

PRESS RELEASE

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Report to the Flemish Parliament

Preventing early school leaving: student counseling in vocational secondary education

With an average of 6.2% early school leavers in 2019, Flanders scores better than the international average (10.3%), but it has not yet achieved Flemish Pact 2020 targets. Moreover, school leavers percentage is much higher in vocational secondary schools. Their students experience serious welfare problems. The schools do put a lot of effort in guiding their students, but better basic care and more bonding with students is still needed. In this, Flemish government can encourage schools even more. Student guidance centres' (CLB) workload has increased in recent years, which has contributed to dissatisfaction among the schools.

Introduction

Pupils leaving secondary education early have lower labour market opportunities. Flemish government is therefore trying to reduce the number of early school leavers. To this end, it has set objectives and drawn up an action plan. The Court of Audit has mapped out the results of the Flemish policy against early school leaving and examined pupil guidance in full-time and part-time vocational secondary education (BSO and DBSO). To this end, it has visited about fifty schools and ten CLBs.

Flemish policy framework

According to the European EAK indicator, Flanders had 6.2% early school leavers in 2019. Although that result is a good in comparison with the international average (10.3%), it does not meet the 5.2% European target, nor the 4.3% Flemish Pact 2020 target. Education forms differ largely, which the EAK indicator does not indicate. The education department's VSV-indicator does take these differences into account. According to this indicator, 12.1% of Flemish youngsters left school early in the 2018-2019 school year. Special Secondary Education (BSO)(17.8%) and especially the Part-time Special Secondary Education (DBSO)(59.4%) with its centres for part-time education (CDOs) have significantly more early school leavers. In 2016, Flemish government launched the action plan *Together against school dropout*. This plan contained many pupil guidance actions, but did not sufficiently achieve its objectives and has not yet been evaluated. The vision memorandum *Visor 2030* repeats the ambition to reduce early school leaving, but it no longer sets a concrete target.

Pupil guidance by BSO schools and CDOs

Schools have been involved in student guidance for quite some time and have been obliged to do so by decree since 2018. All BSO schools and CDOs surveyed have student counseling teams and put in a lot of effort. However, BSO and DBSO are known to have many vulnerable pupils having major welfare problems. Although obtaining crucial information from parents and previous schools is often hard, schools and centres are quite successful in getting accurate student pictures. Acceptance of student guidance is found to be better in DBSO than in BSO. According to the schools, some of the teachers themselves should focus more on basic care and should work towards a less punitive approach. Schools' numerous efforts

to increase parental involvement do not always pay off. Although emphasized by the Flemish action plan, various BSO schools and CDOs still don't have a sufficiently elaborated language policy. In contrast to DBSO schools, in which all pupils follow individual routes, BSO schools make much less use of flexible learning paths for pupils with shortages. Nevertheless, government and schools see this as an important tool to combat early school leaving.

BSO and CDO pupils combine learning with internships or workplace training. BSO schools and CDOs surveyed are generally satisfied with the employers involved. Points for attention are mutual expectations and an adequate supply of workplaces. As to the renewed pathways for the most vulnerable pupils, centres have already identified a number of problems: the pathways have been hastily introduced, their numbers being too few and their contents sometimes being inadequate. Moreover, guidance to these pathways sometimes takes long.

Truancy is an important predictor of early school leaving. More than half of the pupils in DBSO are problematically absent for more than 30 days. The BSO schools and CDOs surveyed make efforts to combat truancy, but do not always apply Flemish government's policy guidelines. Although they consider a persistent and consistent follow-up of absent students a priority, they sometimes invest less in a binding school climate and act more sanctioning than preventive.

CLB student guidance

BSO schools and CDOs surveyed are dissatisfied with CLBs. According to the schools, processes they ran together with CLBs have been progressing more slowly than they used to. At the same time, more than half of the schools appreciated CLB employees. Their workload has increased in recent years due to the integral youth assistance decree and the M-decree. Partly because of this, CLBs have reorganized, which according to the schools has reduced their school involvement. CLBs experience an increase of help requests' complexity and the number of interventions needed. They also pointed out that some schools find it difficult to assume the more important role the student guidance decree has assigned them.

Response of the minister

In his response, the Flemish Minister of Education indicated that cooperation with the Welfare and Work policy areas is necessary. He pointed out the importance of the local context and promised to include the Court's policy recommendations in his further policy design. According to the Flemish Minister of Welfare the report showed many recognizable bottlenecks that strengthen his conviction that a joint education and youth aid policy for vulnerable target groups is crucial to keep these young people in education and to allow them to grow up with opportunities.

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 *Preventing early school leaving: student counseling in vocational secondary education* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: www.courttofaudit.be.