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## **POLICIES FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN FLANDERS**

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### **The context for educational policymaking**

#### ***1. Constitutional framework***

The Belgian institution lays down some of the most fundamental characteristics of the educational system: freedom of education, the right to (high quality) education and equal treatment for all pupils or students, parents, staff and institutions.

Freedom of education has been the central pillar of educational policies for almost two centuries: freedom for providers to start a school and freedom for parents and pupils to choose a school. Freedom of education has led to a wide variety of schools established by either public authorities or individuals or religious congregations.

Considerable state funding for all schools that meet academic standards and legal requirements is a necessity to achieve genuine freedom of education. At the same time, schools cannot charge fees during compulsory education and they must enroll all pupils provided they accept the pedagogical project of the school.

Access free of charge contributes to achieving both freedom of education and the right to education.

The right to education also implies entitlement to a demanding and challenging national curriculum for all pupils: high quality education for all. That core curriculum is laid down by the Flemish Parliament after a carefully designed, but time consuming, decision-making process involving all educational stakeholders.

Equal treatment for all pupils, teachers and institutions applies in the first place to funding: it guarantees freedom of education but it also expresses entitlement to the same national core curriculum for all pupils during compulsory schooling.

The constitutional framework and whatever it implies as checks and balances between all stakeholders (public authorities, providers, teaching unions, social partners, parents, etc.) has led to a delicate decision-making process. Top down decisions from central office have seldom worked in this constitutional and political context. Educational decision-making in the Flemish community requires having careful negotiations with all partners.

Market shares of the 3 main networks in secondary education make decision-making even more complicated as the Catholic network has a 76 % market share. Such market share does not contribute much to greater trust among the major providers.

2. ***High quality secondary education for all - An obstacle to reform.***

The Flemish community has participated in quite a few international comparative assessments: TIMSS(1995), TIMSS repeat (1999) and PISA (2000). In 2003 we participated in TIMSS trends and PISA 2003, the results of which will be made public in December 2004.

Performances of Flemish 13-year old pupils in TIMSS and TIMSS repeat were excellent for mathematics and good for sciences. Performances for 15-year-old students in PISA 2000 were excellent on the reading literacy scale (3rd), the mathematical literacy scale (3rd) and good on the scientific literacy scale (8th).

Not only are performances of our schools in these surveys excellent but there is also great consistency and coherence across age cohorts (13 vs 15-year-olds), international surveys (TIMSS and PISA), subjects (better results for mathematics than for sciences) and periods (1995, 1999 and 2000). We do hope performances in TIMSS trends and PISA 2003 will continue to show the same consistency and coherence.

About 84 % of an age cohort obtain a diploma of upper secondary education.

For educational policy-makers such excellent results are rewarding but there is a downside as well. Very often these performances are used by educational stakeholders to oppose any change or reform, let alone implement a major innovation. Why change an educational system that produces such excellent results in international comparative assessments? Why change a winning team? Those excellent performances often prove to be major obstacles in initiating educational reforms as such arguments against change are often well received by the wider educational community and by the public at large - creating a burning platform for educational innovation has not been made easier!

3. ***No natural resources – the importance of human capital***

Flanders has few or no natural resources: the coal mines were closed more than a decade ago, agricultural acreage is declining. High wages and salaries, an ageing population, low labour market participation among those over 55, sharp increase in dependency rates make for a very vulnerable economic and social future. Human capital is the only resource we have, potentially, in abundance.

As human capital, entrepreneurship and innovation are the major drivers for sustainable growth in the knowledge economy Flanders is heavily dependent on high quality education and training for all its citizens. Schools perform very well; participation in tertiary education is very high and

still on the rise but participation in adult education is pretty low. Moreover those who participate in lifelong learning are those already best qualified; those most in need of training are under-represented.

Can the Flemish education and training system prepare its entire population for the knowledge economy and for lifelong learning?

### **Strategies for change in the 90s**

#### **4. *Top down approach: a comprehensive reform plan***

In 1995 the then new government wanted to design and implement a major reform that would affect the whole of secondary education: its structure, funding mechanism, human resources policy, quality assurance, steering mechanism of secondary schools, etc.

Key objectives of the plan were: greater school autonomy, lump sum funding, creation of larger institutions through more linear norm-based funding (N.B. The current degressive norm-based funding mechanism is more favourable for small schools than for large schools), stricter accountability mechanisms, job descriptions for all teachers and evaluation at regular intervals.

The plan also involved a shift in spending on secondary education: less on staff but more on in-service-training, more on school infrastructure and better salaries for headmasters.

All blueprints for that major reform were designed in central office and sometimes stakeholders were brought in to discuss and eventually improve the plans. The major stakeholders (school boards, teaching unions) embraced bits and pieces of the plan but they rejected the overall objectives and direction of the reform.

Top down approaches failed to enhance ownership among partners who are critical in implementing reforms at the grassroots level.

#### **5. *Consensus approach: involvement of all stakeholders***

Eventually, parts of the overall plan were implemented because of a successful partnership between the minister of education and the major stakeholders. Yet, the overall direction of that reform plan was much more in line with traditional educational policy-making in Flanders. Educational traditions, but also a rather conservative attitude to educational change made the government strike a delicate balance among all partners involved. Still, the teaching unions were rather reluctant. They rejected important parts of the plans: cuts in staffing, human resources policies implementing job descriptions and evaluations.

Top-down decision-making in such complex constitutional framework, in such a sensitive context and with so many powerful stakeholders involved, is often doomed to fail.

Piecemeal change and carefully negotiated and implemented reforms have a long tradition but do they prepare the system for the challenges and demands of the knowledge economy? Are they an effective political platform for even better performances of the educational system?

### **Strategies for change since 2000 : “Accent on Talent” ( Focus on Talent)**

#### **6. *Focus on Vocational and Technical Education (VOTEC)***

In 1999, the new and current minister of education had no outspoken ambition to design and implement a major reform in secondary education. After all, a minor reform was being implemented. Apparently, that reform was wholeheartedly embraced by school boards, school managers and other stakeholders. A minor reform but still time-consuming. School leaders and school boards invested heavily in the reform.

The minister preferred to focus on the weaknesses of the VOTEC-system: weak intake (pupils from low SES), waterfall system (= starting in more demanding fields of study with higher status and ending in the low status vocational stream), lack of social status, often lack of genuine work experience in a school-based VOTEC system. She wanted to remedy these long-standing weaknesses.

There is a general consensus among educational policymakers and analysts on the fundamental problems and challenges facing the VOTEC-system. Most of these problems are deeply rooted in more general societal problems.

The minister invited the King Baldwin Foundation, a high profile NGO with great street credibility, to analyse the VOTEC problems and suggest solutions to break the deadlock VOTEC had been in for many decades. Involving an NGO, however prestigious, was new, and later, proved to be groundbreaking.

The foundation set up a commission of independent educationalists, representatives from business and industry, experts in new public management reforms. Many of the latter had no or little experience of education and training but they could bring in other perspectives which were not clouded by tradition or vested educational interests.

#### **7. *Innovation along 4 axes***

That mix of “old” and “new” in the commission did work. The commission published a report that broke with traditional approaches to educational reform and embraced a more comprehensive strategy suggesting substantial reforms downstream the education system as well: changes in the workplace.

In its final report – “Accent on Talent” - the commission summed up badly-needed innovation in education along 4 axes: choosing differently (for pupils), learning and teaching differently,

working differently (in the workplace), steering differently (for central government). Key words in the document are: large autonomy for school teams, greater accountability, deregulation, bottom-up approach, entrepreneurial schools. Development of all talents is critical in a knowledge society. Too often schools focus almost exclusively on developing cognitive talents. The minister for education strongly endorsed the report but the main challenge was how to sustain the momentum unleashed in the educational community by the report.

#### **8. *On the edge of traditional policy making***

Implementing the report sparked off quite a debate within the commission. Who should steer the implementation? Who should be involved? What is the role of the minister? The majority was reluctant to transfer ownership of the reform and implementation of a major project to the minister of education - they preferred the King Baldwin Foundation to be at the hub of that major reform. Why?

In the public at large and among teachers there is little awareness of the need for innovation in education. “We're doing pretty well - why change?” A prestigious organisation could enhance awareness of a much needed innovation and could break the deadlock of vested educational interests. Strong support of a consultancy firm with solid experience in grand scale innovation (in public service) could be an additional asset.

The minister provided political and financial support for a project for schools willing to work on one or more of the key axes of the commission report. But even more important was that schools could work in a deregulated environment. No longer would detailed regulation be the driver for change, but school team professionalism, the effective school leader and ambitious objectives.

#### **9. *Pioneer schools***

Schools were invited to submit such proposals. The response was immediate and larger than anticipated. Not all schools submitted proposals with fundamental and wide-ranging reforms; too often, a comprehensive vision on innovation in education and on leadership for change was lacking. Still, all seem genuinely to be pursuing key objectives. There was a rich variety of proposals but most importantly, they were not centrally driven but bottom up initiatives. Impact of the centralised networks was limited. That rich harvest proved that at grassroots institutional level there is a growing ambition to innovate in teaching and learning. Many schools want to break the chains of detailed regulations and be entrepreneurial in new approaches to teaching, learning and governance.

It should be admitted, some saw that partnership with the prestigious Foundation as a strong vehicle for a better position on the educational market (Schools compete for a limited pool of

pupils). Participating schools are “pioneer schools” and next year they will be “aquarium schools”, open to other schools wanting to join that reform initiative. Pioneer schools network across the traditional ideological divides and learn from each other: they are “models of lateral learning” (Hargreaves 2001).

To the teaching unions the whole approach - bottom up, large autonomy, deregulation - is highly controversial and recently they have heavily campaigned against the project. We hope the King Baldwin Foundation will not be drawn into a damaging political mêlée.

### **A toolbox for change**

10. “Accent on Talent”, in which some highly innovative schools want to achieve some key objectives, highlights major new approaches to innovation/reform in education.
  - An “outsider” at the steering wheel. The project is situated on the edge of traditional educational policymaking. A high-profile NGO is more likely to enhance ownership of the key objectives among all educational stakeholders and bypass or overcome traditional opposition to change in education.
  - Involvement of a private consultancy firm with a solid experience in large scale innovation projects.
  - Bottom-up approach: little involvement of the traditional educational partners such as the national network representatives. Still, the latter are members of the commission.
  - No prior consultation with the teaching unions at the start of the project. They are very suspicious about the key objectives.
  - Strong involvement of business and industry partners. In September 2004 a sister project called “pioneer companies” will start, thus broadening the scope of the whole project. Eventually, some of these companies will forge twinnings with partner schools.
  - The pioneer schools later becoming aquarium schools (or beacon schools).
  - Strong focus on good governance and governance for change: involvement of all stakeholders at the institutional level.

The project can build on competent leadership in Flemish secondary schools. They all enjoy considerable autonomy in pedagogical, didactic, personnel and financial matters. Very many, especially VOTEC schools, have a long tradition of entrepreneurship.

### **Future of Accent on Talent? Future of policies for change ?**

11. A commission with educationalists, representatives of stakeholders and civil servants is steering the project, a consultancy firm is monitoring the schools, a white paper on innovation in education and training is being drafted and will be submitted to the new minister of education in autumn.

So far, the Accent on Talent project has proved to be pretty successful. In less than two years it has become a brand name for radical innovation in education and for new approaches to implementing such innovation. The project has credibility. The near future will prove if its sustainability. Future performances in international comparative assessments such as PISA 2006 will also be important milestones to evaluate innovation the education system.

A new minister of education will take office after the June 13th general elections.

The future of Accent on Talent critically depends on his/her wholehearted support.

Anything less will undermine its credibility and sustainability. Continuing opposition of the teaching unions could be equally damaging. And last but not least, project steering and management must be transferred to the department for education and the traditional partners in educational policymaking.