

PRESS RELEASE

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Report to the Flemish Parliament

Equal education opportunities in regular primary education

The Flemish Government provides primary schools with additional course hours for disadvantaged students. The Court of Audit's examination has shown that over a period of five years there have hardly been any improvements and even a deterioration in the opportunities gap between disadvantaged and regular students. The Court also examined what makes school with a large number of disadvantaged students successful. A broad support base, involvement of the parents and a student follow-up system were determined prominent conditions for success.

Results

PISA studies by the OECD have shown that Flanders is marked by a large gap in education opportunities. The Flemish Government has pursued an equal education opportunities policy since 2002. It grants primary schools additional course hours and resources for disadvantaged students. This concerns students who have one or more of the following characteristics: to have a low-skilled mother, to not speak Dutch at home, to receive an education allowance.

The government has not clearly defined the goals of its equal education opportunities policy, nor has it set indicators, target figures or a timeframe, which makes an evaluation of the policy difficult. Nevertheless, the government has had several evaluations carried out already. None of those, however, could provide a decisive answer as to the effectiveness of the policy.

The Court has itself gathered data on the results of the policy, using three rough indicators to evaluate primary school students of year six over the course of three school years. Has the student repeated school years during primary education? Does the student go on to the first year of A- (1A) or B- (1B) secondary education? Does the student attain A, B, or C attestations in 1A? It would be more accurate to base the examination on students' learning gains, but those data were not accessible.

The examination has shown a positive evolution for all students concerning two of the aforementioned criteria: more students go on to 1A-type secondary education and more students attain A-attestations in 1A. However, considering the opportunities gap between disadvantaged and regular students, the data suggests that there have only been continuous improvements in the transition of more disadvantaged students into 1A-type secondary education. The data for the other criteria have shown little improvement and even deterioration. Moreover, disadvantaged students are still 3.5 times as likely as regular students to transition into 1B-type secondary education. They are also 4 times as likely to attain B-attestations in 1A-type secondary education, and 6.8 times as likely to attain C-attestations. The gap between disadvantaged and regular students has continued to grow,

when it comes to school progress. Disadvantaged students are 4.4 times as likely to repeat school years as their peers.

The Court of Audit also verified the influence of the aforementioned student characteristics on the opportunities gap between disadvantaged and regular students. The education level of the students' mother had the biggest influence of the three characteristics. Other than that, the composition of the school's student body has also been shown to have an impact.

Recipe for success

Schools with a large population of disadvantaged students have yielded largely varying results. The Court of Audit has examined around 60 factors that can have an impact on the school's success. The problems concerning equal education opportunities are highly complicated and, so, there is no simple recipe for success. However, the analysis has shown a strong link between a school's success and the following factors: a decent student follow-up system, a broad teacher support base and involvement of the parents. However, the government does not provide quality assurance for the student follow-up system. Furthermore, to create a broader support base, the government could hold the school more broadly accountable for its equal education opportunities policy. Finally, the factor of parent involvement points out the truth that the problems cannot be solved by addressing the students alone and that they require a general approach of the students' home situations through collaboration between several policy areas.

The analysis has also uncovered other factors of importance. It has shown the importance of a consistent student population and a stable team of teachers. Secondly, the experience of the school's principal and care team have proven significant. Furthermore, schools that used to participate in the precursor to the equal education opportunities policy, the education priority policy, can boast a better success rate. The government has abolished a number of obligations to allow schools to lower the planning cost and better adjust to the local situation, but that has also increased the risk of the schools paying less attention to equal education opportunities.

Alternatively, the particular situation of a school can have a determining impact. The analysis has not yielded statistically relevant results for a school's decent infrastructure and proper support by the school community, school management or the CLB, but these factors can still be relevant in particular cases. The same applies to the broader context, for example, students partaking in extracurricular support (e.g. speech therapy) or out-of-school education. Pervasive behavioural problems can also have an impact.

Reaction of the minister

The minister of Education agreed upon most of the Court's recommendations. She nevertheless pointed out not to be in favour of pupil related goals. Nor does she want to create additional organizational burdens. Finally, the minister underlined the importance of freedom of education.

Information for the press

The Court of Audit exerts an external control on the financial operations of the Federal State, the Communities, the Regions and the provinces. It contributes to improving public governance by transmitting to the parliamentary assemblies, to the managers and to the audited services any useful and reliable information resulting from a contradictory



examination. As a collateral body of the Parliament, the Court performs its missions independently of the authorities it controls.

The audit report on *Equal education opportunities in regular primary education* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: www.courtofaudit.be.