

The Belgian Court of Audit examined the educational equal opportunities policy

Through their equal opportunities policy Flemish authorities provide additional teaching periods to primary and secondary schools, with the aim to raise disadvantaged pupils' achievement and outcome in terms of qualification. The Court's examination showed that these objectives were not quantified or time framed and that there was in practice no visible relationship with the objectives set at school level. Moreover, Flemish authorities have no clear picture to what extent additional resources effectively foster attainment and improve outcome in terms of qualification. Nevertheless, this policy also showed positive effects : schools operate in a more efficient way and devote more attention to educational equal opportunities. The school administration department generally calculate equal opportunities time periods correctly, but provision of additional teaching periods is largely based on affirmations in lieu of oaths. Besides, the funding of educational equal opportunities has not been fixed by a decree, although this is required by constitutional provisions for education. Finally, the Court recommends obliging schools to pursue the equal opportunities policy also after the introduction of a new funding system, otherwise all efforts might have been spent in vain.

Examination

The Court examined the equal opportunities policy (EOP) in the ordinary primary and secondary school system, but more specially the "pillar" integrated assistance policy. The Flemish authorities' policy goal is to raise disadvantaged pupils' achievement and outcome in terms of qualification through providing additional teaching periods to schools with a sufficient number of disadvantaged pupils. The Court focused its examination on the policy effects and implementation by the administration department and schools during the second EOP cycle of three school years (2005-2008). It also examined how it was assessed and rectified.

Policy's effects

While implementing their EOP Flemish authorities did not define a starting situation nor did they quantify objectives or work out a time path. Policy preparation gave way to a decree by which schools were given much autonomy provided they would comply with a policy cycle : analyse issues and causes, set objectives, work out processes and actions, assess and rectify situation. The decree's provisions, however, were not detailed enough ; for instance, the decree does not indicate how schools have to analyse their starting situation or what quality requirements school objectives have to meet. Implementing decrees confuse objectives and instruments, restrict schools' autonomy by imposing certain instruments and do not oblige schools to check the effect on disadvantaged pupils' achievement and school-leaving qualifications. EOP is well embedded in a whole range of other government measures. In addition, the examination identified a range of problems related to legislative drafting ; the equal opportunities system funding modalities are not sufficiently defined in the decree. In fact, the Flemish Government sets the budget according to the budget appropriations available. By virtue of the

Constitution, however, substantial educational subsidies and funding should be laid down by decree.

From 2011 the integrated assistance offer will be included in the new differentiated funding system for compulsory education. It does not appear clearly whether schools will still have to implement an equal opportunities policy.

Policy implementation

Primary education and the first grade of secondary education are confronted with the problem that a range of socio-economic indicators mentioned for EOP pupils are only based on the parents' affirmation in lieu of oath and are thus not entirely auditable. The calculation of the EOP teaching periods on the basis of these data is almost entirely automatic, so that the risk of error is minimal. The Court, however, found a computer programme error ; as a result, two Brussels schools only got one third of the EOP teaching periods they were entitled to. This error would be put right for the third cycle. In breach of the decree provisions the minister continued providing equal opportunities teaching periods to certain schools in the second cycle while they had got a negative inspection report for the first EOP cycle. The administration department controls the use of the EOP teaching periods in a very limited way. The Court noticed several irregularities in its use. Schools sometimes send their data too late.

Use breakdown

Within the audited timeframe EOP pupils accounted respectively for 21% of pupils in the primary education, 18% in the first grade of secondary education and 12,5% in the second and third grade of secondary education. Among the EOP pupils 98% were in the EOP schools' primary education, 96% were in the first grade of secondary education and 40% were in the second and third grade of secondary education (with additional assistance).

Implementation difficulties

According to inspection, schools had difficulties in implementing EOP. In their start analysis they still relied too little on objective pupil data and there was confusion between objectives and instruments. They neither mapped sufficiently the effects at school level.

Positive effects

EOP has led to positive effects : schools have reinforced their attention to educational equal opportunities, they know better how to use the policy cycle and there is more external assistance. Schools are in favour of a global approach for the educational coordination problems. In practice they hardly distinguish between the remediation and equal opportunities policies as laid down by regulatory provisions. Some schools even used periods from their normal school timetable. Several other schools would like to have more EOP teaching periods while inspection advocates upper limits. Finally certain schools find that registration fees are not sufficiently tuned to the equal opportunities policy : the perception of a caring

school attracts more problem pupils. Several of these schools have seen the number of EOP pupils drastically go up.

Evaluation and correction

The EOP decree provides for two types of evaluations : three-yearly evaluations at macro level by the administration department and three-yearly evaluations of school EOP achievement by inspection. The macro-evaluation has not been held so far. The limited statistical data available do not provide any picture of the disadvantaged pupils' achievement and outcome in terms of qualification. The assessment carried out by the school inspection led to the conclusion that a successful EOP is more dependent on an adequate approach than on resources. Educational research confirmed this finding. Moreover the organisation of selective controls by the school inspection in the second EOP cycle was not in compliance with the EOP decree, which lays down that schools receive new resources for a new cycle provided they obtained a positive evaluation.

Conclusion

The Court concluded that Flemish authorities have put in place strong support measures to raise disadvantaged pupils' achievement and outcome in terms of qualification, but that a framework is missing to allow for evidence of the outcome and that the implementation of this policy in regulatory provisions is not yet comprehensive. The Flemish authorities have no clear picture of how effective EOP has been so far.

Minister's response

The Flemish minister for education replied that the equal opportunities decree should be viewed in the light of the achievement of the optimal learning and development opportunities for all pupils, avoidance of exclusion, segregation and discrimination and the promotion of social cohesion. He stated that in the first stage of the equal opportunities policy the stress was put on a reinforcement of the policy implementation capacity of the schools.

He promised to take account of the Court's recommendations relating to the policy built up. He emphasized that a first follow-up was implemented by virtue of education decree XVIII. In the third EOP cycle starting from 1st September 2008 this decree develops the principle of a "second try" in case of a negative inspection report and introduces more verifiable indicators such as school subsidy and production of attestations for the travelling population.

The audit report "Equal opportunities policy (EOP) in the ordinary primary and secondary school system" was sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full report and the press release are available on the Court's website: www.ccrek.be.

Contact person Flemish Publications unit :

Terry Weytens, 02 551 84 66, weytenst@ccrek.be or

Marc Galle, 02 551 86 65, galle@ccrek.be