund within the AGI, task distribution among regional directorates and setting-up of an internal control.

Although the civil servants from the old State School Buildings Fund were integrated into the AGI in 1997 and in spite of the budgetary, financial and accounting unification of the Fund as a department under separate management, the regional directorates kept to their local practices which they had developed in full autonomy in each policy area.

In view of their support role, the Court of Audit recommended to always separate the accounting and public procurement activities from the administrative divisions of the regional directorates. Besides, developing separate divisions would strengthen the internal control.

Furthermore, the internal control set up by the central administration is still inadequate. Internal control structures have been written into the operational plan and implemented, which is positive; however, looking at the evolution of the number of staff in the central administration between 2006 and 2011, it couldn't be established whether a sufficiently extensive and efficient internal control can be carried out on a permanent basis.

Property management

Exhaustive knowledge of the patrimony and of the current condition of the buildings is crucial to all property management in order to ensure relevant programming of the necessary investments. The Court of Audit therefore recommends making and updating a formal and systematic inventory of the condition of all buildings. It notes, however, that the implementation of a complete and coherent state of the patrimony has been delayed.

Financial interventions aimed at school buildings of the education system organized by the French Community are mainly supported through an annual allocation to the Fund. Despite some recently granted increases, in the framework of public-private partnership (PPP) in particular, the joint resources of the annual allocations are still largely insufficient to cover the investment programmes of the 2011-2015 plan.

This manifest lack of means should operate as an incentive to develop inside the administration the foundation on which to build an effective and efficient property management. For example, improving the management of property disposals could generate supplementary financial means.

Another aim of the Court's audit was to determine the relationship between property management and educational organization by the AGERS.

When updating the maintenance bylaw that defines the relationship between the owner and the schools occupying the premises, a list of the problems associated with it should be drawn up and solutions in accordance with the general interest should be found so that important budget adaptations can be made.

Besides, the Court of Audit underscores the necessity of organizing structured relations with the AGERS in order to share information about learning needs and adequate allocation of financial resources.

The five-year investment programme which is drawn up every year does not include a complete overview of the buildings' condition. Some of the shortcomings are mainly due to the regional directorates, which charge non-programmed investment expenditure against the budget as maintenance costs.

In the first programming year, investment proposals are submitted to the minister's approval for the next budget year. As these proposed works always clearly exceed the financial capacity and are generally endorsed, authorizing the yearly programme in fact implies delegating to the regional directorates a part of the powers of decision which is even larger, given that programme implementation is generally incomplete.

Minister's response

In his reply of 16 January 2012, the minister for Childhood, Research, the Public Service and School Buildings mentions several initiatives aimed at improving the quality and efficiency of the Fund's management, notably by harmonizing practices within the regional directorates and coordinating their functioning. Collaboration with the AGERS is growing thanks to a project laid down in the Fund's operational plan which organizes structured relations between the Fund's representatives and the delegates of education institutions.