

Report to the Flemish Parliament

The Court of Audit examined free education and cost containment in pre-primary and primary schools

The 2007 regulations on free education and cost containment in pre-primary and primary schools have largely produced the desired effects. Schools usually respect the set limits. However, there is still room for improvement. Not every school completely abides by the regulations. The school choice may be influenced in some of them. Schools have also cut back on extra-curricular material and activities since the regulations were enforced. There is limited control on the way schools comply with those regulations.

Basic principles

The regulations on free education and cost containment in pre-primary and primary schools aim to ensure that parents do not have to bear the school costs that are essential to achieve the final attainment levels or the development goals. On the other hand, the authorities determine the maximum costs to be paid for the material and activities that are not necessary to these goals. The authorities have tried to guarantee that the school choice is no longer influenced by the charged costs. At the same time, they allocate additional operating funds to schools. The Court's audit has shown that the regulations are clear and leave little room for interpretation. Besides, the authorities have duly informed schools and parents.

Implementation by schools

Most schools have set up a charging policy in accordance with the decrees' rules. However, numerous schools do not inform parents properly or sufficiently about the costs that are to be expected. Most audited schools do comply with the regulations when they actually charge parents. However, infringements have been observed in nine schools out of a sample of forty. The most serious facts include charging too much money for field trips of more than one day, not putting the educational material necessary to achieve the final attainment levels or the development goals at disposal and slightly exceeding the maximum amount set for field trips for pre-primary schoolchildren. The Court has also found price differences concerning some optional material and services. Most school administrations follow up the costs correctly in spite of some inaccuracies. Schools that do not deduct the compulsory school clothing contribution from the maximum bill do not follow up those costs appropriately. Many schools charging fixed amounts or collecting those in cash do not provide parents with clear and detailed justification.

Effect on the school choice

To complement their means of subsistence, schools deem it necessary to collect funds in collaboration with parents. Such contributions are generally speaking not likely to influence the school choice. Still, over

one third of the visited schools ask parents to contribute to meet the school's operating costs. Two visited schools request such a substantial contribution that it is likely to influence the school choice. Moreover, when schools ask for a voluntary – not always insignificant – general contribution, it is difficult to make out whether parents are contributing willingly. The authorities do not follow up such schools.

Effects on the extra-curricular material and activities

Despite the increased operating funds, about half of schools have cut back on field trips. Yet, about half of schools allocate part of their operating funds to financing extra-curricular material and activities. The 20 Euros maximum amount set for pre-primary schoolchildren and the internal school bus costs supported by rural schools are the major factors that hinder the organisation of extra-curricular activities. Such activities are not considered by schools as a priority, though they are not always clearly separate from educational activities whose purpose is to achieve the final attainment levels or the development goals. Schools particularly dip into their operating funds for their investments in school buildings.

Supervision

It is for the parents to supervise the cost regulation. To that end, they can apply to the School Council and the Commission for sound administration (*Commissie Zorgvuldig Bestuur*). Parents are nevertheless often unaware of the latter. There is limited supervision by the school inspection and the administration's audit services.

Minister's reaction

The minister has replied that he agrees with the general conclusions and recommendations of the Court. He is glad to learn that the decree on cost containment has largely produced the desired effects and admits that there is indeed room for improvement.

The audit report on “Free education and cost containment in pre-primary and primary schools” has been sent to the Flemish Parliament. The full version and this press release can be found on the Court's website (www.ccrek.be).

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