

PRESS RELEASE

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Report to the Flemish Parliament

Special education: access and outflow

The Court of Audit found that the number of students in special education has increased by almost 13% in four years. Flanders therefore has no evolution towards inclusive education. Because the number of students is increasing, there is a capacity shortage in special education, the size of which is insufficiently known by the government. The reports the centers for learning guidance draw up, giving students access to special education, do not sufficiently take into account the student's right to inclusive education.

Introduction

Flemish government aims for more inclusion in education, an obligation that follows from the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. To this end, the government introduced the M-decree in 2014, which was replaced in 2023 by the Learning Support Decree. If necessary, the centers for student guidance (CSG) provide reports that give students the right to go to special education or to follow an individually adapted curriculum (IAC) in regular education.

Evolution of Flanders towards inclusive education

The influx into special education shows no trend towards inclusive education. On the contrary, in four years the number of students in special education has increased by almost 13%. The relative share is also increasing. The increase occurs in both primary and secondary education and is relatively strongest in nursery education. Type 9 in particular for students with autism spectrum disorders is responsible for the increase, together with type 2 (intellectual disability) in nursery education.

The Flemish policy framework for inclusive education has shortcomings. It lacks a clear vision, an end goal, a timing, a strategy and objectives. Policy and schools also have to make every effort to ensure that students in special education return to mainstream education, but currently only approximately 6% of all students take that step every year. That means a decrease of 1.5% compared to five years ago.

The share of IAC students in mainstream education can indicate the extent to which Flemish education is inclusive, but because not all IACs are registered, government does not have correct data. In mainstream secondary education, the share of registered IAC students is increasing, but it still is very low. The majority of schools do not have a single student holding a CSG report. The share of disadvantaged students with a CSG report has increased from 55.3% to 60.2% since 2017-2018. The share of disadvantaged people in special education is above 50%, while in mainstream education it is only 33%.

Switch to special education

The CLB report has to demonstrate why a student cannot follow the common curriculum in mainstream education. However, the reports do not explain why the necessary measures are (or will be) unreasonable. The reports are mainly motivated on the basis of the student's

problematic functioning (learning delay, diagnosis and possibly social-emotional problems). Not a single report contains the required justification that educational needs are not solely attributable to a lack of opportunities. Most reports recommend switching to special education, which complicates the student's right to register in a regular school.

Alignment of special education provision to needs

Due to the increasing number of students, there is a capacity shortage in special education. However, the administration does not have complete and reliable data on the size of this deficit. Based on partial data, it can be concluded that there is a growing capacity shortage, especially in special primary education and in particular for type 9.

To meet the increasing demand, Flemish Government approved the establishment of 13 new schools during this legislature. It also approved infrastructure projects worth more than 54 million euros, providing 1,713 additional places for special education. Only 8 of the 28 selected projects are an expansion of capacity on shared campuses with regular education.

The capacity shortage in special education also causes longer bus rides. The Minister of Mobility's target that the single journey time should take a maximum of 90 minutes was achieved for 94.1% of students at the start of the 2023-2024 school year. A third of the schools are struggling to fill vacancies for bus conductors.

Alignment of special education to the labour market and to further education

Special education has a large share of early school leavers, a lower share of workers and a slower rate of employment. Social employment does attract the right target group. The OV4 training format is also aimed at further education. The flow of these students to higher education is quite high, but slightly lower than in regular education. OV4 students also more often choose a professional bachelor's or graduate program than an academic bachelor's degree, but they have a lower study success rate.

Response from the ministers

The Minister of Education stated in his response that the audit results are valuable to include in education policy for students with special educational needs. He believes that steps are being taken through the Learning Support Decree to accommodate these students in both mainstream and special education. He also referred to a committee tasked with developing a vision and strategy for a phased evolution towards inclusive education. The Minister of Mobility responded that continued efforts must be made to keep journey times under 90 minutes.

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 *Special education: access and outflow* has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website: www.courtsofaudit.be.