

Executive summary

The German-speaking Community is a small jurisdiction and home to around 12 200 students from the pre-primary to the upper secondary level. Despite its small size, the German-speaking Community has a complex and diversified education landscape, comprised of three distinct school networks. School providers enjoy a high degree of pedagogical autonomy concerning, among others, the methods applied in their schools as well as the recruitment of staff. The principle of “freedom of education” also guarantees parents the right to free school choice. The Ministry of the German-speaking Community is responsible for formulating the Community’s education policy and oversees its implementation in all schools. It provides most of the public subsidies for education as well as the core curricula (*Rahmenpläne*), describing the competencies students are expected to develop at key stages of primary and secondary education.

Even though schools in the German-speaking Community benefit from significant educational investment and favourable learning conditions, the Community has a relatively small and diminishing share of top-performing students and remains below its potential in international comparison. At age 15, students performed at the OECD average in science and reading and slightly above average in mathematics in 2018, but experienced a drop in reading and science performance compared to 2015. This suggests significant potential for the German-speaking Community to raise students’ outcomes further by increasing the effectiveness of its resource allocation. At the same time, the Community has low levels of educational inequality and an above average share of resilient students.

To guide reforms until 2030 and beyond, the German-speaking Community of Belgium is in the process of developing an overall vision for its education system (the “*Gesamtvision Bildung*”, henceforth *Gesamtvision*) with the goal to raise education quality and equity. Based on the overall vision, which this OECD education policy review is designed to inform, the government intends to develop a Master Plan laying out an implementation strategy for the reforms needed to achieve the goals formulated in the *Gesamtvision*. There is a widespread recognition of the need for further reforms and an impressive range of actors within and outside the school system who are invested in improving education in the German-speaking Community. This high level of engagement can provide a good basis to keep stakeholders closely involved throughout the development of the overall vision and build ownership of the vision and future reforms among teachers, leaders and other stakeholders.

This report offers an independent analysis of the German-speaking Community’s school system and assesses the system’s strengths and challenges from an international perspective. It focuses in particular on the funding and governance of school education, policies to support equity and inclusion, school leadership and the development of the teaching profession. The report identifies a range of opportunities for the German-speaking Community to build on the strengths of its school system, enhance the effectiveness of its resource use and ensure that the system delivers the best outcomes for all students. The report identifies the following policy priorities:

Leverage the revised core curricula to raise the quality of teaching and learning

The revision of the German-speaking Community's core curricula offers a unique opportunity to carry the goals of the overall vision into the classroom and provide teachers with a shared aspiration for student learning around which they could be supported to collaborate and develop their practice. For this to be the case, the German-speaking Community needs to ensure that the process of developing, revising and implementing the new core curricula is aligned with the development of the *Gesamtvision* and sufficiently inclusive for teachers and other school staff to develop a sense of commitment to them and to ensure their buy-in during the implementation phase. To lead to meaningful changes in the classroom and, it will therefore be important to ensure that teachers, students and other relevant stakeholders are actively involved in the revision of the core curricula. The most successful examples of curricula reforms in OECD countries have emphasised the importance of teacher agency and approached the revision process as a collaborative “bottom-up” process based on broad stakeholder involvement, rather than a technical task for specialists.

Strengthen the monitoring of performance and resource use in schools

The German-speaking Community should strengthen its data infrastructure and information management system to support the monitoring of educational quality and resource use in schools and to promote evidence-based decision making at all levels of the system, from parents and schools to the central administration. In comparison to other OECD countries, the German-speaking Community suffers from limitations to both the availability of data (including comparative benchmarks with other Communities and countries) and the capacity to manage and analyse it. To address these shortcomings, the ministry should develop a central education database covering all schools, teachers and students that would allow the Community to monitor key school characteristics (related to their student body, resources, staffing and performance) as well as students' educational trajectories. To evaluate the equity and efficiency of its school funding system and to detect potential mismatches between schools' resources and their needs, the ministry should also develop a central reporting framework to collect school-level data on revenues and expenditures across all three networks.

In light of limited capacity, the development of indicators and the collection of data needs to be strategic and proceed with a view to support the monitoring of progress towards the goals formulated in the *Gesamtvision*. As the German-speaking Community advances in implementing the *Gesamtvision*, it should consider publishing regular reports with key indicators, which can be an effective way to track the system's progress, increase transparency and accountability and keep the wider public involved once clear objectives and measurable targets have been identified. Given the methodological challenges involved in interpreting data and using it for school improvement purposes, it will be vital to ensure that school leaders are equipped to interpret standardised assessment results correctly and to complement them with other means of monitoring and providing feedback on the quality of learning in schools. To strengthen the monitoring and evaluation of its school system, the German-speaking Community should also undertake efforts to consistently evaluate pilot projects, policies and programmes, particularly with respect to equity and inclusiveness.

Place students and their needs at the centre of learning and adopt a broader view of inclusion

Over the years, inclusive education has become a central element of the German-speaking Community's school system and structured support is available for students with special education needs (SEN), newcomer students and gifted students. Placing students at the centre of learning will be key to building on these efforts and developing an even more inclusive education system that supports all students in

mainstream schools according to their individual needs. To move towards this goal, it will be important to adopt a broader view of inclusivity that considers not only the specific needs and challenges of students with special education needs (SEN), newcomer students and gifted students, but all dimensions of student diversity. This would entail a systematically differentiated approach to teaching based on a diagnosis of students' different learning levels and styles. To prepare teachers to respond to each student's needs, inclusion should be integrated into teachers' competence profiles, initial teacher education modules and the continuing professional learning for teachers, school leaders and non-teaching staff. This could also involve requiring aspiring teachers to complete internships in a special school, in an inclusive school or in a mainstream school with an inclusion teacher.

The German-speaking Community should make it a priority to streamline the provision of support for diverse student groups. Making the procedure for demanding resources for a student with SEN more flexible and less bureaucratic could reduce waiting times and improve system's inclusivity. Schools should be able to draw on different types of support for each student including not only specialised teachers or teaching assistants, but also non-teaching staff. The ability to respond to students' specific needs should be supported by the provision of a pool of materials, accommodations or modifications that can address each student's needs. There is also room to make the language support system more flexible and adapted to serve the needs of students with an immigrant background and specifically newcomer students. Moving towards a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning will require a sustained effort to foster greater collaboration among teachers, which is also critical to implement the Community's competency-oriented core curricula successfully.

Strengthen teachers' professionalism and support their continuing professional growth

The teaching profession will play a pivotal role in ensuring that the reforms guided by the *Gesamtvision* translate into meaningful changes in the classroom and improvements in student learning. In order to strengthen teachers' professionalism, sustainably address teacher shortages, attract talented individuals to the teaching career and sustain their motivation over time, the German-speaking Community needs to undertake further efforts to ensure that the profession is intellectually rewarding and oriented towards continuing professional growth. Recent initiatives and reforms to strengthen leadership teams and improve teachers' support in the early years should be built upon to make teaching and school leadership more attractive professions.

To mobilise the profession for the implementation of the *Gesamtvision*, the Community should co-develop a concise vision statement with the teaching profession that reflects the types of competencies and attitudes that teachers will need to achieve it. In close collaboration with the profession, the German-speaking Community should also develop a set of well-structured professional standards for teachers at different levels of experience. These standards could serve as a reference point to inform the curricula for teachers' initial education, to guide school-level teacher evaluations, support teachers' self-directed professional learning and provide the basis for a transparent, merit-based career ladder.

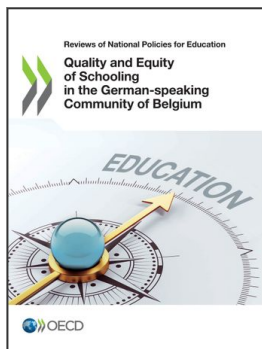
Creating more opportunities for teachers – not only in secondary education – to assume responsibilities associated with formal career steps would facilitate distributed leadership, incentivise teachers' continuing improvement and ensure that highly effective teachers assume responsibilities in the school community that are concomitant with their skills. This could involve creating roles for middle managers in primary schools above a certain size and adding career steps for senior teachers in secondary schools. Better prospects for career progression could also improve teachers' long-term motivation and raise the profession's attractiveness for top-performing students considering initial teacher education.

To ensure that beginning teachers become effective educators quickly, the German-speaking Community should consider concrete steps to strengthen their continuous support at the school level. Plans to

introduce systematic mentoring support (including training for mentors) should be pursued as an important step in this direction. To raise the quality of teaching, a greater emphasis on effective forms of continuing professional learning (CPL) will be critical. In addition to setting clear expectations for teachers' engagement in professional learning, teachers should be provided with the time and resources needed to pursue both individual as well as collaborative forms of professional learning. To link teachers' professional learning more strongly to their individual development needs and those of the system, their schools and their students, teachers at all levels of experience should engage in regular formative appraisal to discuss their goals and learning needs and create individual professional learning plans to address them.

Strengthen schools' capacity for pedagogical leadership and improvement

In order to successfully implement student-centred curricula, develop schools into learning organisations, and take advantage of schools' pedagogical autonomy, the German-speaking Community will need to strengthen school leaders' capacity for pedagogical leadership. Career advancement opportunities for teachers could lead to a more distributed leadership and strengthen schools' ability to engage in continuous self-evaluation and collective school improvement efforts. The Community should refine its leadership training and provide accessible resources to help leaders develop and use multi-year school development plans to advance their "school project", to place the quality of teaching at the centre, and to collect and use relevant data to support the process. Strengthening inter-school collaboration, e.g. by pairing experienced school leaders with less experienced peers, would support this process. In addition to strengthening schools' internal capacity, the Community should continue developing its external support services to assist schools in following-up on evaluation results. To this end, the government should pursue plans to create an institute for school development to facilitate schools' access to external support services and create synergies between them.



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