

Belgium: French Community

Population: 4.3 million. **Fertility rate:** 1.7. **GDP per capita:** EUR 28 700 (Belgium).

Female labour force participation: 57.3% of women participate, 34.1% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 6.3%).

Labour force participation rate of women with child(ren) under 6 years: 68%.

Maternity and parental leave: 15 weeks of maternity leave paid at c. 80% of earnings; paternity leave of 10 days (3 days paid by employers, 7 days by social security); parental leave of 3 months (6 months part-time) paid at a flat rate; time-credit breaks are possible for all workers.

Average duration of parental leave: Not available.

Compulsory school age: 6 years.

Social expenditure: 27.2% of GDP. **Child poverty rate:** c.10%. For Belgium as a whole, the figure is 7.7% after taxes and transfers (OECD average is 11.2%).

Funding of pre-primary educational services (ISCED Level 0): 5% of GDP.

Unit cost per child in early education: (in USD converted using PPP) USD 4 420 (OECD, *Education at a Glance*, 2005).

Funding of services for children under 3: (for Belgium) 0.6% of GDP; 9% of total education.

Average costs to parents: 0-3 years and OSP: parents contribute a maximum 28% of costs for public services. As fees are based on income, at-risk and low-income families have free access. In general, 10% of places in public services are provided freely to families in need. Children 3-6 years: free to parents from 2.5 years. OSP for children 6-12 years: not available.

Legal entitlement to a free service: From 2.5 years.

Major service types and duration: *Accueil familial* (family day care); *crèche*; *école maternelle* (kindergarten), *service d'accueil extra-scolaire* (OSP).

Rate of access to regulated services: Children 0-3 years: 18%. Children 3-6 years: 100%. OSP for children 6-12 years: 33%.

Professional qualifications of lead staff: In the *crèches*, children's nurses (*puéricultrices*) have a 3-year, post-16 vocational qualification; in the *école maternelle*, teachers (*institutrices*) have a specialised 3-year, tertiary level teaching diploma.

Designation of key staff: In *crèches*, *puéricultrices*; in *écoles maternelles*, *institutrices de maternelles*.

Child-staff ratios: Depends on type of service: family day care 4:1; *crèches* 7:1 (depends on age of child); *école maternelle*: 15:1; OSP for children 6-12 years: 14 children to one trained adult.

Maximum group size: Children 3-6 years: 32 children. OSP for children 6-12 years: centres decide themselves.

Auspices and context

In the French Community of Belgium, education and care are divided administratively, although brought together under the Minister of Childhood (Ministre de l'Enfance). The Minister has full competence for early care and basic education (the *école maternelle* and primary education) within the French Community. Some policy and funding responsibilities have been devolved to the two regions, Wallonie and Bruxelles-Capital. At the local level, local authorities organise services (including out-of-school provision) and provide additional funding. Policy with regard to taxes, state finances, employment, social affairs and social welfare falls within the competence of the Federal government.

For children from 0-3 years, the Minister relies on ONE (*Office de la Naissance et de l'Enfance*), a governmental, public agency responsible for mother and child health and protection, and for all aspects of child care policy and provision. All settings providing care to children under 6 years of age must declare themselves to the ONE, obtain its authorisation and bring their programme into conformity with the *Code de qualité de l'accueil*, decreed in May 1999.

The Minister of Childhood also designates the broad aims and objectives of basic education in the Community, which includes primary education and the *école maternelle* for children from 2.5-6 years. Most schools and educational services fall under one of three main umbrella organisations or networks: French Community Schools (non-confessional, covering 10% of children); the public network of non-confessional, Communal Schools, organised by local communes, covering 50% of children; and the Free or Private Schools (including the voluntary, state-aided Catholic system) covering 40% of pupils.

Labour force participation of women: Average female employment in Belgium stands at 57.3%, 34.1% of whom are in part-time employment (male part-time is 6.3%). The labour participation rate of women with children below the age of 6 years is significantly higher at 68%. However, fully a third of women work part-time, indicating – confirmed by the 2002 INS Survey of the Workforce (INS, *Enquête sur les forces de travail*) – that child care issues may be impeding full-time employment.

Maternity and parental leave: By European standards, parental leave is short. In summary, the law provides for 15 weeks of maternity leave paid at c. 80% of earnings; paternity leave of 10 days (3 days paid by employers, 7 days by social security); parental leave of 3 months (6 months part-time) paid at a flat rate; and unpaid time-credit breaks for all workers. In 2002, nursing mothers were allowed to take a daily break of half- to one hour to breast-feed their children. The salary loss for the nursing period is taken in charge to 82% by employers or social security.

Context: During the OECD visit in October 1999, it was clear that Belgium has one of the most comprehensive early education and care systems in Europe. In the care sector, ONE's wish to improve the access and quality of services has given rise to management reform, concertation and planning. A *Quality Code* for child services was decreed in 1999, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and European Union recommendations. Emphasis is placed too on training and professional development. There is high take-up of training opportunities, particularly in Brussels where the FRAJE, a training association attached to the region, has been very active (see Box 3.1 of Chapter 3 in *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001)). There are also efforts to create new municipal posts to co-ordinate early childhood services in different milieus.

The French Community sees child care and the *école maternelle* as a tool against social exclusion, and a privileged means of integrating "at risk" children. A universal right to early care

and education exists in practice, through the *école maternelle*, which is open to all children from the age of 2.5 years. At the *école maternelle*, the focus on quality has given rise to official guidelines (*Décret mission*), drawing attention to fundamental goals, such as developing the creativity of children, early learning, socialisation and citizenship, and the early diagnosis of disability or special need. In-service training is also seen as a privileged instrument to improve the understanding and professional practice of personnel, and it is planned to bring together the different networks for common training sessions. The commitment of university researchers to the early childhood sector is high, and in collaboration with teachers and staff, they carry out many action-research projects on the ground.

Access and provision

0-1 year: Parental care predominates, although many infants – up to 12% – are enrolled from three months in the public crèches. Because of regulations and tax-credits paid to families for use of accredited services, there is little informal care (calculated at about 6.6%), unless by the extended family.

1-3 years: In this age group on average, 21.5% of children are cared for in full- or half-day day care centres and a further 12% in family day care. Further care is provided by drop-in services (*haltes-garderies*, etc.) and by informal, non-registered child minders. Normally, the registered services open 10-12 hours per day throughout the year.

2.5-5 years: Free, half-day coverage is provided to all children from 30 months in the *école maternelle*, with after-school care available if needed. Almost 100% of children are enrolled at 3-4 years. The pre-school opens daily (half-day Wednesday) from 8.30-15.30, with after-school care available if needed.

After-school provision: About 33% of children use after-school provision regularly in the French Community. Much effort has been invested in the domain in recent years.

Attention to children with diverse needs

Children with disabilities: In Belgium, the tradition has been to support these children when young in the home, and then in special education units. There is growing awareness, however, of the benefits of including children with light handicaps in ECEC, and today, children receiving subsidies because of special needs represent about 1% of enrolments. From the age of 3 or 4, special education is well funded in Belgium, but is generally separate from mainstream provision. Relatively few children with organic physical or mental handicaps are included in mainstream early education.

Children from low-income families: After redistribution mechanisms, the child poverty level in the French Community is reckoned to fall around 10%, greater than the 7.7% average for Belgium as a whole. Higher per capita grants and special subsidies are available for low-income children (often including immigrant children – see below), and their schools may receive increased funding for extra teachers and more intensive programmes.

Ethnic and bilingual children: Immigrant children constitute 12% of the basic school population, reaching 30% in Brussels. Strong government investment in social exclusion and priority education programmes exists. 6.4% of children enrolled in the *école maternelle* are recognised as having additional learning needs (immigrant children, low socio-economic background, etc.), and as such benefit from special attention.

Quality

Licensing and regulatory regimes: Although the system is one of mixed public and private provision, the licensing of children's services in Belgium is strict and closely supervised. In the provision of early education services (the *école maternelle*), the three main umbrella organs act in accordance with the laws governing public services, and provide free education that is open to enrolment from all sections of the public. In addition, community regulations, e.g. concerning quality or curriculum content, must be followed by all providers. Operating hours, internal regulations, annual duration of services and some content may vary, however, in function of the needs of families attending a particular centre or of the particular ethos of the umbrella organisation. In the care sector, public services are licensed, supervised and continually evaluated; private services are licensed and supervised.

Funding: In the education sector, services from 2.5 years are free, with special supports for low-income/ethnic areas and families. *Écoles maternelles* are operated by official, community and private networks – almost completely financed by the French Community government. With respect to actual funding, we have not been able to obtain disaggregated figures for the French Community alone. OECD's *Education at a Glance, 2004*, provides an average figure of 0.6% public investment in the infant school for both Communities in Belgium.

In the care sector, parents pay fees to recognised services, according to income, from 17-25% of actual costs. In turn, they are granted tax benefits to recuperate these costs, up to 80%. In the care sector, provision is publicly subsidised and supervised when supplied by community services, and supervised only when provided by private bodies, e.g. private family day care. In public services, 10% of budget must be reserved to meet the needs of families and children presenting particular needs.

Staffing: The division between care and education in the Community is reflected in the training and status of contact staff in each sector. The *puéricultrices* in the care sector have a secondary level, four-year general professional course, followed by two years (16-18 years) of child nursing, which comprises a number of paramedical courses and practical placements. Their salary level is low, about half that of pre-school teachers, who now enjoy a salary level equivalent to that of their primary school colleagues. Personnel in family day care or *maisons d'enfants* (children's centres) are required simply to have a "useful experience" although in the *maisons d'enfants*, many *puéricultrices* are found. In-service training is available, especially for personnel belonging to community services in Brussels. A lack of adequate training has been noted among staff working in private child care institutions.

In the *école maternelle*, teachers are trained at tertiary level for three years in one of 14 higher education colleges. The Community devolves in-training budgets to the level of the school, which must organise eleven days training per year. The umbrella organisations are also required to engage in training activities and inspection of quality.

Work conditions: Information on the number of part-time staff in ECEC settings for children 0-3 years was not available. Among the teachers (*institutrices*) of the *école maternelle*, almost a quarter work part-time. By statute, both professions work 38 hours per week. There is also a statutory requirement to fund a minimum level of staff development, where teachers are concerned, at least 6 half-days per year, with a proposal to extend the number of half-days to 10. Few men are employed in child care, except at managerial level, and among teachers, over 85% are women.

Child-staff ratios: In child care, ratios are as follows: in centre-based day care (*crèche*) 1 children's nurse (*puéricultrice*) for 7 children; in family day care, 1 adult for 4 children. *Crèches* (18-48 places) must also employ a medical nurse and trained social worker, one of whom is generally the manager. In the *école maternelle*, the maximal child-staff ratio is 19 to 1, but in most cases, it is much less. *Puéricultrices* are often employed to assist teachers with the younger children.

Developments

Increases in public investment to widen access to services and in infrastructure: Measures to increase public investment include more efficient use of resources through participation mechanisms, and a new ten-year plan for the development of out-of-school provision. For children aged 0-3 years, a new Stork Plan (*le Plan Cigogne*), adopted in 2003, represents a significant new investment in the sector. It aims to increase the number of subsidised places in the sector over a period of ten years, so as to reach the targets set by the European Union during the Barcelona European Council meeting, 16-17 March, 2002. These plans are written into the management contract of ONE, and are based on greater equality of coverage levels across regions, the creation of synergies with employers, the improvement of the conditions of family day care providers (first steps towards a recognised social status and the possibility of receiving up to 4 children), and a pilot experiment with parental *crèches*. Access to free public education is guaranteed to every child from the age of two-and-a-half years.

Strengthening relations with the education system: A common concern of child care and early education is the challenge of transition. This led ONE, in 2004, to devoting its choice of annual theme to the issue of the passage of each child from child care services (*le milieu d'accueil*) to the *école maternelle*. A renewal of pedagogy in the *école maternelle* classes has also taken place to take into account transition challenges, as also in the child care sector. In the recommended programme for the *école maternelle*, the psycho-motor development activities begun in the *crèche* services are now continued, and policies of positive discrimination in favour of children with special learning needs have been reinforced. Where the older children are concerned, transition between the *école maternelle* and the school is taken in charge by the organisation of a common 5-8-year-old cycle.

Improvements in regulation: By French Community Decree of 27 March, 2002, an Advisory Committee (*comité de pilotage*) for the French Community education system (of which the *école maternelle* is a part), was created. In the child care sector, from 2004, the regular care of any child under 12 years must be reported to ONE, and the provision receiving the child be subject to the Quality Code. In this context, ONE has developed a new professional profile "child care co-ordinators" (*coordinateurs accueil*) whose main function is the inspection of norms and support to pedagogical practice in child care services. Child care providers must also formulate a child care project in conformity with the Quality Code. The successful examination of these projects by ONE agents leads to the delivery of a certificate of quality. The evaluation is a condition for certification and for the payment of subsidies to the provider. A Decree of the 3rd July, 2002, covers out-of-school provision, in particular, the quality of the out-of-school project, the role of personnel, the reception and taking in charge of children, and the development of pedagogical practices.

Improvements in programme quality, e.g. the adoption of a valid pedagogical framework in all services for children 0-12 years, and the education of personnel to implement it. Service frameworks should take into account and conform to the Quality Code, which establishes a basis for reflection, and is turned actively towards the search for quality

within the larger context of equality of opportunity. Every service should develop its own care and education project supported and guided by the Quality Code. Professional development courses will focus on the elaboration of these projects and their contents. In the early education sector, in addition to the reform of pedagogical quality in the *école maternelle*, a significant increase in school budgets (on which the *école maternelle* depends) took place in 2004, and a new mode of financing linked to the socio-economic status of the children attending particular schools was introduced.

Improvements in the education and working conditions of staff: Several governments decrees regulate the education of persons involved in the care and education of young children: the Decrees of 12 December 2000 and of 11 July 2002 govern the initial training and professional development of teachers and aides in the *école maternelle* while the Decrees of the 17th and 3rd July 2003 determine the requirements of recruitment, initial and in-training of personnel in the child care sector and out-of-school provision.

Improvements in the evaluation of programmes and pedagogical support: New agreed structural, pedagogical and process indicators are now applied by regulation (or recommended) to all forms of services. In addition, ONE is developing a new profile, that of “pedagogical advisor”. These advisors will have as their mission the task of reinforcing the psycho-pedagogical dimension of child care. They have been mandated to construct evaluation instruments and processes to allow the new child care co-ordinators to undertake valid and reliable evaluations of child care projects.

Improvements in out-of-school provision: A new ten-year plan for the development of out-of-school provision was launched in 2003 with significant new funding. In addition, a Decree of the 3rd July 2002, covered out-of-school provision, in particular, the quality of the out-of-school project, the role of personnel, norms governing the reception and taking in charge of children, and the development of pedagogical practices. An education bill, voted 28 April 2004, has placed on a statutory basis the financing of homework clubs in schools. Some 4% of *école maternelle* children attend these clubs but their main contribution is towards better preparation of school work by primary school children and as a contribution to the range of services offered by out-of-school provision.

More attention given to data collection and monitoring: e.g. information systems have been established in both sectors to facilitate a more rational planning of access, quality improvement, and the taking into account of new family needs and of changes in the ECEC workforce. Where children from 0-3 years are concerned, the new information systems have allowed a more accurate calculation of the real rate of coverage, taking into account actual capacity, through including places assimilated to subsidised places. The new systems have allowed also the creation of indicators for a universal service and a fairer sharing of places, including positive discrimination in certain communes. The systems have also been able to identify imbalances between sub-regions, between subsidised and non-subsidised services and between crèche services and family day care – enabling a fairer balance to be achieved. Similar initiatives can be seen in the education sector, where likewise a more accurate calculation of children and places has been achieved, and more individualised data on children produced. At the request of the Advisory Committee on education, further uses of information systems and education indicators will be made.