

## Chapter 1

# School education in the Flemish Community of Belgium

*This chapter sets the context for the report and describes the main contextual features of the Flemish school system such as demographic developments influencing educational planning and broader economic trends impacting on the funding of the education sector. It also presents the main characteristics of the Flemish school system itself, including its structure and governance and the organisation of schools within school boards and educational networks. In addition, the chapter describes the system's main educational goals and mechanisms for official recognition and quality assurance of Flemish schools. It also examines evidence on the quality and equity of schooling and considers major trends and policy developments that influence the use of resources in the school sector.*

## Context

### Governance

There are three tiers of government in Belgium: the Federal State, the Regions and the Communities. The Federal Government has responsibility for areas including social security, justice and defence. The jurisdiction of the three Regions (the Flemish, Walloon and the Brussels Capital Regions) revolves mainly around matters related to the territory and the economy, whereas the three Communities (the Flemish, French-speaking and German-speaking Communities) are responsible for matters related to the individual including cultural, language and educational matters. The Flemish Region and the Flemish Community governments have merged into one.

The Flemish, French and German-speaking Communities each have their autonomous education systems. Only a small number of competences for education remain with the level of the Federal Government. These include determining the duration and age range of compulsory education, the conditions for the delivery of recognised qualifications, and the retirement regulations for teachers and educational staff. The Flemish Community is responsible for education in the Flemish Region and for education provided with Dutch as the main instructional language in the Brussels Capital Region. In 2011/12, the Flemish education system comprised 56.3% of the Belgian student population in primary and secondary schools (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015a).

### Population

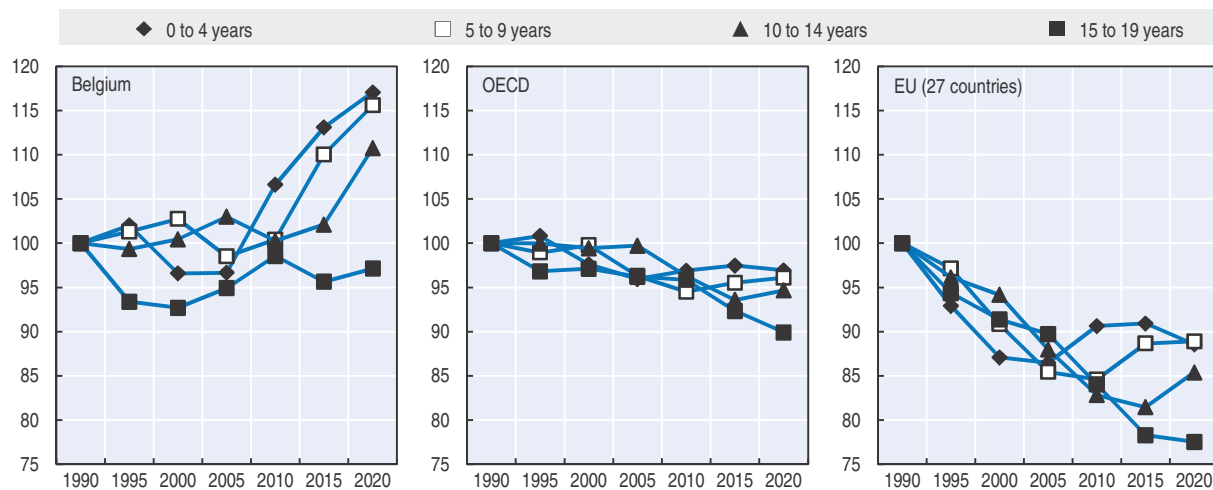
In 2012, the Flemish Region had a population of 6.4 million inhabitants. The Region is densely populated and highly urbanised, with an average of 470 inhabitants per square kilometre. In contrast to most other regions in Europe, population growth in the region has accelerated over the past decades. While the natural growth rate has been gradually increasing (from 0.7 per thousand in 2000 to 1.8 per thousand in 2011), migration is the main driver of population growth and educational expansion. The net migration rate to the Flemish Region was 5.3 per thousand in 2011, up from 1.4 per thousand in 2000 (Government of Flanders, 2013). In 2012, 17.5% of the Flemish Region's population had at least one parent born with a foreign nationality and 7.1% of the population did not have Belgian nationality (Government of Flanders, 2014a). Just under one fifth (19.5%) of the Flemish Region's population was under 18 years old in 2012 (Government of Flanders, 2013).

Not all parts of the Flemish Region are affected by demographic changes to the same degree. As elsewhere, the population increase is concentrated in the larger cities and certain municipalities. Larger cities in the Flemish Region are characterised by more rapid population growth and an above average share of immigrants and young people. In particular, the municipalities of Antwerp, Mechelen and Genk have a substantially larger than average share of immigrants and young people (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015a). High levels of population growth and immigration are also prevalent in

several municipalities in the bilingual Brussels Capital Region where the Flemish Community is responsible for education provided with Dutch as the main instructional language.

Internationally comparable data for Belgium as a whole illustrate these demographic trends. Figure 1.1 shows that the development of the school age population in Belgium since 1990 and projections until 2020 differ significantly from developments in other OECD and European Union (EU) countries. While an overall decline in the school age population can be observed across the OECD and EU areas, Belgium is faced with the opposite phenomenon. There has been a sharp increase in the Belgian population aged 0-4 since 2005, followed by a subsequent increase in the population aged 5-9 (since 2009/10) and the population aged 10-14 (since 2014/15). The population aged 15-19 is expected to increase in the coming years (OECD Database). According to OECD (2013a) data, 15% of Belgian residents were non-native in 2011, with the largest immigrant groups coming from Morocco, France, the Netherlands and Italy (OECD, 2013a).

Figure 1.1. **Variation in school age population in Belgium, the OECD and the EU**  
1990 = 100



Source: Data extracted from OECD database, *Historical population data and projections (1950-2050)*, [https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=POP\\_PROJ](https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=POP_PROJ).

Demographic developments have an important influence on educational planning. The Flemish Community has experienced rapid growth in the school age population of its urban areas over the last decade and a further increase is expected at all levels of education in the coming years. Population projections for schooling in the Flemish Community of Belgium indicate continuous growth of the primary school population over the next years, although a small decrease is projected for 2020/21. In the secondary sector, student numbers have decreased somewhat in the past few years, but are expected to rise again from the 2016/17 school year onwards (Table 1.1). A second trend of significance is the shifting enrolment concentrations, with some rural schools experiencing declining enrolments while many urban schools have rapidly growing populations and struggle to meet the demand for places. This pattern results in the demand for places being unequal across the Flemish Community which presents a challenge for the system.

### Economy and government budget

The Flemish Region is comparatively wealthy by European standards, with a GDP per capita (at PPP) at 133% of the EU27 average in 2012. The Flemish economy has been resilient throughout the crisis and has maintained an employment rate of 71.5%, considerably above both the Belgian (67.2%) and EU28 average (68.5%). Labour productivity, as measured by GDP per person employed, is also above the EU15 average (117%) (European Commission, no date). However, the recovery has been hesitant and, as in the Belgian economy as a whole, there was a small contraction in the Flemish economy in 2012 (OECD, 2013b; Government of Flanders, 2014b). Further predictions for economic growth are moderate, with an expected growth of 1.5% for the period of 2011-20 (Government of Flanders, 2014a).

**Table 1.1. Prognosis on student numbers in pre-primary, primary and secondary schooling in the Flemish Community of Belgium, 2014-21**

School year	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Pre-primary students	271 611	271 822	272 352	272 211	273 275	274 758	276 277
% change to previous year	-0.35	-0.39	-0.72	-0.24	0.26	0.40	0.47
Primary students	437 977	446 965	454 544	459 529	461 416	461 805	460 558
% change to previous year	2.32	2.05	1.70	1.10	0.41	0.08	-0.27
Secondary students	443 679	441 798	442 469	445 167	449 701	455 949	464 348
% change to previous year	-0.71	-0.42	0.15	0.61	1.02	1.39	1.84
Students all levels (total)	1 151 623	1 157 672	1 163 985	1 171 027	1 178 129	1 185 821	1 194 239
% change to previous year	0.50	0.53	0.55	0.60	0.61	0.65	0.71

Source: Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2015a), OECD Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resource Use in Schools, Country Background Report of the Flemish Community of Belgium, [www.oecd.org/edu/school/schoolresourcesreview.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/schoolresourcesreview.htm).

The funding of the education sector is confined by the overall budgetary situation of the Flemish Government. As other parts of Europe, the Flemish Community is faced with population ageing, which increases the demands for funding in the areas of health and care for the elderly and is likely to create pressures on the public budget. At the same time, since funding for schools is allocated on a per-student basis, the increase of student numbers generates additional demands for spending on education. These additional demands may be partly offset by savings made due to the retirement of a significant proportion of highly experienced teachers, which is likely to lead to a reduction in overall staff costs for the education system.

### Structure of the school system

Schooling in the Flemish Community is compulsory from age six to eighteen. The school system is highly stratified, with a first streaming of students occurring at the beginning of secondary education. The school system is organised in four main stages, preceded by a non-compulsory offer of pre-primary education, which is free of charge.

- **Pre-primary education** (typical ages: 2.5-6) is not mandatory, but over 90% of children are enrolled in pre-primary education at age three. Pre-primary and primary education is usually provided under the same roof in elementary schools.
- **Primary education** (typical ages: 6-12) lasts for six years. There is also an offer of seven years of special primary education for children with special educational needs. In the 2012/13 school year, 7% of the primary school cohort was enrolled in special primary education. At the end of primary education, students who achieve the objectives of the curriculum receive a certificate.

- **The first stage of secondary education** (typical ages: 12-14) lasts for two years and is organised in two streams: the “A stream” and the “B stream”. The vast majority of students enrol in the A stream (85% in 2012/13). This first stage of secondary education is intended to provide students with a shared curriculum of basic general education. Students who did not receive a certificate for primary education and those who wish to pursue a vocational education enrol in the B stream. Upon completion of the first year of the B stream, students are allowed to transfer to the first year of the A stream if they wish so. The majority of those completing the first year of the B stream, however, continue in the second year of the B stream.
- **The second and third stage of secondary education** (typical ages: 14-18) usually last for two years each. For students in vocational secondary education, there is an option to take an additional year in the final stage of secondary education if they wish to enter tertiary education. At the second and third stages, secondary education is organised into four main educational pathways, as listed below. Within each of these secondary education programmes, students can choose a particular study area. As they move from the second to the third stage, the education and training provided become progressively more targeted, depending on students’ planned further education or career pathway. All programmes include a mix of compulsory and optional subjects.
  - **General secondary education** (*Algemeen secundair onderwijs*, ASO) offers a broad general education programme preparing students for progression into tertiary education. 41% of students in the second and third stage of secondary schooling were enrolled in ASO in 2012/13.
  - **Technical secondary education** (*Technisch secundair onderwijs*, TSO) offers a mix of general, technical/theoretical and practical subjects, preparing students for a technical profession or tertiary education. 31% of students were enrolled in TSO in 2012/13.
  - **Secondary arts education** (*Kunstsecundair onderwijs*, KSO) combines a broad general education with active arts practice, preparing students for an artistic profession or tertiary education. 2% of students were enrolled in KSO in 2012/13.
  - **Vocational secondary education** (*Beroepssecundair onderwijs*, BSO) provides practice-oriented education in addition to general education, preparing students for entry to the labour market. BSO students who wish to enter professional or academic tertiary education are required to take an extra (third) year in the final stage of vocational secondary education. 26% of students were enrolled in BSO in 2012/13.

Students who have completed the A-stream certificate of the first stage of secondary education can choose to enter any of these four pathways. Those who were enrolled in the B stream of the first stage are automatically referred to vocational education (BSO) in the second stage of secondary education. There is also an offer of special secondary education (*Buitengewoon secundair onderwijs*, BUSO) for students with special educational needs. 5% of all secondary school students were enrolled in special secondary education in 2012/13.

All students in the Flemish Community have a full-time learning obligation until age 18. From the age of 16, or even 15 for students who have completed the first stage of secondary education, they may follow part-time education in combination with work-based learning. Such education is offered in three forms: i) part-time vocational secondary education (*Deeltijds beroepssecundair onderwijs*, DBSO), ii) apprenticeship (*leertijd*) offered by *Syntra Vlaanderen* training centres and iii) part-time training programmes.

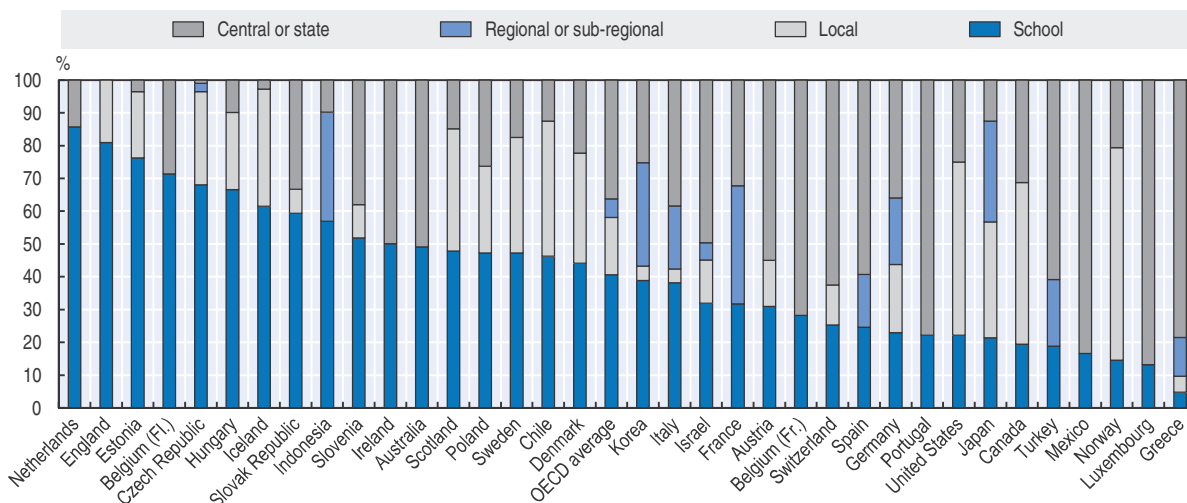
Students in the BSO programme who successfully complete six years of secondary education receive a certificate of vocational secondary education, oriented towards entry to the labour market. For certain study areas in TSO and KSO, students can opt to enrol in an additional specialisation year, which is referred to as “secondary education after secondary education” (Se-n-se). Students obtain the diploma of secondary education, which grants access to tertiary education, after successfully completing six years of secondary education in the ASO, TSO or KSO programmes, or seven years in the BSO programme. The principle of freedom of choice regarding educational institutions and programmes is also guaranteed at the level of tertiary education.

## Governance of the school system

### *School autonomy and freedom of education*

The Flemish Community has one of the OECD’s most devolved education systems with schools enjoying a high degree of autonomy and the local level (Provincial and Municipal Governments) playing only a minor role. According to data collected for the OECD’s Education at a Glance 2012 publication, lower secondary schools make 71% of key decisions (compared to an OECD average of 41%) and the central government makes 29% of the decisions (compared to an OECD average of 36%) (Figure 1.2).<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1.2. **Percentage of decisions taken at each level of government in public lower secondary education, 2011**



Note: Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of decisions taken at the school level.

Source: OECD (2012), *Education at a Glance 2012: OECD Indicators*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2012-en>, Table D6.1, see Annex 3 for notes.

A closer look at the different domains of decision-making<sup>2</sup> reveals that Flemish schools make 89% of the decisions regarding the organisation of instruction, 75% of the decisions regarding personnel management and 71% of the decisions regarding planning and structures. However, they only make 50% of the decisions on resource management. The latter domain includes the allocation and use of resources for teaching staff, non-teaching staff, capital and operating expenditure and professional development of principals and teachers.

School autonomy is grounded in the principle of “freedom of education”, which is guaranteed by Article 24 of the Belgian Constitution. Freedom of education gives the right to any natural or legal person to set up a school, recruit staff and determine the (educational, religious or ideological) principles of the school. Schools also enjoy considerable autonomy in developing curricula and organising teaching within the boundaries set by the regulatory framework (see below). Parents are free to choose and are guaranteed access to a school of their choice within reasonable distance from their home. In principle, funding “follows the student”, which lays the foundation for potentially strong competition among schools to attract students (see Chapter 3 for more detail).

### **The role of school boards and educational networks**

Every school is governed by a legally recognised competent authority, typically referred to as school board or school governing body, which oversees the implementation of legislation and regulations in the school. There are about 1 500 school boards in the Flemish Community.<sup>3</sup> School boards can be responsible for one or several schools and they typically administrate all resources for their school(s). Most school boards belong to an “umbrella organisation”, which represents them in policy discussions with the government and provides school support, for example by developing curricula and timetables based on the centrally-set attainment targets and developmental objectives (more on this below). Officially recognised schooling in the Flemish Community is organised within three educational networks:

- **The Flemish Community education network** (*Onderwijs van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, GO!*) acts under the authority of the Flemish Community government and has its own school board: the Community Education Council. The operational functions of this board are situated at the meso-level: schools are organised in 28 school groups. In 2012/13, the Flemish Community network included 14.9% of primary school students and 17.6% of mainstream secondary school students (Government of Flanders, 2013). Community schools have to comply with a range of principles regarding the neutrality of education and they have to offer a range of choices for students to attend classes in an officially recognised religion or in non-confessional ethics (see Chapter 2).
- **The publicly funded and publicly managed education network** (*Officieel gesubsidieerd onderwijs, OGO*), also referred to as grant-aided public education, includes schools organised by the provincial and city/municipal authorities. These local and provincial authorities act as school boards. At the political level, the city and municipal authorities are represented by the Educational Secretariat of the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (*Onderwijssecretariaat voor Steden en Gemeenten van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, OVSG*). The provincial authorities are represented by the Flemish Provincial Education (*Provinciaal Onderwijs Vlaanderen, POV*). The OGO network included 22.7% of primary school students and 7.6% of mainstream secondary school students in 2012/13 (Government of Flanders, 2013).
- **The publicly funded and privately managed education network** (*Vrij gesubsidieerd onderwijs, VGO*), also referred to as grant-aided private education, includes denominational and non-denominational schools. The vast majority of denominational schools are of Catholic tradition. The school boards of Catholic schools are typically private foundations related to dioceses, parishes or congregations. These are represented by the Flemish Secretariat for Catholic Education (*Vlaams Secretariaat Katholiek Onderwijs, VSKO*). Six other denominational schools are clustered in the Council of School Boards of Protestant-



Christian Education (IPCO). The few other denominational schools have not established an umbrella organisation. The non-denominational schools typically pursue a particular educational method or philosophy. There are 25 schools represented by the Federation of Steiner Schools, eighteen schools represented by the Federation of Independent Pluralistic Emancipatory Method Schools (FOPEM) and 12 schools clustered in the Flemish Education Consultation Platform (*Vlaams Onderwijs OverlegPlatform*, VOOP). The four smaller umbrella organisations within the VGO network have established the Consultation Body of Small Education Providers (*Overleg Kleine Onderwijsverstrekkers*, OKO) as a discussion partner for the Flemish Community. The VGO network enrolls the majority of the student population, 62.4% of primary school students and 74.8% of mainstream secondary school students in 2012/13 (Government of Flanders, 2013).

Table 1.2 illustrates the organisation of the Flemish school sector within the educational networks and umbrella organisations and Figure 1.3 depicts the distribution of students across the three educational networks. There are considerable differences in the number of schools grouped together under one school board within and across the different educational networks. In the Flemish Community education network (GO!), all 28 school boards (also referred to as “school groups”) are responsible for more than one school. Since these groupings can bring together elementary schools, secondary schools, centres for adult education, boarding schools and Centres for Student Guidance, they can be quite large and have up to 25 members. In grant-aided public and private education (OGO and VGO), on the other hand, more than 50% of the primary schools have a school board responsible for only one school. At the secondary level, this is the case for 33% of VGO schools and 56% of OGO schools (Groenez et al., 2015).

**Table 1.2. Educational networks, umbrella organisations and school boards**

Network	Community education (GO!)	Grant-aided public education (OGO)		Grant-aided private education (VGO)		
Umbrella organisation	Flemish Community Education (GO!)	Educational Secretariat of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (OVSG)	Flemish Provincial Education (POV)	Flemish Secretariat for Catholic Education (VSKO)	Council of School Boards of Protestant-Christian Education (IPCO)	FOPEM Steiner VOOP
					→ Consultation Body of Small Education Providers (OKO)	
School board	Flemish Community Education Council → School groups	Cities and municipalities	Provinces	Private foundations		
Schools						

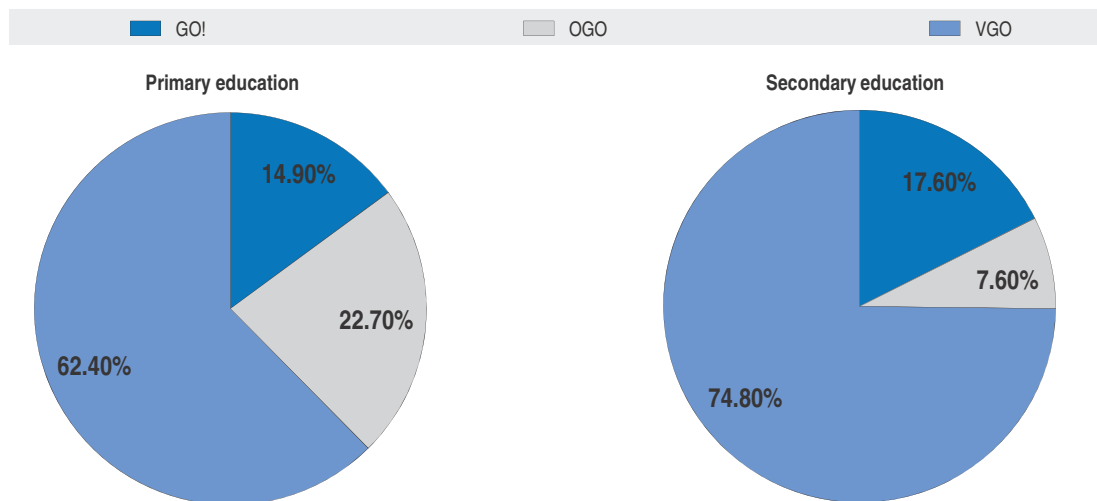
Source: Authors based on Flemish Ministry of Education and Training (2015a), *OECD Review of Policies to Improve the Effectiveness of Resource Use in Schools, Country Background Report of the Flemish Community of Belgium*, [www.oecd.org/edu/school/schoolresourcesreview.htm](http://www.oecd.org/edu/school/schoolresourcesreview.htm).

## **Educational goals, recognition and quality assurance**

### **Educational goals and official recognition of schools**

The Flemish Authority sets a “core curriculum” consisting of attainment targets and developmental objectives to be implemented by all schools. Final attainment targets are minimum objectives, which the government considers necessary and attainable for



Figure 1.3. **Distribution of students over the three main educational networks**

Notes: GO! = Flemish Community education; OGO = Grant-aided public education; VGO = Grant-aided private education

Source: Government of Flanders (2013), *Flanders in Figures*, [www.flanders.be/en/discover-flanders](http://www.flanders.be/en/discover-flanders).

students at the end of specific year levels and study programmes. They were first implemented in 1998 to increase transparency, quality assurance and comparability in the education offered across schools and networks. Developmental objectives are goals that schools should strive for their students to attain, but there is no obligation for all students to actually reach them. Schools only need to account for their efforts to work towards these goals. The attainment targets are an instrument for the government to guarantee the minimum desired quality of education.

For schools to receive public funding and have the right to award official certificates, they need to be “recognised” by the Flemish authorities. There is a system of compulsory inspection for all schools seeking recognition by the Flemish Government. School boards that are seeking recognition for their schools have to comply with a number of regulations. Most importantly, they must incorporate final attainment targets and developmental objectives set by the Flemish authorities in their curricula and allow the Flemish authorities to assure the quality of their schools via the regular inspections. Schools must also be adequately equipped and be housed in buildings that comply with a range of quality standards. Both publicly managed and privately managed schools receive public funding provided that they meet the requirements for schools in their sector (see Chapter 2 for more detail on school funding).

### **School-based curricula and quality assurance**

According to the 2009 Decree on Quality of Education, each school is responsible for providing good quality education. Within the framework of attainment targets and developmental objectives, schools are free to develop their own curricula, which will reflect different priorities and cover broader areas. In practice, most schools work within the curricula developed by the umbrella organisations of their educational network. Schools are legally required to implement a system of quality assurance, but they are free to determine the type and design of their own quality system. There are no nationwide standardised tests or examinations to measure the learning outcomes of all Flemish

students at key stages of schooling. However, a range of externally designed tests exist to help schools measure their outcomes. These include the following (Shewbridge et al., 2011):

- The National Assessment Programme (*Peilingen*) was originally developed as a periodical sample survey to monitor the implementation of attainment targets at the system level. The tests are administered every year to a representative sample of students in primary school (Year 6) and secondary school (Year 8, 10 or 12). However, it is now possible for schools to administer parallel versions of these tests as part of their own evaluation activities. Also, all schools participating in the National Assessment Programme receive reports with feedback on their own performance.
- The umbrella organisations of several educational networks offer student tests for the final year of primary education, aligned to the networks' respective curricula. The two main tests are provided by VSKO and OVSG. The VSKO's tests (*Inter-Diocesane Proeven*, IDP) in Dutch language and mathematics have been available since the 1970s, while tests in "world orientation" (with the two strands "nature and technology" and "humanity and society") have been added more recently. These tests are taken by almost 90% of all Flemish Catholic school students. Results are reported compared to the national average for participating schools and to participating schools with similar student population or contextual characteristics. The OVSG's tests (*OVSG-toets*) are used by schools managed by the municipalities and cities but also by most schools of the GO! network and some publicly funded private schools. These tests cover the breadth of the OVSG curriculum and attainment targets in Dutch language, mathematics, environmental studies, arts education and French. Practical tests are also available in a range of subjects including spoken language (Dutch and French), physical education, technology and music. Results are processed on line and can be compared to average results of participating schools, schools with a similar profile and previous years' results.
- A range of student tests for schools (*Toetsen voor scholen*) are available on a special website run by the Ministry of Education and Training.
- The Flemish student monitoring system (*Leerlingvolgsysteem voor Vlaanderen*, LVS) offers a suite of formative assessments for the primary sector. Primary schools can use these to monitor student progress in Dutch and mathematics at different stages of primary schooling.

### **School inspection**

External evaluation of schools is implemented by the Flemish Inspectorate of Education. External inspection by the Inspectorate ensures that schools implement the centrally-set attainment targets and developmental objectives, comply with the regulations for recognition and financing and systematically monitor their own quality. Since 2009, the Inspectorate pursues a differentiated approach where every school has to be inspected at least once every ten years, but some schools will receive more frequent and intensive inspection, depending on the Inspectorate's evaluation of their educational quality. On average, the Inspectorate visits schools after an interval of five years (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015a). The Inspectorate uses an inspection framework with quality indicators to evaluate school context, input, processes and output. Part of the inspection involves examining the tests schools use to assess their students. Following the inspection process, the Inspectorate prepares a report for publication, which contains a

recommendation to the Flemish government about the schools' quality and future steps to be taken. There are three possible recommendations: positive, restricted positive and negative (Shewbridge et al., 2011).

### **Pedagogical Advisory Services**

Each umbrella organisation runs a pedagogical advisory service (*Pedagogische Begeleidingsdiensten*, PBD) to provide professional support to teachers and school leaders. Schools can call upon the PBD to receive educational and methodological support, for example in the area of school self-evaluation, quality assurance and innovative school projects. There has been a shift of focus from support for individual teachers towards support for the whole school, and in particular for strengthening schools' "policy-making capacity". In the case that a school receives a negative recommendation from the Inspectorate and is judged to have insufficient policy-making capacity to implement a successful improvement plan, the school will be obliged to accept support from the PBD (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015a; Shewbridge et al., 2011).

### **Student guidance and youth assistance**

Across the Flemish Community, there are 73 Student Guidance Centres (*Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding*, CLB) financed by the government. These centres bring together a mix of different professionals including educationalists, psychologists, social workers, medical doctors and nurses to provide multidisciplinary support to students. Guidance provided by the CLBs is based on four main pillars: i) learning and studying, ii) the school career, iii) preventive health care, and iv) social and emotional development. The CLBs also organise mandatory medical examinations of students.

The CLBs are independent and work across the three educational networks, although each CLB is connected to one of the three networks. Students, parents, teachers or school leaders can call upon the CLBs to intervene, but supervision of a student by a CLB is only compulsory in the case of truancy. In all other cases the CLB will provide guidance and supervision only after obtaining the student's or parents' (for students under 12 years of age) consent. The CLBs also guarantee confidentiality of all student data.

The main focus of the CLBs' work is on ensuring equal educational opportunities for all students, particularly by working with students at risk of drop out and early school leaving. The CLBs also provide guidance to students regarding their choice of educational programme based on prior achievement and they can refer students to special education if necessary. Further, the CLBs can help establish connections with appropriate assistance and for this purpose they are a major partner of Integrated Youth Assistance,<sup>4</sup> a system of co-operation between different sectors of youth care to ensure well aligned and efficient assistance to all students in need.

### **Responsibilities for policy development and implementation**

The Flemish Ministry of Education and Training comprises the Department of Education and Training and four executive agencies. The Flemish Department of Education and Training has responsibility for policy preparation, evaluation, co-ordination and communication, while the four autonomous agencies are in charge of policy implementation and oversee all services related to quality improvement in education.

- The Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Training (*Agentschap voor Kwaliteitszorg in Onderwijs en Vorming*, AKOV) is responsible for defining the minimum

standards for quality education that all Flemish schools must meet. In this context, AKOV sets the attainment targets and developmental objectives for schools. It is also in charge of the recognition of qualifications and the recognition of prior learning.

- The Agency for Educational Services (*Agentschap voor Onderwijsdiensten*, AgODI) is responsible for the implementation of policies on school education, part-time arts education, centres for student guidance, the inspectorate and the pedagogical support to teachers and schools. AgODI pays the salaries of all school staff, manages the personal files of teachers and monitors student enrolment, truancy and early school leaving.
- The Agency for Educational Infrastructure (*Agentschap voor Infrastructuur in het Onderwijs*, AGIO) provides financial support for the acquisition, construction and renovation of buildings for schools and universities.
- The Agency for Higher Education, Adult Education and Study Grants (*Agentschap voor Hoger Onderwijs, Volwassenenonderwijs en Studietoelagen*, AHOVOS) is responsible for the implementation of policies on higher education, adult education and study grants. At the time of the preparation of this report, a merger between AKOV and AHOVOS was taking place.

Stakeholder consultation and participation is built into the public policy process. All legislation on education requires a mandatory consultation of the Flemish Education Council (*Vlaamse Onderwijsraad*, VLOR), the strategic advisory body for education and training which brings together representatives from all major stakeholder groups. Both trade unions and employer organisations are consulted in economic and social decisions, and meet regularly with the government as part of the Social and Economic Council of Flanders (*Sociaal-Economische Raad van Vlaanderen*, SERV).

## Main features of the school system

### Quality and equity of schooling

The Flemish Community shows strong overall performance in international student assessments. At the primary level, Flemish students in Year 4 (typically aged 9 and 10) participate in the IEA's (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). In TIMSS 2011, they reached excellent results in mathematics and scored just above the TIMSS scale centerpoint in science. Indeed, the Flemish Community was among the top ten of high achieving education systems in mathematics and was significantly outperformed by only six participating countries.<sup>5</sup> Half of the Flemish students assessed in TIMSS reached the high benchmark of achievement in mathematics and 10% reached the advanced benchmark (compared to an international median of 28% and 4% respectively). In science, however, while the Flemish Community scored slightly above the TIMSS average, it was positioned among the lower achieving education systems, outperformed by 23 participating countries (Martin et al., 2012). As shown in Table 1.3, this relatively low position is mainly due to a smaller proportion of Flemish students achieving at the high end of the achievement distribution. While the proportion of students reaching the low and intermediate benchmarks in science achievement were slightly above the international median, only 24% reached the high benchmark and 2% reached the advanced benchmark (compared to an international median of 32% and 5%, respectively).

At age fifteen, Flemish students show strong performance in all the areas tested (mathematics, reading and science) in the OECD Programme for International Student

**Table 1.3. Performance of Flemish students in mathematics and science at the international benchmarks of achievement in primary education**

Percentages of students reaching international benchmarks in TIMSS

International benchmark	Area tested	Flemish Community of Belgium	International median
Low	Mathematics (TIMSS)	99	90
	Science (TIMSS)	96	92
Intermediate	Mathematics (TIMSS)	89	69
	Science (TIMSS)	73	72
High	Mathematics (TIMSS)	50	28
	Science (TIMSS)	24	32
Advanced	Mathematics (TIMSS)	10	4
	Science (TIMSS)	2	5

Sources: Martin, M. O. et al. (2012), *TIMSS 2011 International Results in Science*, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Amsterdam and TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center, Boston; Mullis, I.V.S. et al. (2012), *TIMSS 2011 International Results in Mathematics*, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Amsterdam and TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center, Boston.

Assessment (PISA). Since PISA was first administered in 2000, Flemish 15 year-olds have consistently achieved performance results above the OECD average. The Flemish Community of Belgium has reached particularly good results in mathematics, where it is typically positioned among the highest performing OECD education systems.

The PISA 2012 results further show that the Flemish Community of Belgium has been able to nurture a high share of top performers while limiting the proportion of low performers. Compared to the OECD average, significantly fewer Flemish 15 year-olds scored below the PISA performance level 2, believed to be the mark of basic competency necessary for a successful transition to the labour market or tertiary education in subsequent years (Table 1.4). At the top end of the performance distribution, a quarter of the Flemish student population reached the PISA performance level 5 and above, compared to an OECD average of 13% (OECD, 2013c). The Flemish Community is also among the education systems with the highest proportions of “resilient students”, i.e. students who manage to overcome difficult socio-economic circumstances and exceed expectations, when compared with students in other countries<sup>6</sup> (10%, compared with an OECD average of 6.4%).

However, the PISA results also confirmed the persistence of profound inequities within the Flemish school system. As in previous rounds of the PISA assessment, socio-economic factors strongly influenced student performance in 2012: 20% of the mathematics performance variance in the Flemish Community could be explained by socio-economic background, compared to 15% at the OECD average. The most socio-economically advantaged quarter of Flemish students outperformed the least advantaged quarter by 116 score points, indicating a significant educational gap between students coming from different socio-economic backgrounds (OECD, 2013c).

Immigrant students are particularly at risk of underperformance. In 2012, 11% of the Flemish students assessed in PISA 2012 had an immigrant background and these students were more likely to be socio-economically disadvantaged in comparison to non-immigrant students. Immigrant students scored an average of 97 points lower in the PISA mathematics assessment than non-immigrant students, and an average of 65 points after accounting for socio-economic differences. This performance difference is significantly larger than in the OECD overall, where on average immigrant students performed 34 points lower than non-immigrants, and 21 points after accounting for socio-economic

Table 1.4. **Selected indicators of quality and equity in Flemish education, based on PISA 2012**

		Flemish Community	OECD average
Percentage of top performers	Mathematics	25	13
	Reading	13	9
	Science	12	8
Percentage of low performers	Mathematics	15	23
	Reading	14	18
	Science	15	18
Percentage of students who repeated a grade		27	12
Percentage of immigrant students who are low performers in mathematics		41	36
Percentage of variance in mathematics performance explained by socio-economic status		20	15

Notes: Top performers = students performing at PISA level 5 and above; low performers = students performing below PISA level 2.

Sources: OECD (2014a), PISA 2012 Results: What Students Know and Can Do (Volume I, Revised edition, February 2014): Student Performance in Mathematics, Reading and Science, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264208780-en>; OECD (2013c), PISA 2012 Results: Excellence through Equity (Volume II): Giving Every Student the Chance to Succeed, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201132-en>; OECD (2013d), PISA 2012 Results: What Makes a School Successful (Volume IV): Resources, Policies and Practices, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201156-en>.

differences. In the Flemish Community, 41% of students with an immigrant background were low performers (i.e. scoring below the PISA level 2) in mathematics, compared to 12% of the non-immigrant population (OECD, 2013c).

The Flemish Community of Belgium also has high proportions of grade repetition, with 27% of 15 year-olds reporting that they have repeated a grade at least once, compared to 12% at the OECD average (OECD, 2013d). A closer look at this data reveals that grade repetition is more prevalent in primary education, with 18% of 15 year-olds reporting that they repeated a grade in primary education, compared to 9% in lower secondary education. National data indicate that grade repetition is also common practice at the upper secondary level. In the 2013/14 school year, 6% of the students enrolled at the second and third stage of secondary education were enrolled in the same grade as the previous year (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015b). At this stage, grade repetition needs to be seen in the context of a relatively long duration of compulsory education – from age 6 to age 18 – and challenges in keeping all students motivated to stay in education up to age 18.

There are marked performance differences between schools in the Flemish Community. The performance variance lying between Flemish schools for mathematics was among the highest of the participating education systems at 67% of the total variance, in contrast to 37% in the OECD. Most of the between-school variation is explained by the study programme in which a student is enrolled (OECD, 2013c). There are also indications that the socio-economic status of students influences their enrolment in different school types, with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds being overrepresented in the technical and vocational tracks and underrepresented in the general tracks in upper secondary education (Hindriks and Lamy, 2013).

As described above, the Flemish Community of Belgium has a highly stratified school system. In PISA 2012, 30% of students were in schools whose principal reported that a student in the national modal grade for 15 year-olds would be “very likely” transferred to another school because of “low academic achievement”, “behavioural problems” or “special learning needs”, compared to 13% on average across the OECD (OECD, 2013c). The fact that the Flemish school system provides the option to struggling students to transfer



to another programme may reduce incentives for teachers to work with these students to help them catch up. In the Flemish Community, the phenomenon of students who are falling behind transferring to less academically oriented schools or programmes is referred to as the “waterfall system”.

In addition, a large proportion of students in the Flemish Community are diagnosed as having special educational needs and the majority of them are educated separately in special schools and classes. A comparative study prepared for the European Commission (NESSE, 2012) found that in 2010, 5.2% of the total student population in the Flemish Community of Belgium were being educated separately from the mainstream in special schools and classes. This was the highest proportion among 32 European education systems, based on information from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education.

### ***Attainment and transition to the labour market***

Belgium as a whole has a highly qualified population and its general level of education has gradually increased over the past generation. Education is compulsory up to age eighteen. In 2013, almost three out of four (73%) Belgians aged 25-64 had at least an upper secondary education (compared with the OECD average of 77%) and 36% held a tertiary education degree (compared to an OECD average of 33%). The younger generation is doing even better: among 25-34 year-olds, 82% held at least an upper secondary qualification (compared to an OECD average of 83%), and 43% held a tertiary qualification (compared to an OECD average of 40%). Among 15-29 year olds, 15% were neither in education nor in employment, the same as on average across the OECD (OECD, 2015). The early school-leaving (ESL) rate in the Flemish Region is relatively low at 7.5%, compared to 14.7% in the Walloon Region and 17.7% in the Brussels Capital Region (European Commission, 2015).

The Flemish Community's own ESL indicator, which is based on administrative data for Flemish schools, shows a decrease in the share of youngsters leaving education with at most lower secondary education, from 12.9% in 2010 to 11.7% in 2013 (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015c). This leaves the ESL rate at 6.5 percentage points from the Flemish target of 5.2%. The indicator shows that early school leaving is more widespread among Flemish students in the urban areas, with the highest ESL rates found in the cities of Antwerp (24.6%), Ghent (20.6%), the Brussels Capital Region (19.6%) and Genk (19.4%) (Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, 2015c).

Results from the OECD's 2012 Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) indicate that adults aged 16-65 in the Flemish Community of Belgium are highly skilled, achieving above-average proficiency in literacy and numeracy and average proficiency in problem solving in technology-rich environments compared with adults in the other countries participating in the survey.<sup>7</sup> The Flemish Community also has a lower proportion of low-skilled adults than on average across participating countries: some 14% of adults in the Flemish Community attain only the lowest performance level in literacy proficiency (compared with an average of 16%) and 13% attain only the lowest performance level in numeracy (compared with an average of 19%).

Educational attainment appears to have a significant impact on employment prospects in Belgium. Among Belgian adults aged 25-64, people with tertiary qualifications have the highest employment rates and those with only below upper secondary education are most at risk of being unemployed. In 2012, the percentage-point difference in



employment rates between people with tertiary qualifications and those with below upper secondary education in Belgium was among the highest in the OECD, at 37% (compared to an average difference of 28% across the OECD) (OECD, 2014b). Educational attainment is also related to the level of foundation skills in the adult population. As in other countries, Flemish adults with higher levels of education also tend to have higher scores in literacy and numeracy as measured in PIAAC (OECD, 2014b).

Among those with upper secondary education as their highest level of education, graduates from vocational education and training (VET) programmes appear to fare better in the labour market than graduates from general education programmes. In 2012, 76% of individuals aged 25-64 with a vocational upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification were employed – a rate that was 7 percentage points higher than among individuals with a general upper secondary education as their highest qualification. The difference may be explained, at least in part, by the fact that people who study in non-vocational tracks generally pursue education at the next education level, while those who study in vocational tracks at the upper secondary level generally enter the labour market once they have obtained this qualification (OECD, 2014b). A potential drawback, according to results from PIAAC, is that people with VET qualifications generally have lower levels of literacy proficiency than people with general upper secondary education, which is likely to make it more difficult for them to adapt to changing work environments.

The European Commission (2015) points to concerns about labour shortages for critical occupations and skills mismatch in Belgium as a whole. Most mismatches are vertical, i.e. they are linked to the fact that workers' levels of skills are lower than required by the job. According to the European Commission (2015), more than 80% of the active population with tertiary education are employed, against 65% for medium-skilled persons and less than 40% for the low-skilled. While these percentages are below the EU average for all three groups, the gap for the low-skilled is especially large (European Commission, 2015).

## Policy priorities and recent developments

### **School collaboration through school associations**

In 1999, the Flemish authorities launched a policy to encourage school collaboration through the establishment of “school associations” (*scholengemeenschappen*) in the secondary sector. From 2003, school associations were also introduced in the primary sector. School associations are collaborative partnerships between schools in the same geographical area. On average, school associations comprise between six and twelve schools (Pont et al., 2008). Schools forming a school association can belong to different school boards and even to different educational networks (although school associations within the same educational network are far more common). In 2010, the vast majority of schools (96.7%) belonged to a school association (Ministry of Education and the University of Antwerp Edubron Research Group, 2010).<sup>8</sup>

It is a key purpose of this policy to strengthen schools' organisational and leadership capacities through increased co-operation. In secondary education, the policy also aims at improving the co-operation of schools in the supply of study options, career guidance and efficient use of resources (Ministry of Education and the University of Antwerp Edubron Research Group, 2010). Joining a school association is voluntary, but the Ministry of Education and Training provides incentives for schools to join an association by attributing resources to the association, and granting more organisational flexibility in the case of secondary schools. School associations receive a package of points for the management

and support staff in their schools, which are then redistributed among the individual schools in the association based on a repartition system agreed between the schools forming the association. In elementary education, some of these points may be used to appoint a co-ordinating director of the school association, and in secondary education, the school association can retain up to 10% of the points to ensure its own operation.

### ***Master plan for secondary education and policy measures for the reduction of early school leaving***

In 2013, the Flemish Government adopted a “master plan” for the reform of the secondary education system (*Masterplan Secundair Onderwijs*), which is due to be further translated into legislation during the 2014-19 administration period. The stated intentions of the master plan are to improve quality and equity in secondary education by reducing early school leaving; addressing the strong impact of students’ socio-economic background on their school and programme choices; improving students’ learning trajectories and facilitating the transition from primary to secondary education.

In the medium term, the modernisation of the secondary sector is intended to introduce i) a broader first stage of secondary education, which will delay early tracking and allow students to make choices based on their talents and interests, and ii) a simplified structure for the second and third stage of secondary education, which will result in fewer study programmes. In the long term, the modernisation process should lead to the abolition of the hierarchy between the four existing programme types in secondary education (Eurydice, 2014).

The Master Plan for Secondary Education also includes provisions for changes in the primary sector, including increased attention to languages, sciences and technology; more differentiated teaching and learning providing the adequate level of challenge and support for each student; and adaptations allowing a more gradual transition into secondary education (Eurydice, 2014).

### ***Equal opportunities policy (“GOK policy”)***

Ensuring equity in education has been a policy priority for Education Ministers in the Flemish Community over the past decades. The 2002 Decree on Equal Educational Opportunities (*Gelijke Onderwijskansen*, GOK) has played an important role in promoting policies to maximise learning opportunities for all children. The 2002 Decree includes three main provisions, referred to as the “GOK policy”: i) the creation of local consultation platforms to ensure fair school admission and enrolment processes; ii) measures to safeguard school choice and the right to enrolment for each child in a context of demographic growth; and iii) the allocation of extra staff resources for schools implementing additional educational support in the context of this policy. A fourth measure to promote equal opportunities through extra resources was implemented in 2008 with the introduction of a weighted funding system for school operating grants based on student characteristics. These measures are described in detail throughout Chapters 2 and 3.

### ***Inclusion of students with special educational needs in mainstream schools (“M Decree”)***

Working towards a better inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) has also been high on the Flemish education policy agenda in recent years. According to national data (see Chapter 3), 4.5% of the Flemish student population were enrolled in

separate schools providing education exclusively for students with SEN in 2013, while an increasing number of students have been enrolled in integrated education (*Geïntegreerd Onderwijs*, GON, integrated education under the guidance of a special school) and in inclusive settings (*Inclusief onderwijs*, ION, inclusive education in mainstream schools). In March 2014, the Parliament passed a Decree concerning measures for students with special educational needs, which is referred to as the “M Decree”. The Decree will be gradually implemented from September 2015. It aims to avoid the disproportionate referral of students to separate schools and to ensure greater access to mainstream education for students with special educational needs. The Decree states that schools can only refer students to special education if they can justify having tried all “reasonable adaptations” to allow them to follow the teaching programme in mainstream education (for more detail, see Chapter 3).

### Notes

1. This indicator presents results from data collected in 2011 on decision making at the lower secondary level of education and updates the previous survey on this topic, which took place in 2007. This indicator shows where key decisions are made in public institutions at the lower secondary level of education. The indicator does not capture the totality of decisions made within a school system. Instead, a representative set of 46 key decisions, organised across four domains, are considered. Responses were compiled in each country by a panel of experts representing different levels of the decision-making process at the lower secondary level. Information on the composition of these panels and the methods and process used to complete the survey can be found in the “Notes on methodology” in Annex 3, available at [www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012](http://www.oecd.org/edu/eag2012).
2. The four domains of decision-making defined by the OECD (2012) comprise the following areas:
  - **Organisation of instruction:** student admissions; student careers; instruction time; choice of textbooks; choice of software/learningware; grouping of students; additional support for students; teaching methods; day-to-day student assessment.
  - **Personnel management:** hiring and dismissal of principals, teaching and non-teaching staff; duties and conditions of service of staff; salary scales of staff; influence over the careers of staff.
  - **Planning and structures:** opening or closure of schools; creation or abolition of a grade level; design of programmes of study; selection of programmes of study taught in a particular school; choice of subjects taught in a particular school; definition of course content; setting of qualifying examinations for a certificate or diploma; accreditation (examination content, marking and administration).
  - **Resource management:** allocation and use of resources for teaching staff, non-teaching staff, capital and operating expenditure, professional development of principals and teachers.
3. This figure is an estimate. The exact number of school boards is not available due to yearly fluctuations and a discrepancy between administrative school numbers and school locations (campuses).
4. The other partners of Integrated Youth Care are: General Welfare organisations, the sector of Specialised Youth Care, the Centres for Mental Health Care, the Preventive Child Health Care organisations, the Centres for Integral Family Care and the Flemish Agency for Persons with a Handicap.
5. In 2011, 52 education systems and 7 benchmarking participants took part in the fourth grade assessment of TIMSS.
6. Resilient students are defined by the OECD (2013c) as disadvantaged students (those in the bottom quarter of the socio-economic scale within a country or economy) who perform among the top 25% of students across all participating countries, after taking their socio-economic status into account.
7. Around 166 000 adults aged 16-65 were surveyed in 24 countries and sub-national regions.
8. Most of the schools that have not joined a school association provide special education.

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**From:**

## **OECD Reviews of School Resources: Flemish Community of Belgium 2015**

**Access the complete publication at:**

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264247598-en>

### **Please cite this chapter as:**

Nusche, Deborah, *et al.* (2015), "School education in the Flemish Community of Belgium", in *OECD Reviews of School Resources: Flemish Community of Belgium 2015*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264247598-5-en>

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