



## Education for children with learning difficulties in Belgium

Belgium's approach to education for students with learning disabilities (special needs education) is based on the principle of inclusion and equality. There is a strong commitment in giving every child the right to an education which maximises their potential<sup>1</sup>.

Belgium ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and in 2009 the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

According to Article 24 of the Belgian Constitution, everyone has the right to a free education. All schools are free to develop their own curricula in line the achievement of the educational objectives set in the legislation.

Belgium is a federation and, with regard to school, the role of the federal government is limited to:

- The determination of the beginning and the end of compulsory education;
- The setting of minimum requirements for the issuing of diplomas;
- the regulation of retirement for employees in the educational system.

Belgium however is a quite peculiar federal country, and the responsibility for implementing educational policies belongs to language communities and their respective Ministries of Education:

- the Flemish Speaking Community (around 58%of students);
- the French Speaking Community (around 37%of students);
- and the German Speaking Community (around 5%of students).

Communities do not follow the same geographical lines of the Regions. Brussels Capital Region for example sees a mixture of both Flemish and French Community schools, while the Walloon Region sees German-speaking Community schools together with has French Community<sup>2</sup>.

The policies on inclusive education and children with disability differ for each community and all schools in Belgium have freedom to develop their own curricula, assessments and self-evaluations. The main differences concern the Flemish and French speaking communities.

---

<sup>1</sup> Special Needs Education - Belgium – Angloinfo (<https://www.angloinfo.com/how-to/belgium/family/schooling-education/special-needs-education>)

<sup>2</sup> Education Policy Outlook – Belgium (<https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/d93ed6c1-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/d93ed6c1-en>)

From a federal point of view, public investment into educational institutions corresponds to the 5.8% of GDP (higher than the OECD average of 5.2% of GDP). Education in Belgium is financed by each of its three Communities. In all the Communities schools receive a periodic allocation for staffing and the funding based on enrolment, size of the school sites and the socio-economic profile. Positive discrimination (in terms of extra human resources and extra funding) exists towards disadvantaged schools through differentiated staff allocation and operational funding, and additional capital funding based on need.

Enrolment in a special school is at the request of the family. Before a place is given there is a multi-disciplinary examination. In the French and German speaking communities this is handled by the Psychological-Medical-Social-Centre (centre psycho-medico-social, PMS). A similar body, the Centre for Guidance (Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding, VCLB) operates in the Dutch community. The findings of the examination committee will determine the school judged to be most appropriate. Just as children may move back into mainstream education from a specialist school, other children may move out of ordinary school and into a specialist establishment if this is thought to be necessary.

As for school timing, school day and school term in special schools follows that of mainstream schools very closely in all the communities.

Transport to the nearest appropriate school is almost always provided free of charge either by school bus (in which case there is always someone to accompany the child) or by private vehicle, specially adapted if necessary.

### **Flemish Speaking Community**

In Flanders, the Parliament Act of 28th June 2002 on equal opportunities in education, granted all students who, based on a statement of special educational needs are oriented towards a type of special education, the right to enrol in a school or school site of their choice. This Act was followed by other integrations in 2008 and 2011 that provided a framework for the equal opportunities and equal treatment policy, and further promoted equal opportunities in Education. The legislation for inclusive education was further strengthened in 2014 with an M-Decree, which reinforces the right of students with special educational needs (SEN) to be enrolled in mainstream education. In particular, this measure:

- Update the categories for students with special educational needs, including a category for children with autism. 8 categories are foreseen (of persons from the age of 2 and a half to until 21 years old) including: learners with a mild intellectual disability (Type 1); learners with a moderate or severe intellectual disability (Type 2); learners with serious emotional and/or behavioural problems (Type 3); learners with a physical disability (Type 4); learners admitted to hospital or in quarantine for medical reasons (Type 5); learners with a visual impairment (Type 6); learners with a hearing impairment (Type 7); learners with serious learning difficulties (Type 8). Learners with a mild intellectual disability and with serious learning difficulties are not provided with nursery support and the latter also with secondary level education.
- Foresees the obligation for mainstream schools to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate students with special education needs;
- Introduces the right to appeal to a Student Rights Commission (*Commission intake leerlingenrechtenor - CLR*) when parents of a child with special educational needs disagree with a schools' refusal to enrol him/her.

Flanders made good steps towards inclusive education, but there is still more work that must be done to meet all of the requirements of the UN CRPD.

As for finance, in the Flemish Speaking Community both mainstream and special schools receive funding, but for special schools there is a differentiation in funding depending on the type of special education they offer. Mainstream schools who enrol a minimum number of disadvantaged learners receive extra support within the framework of the equal educational opportunities policy<sup>3</sup>.

As for the enrolment, in the in the Flemish Community a learner must obtain a statement from the Pupil Guidance Centre (CLB) containing two documents:

- A document stating that the learner clearly demonstrates 'a need for special education and may usefully attend a special school'.
- A document, which justifies this document, containing a synthesis of the psychological, pedagogical, social and medical situation of the learner.

---

<sup>3</sup> Agency for special needs and inclusive education, 14/03/2018, Country information for Belgium (Flemish Community-Financing of inclusive education systems, [11/10/2018] Available from [www.european-agency.org/country-information/belgium-flemish-community/financing-of-inclusive-education-systems](http://www.european-agency.org/country-information/belgium-flemish-community/financing-of-inclusive-education-systems)

However, the CLB only has an advisory role in the school enrolment process and it cannot force parents to enrol their child in a special school. The admission to both a special school or inclusive education require a certificate, which in the inclusive education includes as well a reference to an 'inclusion plan', which is the result of a consultation among all parties involved: the learner or their parents, the mainstream school, the supporting special school, and the CLB's advisory teams.

### **French Speaking Community**

The French Community as well has made efforts to promote the rights of learners with disabilities to an inclusive education. Eight types of special education are foreseen, broken down according to the child's disability: learners with mild intellectual disabilities (Type 1, primary school only); learners with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities (Type 2); learners with severe behavioural and personality problems (Type 3); learners with physical impairments (Type 4); learners with an illness or who are convalescent (Type 5, classroom in clinic); learners with a visual impairment (Type 6); learners with an auditory impairment (Type 7); learners with an instrumental impairment (Type 8; primary school only). In 2009 the a decree introduced provisions for the integration of students with special needs in mainstream education requiring a partnership between a special school, in which a pupil is officially enrolled, and a mainstream school into which the pupil is partly or totally integrated, with assistance from various parties.

In the French Community enrolment into a special school is also based on a report that specifies the level and type of education corresponding to the needs of the student, and which is the result of a multidisciplinary examination and indicated the type of teaching and the supporting protocol. Many children with special needs can find accommodation in mainstream schools. Some schools have a permanent member of staff who is a special needs expert. Schools can apply for funding to pay for additional staff, special equipment or teaching materials, which will allow them to accommodate children with special needs. This may also extend to providing additional help for children who do not speak the main teaching language. For children with learning difficulties such as dyslexia or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, the usual approach is for them to be educated in a mainstream school with additional support.



Within the French speaking community, education is organised not by age and cycles as in mainstream schools, but by four levels of maturity/competence. A child moves from one level to another when certain skills have been acquired and this may happen at any point in the academic year. In all cases children are taught by qualified teaching staff at all stages and have personalised study plans. Where required, teaching staff are supported by medical professionals, social workers and psychologists.

### **German Speaking Community**

In the German Community, the provision of special education needs services is disconnected from the education system, and a separate institution has been put in charge of this. Therefore, in the German community schools are not in charge of the provision of special education needs services, yet still have to facilitate a learning environment to incorporate them<sup>4</sup>. Several decrees have been adopted throughout the years specifying the support needs to be provided through a collaboration of multiple institutions with the aim to coordinate and complement the education provided, and the aim of education for children with special education needs, which is to enable them to live an independent and social life<sup>5</sup>. In 2009 it was established a Center for Education of Children with Special Needs aimed at improving education for children with special needs<sup>6</sup>. In 2016 was ratified the Decree on the Instalment of a Department of the German-Speaking Community for Self-Determined Life whose Article 6 states that the responsibilities towards the general public include creating awareness for special education needs and its current support provision, as well as to conduct research to improve these services moving forward. Furthermore, the responsibilities of the department towards children with special education needs focus on providing guidance and support in their development, education, and social integration<sup>7</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.educaus.eu/country-profiles/belgium.html>

<sup>5</sup> Decreet betreffende de opdrachten toevertrouwd aan de inrichtende machten en aan het schoolpersoneel en houdende algemene pedagogische en organisatorische bepalingen voor het gewoon onderwijs. 1998: [http://www.etaamb.be/nl/decreet-van-31-augustus-1998\\_n1998033100.html](http://www.etaamb.be/nl/decreet-van-31-augustus-1998_n1998033100.html)

<sup>6</sup> Decreet over het centrum voor onderwijs aan leerlingen met specifieke behoeften ter bevordering van het onderwijs aan leerlingen met specifieke behoeften in de gewone scholen en de scholen voor onderwijs aan leerlingen met specifieke behoeften evenals ter. 2009: <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/decreet/2009/05/11/2009202854/staatsblad>

<sup>7</sup> Decreet tot oprichting van een dienst van de Duitstalige Gemeenschap voor zelfbeschikkend leven. 2016: [http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi\\_loi/change\\_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=2016121307&table\\_name=wet](http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/cgi_loi/change_lg.pl?language=nl&la=N&cn=2016121307&table_name=wet)



## References:

- OECD EDUCATION POLICY OUTLOOK – BELGIUM  
(<http://www.oecd.org/education/Education-Policy-Outlook-Country-Profile-Belgium.pdf>)
- IE+ Inclusive Education, the way forward – Belgium  
[https://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/Projects/IE/ie\\_country\\_report\\_belgium.pdf](https://www.easpd.eu/sites/default/files/sites/default/files/Projects/IE/ie_country_report_belgium.pdf)
- Special Needs Education - Belgium – Angloinfo (<https://www.angloinfo.com/how-to/belgium/family/schooling-education/special-needs-education>)
- European Agency for special needs an inclusive education, Country information for Belgium (Flemish Community) [www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/belgium-flemish-community\\_en](http://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/belgium-flemish-community_en)
- European Consortium For autism researchers in education (EDUCAUS) – Belgium  
(<https://www.educaus.eu/country-profiles/belgium.html>)
- [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description\\_en](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/national-description_en)