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Promoting equity and inclusion

This chapter covers equity and inclusion in the education system of the German-speaking Community of Belgium. It first describes historical developments related to equity and inclusion in the German-speaking Community, before discussing recent reforms and providing descriptive information on the Community's diverse student population. The chapter focuses on newcomer students, students with special education needs (SEN) and gifted students. An analysis of the system's strengths and weaknesses is followed by several policy recommendations designed to foster equity and inclusion in the education system.

Context and main features

Historical developments in the German-speaking Community of Belgium related to educational equity and inclusion

In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, the development of special schools started in the 1960s and enabled children and adolescents (aged 3 to 21 years) with special education needs to attend school. At the end of the 1980s, some students with SEN started to be integrated into mainstream schools and, by the 1990s, several working groups were set up to determine the conditions and legal requirements for fully integrating children with special education needs into mainstream education (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[1]). At the beginning of this integration process, children were enrolled both in special and mainstream schools and the hours of support they received were calculated for both schools. This double enrolment system was abolished in the beginning of the 2000s. Today, children are only enrolled in the mainstream school they attend and the number of children with SEN pursuing an integration project has risen significantly since then (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[1]).

The integration of students with SEN in the German-speaking Community is governed by the Decree on Special Education Needs (*Förderdekret*),¹ which was passed on 11 May 2009 with the aim to improve the quality of teaching and learning for students with SEN in mainstream and special schools (UNIA, 2019^[2]). In 2009, the Community also merged its special schools and formed the Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy (*Zentrum für Förderpädagogik, ZFP*), which has the mission to accompany mainstream schools in their work towards more inclusive education settings. These efforts were strengthened in 2011, when a competency centre was developed to give concrete expression to the ZFP's role in supporting and advising mainstream schools. A further development occurred in 2014, when the system's psycho-medical social centres (PMS), the school health centres and the child and family services were merged into a single structure, Kaleido Ostbelgien. More information on the current support system for students with SEN is discussed in the strengths section of this chapter.

An important feature of the German-speaking Community's approach to special education needs is that it no longer allows for the classification of students by types of disorders, disabilities or impairments. Instead, the system focuses on each students' pedagogical needs, as determined through observations and pedagogical assumptions. This means that special education needs are not identified based on specific disorders, disabilities or impairments *per se*, but based on the educational needs that arise from them. More information on the definition of special education needs in the German-speaking Community of Belgium is presented in Box 3.1.

Box 3.1. Defining special education needs in the German-speaking Community of Belgium

The international definition

Special Education Needs – or SEN – is a term used across various OECD education systems to characterise the educational requirements of students with any of a wide range of physical disabilities, medical conditions, intellectual difficulties, or emotional or behavioural problems. When discussing students with SEN, the OECD Strength through Diversity Project, refers in particular to students with learning disabilities, physical impairments and/or who suffer from mental disorders (Cerna et al., 2021^[3]).

How does it differ in the German-speaking Community of Belgium?

In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, special education needs are not defined based on disorders, disabilities or impairments *per se*, but based on the educational needs that arise from them. In the Community, “*sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf*” (special education needs) exist when a need for support cannot be met by means of general education. This is the case when the extent of a child's or young person's impairment is such that intensive measures for developmental and educational support become necessary and the nature of the impairment requires the support of teachers, therapists and other professionals with appropriate specialist training.

In practical terms, this means, for instance, that Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is not considered a special education need *per se*; yet, if ADHD causes significant difficulties to a student, the Community may identify the student as having a special education need. Conversely, in a situation in which having ADHD does not cause educational difficulties to the student, they would not be diagnosed with a special education need. This applies to all mental disorders, learning disabilities and physical impairments which may or may not be the source of a special education need in the German-speaking Community.

Although the term “*sonderpädagogischer Förderbedarf*” is thus not directly translatable with “special education needs”, considering the definition of the Strength through Diversity Project and other OECD countries, a decision has been made to translate it as such for the scope of this review. Unless otherwise noted, the term “special education needs” will be used throughout this chapter according to its meaning in the German-speaking Community. This has been decided for two main reasons: first, to align the terminology of the Community to the international literature in the field; second, to avoid creating a new term that would populate an already complex field that often uses different terms interchangeably (see (Mezzanotte, 2020^[4]) on the use of “learning disabilities”, “difficulties” and “disorders”).

Source: Cerna et al. (2021^[3]), “Promoting inclusive education for diverse societies: A conceptual framework”, *OECD Education Working Papers* No. 260, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/94ab68c6-en>.

Each special school in the German-speaking Community must be able to support all types of disability and educational needs. This means that schools are supposed to help all students, regardless of their specific characteristics, with the support of the Community's agencies and specialised institutions. Overall, the current objective of the system is to keep students with SEN in mainstream education using a strategy of educational adaptation rather than full inclusion (UNIA, 2019^[2]). Specialised education is thus not meant to fully disappear, but to manage, direct and implement the process of inclusion of students into mainstream education. Since the *Förderdekret 2009* came into force, special schools must also share a campus or building with a mainstream school, as is the case with the “inclusive campuses” in Eupen, Bütgenbach and St. Vith.

Recent reforms and policies related to equity and inclusion

As described in the preceding section, the German-speaking Community has undertaken legislative efforts to promote greater equity and inclusion in its education system. Although the *Förderdekret* of 2009 has been the most prominent milestone in updating regulations related to students with SEN (MDG, 2022^[5]), the project "Future of special needs education in mainstream schools" has also contributed to creating a more equitable and inclusive school system by developing principles for SEN education to be implemented in all mainstream schools (MDG, 2022^[5]).

The Community's regional development concept III (*Regionales Entwicklungskonzept*, REK III), which provides the framework for the current legislative period, stipulates the goal of improving the quality of education and training and expanding the diversity of non-formal education opportunities by 2025 (MDG, 2022^[5]). In addition to students with SEN, one focus of the REK III is the integration of people with an immigrant background through education. The project "Integration in Education" aims to promote educational equity by empowering people of all ages with an immigration background as well as newcomer students to participate in society through education, including basic, vocational and adult education. The project also aims to strengthen teachers' competency in dealing with diversity (MDG, 2022^[5]).

Moreover, students with an immigrant background as well as their native peers are supported through the project "Promoting Language Education and Multilingualism". The project aims to improve students' foreign language skills in French, German, Dutch and English and to further strengthen continuous language education, especially in relation to German as a language of instruction.

Who are diverse students in the German-speaking Community of Belgium and how are they supported?

The concept of diversity refers to people's differences, which may relate to their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, religion, mental and physical ability, class, and immigration status (UNESCO, 2017^[6]). More specifically, diversity refers to cohabiting people who perceive themselves or are perceived to be different and form a range of different groups. The concept of diversity is multidimensional. It might relate to physical aspects or immaterial ones, such as cultural practices, and it makes sense according to the boundaries defined by groups of individuals (Cerna et al., 2021^[3]). In the context of the OECD review, the analysis of diversity in the German-speaking Community's education system has focused particularly on students with special education needs, students with an immigrant background and gifted students.

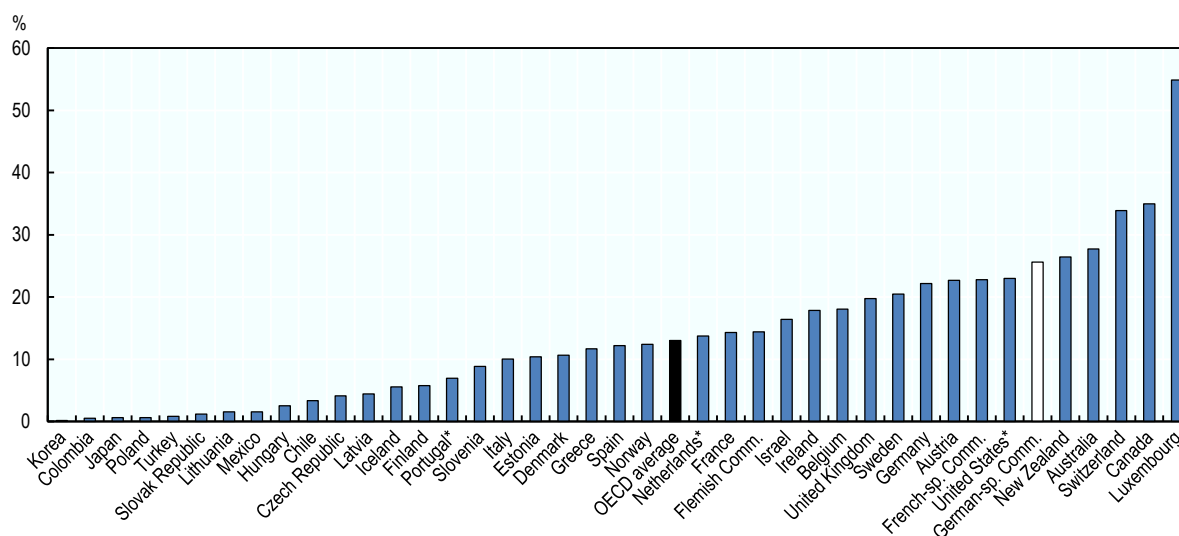
Immigration and students with an immigrant background

The German-speaking Community has a significant immigrant population and a large French-speaking linguistic minority. In 2020, 16 584 of the Community's 77 949 inhabitants were foreigners, 14 143 of whom lived in the canton of Eupen and 2 441 in the canton of St. Vith (Das Statistikportal - Ostbelgien (Statistical Portal German-speaking Community of Belgium), 2020^[7]). The majority of these foreign nationals are German. Furthermore, 13 559 of the 61 365 Belgians living in the German-speaking Community have foreign roots. This means that they either have at least one parent who had a foreign nationality when they first registered or had a foreign nationality themselves when they first registered. Many of these 13 559 inhabitants have a connection to a neighbouring country (7 025), but mostly only through one parent. Another 5 027 Belgians have roots in a country outside the EU, most of whom were first registered with a foreign nationality before becoming Belgian (Das Statistikportal - Ostbelgien (Statistical Portal German-speaking Community of Belgium), 2020^[7]). Thus, 30 143 inhabitants of the German-speaking Community (37.7% of the total population) have foreign roots or connections: 16 584 based on their foreign nationality and 13 559 based on the first registered nationality of their parents or themselves (Das Statistikportal - Ostbelgien (Statistical Portal German-speaking Community of Belgium), 2020^[7]).

Data from the 2018 OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that 25.6% of 15-year-old students in the German-speaking Community had an immigrant background (Figure 3.1), which was above the OECD average of 13%. Among them, about 56% reported to speak mainly a language other than German at home (OECD, 2019^[8]). In contrast to other OECD countries, 33% of non-immigrant students also spoke another language at home, many of whom belong to the Community's French-speaking minority (OECD, 2019, p. Table II.B2.73^[8]). The percentage of immigrant students in the German-speaking Community is also higher than in the rest of Belgium.²

Figure 3.1. Percentage of immigrant students, 2018

15-year-old students



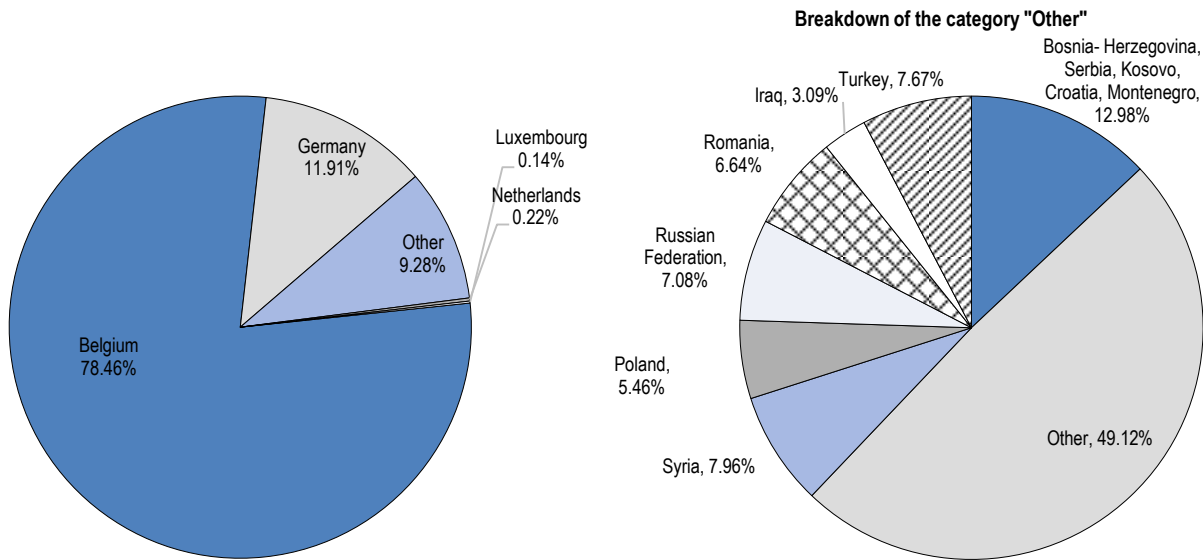
* Netherlands, Portugal and United States: Data did not meet the PISA technical standards but were accepted as largely comparable.

Source: OECD (2019^[8]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/b5fd1b8f-en>, Tables II.B2.72 and II.B1.9.1.

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National data show that 78% of pre-primary and primary students in the German-speaking Community hold the Belgian nationality. The majority of students with an immigrant background (12%) come from Germany (see Figure 3.2). Other European common nationalities among students with an immigrant background include the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania and, to a smaller extent, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, Croatia and Montenegro. The most common non-European nationalities among students with an immigrant background are those of Syria, the Russian Federation, Iraq and Turkey.

Figure 3.2. Nationality of pre-primary and primary school students

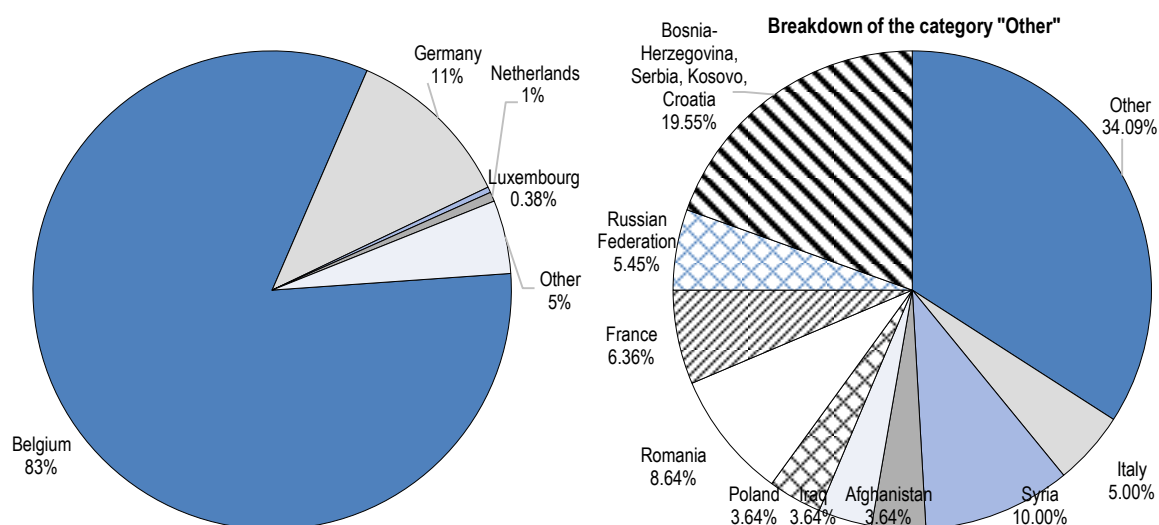


Source: Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (2021^[9]), *Schülerzahlen 2020-2021*, <https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/Resourcelmage.aspx?raid=184166> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

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The composition of students' nationalities is similar at the secondary level (see Figure 3.3). As in pre-primary and primary schools, most secondary students with an immigrant background are from Germany, but there is a slightly larger percentage of students from Italy and France, each of which represent about 0.3% of the overall secondary student population (MDG, 2021^[9]).

Figure 3.3. Nationality of mainstream secondary school students



Source: Ministry of the German-speaking Community (2021^[9]), *Schülerzahlen 2020-2021*, <https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/ResourceImage.aspx?raid=184166> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/mltz95>

Among the students with an immigrant background, one of the most vulnerable categories are generally newly arrived or “newcomer” students. The challenges that these students face in the education system depend on their experience of migration, but also on the age at which they immigrated. Children who migrated at an early age often share a life history that is more similar to that of second-generation immigrant students than to that of other first-generation students. By contrast, students who migrated at an older age often face greater barriers when adapting to a new education system and to ways of being and behaving that differ from those in their country of origin (OECD, 2018^[10]). Data from the German-speaking Community show that the number of newcomer students in pre-primary and primary schools has increased between 2017 and 2020, and that most students in these groups are in pre-primary education. As shown in Table 3.1, the majority of newcomer students (91% in 2020) attend schools in the northern part of the Community.

Table 3.1. Newcomer students in primary schools, 2017-2020

Year		North	South	Total
2020	Pre-primary	259	15	274
	Primary	40	14	54
	Total	299	29	328
2019	Pre-primary	198	33	231
	Primary	25	16	41
	Total	223	49	272
2018	Pre-primary	194	5	199
	Primary	36	20	56
	Total	230	25	255
2017	Pre-primary	188	9	197
	Primary	37	13	50
	Total	225	22	247

Note: The dates of reference are in late September of each year (30.09.2020, 30.09.2019, 28.09.2018, 29.09.2017).

Source: Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (2021^[9]), *Schülerzahlen 2020-2021*, <https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/ResourceImage.aspx?raid=184166> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

The number of newcomer students enrolled in secondary schools of the German-speaking Community is much lower than that of students in pre-primary and primary schools (see Table 3.2). In the academic year 2020/21, only 32 newcomer students were enrolled in mainstream secondary education. There were 27 newcomer students in 2019/20 and 35 in 2018/19 (MDG, 2021^[9]).

Table 3.2. Newcomer students in secondary schools, 2017-2020

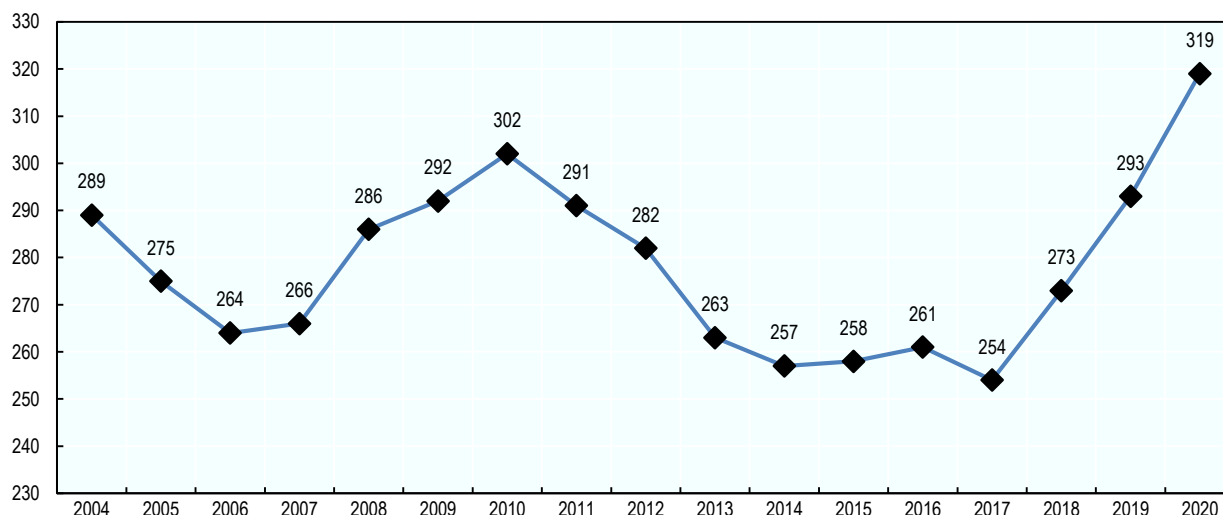
	2020/21	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18
Robert Schuman Institute	19	12	23	25
Pater Damian Special School	9	8	5	17
St. Vith Episcopal School	4	7	7	13
TOTAL	32	27	35	55

Source: Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (2021^[9]), *Schülerzahlen 2020-2021*, <https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/ResourceImage.aspx?raid=184166> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

Students with special education needs

In the school year 2020/21, about 2.6% of students of the German-speaking Community of Belgium attended a special school, while 3.19% received high-threshold support in mainstream schools (MDG, 2022^[5]). Data from the Community show that the number of students in special schools has decreased until 2017/18 and started increasing after that (see Figure 3.4). The OECD review team was told that this increase was primarily driven by factors. First, the Community has seen a change in students' profiles and in particular a rising number of students with specific socio-emotional difficulties, disabilities or other medical issues. Second, the number of students with SEN studying abroad has decreased. Until recently, many students with specific SEN – in particular those with visual or hearing impairments – had been commuting to North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany), where special education provisions could be better guaranteed. In recent years, a greater number of students with visual and hearing impairments have been accommodated in local schools while receiving support from teachers of specialised schools in Aachen (Germany).

Figure 3.4. Trend in the number of students in special schools in the German-speaking Community, 2004-2020



Source: Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (2021^[9]), *Schülerzahlen 2020-2021*, <https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/ResourceImage.aspx?raid=184166> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

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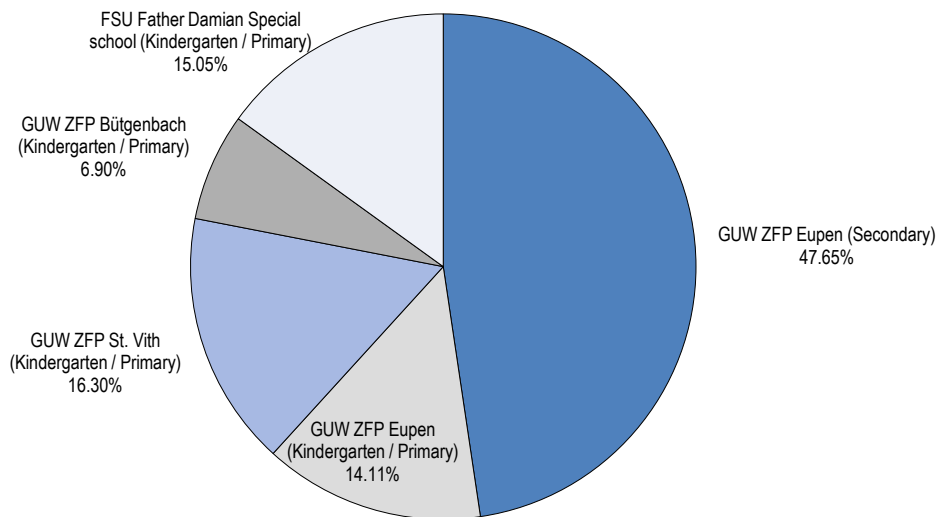
As mentioned above, about 2.6% of students in the German-speaking Community attend a special school. The Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy (*Zentrum für Förderpädagogik*, ZFP) has three branches where students aged 3 to 14 receive individual support:

- The branch in **Eupen** teaches students in six support and learning groups. The learning groups consist of four to eight students.
- The branch in **Bütgenbach** is organised as an inclusion-oriented school, jointly with a local primary school (see Box 3.3). The classes include both students with special education needs and their peers. Pre-primary children from age 3 to 5 are supported in mixed groups. The classes of the primary school are organised in levels (Level 1: 1st and 2nd grade, Level 2: 3rd and 4th grade; Level: 5th and 6th Grade). The learning groups are team-taught and consist of 20 to 25 students, of which four to five may be students with SEN. The learning groups can be supported by therapeutic specialists if necessary. A “rainbow class” serves children with multiple disabilities or autism, who can be integrated into regular classes on an hour-by-hour basis.
- The **St. Vith** branch is not organised by grade, but in four mixed-age groups, inspired by Edwin Achermann’s principles of mixed-age learning. The groups consist of five to twelve children who are looked after by up to four teachers and educators (Zentrum für Förderpädagogik, 2021^[11]).

In the Pater Damian special school, which is part of the Free Subsidised Education System (FSU), teaching takes place in three age groups consisting of a maximum of eight students. The age groups are supported in their learning by speech therapists, kinesiotherapists and occupational therapists (PDS, 2021^[12]).

In 2020, most students with special education needs at the pre-primary and primary level were supported by the ZFP St. Vith (16.3%), followed by the FSU Pater Damian (15%), ZFP Eupen (14.1%) and ZFP Bütgenbach (6.9%). In addition to the ZFP’s three branches at the primary level, the Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy also includes a secondary school in Eupen where students with different learning needs are individually supported in learning groups (Zentrum für Förderpädagogik, 2021^[11]). 47.7% of students with special education needs attended the ZFP’s special secondary school in Eupen (see Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5. Distribution of students with special education needs among different schools, 2020



Source: Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium (2021^[9]), *Schülerzahlen 2020-2021*, <https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/ResourceImage.aspx?raid=184166> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

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Although, based on the legislative framework discussed above, the German-speaking Community does not categorise students with special education needs based on types of disorders, disabilities or impairments, the Community does recognise five broad areas of special education needs. Each area is associated with a set of support measures that students can receive and which are described in more detail further below. The five areas of needs are as follows:

- **Learning disabilities** (Teilleistungsstörungen): Disorders such as dyslexia, dyscalculia, etc. While the term literally translates to “partial performance disorders”, it has been decided in this report to translate it as learning disabilities to align it to international literature and practice that uses either learning disabilities or difficulties.
- **Intellectual disabilities** (Lernbeeinträchtigung): General problems related to weak cognitive performance, such as learning deficits in multiple areas, low intelligence quotient (IQ) between 70 and 85, etc.
- **Developmental delays** (Entwicklungsverzögerung): Multiple disabilities, such as complex medical conditions, that can range from spinabifida, hemiparesis, to autism spectrum disorders.
- **Socio-emotional issues**: Including attachment disorders, behavioural problems, trauma, etc.
- **Medical issues**: Children who have specific medical conditions, such as epilepsy, heart disorders, genetic diseases, etc.

Some conditions may be included in more than one category. ADHD, for instance, could either be considered a learning disability or a socio-emotional disorder, depending on the severity of the condition. Rather than serving as a prescriptive structure, the typology is meant to serve as a reference framework with the goal to help identify every child’s needs and provide them with the necessary support, regardless of their specific condition.

Gifted students

In recent years, supporting gifted students (*Begabtenförderung*) has become a focus for policy makers in the German-speaking Community (MDG, 2018^[13]). In the Community, "gifted", "highly gifted", "highly intelligent" or "particularly capable and talented" students are understood to include children and adolescents who are distinguished from their peers due to their early development, above-average abilities, their interests and achievement (MDG, 2021^[14]). (Highly) gifted students are understood to be those with an IQ of at least 125 and excel in several of the tested sub-areas, such as language comprehension, visual-spatial reasoning, working memory, processing speed and logical reasoning (MDG, 2018^[13]).

While the general mandate to the school authorities formulated in Chapter II Section 1 of the Decree of 31 August 1998 (*Kapitel II Abschnitt 1 des Dekrets vom 31. August 1998*) requires schools to foster the talent and individual development of all students, the promotion of giftedness focuses on a specific group of learners identified as having above-average potential. The aim of this specific support is to stimulate the development of the potential of these students within the existing teaching system and to accompany them in the best possible way (MDG, 2018^[13]).

To support gifted students, the German-speaking Community has introduced several measures through Article 61 of the Draft Decree on Measures in Education 2018 (*Dekretentwurf über Maßnahmen im Unterrichtswesen 2018*).³ Previously, Chapter II of the Royal Decree of 29 June 1984 on the Organisation of Secondary Education (*Kapitel II des Königlichen Erlasses vom 29. Juni 1984 über die Organisation des Sekundarschulwesens*) had impeded an accelerated progress of gifted students since it did not allow students to skip one or more years of school. The new legislation introduced the possibility for an external examination board to allow gifted students to graduate from primary education early and enrol in the first or second year of secondary education, if they are at least ten years old. The giftedness examination board can also permit gifted students to follow lessons at a secondary school prior to completing the previous education cycle or allow students to follow courses outside of school, for example at higher education institutions. These opportunities are only open to gifted students who demonstrate an IQ of at least 125, which can be based on an assessment by Kaleido or another institutions. Since schools autonomously engage in the identification and support of gifted students, there are no central data on the number of gifted students currently enrolled in the German-speaking Community's education system.

Strengths

Inclusion is seen as a priority by all stakeholders and recent and ongoing reforms are pointing in the right direction, towards a more inclusive education system

Inclusive education is becoming an important element of the system of the German-speaking Community of Belgium and different stakeholders recognise its importance for students. Indeed, the Community has built a structured support system, in particular for students with SEN and gifted students, and recognises the relevance of multilingualism and multicultural education.

There is a structured support system, especially for students with special education needs

The German-speaking Community of Belgium has developed a structured support system for students with SEN. In the academic year 2019/20, the Community provided support to 293 children and young people in special schools through individualised teaching and other support (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]). Schools' work with students with SEN is supported and co-ordinated by agencies and specialised staff:

- The Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy (*Zentrum für Förderpädagogik, ZFP*), whose specialist advisors offer a wide range of special education services in the associated Competency Centre and co-ordinate both the special needs schools and the integrative support in mainstream schools.

- Kaleido Ostbelgien, the centre for healthy development of children and adolescents, which prepares the expert opinion for special education needs and provides holistic advice and support to families.

The integration of students into mainstream schools is organised by two specialised schools: the ZFP Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy and the Pater Damian Special School (*Pater-Damian-Förderschule*). These schools manage “integration projects” throughout the German-speaking Community, which comprises about 60 regular schools (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[1]). To accompany integration projects and support students with SEN, teachers are seconded from the special schools to mainstream schools.

The education system of the Community offers three main support measures when educating students with special education needs (MDG, 2022^[5]):

1. **High-threshold support** (hochschwellige Förderung) applies to students who have special education needs identified by Kaleido⁴ and are carried out by integration teachers with a capital of 900 hours.⁵ Special education needs are diagnosed whenever a student’s need for support cannot be met by general educational measures. This is the case when the extent of the impairment is such that intensive measures for developmental and educational support become necessary and the nature of the impairment requires specific measures for which teachers, therapists and care specialists with appropriate specialist training are required. High-threshold support is generally provided once Kaleido has identified a significant need for support in a student. Applications for the identification of SEN are submitted in writing to Kaleido by the parent or guardian or by leader of the mainstream school at which the student is or will be registered. If the mainstream school wishes to initiate the procedure, it must obtain the consent of the parent or guardian. The head of the mainstream school has the option of appealing to the support committee if the legal guardians do not give their consent. Once the need for high-threshold is identified by Kaleido, students can be enrolled in mainstream education and receive the aforementioned support from integration teachers, either in their mainstream school or in a special education school, depending on an evaluation from a “Support Conference” (Förderkonferenz) convened by Kaleido. The Support Conference involves various stakeholders relevant to the student’s education, including parents or legal guardians, the school leader of the mainstream school, mainstream teachers, the head teacher of the special school co-operating with the mainstream school, special education teachers and paramedical or socio-psychological staff of the special school, as well as Kaleido staff.
2. **Low-threshold support** (niedrigschwellige Förderung) is intended to offer children with permanent or temporary increased support needs the best possible support in schools by strengthening the pedagogical support for teaching staff in mainstream primary schools. Students who do not meet the diagnostic criteria for high-threshold support or for attending a special school are entitled to appropriate support measures that respond to their individual needs. To this end, mainstream primary schools receive 90 quarter positions for special education teachers (Förderpädagogen) who can assist primary school teachers with differentiated instruction in their lessons (e.g. for dyslexia or dyscalculia). This support requires neither a special education need nor an assessment by Kaleido, but can be provided based on teachers’ identification of students’ needs. The concept of low-threshold support contains four essential elements that facilitate its professional implementation:
 - The use of special education teachers in all mainstream primary schools.
 - Structured processes in co-operative support diagnostics and integrative low-threshold support.
 - The reliance on special education advice for primary schools.
 - Accompanying supervision of all special need teachers in mainstream primary schools.

Low-threshold support does not yet exist in secondary education.

3. **Subsidised contract staff** (*bezuschusste Vertragsarbeitnehmer*, BVA). BVA staff are specialists made available to schools to support students whose needs are not only pedagogical. This can

include nurses, kinesiotherapists, occupational therapists, and/or behavioural psychologists. BVA hours are typically granted for one year (MDG, 2022^[5]). (See Chapter 2 for more information on BVA).

The main distinction between low-threshold and high-threshold support is therefore not the type of impairment or disorder that a student has, but whether Kaleido determines that the impairment or disorder leads to the development of a special education need for the individual student. This means that a student with a certain disorder could, in theory, receive different type of support, depending on the nature of their needs. The OECD review team has been informed, however, that Kaleido does not typically identify special education needs for students that have learning disabilities (*Teilleistungsstörungen*), which includes disorders such as dyslexia and dyscalculia. In practice, when evaluating a student with autism, for example, Kaleido could thus conclude that:

- The student does not require any special support in school.
- The student should receive a compensation for disadvantage (which is available for all students).
- The student does not have a special education need, but should receive low-threshold support, such as the help from a support teacher.
- The student has a special education need and is thus entitled to high-threshold support, such as integration lessons or other specific forms of support that require teachers, therapists and care specialists with appropriate specialist training.

The three support forms outlined above are complemented by other measures and approaches that teachers can adopt to support their students. While specific disorders or disabilities are not strictly linked to corresponding support measures, measures that may typically be taken to support students with each of the five types of disorders and/or disabilities are listed below:

- Learning disabilities (*Teilleistungsstörungen*): Consultation of the ZFP, grade protection and compensation of disadvantage, which are explained in detail below.
- Intellectual disabilities (*Lernbeeinträchtigung*): Differentiation, low-threshold support (if there is not a special education need diagnosed), or high-threshold support (if there is a special education need).
- Developmental disorders (*Entwicklungsverzögerung*): High-threshold support (if there is a special education need), support from subsidised contract staff (BVA) and therapeutic approaches.
- Socio-emotional needs: Participation in the Time-Out programme, the planned systemic institution for attachment-oriented pedagogy (*Systemische Kindereinrichtung mit bindungsorientierter Pädagogik*, SKEI) for children under 12 years in co-operation with the youth welfare (*Jugendhilfe*) and Kaleido.
- Medical issues: Support through specialist staff, supervision through medical facilities and fast-track courses (MDG, 2022^[5]).

Grade protection and the compensation of disadvantage constitute two specific measures, which the German-speaking Community can provide to some students with SEN. “Grade protection” (*Notenschutz*) can be granted to student to absolve them from assessments in certain subject areas (MDG, n.d.^[16]). The grade protection can apply to a sub-area of one or more subjects and can only be requested and granted for students with the following conditions:

- a sensory impairment such as visual or hearing impairment
- a perception disorder such as an auditory or visual perception disorder
- a learning disability such as a dyslexia, dysgraphia or dyscalculia
- a physical impairment or a temporary functional impairment.

Students whose severe intellectual disability is accompanied by an IQ below 85 are excluded from the grade protection since the grade protection should apply to exceptional subject areas while students with severe intellectual disabilities would need to be excluded from assessments in many areas (MDG, n.d.^[16]).

The “compensation for disadvantage” (*Nachteilsausgleich*) refers to a set of pedagogical measures intended to compensate for specific deficits of students at the primary or secondary levels, which schools can grant without an assessment from Kaleido or a formal diagnosis (MDG, n.d.^[17]). The compensation for disadvantage is similar to what – in other contexts – is generally referred to as “accommodations”, which are support measures that concern *how* students learn, in contrast to “modifications”, which rather concern *what* students learn (Mezzanotte, 2020^[4]). Accommodations are intended to help students with SEN learn the same information as other students through supportive changes to their learning environment. The compensation for disadvantage does not absolve students from having to meet the competence expectations of the core curricula (and thus does not appear in the students’ report cards), and can be of a technical, personal, organisational or infrastructural nature. For example, visually impaired students might be provided with worksheets in an appropriate font or size, or student with a learning disability might be given additional time to complete a test or exam.

The measures to compensate for disadvantages are considered appropriate if they:

- are adapted to students’ individual needs
- encourage students’ participation in activities
- ensure students’ autonomy, security and dignity (MDG, 2022^[5]).

School leaders determine appropriate measures to compensate for students’ disadvantage and can receive guidance from external experts. Measures whose financial and/or organisational costs are disproportionate to the benefit they provide are generally considered inappropriate.

Similarly to grade protection, students are eligible to receive a compensation for disadvantage if they have:

- a sensory impairment such as visual or hearing impairment
- a perception disorder such as an auditory or visual perception disorder
- a learning disability such as dyslexia, dysgraphia or dyscalculia
- a physical impairment or a temporary functional impairment (MDG, n.d.^[17]).

The use of grade protection and compensation for disadvantage in schools is still being developed and was not covered by the external evaluations’ latest round of school evaluations (Cormann and Goor, 2021^[18]). Further work is therefore needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these measures, as is the case for the inclusion of students with SEN more generally (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]).

At the beginning of the school year, every child for whom high-threshold support has been approved must receive an individual support plan (*Individueller Förderplan*, also called “Individual Education Plan” or IEP internationally) prepared by the special or mainstream school. After a pedagogical-diagnostic discussion with the student, parents and teachers, the IEP is drawn up during a Support Conference (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[11]). The IEP includes:

- A precise description of the support goals (possibly with intermediate goals) that the child should achieve with the involvement of the parents.
- A description of the support measures to be taken (specific adaptations, differentiations, etc.) and the staff entrusted with their implementation.

The responsibility for maintaining the student file (student portfolio) lies with the head of the school the child attends (mainstream school or special school). Moreover, all staff involved in the implementation of the IEP’s goals (class leaders, support teachers, subject teachers, educators, therapists, etc.) need to document their views on the learning progress of the supported child. The Support Conference needs to evaluate the extent to which the described goals have been achieved at least once during the school year and make an assessment

of whether the goals and measures need to be adapted (MDG, 2021^[19]). On the basis of these evaluations, the members of the Support Conference agree on the continuation or termination of an integration project for the next school year, by 30 May of the current school year. The Support Conference can also decide to terminate an integration project during the school year.

Overall, the German-speaking Community of Belgium has a developed system of support for students with SEN. There is an emphasis on flexibility and offering tailored support to each student who requires help, regardless of their diagnosis. Measures such as the low-threshold support or the “compensation for disadvantage” offer extra support and accommodations for any student in need of extra support. Moreover, the expertise and knowledge developed in special schools is progressively being mobilised to support mainstream schools, which are now the primary education settings for most students with SEN. The quality of inclusion and individualisation of support measures is further strengthened by the fact that many classes in the German-speaking Community are small and distances are short.

Newcomer students are generally well supported in the area of language learning

The Germany-speaking Community of Belgium provides newcomer students with structured support in the area of language learning in order to ensure that they have the linguistic means to integrate academically and socially. Offers such as language learning classes pave the way to a culture of integration and inclusion, even if there are still challenges related to their implementation and expansion (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]).

Students who fulfil the following conditions at the time of their first enrolment in a school in the German-speaking Community are considered as newcomer students (*erstankommende Schüler*, EAS) (MDG, 2019^[20]):

- They are between 3 and 18 years old.
- Their competence in the language of instruction is below level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).
- Their place of residence or permanent residence is in one of the nine municipalities of the German-speaking Community.

The Community has developed a structured system to support newcomer students in their language acquisition, with different practices and administrative requirements for pre-primary, primary and secondary schools. School leaders assess students’ competence in the language of instruction at the time of enrolment, using a test that was elaborated by the school inspectorate. The test is contained in the application form that the school leader has to fill in. In primary education, the assessment of students’ level of language development in speaking and listening is conducted through an interview by the school leader. The reading assessment is based on the reading of a text and answers to related questions; the assessment of students’ writing is optional and based on the writing of a short text. The modalities for students in secondary education are similar, but the content of the questions is adapted to their age group. The assessment of language competence is included in the form that school leaders need to compile to enrol students in their school. The ZFP supports schools’ integration of newcomer students and conducts annual language tests for all newcomer students. Once the newcomer students’ level of language competency and their need for language learning support are identified, different practices are adopted across levels of education.

In pre-primary education, language acquisition takes place in the first two years using the immersion principle. According to this principle, the children should learn the language of instruction through play. For this reason, there is no budget for language courses or a language learning class at the pre-primary level. However, if more than 40% of the students in pre-primary education (or 30% in the case of bilingual pre-primary education) are enrolled as first-year students and do not speak the language of instruction at least at level A2 of the CEFR, additional hours of language support are granted. If at least 12 children are enrolled in these pre-primary language classes, schools can apply for additional staff funding (MDG, 2019^[20]).

In primary school, students from the age of five (third year of pre-primary and primary school) who meet the conditions described above can either attend language learning courses or a language learning class four days

a week. Language learning classes are organised across grades and levels in mainstream schools. They only teach newcomer students aged 5 to 18 with the aim of helping them acquire the language requirements to be integrated into mainstream schools. By contrast, language learning courses are intensive courses in mainstream primary schools that enable newcomer students to meet the language requirements to be integrated into mainstream primary schools. Students who attend a language learning class do so on the fifth day of the school week on a long-term basis. A language learning class can only be organised if there are at least nine newcomer students in a school or with the same school provider, which is the number of students required for the school or provider to receive a full-time teaching position for the class. However, there are some provisions in place in case there are fewer students.

Students can attend the language learning class for a maximum of one school year or follow a language learning course. From the school year 2021/22, the length of stay can be extended by a maximum of one year in exceptional cases. Furthermore, from the school year 2021/22, additional hourly capital will be granted if a mainstream primary school educates three or more students who were enrolled as first-year students during the previous school year. Moreover, the Decree of 28 June 2021 on “Measures in the Field of Education 2021” (*Dekret vom 28. Juni 2021 über Maßnahmen im Unterrichtswesen 2021*) introduced an internal school Monitoring Council in primary schools, which will decide on students’ integration into the regular primary school classes and recommend a compensation for disadvantage where necessary (PDG, 2021^[21]).

Sometimes newcomer students attend a language learning class in a different primary school, in which case the Community organises the transport between schools. The approved funding for this form of support is valid from the moment of the approval until 30 September of the following school year and an application can be made at any time during the school year (MDG, 2019^[20]). Newcomer students do not count towards the funding of teaching staff in the primary school where they are enrolled, but they do count for the funding of the school leader, co-ordination and projects as well as the funding for pedagogical purposes and operating grants. Funds for the reduction of parental school costs are provided to the regular primary school at which the language learning classes are established.

In secondary education, three schools offer language learning classes: Two in the north of the Community (the Pater Damian Special School and the Robert Schuman Institute in Eupen) and one in the south (the St. Vith Episcopal School). These classes each receive resources for 30 hours of teaching for up to 12 newcomer students. More teaching time is granted for language classes with more than 12 newcomer students (MDG, 2019^[20]). Students who have received the approval to participate in language learning classes do not count towards the regular funding of teaching staff in their school, but they do count for the funding of the school leader, for co-ordination, project posts and educators. The secondary schools in which the newcomer students are enrolled also receive funding for pedagogical purposes and the corresponding operating grants for these students.

In secondary education, students can attend the language learning class for a maximum of two school years. As in primary education, from the school year 2021/22, secondary students will be able to extend their attendance by a maximum of one year, in exceptional cases. Secondary students who completely transfer from the language learning class to the mainstream classroom continue to receive additional hourly capital for three school years so they can continue to receive language support and assistance from the teachers of the language learning class if necessary.

If students have obtained a sufficient command of the language of instruction before the end of their maximum attendance of language learning classes, they can leave earlier. The Monitoring Council, which meets at least twice a year, makes recommendations for the integration of newcomers into mainstream classes based on their progress and monitors newcomers’ development until they are fully integrated into mainstream classes. The ZFP can accompany schools that educate newcomer students upon request and conducts language proficiency tests once a year with all newcomer students in the German-speaking Community.

A fundamental element for an efficient and high-quality language education for newcomer students is the preparation of their teachers. In the German-speaking Community, a dedicated decree defines the roles of

teachers of language learning classes and language learning courses in primary education as well as the role of teachers of language learning classes in secondary education. To qualify for these positions, staff need to have the following minimum qualifications or certificates (MDG, 2019^[20]):

- A primary school teacher diploma OR a master's or bachelor's degree in German Studies (basic subject German) supplemented by a teaching qualification of at least 30 ECTS credits (Agrégation or CAP+). Teachers of the French language need a master's or bachelor's degree in Romance Studies (basic direction French).
- Proof of successful completion of at least 10 ECTS points of additional training in "German as a second language" for teachers of the German language, or in "French as a second language" for teachers of the French language.
- A certificate stating that the staff member meets CEFR level C1 competence in the language taught OR a certificate of completion of upper secondary education issued in the language taught.

The minimum qualifications for teachers of language learning classes and courses acknowledge that strong and specific competences are required to teach newcomer students effectively and they signal a commitment to providing newcomer students with high-quality instruction to facilitate their integration into the Community's education system.

While the support for language learning is a fundamental step in the integration of newcomer students, there are some risks and limitations that should be taken into account to support the fostering of equity and inclusion within the system. These are developed more extensively in this chapter's section on challenges.

Gifted students increasingly receive targeted support

As described above, since 2018, support for gifted students has increasingly become a policy priority in the German-speaking Community of Belgium. Even though the Ministry uses a broader definition of giftedness, support has so far been focused on the group of gifted students that show high intellectual potential (MDG, 2021^[14]). The Community's schools use a number of pedagogical strategies to support gifted students, including individualisation through internal differentiation, acceleration, enrichment and grouping (MDG, 2022^[5]).

Research shows that, across OECD countries, acceleration and enrichment are two of the main strategies used to support gifted students in reaching their full potential (Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021^[22]). Acceleration can be defined as "an educational intervention based on the mastery of higher grade-level knowledge than typical grade-level content or speeding up the pace of the material presented" (Kim, 2016, p. 103^[23]). In other words, this strategy consists of providing a student with a curricular programme at a faster pace or at a younger age than her/his peers. Practices associated with acceleration might include grade-skipping, early entrance into pre-primary education, school or higher education or subject-specific acceleration (Steenbergen-Hu, Makel and Olszewski-Kubilius, 2016^[24]). In comparison with acceleration, enrichment "provides richer and more varied [curricular] content through modification and supplementation of content in addition to standard content in the regular classroom" (Kim, 2016, p. 103^[23]). As mentioned above, the German-speaking Community allows acceleration measures to be taken for students with an IQ above 125 and a specific intelligence profile, who are cleared by an external evaluation board. These students are allowed to skip between levels from primary to secondary education. Concerning enrichment in the Community, this support strategy is organised by schools with the support of the ZFP, which helps teachers to adapt their teaching to each student.

Moreover, gifted education often relies on a differentiated pedagogy, which can also be merely called differentiation (ANEIS, 2017, p. 41^[25]; Eyre, 2012^[26]). This notion refers to educational strategies used by teachers and other educational staff based on a flexible education which adapts to the personal students' individual cognitive and psycho-social characteristics. Differentiation "means building instruction from students' passions and capacities, helping students personalise their learning and assessments in ways that foster engagement and talents, and encouraging students to be ingenious" (OECD, 2018, p. 6^[27]).

Another strategy used to support gifted students is to group them to learn together with students of similar ability or achievement levels (Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021^[22]). Some research supports the separate classroom method, maintaining that it enables gifted learners to work with similar ability peers and engage in more challenging and appropriate learning than they would in a mixed-ability class. Studies find that it can lead to greater academic achievement and that it can have a positive effect on the social development of students – if it is combined with time spent in mix-ability classes (Reis and Renzulli, 2010^[28]; Rogers, 2007^[29]; Sahlgren, 2018^[30]; Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, 2019^[31]). However, ability grouping strategies for gifted students are subject to significant controversy among educators and academics, primarily because of concerns around elitism and gaps or inconsistencies in recent research. Researchers also suggest a careful use of this classroom strategy because there is some indication that students' academic self-concept can suffer if high-performing students are too often grouped in homogenous high-ability classes, rather than mixed-ability classes (Mendaglio, 2013^[32]). Yet, the available evidence on the impact of grouping strategies on gifted students' socio-emotional well-being is still too scarce to yield definitive conclusions (Rutigliano and Quarshie, 2021^[22]).

When supporting gifted students, it is important to consider their socio-emotional needs along with their academic needs. In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, a working group on giftedness plans and implements the "Days for Bright Minds" (*Tage für helle Köpfe*) programme. The rationale of this programme stems from the observation that gifted children often feel "different" but do not know how to define or categorise these feelings. During the "Days for Bright Minds", they have the opportunity to meet and exchange with students in a similar situation. The students can pursue their special talents in various working groups, creative and linguistic activities or specific subject areas, such as natural sciences. These activities take place on three Saturdays a year and on three consecutive days during the summer holidays (MDG, 2022^[5]). The OECD review team has been informed that the students participating in these activities are generally nominated by principals who ask families whether their children would be interested in participating. This selection mechanism may be favouring socio-economically advantaged students, who have more involved parents on average and more means to participate in these activities. However, the participation fee for the three-day activity is relatively low (about EUR 30 for food-related expenses), which reduces socio-economic barriers to participation.

The Community's structured support system around giftedness not only addresses students, but also their schools and teachers. Schools can receive support in the form of advice when developing and implementing internal school projects for the support of gifted children. Moreover, teachers involved in the implementation of these school projects can receive information and further support from the ZFP. The ZFP helps to raise awareness and inform teachers about definitions of giftedness and its diagnosis, different strategies to support gifted students (including differentiation, acceleration, enrichment and grouping) as well as creating a learning and feedback culture that promotes giftedness (MDG, 2022^[5]). In addition, exchanges between interested teachers can be organised on themes such as effective learning strategies and differentiation techniques for gifted students as well as recommended literature.

While the German-speaking Community has significantly advanced the development of its support system for gifted students over the last years, the identification of gifted students is still quite narrow. Although the Ministry reports to use a relatively broad definition of giftedness, the legislation focuses mostly on ability tests as identification strategies (MDG, 2021^[14]). Over the past decades, the concept of giftedness as well as its identification have been expanded internationally. For instance, the literature on the identification of giftedness highlights a range of identification methods (Sękowski and Łubianka, 2015^[33]):

1. *Psychological diagnosis*, conducted by a psychologist and/or specialised educators through intelligence quotient assessments that provide comprehensive reports on the nuances of students' cognitive performance (Parekh, S. Brown and Robson, 2018, p. 4^[34]).
2. *Ability tests*, most of which focus on academic performance, although some look at the way students learn and/or their involvement in a specific domain (Cao, Jung and Lee, 2017^[35]).

3. *Teacher nominations*, which are thought to be one of the most reliable methods since teachers spend a large amount of time with their students and can have significant pedagogical experience.
4. *Parental nominations*, which are a subjective tool in the identification process and are usually not used on their own.
5. *Peer opinion*, which are also rarely used on their own but can give a quick and adequate idea of which students are the best in a certain domain.
6. *Self-identification*, by letting students participate in out-of-school educational, scientific or creative activities and programmes in order to identify their motivation and potential.

Some of these identification processes could be adopted by the Community as means to identify a broader spectrum of talents or to streamline the identification of gifted students' potential. Since talent does not necessarily go hand in hand with achievement – as acknowledged by the Ministry – support can also be useful for students that have specific talents but struggle to achieve their full potential. This would require moving beyond a legal definition that focuses exclusively on IQ as a measure of giftedness and considering a wider range of identification methods and support strategies, as discussed in this chapter's section on policy recommendations.

The importance of multilingualism in the education system is recognised

The language policy of the German-speaking Community aims at supporting German as a Community language, while guaranteeing that students will be integrated into the wider Walloon Region and will have access to higher education, which most students pursue in the French Community (Bouillon, 2018^[36]; Mettewie and Van Mensel, 2020^[37]). Multilingualism is therefore considered an important prerequisite for students' social and cultural development as well as for their professional success (Mettewie and Van Mensel, 2020^[37]). During interviews, the OECD review team gained the impression that multilingualism is considered by stakeholders as a strength and advantage in the German-speaking Community as many students and adults study and work abroad.

Multilingualism is associated with a range of cognitive, social, personal, academic and professional benefits (Herzog-Punzenberger, Le Pichon-Vorstman and Siarova, 2017^[38]) and studies indicate that children exposed to more than one language tend to perform better than their monolingual peers (Cummins, 2000^[39]; Mehmedbegovic and Bak, 2017^[40]). Facilitating students' learning of multiple languages requires the support of families, communities, school leaders and teachers as well as relevant professional development for teachers.

German is the language of instruction in all schools in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, except in the French-language school in Eupen (*Ecole communale pour enfants d'expression française*, ECEF) and in primary schools where French-speaking sections have been set up to cater to the French-speaking minority. The first foreign language is usually French, except for the French-speaking sections in primary schools, where German is the first foreign language (MDG, 2021^[41]). Students start learning their first foreign language during their pre-primary education, with activities of 50 to 200 minutes per week. As part of a pilot project, schools can also increase the proportion of foreign language activities in pre-primary education to 350 minutes per week or to 40% of teaching time (MDG, 2022^[5]).

The early immersion in a foreign language can be seen as a strength of the German-speaking Community's school system. From the first year of primary school, the first foreign language is a compulsory subject with a minimum of two hours per week, which progressively increases up to at least five hours by the sixth grade. In primary education, the subjects of art, music and sport can also be taught in the first foreign language. In addition to the pilot project at the pre-primary level, at the secondary level, teaching in a foreign language can be expanded to the subjects of mathematics, geography, history and science and account for a maximum of 40% of the total teaching time (MDG, 2021^[41]). In general secondary education, students need to receive at least four lessons of French-language instruction per week. In technical and vocational secondary education, students are taught French for at least two lessons per week.

Overall, while multilingualism is seen as a strength and source of potential of the education system in the German-speaking Community, some challenges remain. The core curricula envisage that students should attain competence at level B2 of the CEFR by the end of secondary school. This may be insufficient for studying or working in the French Community and parents, students, business representatives and social partners have expressed their desire for French as first foreign language to be promoted even more. While the OECD review team has been told that there are differences in the level of proficiency reached by students in the northern and southern areas of the Community, the overall objective should be for all to reach sufficient competency in the foreign language to enable them to communicate with their fellow Belgian citizens, to participate fully in society and to study in their own country. Besides achieving proficiency in both German and French, there are also demands among stakeholders to further promote English language skills to foster a truly multilingual Community (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]).

Challenges

Despite the German-speaking Community's strengths in identifying inclusion as a priority and recognising the different needs of some student groups, there are some challenges that need to be tackled in order to make further progress towards equity and inclusion for all students. In particular, the Community is adopting a quite narrow understanding of inclusive education, which could limit the support provided to students beyond certain focus groups. This limited understanding is apparent when considering the insufficient use of differentiation and formative assessment in schools, the high grade repetition rates, the lack of evaluations on the effectiveness of measures such as Time-Out, concerns regarding the lack of coherence between school-based and out-of-school care and the limited training of teachers in the area of inclusion. Moreover, parts of the existing support structures show rigidities that can create barriers for diverse groups of students. Finally, the lack of disaggregated data diminishes the system's ability to monitor its progress towards inclusion and equity goals and its ability to engage in evidence-based policy making in these areas.

There is a narrow understanding of what inclusive education means and which elements in the education system can affect it

The way in which international education systems have approached students with diverse needs has evolved throughout the decades. Researchers broadly distinguish between four different approaches: exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion – the latter two being the most relevant. According to the literature, integration is achieved by placing students with diverse needs in mainstream education settings. Although students may be provided with some adaptations and resources, this approach is generally based on the assumption that students fit into pre-existing structures, attitudes and a largely unaltered environment (UNESCO, 2017^[6]). For example, integration can imply placing a student with a physical impairment or a learning disability in a regular class but without any individualised support and with a teacher who is unwilling or unable to meet the child's learning, social or disability support needs.

Although the terms integration and inclusion are sometimes confused or used interchangeably, they are distinct concepts with significant differences. Inclusion in education is defined as “an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination” (UNESCO, 2009^[42]). An inclusive approach to education focuses on changing the system to fit the student, not changing the student to fit the system. It considers individual students' exclusion to be the result of the system's characteristics, rather than that of those of the person in question (UNICEF, 2014^[43]). According to UNICEF (2014^[43]), inclusive education is defined as a dynamic process that is constantly evolving according to the local culture and context, as it seeks to enable communities, systems and structures to combat discrimination, celebrate diversity, promote participation and overcome barriers to learning and participation for all people. All personal differences (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity, language, health status, etc.) are acknowledged and respected.

In practice, stakeholders often use the term integration to refer to immigrant and refugee students, whereas inclusion is more often used to refer to students with SEN and, historically, the literature on inclusion in education has focused almost exclusively on students with SEN. This can lead to a narrow conception of inclusion that focuses on only one dimension of diversity. Nowadays it is becoming increasingly common to see the concept of inclusive education used to refer all children, including students with SEN as only one among multiple historically marginalised groups (Cummings, Dyson and Millward, 2003^[44]). This broader view of inclusion incorporates students with different needs and backgrounds, such as immigrant and refugee students, male and female students, students from ethnic minorities, gifted students, students with different gender identities and sexual orientations, as well as students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, external evaluations show that students learn to perceive and accept diversity as a natural part of school life (Cormann and Goor, 2021^[18]). Nonetheless, the focus on inclusion lies mostly on students with SEN, with some focus also on newcomer students and gifted students. Other diverse groups of students who may need additional support are not considered to a great extent.

The narrow understanding of inclusion corresponds to a limited use of practices, tools and methods to promote inclusion in schools, including the use of differentiation and formative student assessment. The limited use of these techniques can also contribute to higher levels of grade repetition since students may fall through the cracks. Grade repetition often particularly affects vulnerable students the most and undermines their inclusion in schools. Furthermore, the school system and out-of-school care (*außerschulische Betreuung*, AUBE) are not integrated, which may further limit the support available to all students. Limited data, monitoring and evaluation may further exacerbate the existing inequalities due to insufficient evidence on the effects of support measures.

Differentiation and formative student assessment are insufficiently embedded in daily teaching and learning

During the review visit, the OECD team gained the impression that differentiation and formative student assessments play a relatively minor role as pedagogical tools in the German-speaking Community. The limited differentiation and insufficient monitoring and support of students at risk of dropping out may be related to some of the Community's challenges, such as the high grade repetition rate, and may be exacerbated by the limited exchanges between teachers, subjects and education levels around the holistic development of each student.

The 2021 report on external evaluation confirmed that insufficient attention is paid to actively and systematically handling the heterogeneity of students by engaging in differentiated instruction and using an appropriate subject-specific didactic lesson design (Cormann and Goor, 2021^[18]). More specifically, differentiation by competency level was only observed in about 18.7% of sampled classes. Differentiation by competency level, time and scope was determined in about 11% of the cases (Cormann and Goor, 2021^[18]). An earlier study on homework in the German-speaking Community showed that differentiation in the content and scope of homework assignments was rather limited at both primary and secondary levels (Sereni, 2011^[45]).

While most education systems use summative assessments to evaluate students' progress, assessment may also serve the formative function of shaping and deepening students' subsequent learning process. Formative assessment is sometimes referred to as assessment "for learning", rather than "of learning". In the classroom, this can take the form of frequent, interactive assessments of students' progress and understanding with the goal to identify learning needs and adjust teaching practices accordingly (OECD, 2013^[46]). Teachers using formative assessment are better prepared to meet diverse students' needs through differentiation and the adaptation of their teaching, to raise student achievement and promote greater equity in student outcomes (OECD, 2008^[47]). Indeed, formative assessment practices typically pay particular attention to student groups at risk of underperformance, such as students from cultural or language minorities and students with special education needs (OECD, 2013^[46]).

The use of formative assessment can extend beyond the classroom to promote the goals of lifelong learning throughout the education system, including higher levels of achievement, greater equity of student outcomes

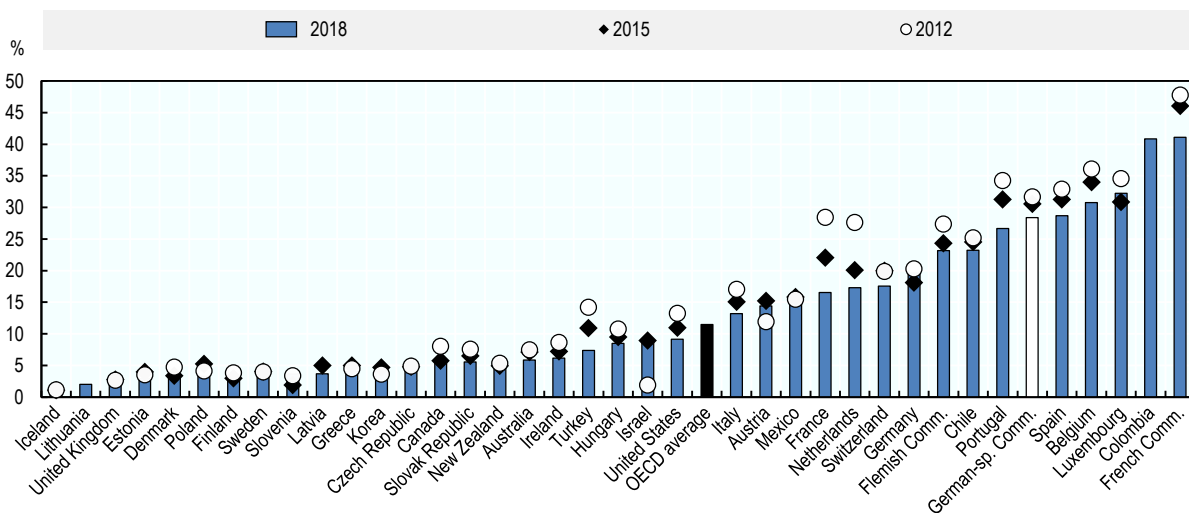
and improved learning-to-learn skills (OECD, 2008^[47]; Looney, 2011^[48]). However, in the German-speaking Community the use of formative assessment to adapt teaching to students at different levels remains limited, as reported in the latest reports of the external evaluation (Cormann and Goor, 2021^[18]). This was also the impression that the OECD review team gained during the visit. One of the prerequisites for a wider use of formative assessment practices is to develop teachers' capacity as well as fostering students' ability to engage in their own assessment (see Chapter 2). Furthermore, it is important to ensure that student assessment is inclusive and responsive to different learners' needs and that assessment practices are well-aligned with the system's wider educational goals (OECD, 2013^[46]).

Grade repetition rates remain high

Grade repetition (or retention) constitutes a form of vertical differentiation in schools, which seeks to adapt the curriculum to student performance and create more homogeneous learning environments by modifying the distribution of students across grades. Although some research suggests that repeating a grade generally does not yield improvements in learning outcomes and is associated with high economic and social costs, grade repetition is still commonly used in many OECD countries (OECD, 2016^[49]). As mentioned in Chapter 1, grade repetition is relatively frequent in the German-speaking Community, particularly in some schools. PISA 2018 data suggest that, among 15-year-old students, 28.4% had repeated a grade at least once in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary school (OECD, 2020, pp. 308, Table V.B2.2.9^[50]). This was significantly above the OECD average of 11.4%. In 2018, 13% of 15-year-olds reported to have repeated at least one grade in primary education and 12.6% to have repeated at least once in lower secondary education (compared to 6.7% and 5.5% respectively across the OECD) (see Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.6. Trends in grade repetition, 2012-2018

Percentage of 15-year-old students who repeated at least one grade in primary, lower or upper secondary school



Sources: OECD (2020^[50]), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume V): Effective Policies, Successful Schools*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/ca768d40-en>, Tables V.B2.2.9 and V.B1.2.9; OECD (2016^[49]), *PISA 2015 Results (Volume II): Policies and Practices for Successful Schools*, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264267510-en>, Tables B2.II.33 and II.5.9; OECD (2013^[51]), *PISA 2012 Results: What Makes Schools Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices (Volume IV)*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264201156-en>, Tables B2.IV.1 and IV.2.2.

Whether or not a student repeats a grade is usually formally decided on the basis of their academic performance, but some studies suggest that students' behaviour and other factors can also influence the decision (OECD, 2015^[52]). PISA data show that, across OECD countries, students with poorer academic performance are more likely to have repeated a grade but that students' behaviour and motivation are also related to grade repetition. In 2015, students who reported that they had skipped a day of school or arrived late for school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test were 38% and 24% more likely, respectively, to have repeated a grade than students who reported that they had not done so. Many stakeholders would agree that performance, behaviour and motivation are legitimate reasons for deciding which students repeat a grade. Nevertheless, PISA has consistently shown that, even after accounting for students' academic performance, self-reported behaviour and attitudes, students with certain characteristics are more likely to have repeated a grade in many education systems (OECD, 2015^[52]). For instance, across OECD countries, boys are more likely to have repeated a grade than girls, socio-economically disadvantaged students are more likely than advantaged students, and students with an immigrant background are more likely than students with no immigrant background. In Belgium, data from PISA 2018 show that boys were more likely to have repeated a grade than girls and that both first and second-generation immigrant students were more likely to have repeated a grade than native students. As in many school systems, the probability of repeating a grade in the German-speaking Community also appears to be associated with students' socio-economic status (De Witte et al., 2018, p. 17^[53]).

The evidence on grade repetition is mixed but generally concludes that it is not likely to remediate academic failure or behavioural difficulties (Allen et al., 2009^[54]; OECD, 2020^[50]). Research examining the efficacy of grade retention generally does not demonstrate academic advantages for retained students relative to comparison groups of low-achieving peers and even in analyses that find positive effects they are usually not maintained over time (Jimerson, 2001^[55]) (Jimerson et al., 2005^[56]). Instead, research suggests to focus on instructional strategies and specific interventions to facilitate the education of children at risk of academic failure. For instance, literature related to both grade repetition and early school leaving focuses on creating Early Warning Systems (EWS) (OECD, 2021^[57]). EWS are intended to provide actionable predictors of students experiencing challenges in order to help guide targeted interventions that can prevent student failure. The EWS are often aimed at preventing early school leaving, but can also be adopted for students at risk of grade repetition.

In Latvia, for instance, the "Tackling early school leaving project" lets teachers create an individual support plan for each student at the beginning of the school year based on an assessment of various risk factors (OECD, 2021^[58]). Follow-up support measures include, for example, consultations with specialists, which can be adapted based on students' risk of failing a year. The Flemish Community of Belgium provides another example. Following school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Flemish Community organised remedial courses outside of regular school hours during the school year and during holiday periods in order to reduce grade repetition. Small groups of students were offered tailor-made solutions to catch up on learning deficits and to become more resilient, in particular with regards to important school transitions (Eurydice, 2021^[59]).

In addition to the lack of academic benefits, empirical evidence suggests that students who were retained hold more negative attitudes towards school at the age of 15 than students who had not repeated a grade in primary or in secondary education. Students who repeated a grade are also more likely to drop out of school entirely (Manacorda, 2012^[60]). Studies have also suggested that grade retention can have harmful socio-emotional effects and that it is detrimental to students' behavioural and academic adjustment (Jimerson et al., 2005^[56]). In addition, grade repetition can negatively affect students' well-being, their sense of belonging to the school community and their life satisfaction. On average across EU countries in 2015, students who repeated a grade were six percentage points less likely to report being satisfied with life and difference was above eight percentage points in Belgium (OECD, 2018^[10]). It should also be noted that grade repetition can be a costly policy since it requires resources for an additional year of schooling and delays students' entry into the labour market (OECD, 2013^[61]).

The German-speaking Community does not regularly monitor the rate of year repetition, which limits its ability to analyse whether the practice is affecting disadvantage students the most in their education system.

Nevertheless, it stands to reason that the high rate of grade repetition in the German-speaking Community is likely to have a negative impact on the students' academic and socio-emotional well-being while also posing a risk to equity, considering that some student groups are usually more affected than others.

Reducing a system's reliance on grade repetition requires significant efforts, ranging from changing the mindsets of all actors involved in the education systems (including teachers, school leaders, parents and students) to the creation of robust and well-planned didactic alternatives. For instance, the French Community of Belgium aims to develop strategies to combat school failure, drop-out and repetition in order to improve the role of education as a source of social emancipation while focusing on quality for all and promoting inclusive schooling. With its systemic educational reform, the "Pact for Excellence in Teaching", the French Community has set itself the target to reduce the rate of grade repetition by 50% by 2030, while increasing average student achievement in basic skills. The French Community's strategic approach to combating failure and repetition is holistic and based on a set of specific responses to learning difficulties, as well as on initiatives targeting students and their parents (Enseignement en Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, 2017^[62]).

The effectiveness of Time-Out is unclear

As mentioned in Chapter 1, since 2018, the German-speaking Community's Time-Out centres provide supervision to youth who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out of full-time education or apprenticeships due to socio-emotional and behavioural problems. The centres support students in reflecting on their educational or professional goals, aim to build their long-term motivation and help them develop the competences needed to pursue these goals with a view to reintegrate them into an educational or professional pathway after a limited period of time.⁶

For young people who are not enrolled in a school or Vocational Education and Training institution or who have lost their connection, Time-Out aims to support the development of future and life perspectives. In contrast to the centre for part-time vocational education (*Teilzeitunterricht*, TZU), the Time-Out facility emphasises self-directed learning and an individual and social pedagogical approach. The Time-Out facility aims to offer individual experiential and action-oriented learning spaces tailored to each young person. The target group of the Time-Out centres is affected by a lack of perspective, especially at the school level, and Time-Out seeks to support some of the most vulnerable youth. In practice, a staff member from the Time-Out facility who has pedagogical training is in charge of supporting the participating youth in building specific subject-related competences. During their time in the programme, participants primarily rework their school and vocational projects in order to develop sustained motivation and competences with a view to realising their personal learning, career and life perspectives. The average length of the care period is 12 months including holidays. 44% of participants attend the programme for less than 9 months and 39% for more than 12 months. During the reintegration of participants, the remedial education counsellors of the Time-Out facility work closely with schools to facilitate the students' transition.

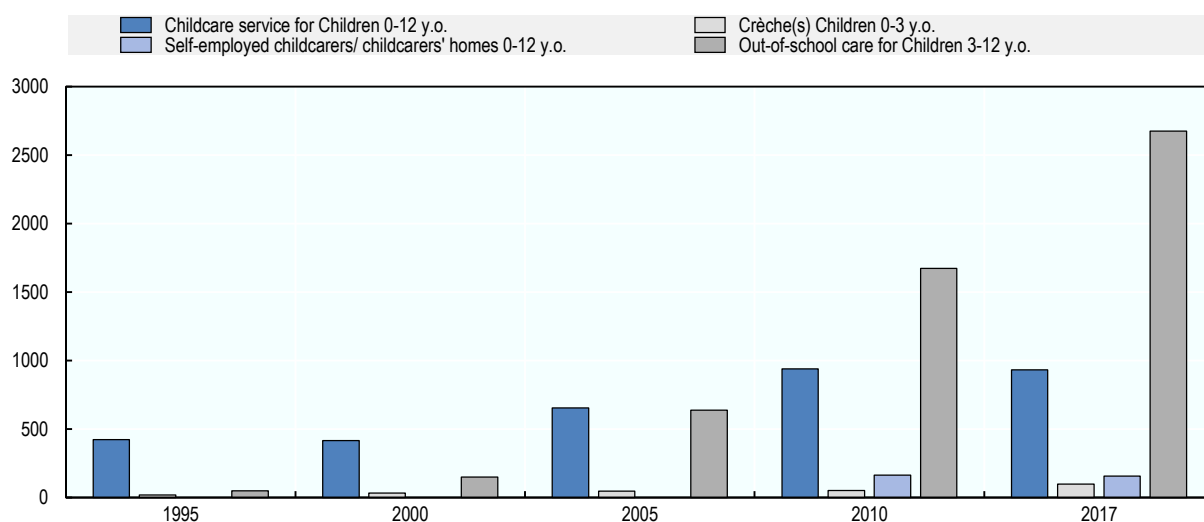
So far, the impact of the Time-Out programme has not been systematically evaluated by the external evaluation or another institution. It is therefore not possible to assess whether and to what extent this form of support has the desired effect on participants. Another limitation is that Time-Out centres currently only target older students between the ages of 12 to 18. If an evaluation shows the system to be effective, it should be considered to expand its services to younger children who may also be disengaged from education. There are already plans to create a similar institution for the integration of children aged five to 12 (the *Systemische Kindereinrichtung mit bindungsorientierter Pädagogik*, SKEI), which would seek to support students' progression in schools and their development of social and emotional skills (MDG, 2022^[5]).

Concerns about lack of coherence between school and out-of-school care

The Government of the German-speaking Community of Belgium has set itself the goal to meet 100% of the Community's demand for childcare by 2025 and the number of children aged 3 to 12 years that are covered by these services has significantly increased between 1995 and 2017 (see Figure 3.7).

Figure 3.7. Childcare services in the German-speaking Community, 1995-2017

Number of children enrolled in different types of childcare service



Source: Government of the German-speaking Community (2018_[63]), *Masterplan 2025*, https://www.bvkt.de/media/masterplan_stand_oktober_2018_definitiv_1.pdf (accessed on 15 December 2021).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/cz6r5y>

There are different forms of out-of-school care (AUBE) offered in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, which happen outside the school. The AUBE is a childcare service for all children from the first year of pre-primary education until the end of primary school. The extracurricular care is clearly separated from everyday school life and usually takes place outside the classroom and during the times when children are not in pre-primary or primary school (MDG, 2021_[64]), either in the morning before school, in the afternoon after school, on Wednesday afternoons or during the schools' staff training days.

There are 25 locations for out-of-school care in the German-speaking Community. Of these, 23 are connected to the regional centre for early childhood and care (*Regionalzentrum für Kleinkindbetreuung*, RZKB). The remaining two locations are the Pater Damian primary school (Eupen) and the Königliches Athenäum Eupen, which only children registered in these schools can attend. The parental contribution is calculated based on their income⁷ and is partially tax deductible up to the age of 12 (MDG, 2021_[64]).

As in most OECD countries, students in the German-speaking Community are expected to work on homework assignments after the end of their school days. Some studies have raised concerns about homework amplifying educational inequalities since advantaged students are more likely to benefit from it, whereas disadvantaged students more often lack access to a quiet place to study, internet access and support from their parents (Rønning, 2011_[65]; OECD, 2020_[50]). OECD PISA data also show that there is a considerable difference in time spent doing homework between advantaged and disadvantaged students and between different types of schools (OECD, 2014_[66]). School-based homework support can be one way of addressing these concerns (OECD, 2020_[50]).

The out-of-school care (AUBE) organised by the Government does not include homework support. While children have the opportunity to do their homework at the AUBE autonomously, supervisors cannot provide them with individual help (Government of the German-speaking Community, 2021_[67]). This is linked to the qualification and role description of staff engaged in out-of-school care. The lack of homework support offered as part of AUBE may place students who would benefit from supervision to improve their academic performance at a disadvantage. Since the German-speaking Community does not collect any socio-economic information on

the families of students relying on AUBE, it is not possible to assess the extent to which these services are used by vulnerable populations or not.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, a significant proportion of homework support in the German-speaking Community is provided outside of schools and the AUBE. A number of providers offer homework support in so-called homework schools (these are the homework school Ephata in Eupen, the homework school ÖSHZ in Raeren, the Red Cross homework school in St. Vith and the Cardijn homework school in Eupen).⁸ The homework schools in Eupen and Raeren (and soon also in Kelmis) are supported by the Competency Centre (*Kompetenzzentrum*) of the Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy (ZFP), which provide some staff and create a network of all homework schools. The homework schools work mainly with volunteers and their services are open to all students in primary and secondary schools. They are either free or charge a small fee of about EUR 1 per hour or EUR 5 per week.

A study shows that supervision in the homework schools is primarily used by primary students but also by some lower secondary and upper secondary students. A large proportion of the students taking part in homework supervision have an immigrant background. Around 58% of the homework carers surveyed indicated that 75-99% of the students in their school have an immigrant background (Sereni, 2011^[45]).

The Parliament and the Government have commissioned a study to evaluate the extent to which students rely on after-school support, whether parents helped with students' homework and whether there were socio-economic discrepancies in the access to either type of support (Moroni, 2020^[68]). According to the survey, about 20% of students reported using tutoring services, of which one quarter were free of charge and three quarters charged tuition. Among these students, half took advantage of private tuition in order to better understand the subject matter, and 45.7% reported seeking extra tuition to improve their grades because their grade promotion was at risk. Parents were also asked whether tutoring was a major financial burden for them. On a scale from 1 ("does not apply at all") to 4 ("fully applies"), parents reported a score of 1.91 on average, suggesting that it is not generally considered a major financial burden, although it may be a significant expense for some families. Moreover, the OECD review team learnt that not all schools and municipalities offer homework support, which creates inequalities in access. Another study from 2011 found that around 13% of primary school students in the German-speaking Community engaged in private tutoring (9.1% "regularly" and 4.9% "rarely"). At the secondary level, almost 30% of parents stated that their child received private tutoring (10.9% "regularly" and 18.9% "rarely"). Since not all parents may be able to afford tutoring, this could also create equity concerns (Sereni, 2011^[45]).

Through the regional centre for early childhood and care (RZKB), holiday care is offered to children and their families. For children from nursery school age, holiday care is available during the school holidays (one week during the autumn, Christmas and Carnival holidays, two weeks during the Easter holidays and 2-3 weeks during the summer holidays) from 7:30-17:30 at various locations, also for children from outside the school. Rates differ depending on the household income.⁹ Other providers, besides the RZKB, also organise holiday care. The Government subsidises municipalities that organise holiday care for children of age 3 to 12, some of which work with local providers from the cultural and sports sector to offer the service. In addition, some private providers offer holiday care.

The Ministry of the German-speaking Community runs or supports a number of programmes offering extra-curricular enrichment in the fields of arts, theatre and sports,¹⁰ alongside a variety of external providers of services that complement the educational and extra-curricular offer of schools. Parents and schools usually approach these providers directly and there is little external co-ordination between them (MDG, 2022^[5]). The main providers include Kaleido Ostbelgien, the Competency Centre of the ZFP, the so-called "homework schools" (*Hausaufgabenschulen*) described above, the Time-Out centres, various sport clubs and youth clubs, the music academy, the Institute for Civic Education at the AHS (*Institut für Demokratiepädagogik*) and others.

Even though there have been discussions about a reform of the system since 2020, the out-of-school care (AUBE), holiday care, homework schools and extracurricular activities remain weakly connected and not integrated into the education system. The Minister of Education and Scientific Research has commissioned an

external legal evaluation of the reorientation of the RZKB in order to assess whether the activities of the RZKB could be integrated into the education system to create synergies between AUBE and the school system. The findings of this evaluation indicate that the RZKB will not become a para-Community institution and will therefore not be integrated into the education system, at least legally.

The link between activities within and outside of schools can have an important impact on students' social integration, their sense of belonging and general well-being. Overall, research from 2016 suggests that students with SEN that are integrated into mainstream education feel well integrated with their classmates and seem to have a good sense of belonging to the school community (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[11]). According to research of the Université Catholique de Louvain, 83.5% of students with SEN that were integrated into mainstream education responded that they are usually with at least one friend in the playground (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[11]). However, students with SEN felt little affiliation with other students outside their school and reported being rarely invited to play outside the classroom, to do extracurricular activities or for birthday parties. Moreover, when asked about the ease of making friends or whether they would like more friends, their answers were quite divided. This is particularly challenging for secondary students, whose sense of affiliation with classmates outside their school was even lower than for primary school students. The lack of connections between in-school and after-school activities in the German-speaking Community may contribute to these findings since it means that there are relatively few activities that bring together students from across the education system outside of school.

At the classroom level, there were no differences in students' sense of affiliation between those integrated into mainstream primary education and those integrated into mainstream secondary education. When parents were asked the same questions about their child being invited for activities with classmates outside of school (to play, for a birthday party or an outing), they had the same perception and considered, on average, that such interactions were rare or limited (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[11]). The OECD review team also observed a disconnect between school policy and youth policy and exchanges between different departments are rather selective and not systematic (see Chapter 2). The youth department's strategy plans (*Jugendstrategieplan*) are not used by the school departments even though there is no comparable school plan. This could limit the policy coherence around child development.

A further challenge related to the support of students in out-of-school activities concerns the organisation of the school calendar. In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, the school rhythm is organised around a long summer break that generally takes place from the beginning of July to the end of August, along with shorter breaks throughout the year.¹¹ This corresponds to the traditional school calendar adopted in many OECD countries, with short breaks during the school year and a long summer break (Graves, 2011_[69]). One concern raised by the traditional school calendar is the learning loss that students may incur during the long summer break, and the lack of alternative educational offerings during these periods. According to the literature, differences in the extent to which learning during the summer is supported by students' family and community widens the achievement gap across social lines (Cooper et al., 1996_[70]). Since socio-economically advantaged children are more likely to have access to additional learning activities during the summer or receive help from their families they tend to experience less of a summer learning loss than their disadvantaged peers (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2007_[71]). Considering that, issues related to summer breaks and the planning of the school rhythm should be taken into account as relevant elements for equity issues. Year-round school calendars that distribute holidays more evenly over the year have been proposed as a way to alleviate this problem (Graves, 2011_[69]). The school rhythm is discussed in more detail in the policy recommendations below.

Limited initial teacher education and continuing professional learning opportunities in the area of inclusive education (for teachers, school leaders and non-teaching staff)

Developing inclusive teaching environments in which all students, but especially diverse ones, can thrive is key to promoting equitable and inclusive learning opportunities and fostering students' well-being (Brussino, 2021_[72]). Teachers play a fundamental role in this since they are tasked to design and implement inclusive

teaching practices that adequately meet diverse students' needs and learning styles. To do so, they must be equipped with the knowledge, skills and tools to incorporate inclusive teaching strategies into their pedagogical approaches, curricula and assessment practices. School leaders and non-teaching staff also have an important role to play in the development of inclusive schools and learning settings.

In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, teachers, school leaders and non-teaching staff do not seem well prepared to teach students with some types of special education needs while reporting greater confidence in dealing with other disorders. A study from the Catholic University of Louvain asked mainstream teachers to report on their sense of competence in supporting students with special education needs, according to the type of needs these students may have (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[1]). Table 3.3 lists the different conditions in decreasing order of teachers' reported confidence in meeting their needs.

Table 3.3. Teachers' confidence in teaching students with different conditions in the German-speaking Community, 2016

"I feel able to provide education that meets the specific needs of students with..."	Average (1 = "strongly disagree"; 7 = "strongly agree")	Standard deviation	N
... mild intellectual disability	5.77	1.239	128
... a physical impairment	5.59	1.398	125
... a high intellectual potential	5.16	1.499	125
... specific learning disabilities (e.g. dyslexia, dyscalculia...)	5	1.489	121
... ADHD	4.89	1.494	124
... behavioural problems	4.7	1.393	127
... speech and language disorders (e.g. dysphasia...)	4.62	1.555	122
... a visual impairment	4.6	1.775	124
... a hearing impairment	4.6	1.839	122
... dyspraxia	4.39	1.68	104
... moderate or severe intellectual disability	3.28	1.68	127
... an autistic disorder	3.25	1.829	124

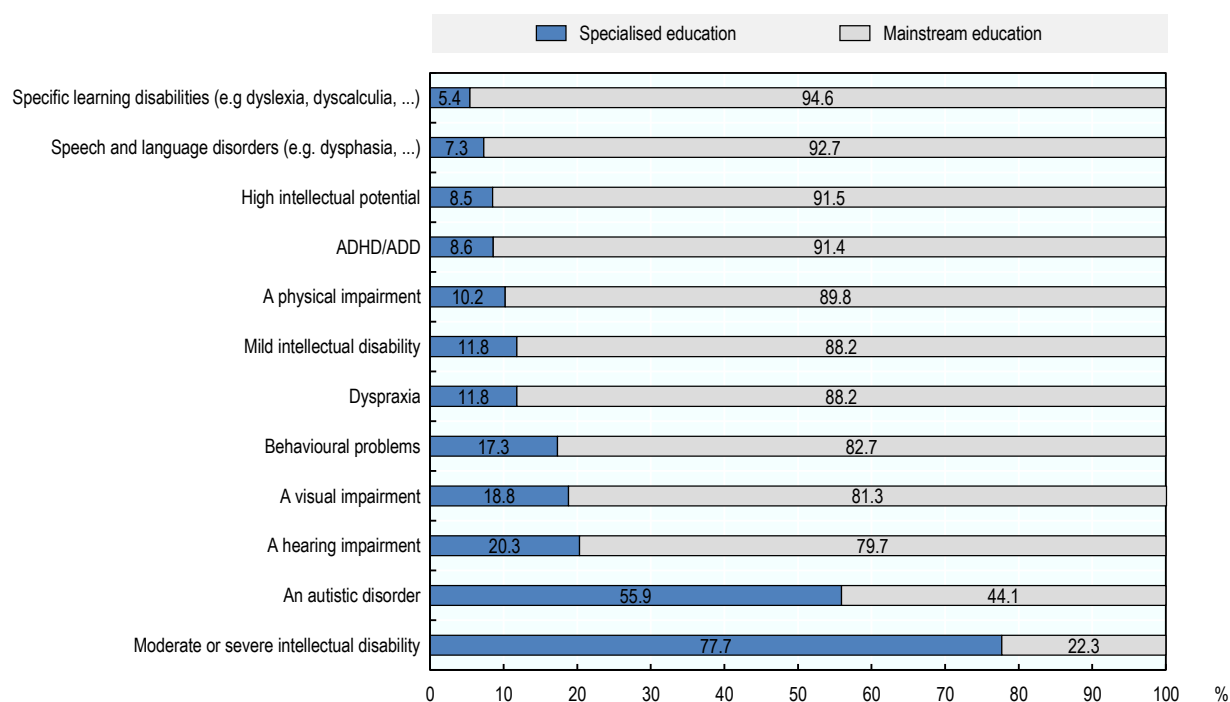
Note: Scale from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree; Valid N: 94.

Source: Université Catholique de Louvain (2016^[1]), *L'intégration d'élèves à besoins spécifiques dans l'enseignement ordinaire belge germanophone: étude menée auprès des élèves intégrés, de leur famille et des acteurs scolaires*, <https://bit.ly/31Ny5NR> (accessed on 15 December 2021).


On a scale from 1 to 7, mainstream teachers reported confidence in their ability to support children with mild intellectual disability, physical impairments, high intellectual potential and specific learning disabilities. Slightly lower levels of confidence were reported when teaching students with ADHD, behavioural disorders, speech and language disorders, visual and hearing impairments and dyspraxia. On average, teachers felt least confident in their ability to support students with moderate or severe intellectual disability and autistic disorder.

When asked about the appropriate setting for students with different types of special education needs, moderate or severe intellectual disability and autistic disorders were the only conditions for which a majority of mainstream teachers (56% and 77% respectively) reported that they would be better educated in special schools (Figure 3.8). For all other types of SEN, the large majority of mainstream teachers (all but 20% or less) felt that mainstream education could provide an appropriate setting for students. Educational support staff provided similar responses and most of them reported that only children with moderate or severe intellectual disability or autistic disorders should be educated in special education, whereas mainstream education was thought to be suitable for other types of special needs (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[1]).

Figure 3.8. Teachers' attitudes on the best setting for students with special education needs, 2016



Source: Université Catholique de Louvain (2016^[11]), *L'intégration d'élèves à besoins spécifiques dans l'enseignement ordinaire belge germanophone: étude menée auprès des élèves intégrés, de leur famille et des acteurs scolaires*, <https://bit.ly/31Ny5NR> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

StatLink  <https://stat.link/gyimkb>

One of the ways to support the inclusion of students with SEN in mainstream schools is through the adequate training of teaching professionals (Tremblay, 2012^[73]). In general, valuing diversity and effectively fostering inclusion in the classroom depends on ensuring that teachers possess the right set of skills and knowledge (UNESCO, 2020^[74]). To achieve this, teachers should be acknowledged as lifelong learners who understand and can create rich and inclusive learning environments (Brussino, 2021^[72]). Equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills for inclusive teaching should start with their initial teacher education (ITE) (OECD, 2010^[75]). ITE plays a central role in preparing teachers since it creates the foundation for their continuing professional learning. The objectives of ITE, the competences and contents covered, and the types of training and qualifications offered by ITE providers can influence teachers' preparedness for the inclusive classroom.

The Louvain study also examined whether mainstream teachers in the German-speaking Community valued updating their knowledge about students with special education needs and how, over the last two years, teachers have developed their knowledge. Table 3.4 shows the teachers' attitudes towards different aspects of professional development. Most teachers considered professional development to be important and useful and reported that they were interested in updating their knowledge. However, teachers also agreed that updating their knowledge takes a lot of time and is costly (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016^[11]).

Table 3.4. Mainstream teachers' attitudes towards professional development in the German-speaking Community, 2016

	Average (1 = "strongly disagree"; 7 = "strongly agree")	Standard deviation	N
Updating my knowledge is important	5.71	1.529	126
Updating my knowledge is useful	5.97	1.332	125
Updating my knowledge is interesting	5.97	1.295	125
Updating my knowledge takes a lot of time	5.74	1.355	124
Updating my knowledge is very costly	5.38	1.627	123

Note: Scale from 1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly agree; Valid N: 116.

Source: Université Catholique de Louvain (2016_[1]), *L'intégration d'élèves à besoins spécifiques dans l'enseignement ordinaire belge germanophone: étude menée auprès des élèves intégrés, de leur famille et des acteurs scolaires*, <https://bit.ly/31Ny5NR> (accessed on 15 December 2021).

The study also investigated the frequency with which teachers in the German-speaking Community updated their knowledge about students with special education needs through in-service teacher training. About 46% of mainstream teachers reported that they take part in relevant training at least once a year, 7% take part annually and the remaining 46% had not taken part in training on special educational needs over the past two years. Exchanges with fellow teachers and educational coaches are another important source of professional learning for teachers. Nearly half of the teachers reported that they had at least weekly discussions with their colleagues or a tutor. Teachers also engaged in specialist reading and internet research (via Google), albeit slightly less frequently. Other web resources are rarely used (50-70% never use them) and independent research based on video resources, via encyclopaedias, television or radio are only conducted, on average, once or twice a year.

ITE alone cannot fully prepare teachers for their profession and some skills and pedagogical strategies can be better learnt in the classroom while teaching. Therefore, continuing professional learning (CPL) is crucial to enable teachers to respond to the challenges they encounter in the classroom by consolidating their knowledge and competences and learning new skills (Brussino, 2021_[72]; OECD, 2011_[76]). Strategies to promote teacher capacity for inclusive teaching can range from induction programmes and mentoring to formal and informal in-service training (OECD, 2020_[77]). CPL is also important to expand teachers' skills and knowledge in response to changing student demographics as well as unforeseen developments, such as those related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which required teachers to quickly develop their capacity for distance and online teaching (OECD, 2014_[78]).

Researchers from the Université Catholique de Louvain measured teachers' years of professional experience with different types of SEN. Many of the mainstream teachers surveyed had no experience with students with visual impairments (68%), dyspraxia (67%), hearing impairments (64%), autistic disorders (60%), moderate or severe intellectual disability (56%), physical impairments (48%), speech or language impairments (47%) or high intellectual potential (37%). The tutoring staff often reported that they had no experience with students with high intellectual potential (60.4%), visual impairments (56%), hearing impairments (42%), dyspraxia (33%), physical impairments (32%), speech or language difficulties (30.6%) or moderate or severe intellectual disability (26%) (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[1]).

Educational assistants in mainstream schools with SEN students reported having most experience with students with behavioural problems, mild intellectual disability, specific learning difficulties or ADHD. School leaders reported having most experience with students with special learning needs, ADHD, behavioural problems or mild intellectual disability. About 40-50% of the school leaders reported having 12 or more years of experience with these types of students. Their experience with other types of SEN (e.g. with moderate to severe intellectual disability, students with autistic disorder, visual or hearing impairments, or dyspraxia) was much shorter (between 1 and 3 years) or non-existent (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[1]).

The evidence presented so far suggest that the training and professional learning of teachers and school leaders could be a challenge for the German-speaking Community. In particular, their beliefs on the integration of certain

groups of students with SEN, their limited professional experience and low self-reported confidence suggest the need for increased training in the field. A 2020 evaluation concluded that training on these topics should be given more space as differentiation and special education are becoming increasingly important, in order to sensitise teachers and enable them to cater to all students' needs (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]). A majority of the teachers responding to the survey reported to be in favour of "sound training in the field of special needs education" at both the pre-primary level (68%) and the primary level (77%).

There is some debate over the reform of initial teacher education, in particular on whether it would be helpful to extend the initial teacher education in order to meet the increased demands on the profession (for an overview of initial teacher education in the German-speaking Community, see Chapter 4). A longer training duration would give student teachers the opportunity to gain more practical experience, to work on content in more detail or to choose a learning focus (e.g. foreign language didactics, special education or computer science). However, only 26% of the survey participants considered it sensible to introduce master's level studies (five years of study in total) for primary school teachers and 15% for pre-primary teachers. This discussion adds a layer of complexity to the general challenge of ITE in the field of special education needs (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]). There are also concerns that requiring a master's level qualification could lead to tensions and inequalities between new and experienced teachers. An alternative could be to extend the duration of the bachelor's degree by one year.

Despite the limitations described above, there are several options for teachers working with students with SEN to receive additional training. All support teachers as well as all primary and pre-primary teachers (in the future also speech therapists) who work in the context of low-threshold support are obliged to complete additional training on special education needs. This training is based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) and corresponds to 15 ECTS points. It is provided by the *Autonome Hochschule Ostbelgien* (the German-speaking Community's only higher education institution) with two guest lecturers from the Intercantonal School of Special Needs Education Zurich (MDG, 2022^[5]). Teachers or paramedics who work in the context of high-threshold support are obliged to complete the same additional training as support teachers, corresponding to 10 ECTS points. There is also compulsory additional training for integration teachers (MDG, 2022^[5]).

The compulsory training is complemented by voluntary sensitisation programmes for teachers as well as training and further education in the field of giftedness. One training is offered in co-operation with the University of Mons ("*Certificat d'université en intervention auprès des enfants et des adolescents à hauts potentiels en difficulté*", 14 ECTS) and another with WWU Münster and Akademie Franz Hitze Haus ("*Echa-Diploma of advanced Studies - Specialist in Gifted Education and Talent Development*", 15 ECTS) (MDG, 2022^[5]).

The ZFP can also provide counselling to teachers, school leaders and students' guardians on a range of topics, including giftedness, pedagogical counselling for newcomer students and support in the area of language learning. Moreover, they provide special education counselling on the compensation for disadvantage and grade protection measures as well as on learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, other socio-emotional disorders and physical impairments. These resources are a valuable support for all stakeholders who can rely on the specialised experience of the ZFP to get informed and update their practices for diverse students.

The *Autonome Hochschule Ostbelgien* has further education offers in areas such as supporting gifted students, differentiation (concrete approaches to dealing with heterogeneity), heterogeneous learning groups and internal differentiation in mathematics lessons. Starting with the school year 2021/22, teachers will also be able to participate in a free and certified training on supporting gifted students, which will be offered by the University of Mons (in French). This course was organised in collaboration between the University of Mons and the Government of the German-speaking Community in order to train staff to support gifted students while deepening the synergies between the education system and external partners. Participants will receive a university certificate of 14 ECTS upon successful completion of the course (Government of the German-speaking Community of Belgium, 2021^[79]).

Even though a number of trainings and professional learning opportunities are offered in the area of SEN, the OECD review team gained the impression during interviews that these opportunities are not offered regularly enough. This is also the case in the area of professional learning for students with autism. A 2016 study conducted by the Catholic University of Louvain also reported that teachers felt particularly unprepared to support students with autism as well as those with intellectual disabilities (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[11]). Furthermore, most training and professional learning does not seem to cover broader areas of diversity, equity and inclusion such as multiculturalism and supporting newcomer students and other diverse students.

The system for supporting students with special education needs and newcomers is rigid at times and would benefit from greater coherence in the identification of students' needs

Despite the support available for students with special education needs in the German-speaking Community, the system can be overly bureaucratic and rigid. If a child or young person may need special education support (i.e. if general educational measures in the classroom are no longer sufficient), a request for an “integration project” is initiated through Kaleido. The request must be made in writing by the parents or guardian or by the principal of the mainstream school. If the mainstream school wants to initiate the procedure, the parents or guardian must agree. The principal of the mainstream school can contact the Support Conference, if those responsible for the student do not agree. The application must be submitted by 1 February at the latest for special education support to be provided in a mainstream or special school from the following school year (Université Catholique de Louvain, 2016_[11]). After receiving the application, Kaleido establishes a reasoned opinion within the framework of a multidisciplinary examination and stipulates, in a binding manner:

1. If the student needs special education support.
2. The nature of the “disability”.
3. In which area(s) specialised pedagogical support should be provided.
4. The nature of the special education support required (e.g. therapeutic measures, adaptations).

By 1 May of the school year preceding the year in which the support measures or an integration project are to begin, Kaleido sends its opinion to the parents or legal guardians; to the head of the regular school that the student attends or will attend in accordance with the parents' wishes; and to the school leader of the special school with which the desired regular school has been collaborating up to now, insofar as the opinion stipulates that special pedagogical support is necessary. If parents wish to enrol a child with a confirmed need for special education support in a mainstream school as an “integration project”, they inform the school leader who then brings together all the stakeholders involved in the integration project and convenes a Support Conference.

At this conference, the members establish the modalities and objectives of the support and the means necessary to best accompany the student. Recommendations on the number of hours of support and the final decision by the head teacher of the special school are made by 15 June. During the school year, several Support Conferences are held to reassess the situation of the integrated students. This application process seems quite lengthy and students may need to wait for nearly a year to receive support since there appears to be only one deadline to apply for support. This annual deadline was also pointed out as too rigid by a Citizens' Council convened in 2021 (PDG, 2021_[80]). Nonetheless, for new students arriving in the Community throughout the year, it is possible to receive support even after the deadline has passed.

In the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector, there are different measures to support students with special education needs, such as the compensation for disadvantage (see above) and partial qualifications. However, these support measures are not sufficiently known among all stakeholders and there is uncertainty about their use (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020_[15]).

The German-speaking Community's SEN support system also suffers from a lack of clarity and coherence around its approach to defining and classifying students' special educational needs. While the system does not aim at grouping students to assign them support measures, it still categorises them in different ways. First, the system still incorporates the five groups of different needs (learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities,

developmental delays, socio-emotional and medical issues), each of which is eligible for specific support measures. Although certain disorders can fall in more than one group, which grants some flexibility, it is not clear how the groups contribute to the efficiency of the support system or the process of identifying students' needs. Second, there is a clear distinction between the types of support measures offered to students with SEN, gifted students and newcomer students. Newcomer students almost exclusively receive language support, even though some of the support offered to students with SEN could be generalised and adapted to newcomer students too. This includes, for example, the use of individual learning plans and the provision of low-threshold support to help them catch up with their peers. A more universal and inclusive approach could make these interventions more accessible and reduce the need for separate systems and rules governing the support for distinct groups of students. A more inclusive approach to pedagogy and support measures would also make the system more adaptive and prepared for future social changes.

Another challenge concerns the limitations of the support measures in place for newcomer students. Although the available support is very valuable, its focus is exclusively on learning the language of instruction. There is evidence that supports the importance of preparatory classes for the teaching and learning of the language of instruction, as they offer more time and space for the learning than mainstream classes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019^[81]). This can be particularly relevant, for instance, in secondary education where students are older and less likely to pick up the new language. Moreover, in secondary education, the curriculum content and the academic requirements are increasingly difficult and require a certain proficiency in the language of instruction to be assimilated. Nevertheless, the literature shows that preparatory classes can also hinder integration by separating newcomers from natives (Ibid). This separation can delay the educational progress of newcomer students if the focus is placed too narrowly on language acquisition rather than the curriculum more broadly (Nusche, 2009^[82]). For instance, in Sweden, researchers have criticised teaching the language of instruction in isolation from the subject matters of the mainstream curriculum since this can deprive students of the contextualisation needed to promote language acquisition (Nilsson and Bunar, 2015^[83]; Short, 2002^[84]). Where students do not have access to effective language and learning support, the full transition from preparatory to mainstream classes can become problematic (Nilsson and Axelsson, 2013^[85]). It is therefore important for policy makers to consider the possible ramifications of offering language support in a segregate setting, in particular for longer time periods, and to consider the role of social contact for integration of the students and their access to the mainstream curriculum.

In response to this tension, some countries focus on providing students not only with language learning support but also with broader curricula of preparatory classes. Eurydice (2019^[81]) shows that while most countries offer support for the language of instruction in preparatory classes, some integrate the learning of the students with teaching in mathematics, foreign language(s), natural sciences, social studies, and other subjects. For instance, the report shows that in the French and Flemish Communities of Belgium, these classes offer broader curricula. In particular, the French Community includes in its preparatory classes mathematics, natural sciences, and social studies, beyond language. Flanders offer an even more extended curriculum, which includes mathematics, social studies, information and communications technology (ICT), intercultural education and religion/ethics (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019^[81]).

It may be relevant for the German-speaking Community of Belgium to consider an expansion of the curriculum of their preparatory classes in order to strengthen the support for newcomer students. Some changes are already underway. According to the Decree on Measures in the Education System 2022, the hourly capital for the language learning classes in the regular secondary education system is to be expanded by four hours for the area in mathematics teacher to promote the mathematical competences of newcomer students. The mathematics lessons for newcomer students will also be taught in German, so that these lessons can promote their language acquisition and ultimately facilitate the integration of these students into mainstream education.

In addition, most education systems ensure the provision of psycho-social support to students with an immigrant background. In the German-speaking Community organising this support is the responsibility of local authorities or schools (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019^[81]). This may limit the scope of support received by

some students and lead to different levels of support across municipalities or schools, which should be carefully monitored by policy makers of the Community in order to avoid inequities.

There is a lack of disaggregated data, monitoring and evaluation

Establishing system-level frameworks to monitor the access, participation and achievement of all learners is fundamental to evaluating the progress towards reaching diversity, inclusion and equity goals and to subsequently inform policies in these areas. This includes monitoring the performance of specific student groups, such as those with special education needs or from an immigrant background. National research on the association of student and school characteristics with student performance can identify the type of information that is most pertinent to collect systematically and to include in a national indicator framework for education (OECD, 2013^[46]).

Additionally, there is a need to collect information on broader aspects of educational quality, such as students' attitudes, motivation and well-being and the overall teaching and learning environment in schools. As part of this effort, there should be consideration on how to best include the perceptions of stakeholders in the national monitoring system, in particular concerning the education system's inclusivity. One way in which school systems can solicit the perspectives of stakeholders is to administer a questionnaire to a sample of students, parents, school leaders and teachers to collect their views about a range of aspects, including their academic, psychological, physical, social and material well-being.

High-performing school systems also need to systematically evaluate programmes targeted at improving inclusion and equity in education. To facilitate the evaluation of their effectiveness and impact, it is important that all new programmes are designed with an evaluation component, including targets and baseline indicators. Evaluation results should then be used to make strategic decisions about specific programmes, including their discontinuation, improvement and re-design, or adjustments to the implementation process.

In the German-speaking Community of Belgium, several elements of the monitoring and evaluation systems are currently underdeveloped. The academic outcomes and well-being are not systematically monitored in a disaggregated manner for a variety of diverse students. Doing so would support policy makers' ability to differentiate between different groups of students and help them develop targeted policies and practices. Data collections should be disaggregated by relevant dimensions, not only based on gender and potential special education needs, but also based on their immigrant status or other individual characteristics where allowed by the legal system. The trade-off between privacy concerns and the system's ability to collect data to monitor sensitive student outcomes in order to better respond to their needs should be taken into account when designing monitoring systems.

A further challenge in the German-speaking Community is that policies, programmes and projects on inclusive education are rarely evaluated. This makes it challenging to highlight effective programmes and pilot projects and to scale them up across the Community. For instance, the Community could evaluate the impact of support teachers on students learning or the effect of mainstreaming students with special education needs in order to decide whether and how to expand policies to the whole student population.

Policy recommendations

Place students and their individual needs at the centre of learning

Placing students and their individual needs at the centre of learning will be key to developing a more inclusive education system. Several policy recommendations are developed in this section to guide the system towards this goal. These include streamlining the process for students with SEN to obtain support, strengthening differentiated teaching and student learning, integrating mandatory training in the area of inclusive education

during initial teacher education and providing regular professional learning opportunities on the subject for teachers, school leaders and non-teaching staff.

Adopt a broader definition of inclusion and implement it coherently across the education system

As discussed in the preceding section of this chapter, the German-speaking Community of Belgium uses a relatively narrow definition of inclusive education. Adopting a broader definition of inclusivity in the education system could enable the Community to further strengthen its focus on supporting all students in mainstream schools according to their individual needs. Inclusion in education is defined by UNESCO as “an on-going process aimed at offering quality education for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities, eliminating all forms of discrimination”. In an inclusive education system, all personal differences (with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, indigenous status, language, health status, etc.) are acknowledged and respected, and the core principle is that every learner matters and matters equally (Cerna et al., 2021^[3]).

The promotion of inclusive education builds on a commitment to anti-discrimination policies and the identification of compensatory mechanisms in education to create systems that are affordable, accessible and adaptable to learners’ needs. Inclusive education can be contrasted with policies based on separation, which aim to create homogenous groups within a heterogeneous student population and which tend to result in the isolation of some student groups, given the broader context of social and economic inequalities and power imbalances (Cerna et al., 2021^[3]). Adopting a broader definition of inclusion would help the German-speaking Community in strengthening its commitment to support each student based on their specific needs and to overcome the focus on a limited set of student groups. For instance, this would entail considering not only students with SEN, newcomer students and gifted students, but also the specific needs and challenges of girls and boys in schools, and of students who belong to the LGBTQI+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex) community.

Such a shift could also provide a basis for implementing legislation in line with the recommendations of the Citizens’ Council (2021^[80]), which underlined the importance of strengthening the focus on differentiated learning. In particular, the Council noted that the German-speaking Community system seems to be very performance-oriented and presupposes homogeneity, with all students being required to achieve the same level of competence at the end of the school year. The Council instead suggested that core curricula should be made more flexible to allow students to learn at their own pace and to develop their potential in the best possible way. There is already some flexibility regarding students with special education needs who are not taught according to the core curricula and for whom the core curricula’s standards form the basis for differentiation and the development of individual support plans.

An effort to create more flexibility would be supported by adopting a broader concept of inclusion that considers inclusion as a process of reducing barriers that limit the presence, participation and achievement of any learners. Adopting such a vision of inclusion would be instrumental for changing the education system to fit the students, rather than focusing on changing the students to fit the system, and acknowledging that the source of students’ exclusion lies in the structure of the school system, rather than their individual characteristics (UNICEF, 2014^[43]). The Citizens’ Council of the German-speaking Community underlined this point, by affirming that increasing the inclusion of children with special education needs in mainstream schools would allow the German-speaking Community to become a pioneer (PDG, 2021^[80]).

Despite some scholars’ concerns about the limitations of fully inclusive systems, evidence suggests that all learners can attain high levels of achievement in an inclusive school system (AuCoin, Porter and Baker-Korotkov, 2020^[86]). Evidence from New Brunswick (Canada) shows that this is possible by anchoring the public education system in the commitment that all students can succeed, which is enhanced by teachers seeking out and using effective instructional strategies and sustained by investments in professional learning and capacity building (Forlin et al., 2011^[87]). In 2013, New Brunswick (Canada) introduced the Policy 322 on Inclusive Education, a legally-binding policy at the province level that sets out the requirements of an inclusive education

system for all public schools, overseen by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The policy lays out detailed standards for inclusion, including requirements for all school personnel to ensure that each student can fully participate in a common learning environment by applying student-centred learning and providing accommodations, with variations occurring only under strictly limited conditions. Segregated and alternative education programmes for students enrolled from pre-primary to Grade eight (ISCED 3) are prohibited (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013^[88]).

Box 3.2. The 2018 law on inclusive education in Portugal

With its 2018 law on inclusive education and accompanying policy measures, Portugal has made a clear commitment to developing an inclusive education system, supporting equity and inclusion for all learners. The Decree Law No. 54/2018 states that “schools shall include in their guidance documents the lines of action to create a school culture where everyone finds opportunities to learn and the conditions to fully realise this right, responding to the needs of each pupil, valuing diversity and promoting equity and non-discrimination in accessing the curriculum and the progression in the educational system.”

The law on inclusive education establishes the principles and regulations that ensure inclusion as a process, according to which the education system must adapt to respond to the diversity of needs and capabilities of each student, through increased participation in the learning processes and educational community. It reflects a shift away from the rationale that it is necessary to categorise to intervene. Rather, it seeks to ensure that all learners attain the goals delineated in a *Students' Profile by the End of Compulsory Schooling*, through accommodations and differentiated learning that allow each learner to progress in the curriculum in a way that ensures their educational success.

Accordingly, Portugal’s new law on inclusive education does not require students to have a formal diagnosis to receive specific support. Furthermore, the new law abandons the categorisation of learners, including the categories associated with special education needs. As such, it removes segregation and discrimination based on diagnostic or clinical labels and special legislation frameworks for learners with special needs from the educational system. Moreover, the law removes the restricted concept of “support measures for learners with special education needs”. Rather, it takes a broader view based on a whole school approach that considers multiple dimensions and the interactions between them.

Source: Ministry of Education of Portugal (2018^[89]), *Decree 54/2018*, http://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/EEspecial/dl_54_2018.pdf (accessed on 15 December 2021).

Overall, it would be helpful to link the definition of inclusion to the overall vision (*Gesamtvision Bildung*), the core curricula (*Rahmenpläne*) and the system’s mission statement (*Leitbild*) to ensure coherence across the education system and its approach to inclusive education. It will also be important to ensure a coherent understanding of and approach to inclusive education in schools. Several projects in the German-speaking Community could provide positive examples in this process. This includes the Joint Primary School in Bütgenbach, where a mainstream school and a special school were merged on a campus with a joint management team and where students with and without SEN attend the same classes, making use of team teaching (PDG, 2021^[80]). Another example is the Robert Schuman Institute in Eupen, where students with SEN, newcomer students and other diverse students are taught together (see Box 3.3).

Box 3.3. Good examples of local practices in the German-speaking Community of Belgium to support inclusion that could be built upon

The German-speaking Community of Belgium offers some good practices of schools implementing a coherent approach to inclusion. One example is the Joint Primary School in Bütgenbach (*Gemeinsame Grundschule Bütgenbach*), which united the former municipal school and the special school in one school building under two providers. The school is led by two principals, one from the Community and one from the ZFP, and receives resources from both networks. It offers joint teaching, which is ensured by team teaching (double staffing of classes). The school currently has about 190 pre-primary and primary students, about 24 of whom have recognised special education needs (and receive high-threshold support). Other students can receive low-threshold support. One of the pre-primary classes (the “rainbow class”) caters specifically to the needs of children with multiple disabilities or autism. Teachers use a variety of strategies (including differentiation) to respond to the needs of all students and they are supported by a team of speech therapists, special education needs teachers, therapists and a paramedical co-ordinator. The ZFP provides additional support to the teachers and the school. The school has a farm with horses for riding therapy and different therapy rooms. It considers itself an inclusion-oriented school as it is on the way of becoming an inclusive school.

Another positive example of inclusive practices in the German-speaking Community is the Robert Schuman Institute in Eupen, which is the largest secondary school with around 860 students. It offers 14 different fields of study in technical and vocational education and offers students a pathway to obtaining the Abitur (final year examination) and progressing to higher education. The school incorporates students with special education needs as well as newcomer students and students with an immigrant background. The school also incorporates a centre for part-time vocational education (TZU). Over 200 full- and part-time teachers strive to support all students with their different abilities to reach their potential (Robert Schuman Institute, 2021^[90]). Teachers apply differentiation to respond to the needs of all students and engage in a project on diversity in classrooms. Teachers are supported internally by a team of educators, psychologists and therapists, and externally through the ZFP and youth workers. Students with SEN are taught by a team of two teachers, one from the Robert Schuman Institute and one from the ZFP. Newcomer students who do not speak the language of instruction are placed in newcomer class where they remain one to two years in order to learn German and receive targeted support. Once they reach a certain level of German, they are integrated into mainstream classes but are still supported in their language learning.

Source: Authors' interviews.

Adopting a broader definition of inclusion could support the learning of students with special education needs in mainstream schools, but it would also help to provide a welcoming environment for students from other diverse backgrounds, such as newcomer and immigrant students, gifted students and students from different socio-economic backgrounds. This would entail working towards a cultural change driven by clear goals for inclusion that are reflected in curricula and learning progressions, in the continuing professional learning of teachers and in the staff mix in schools.

Streamline components of the education system that provide support to diverse student groups

To help place students at the centre of learning, the German-speaking Community should also undertake efforts to streamlining the provision of support for diverse student groups. As mentioned above, the process for students that need extra resources or teaching to apply for support is quite bureaucratic and rigid, which can cause delays in the time it takes for students to get the support they need. Measures to streamline this process

could improve the equity and inclusivity of the system. First, 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. Moreover, flexibility in responding 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.

Secondly, since the procedure for demanding support for a student with SEN is lengthy and bureaucratic, greater flexibility in the system could reduce the waiting time for students to receive the necessary support. For instance, the Citizens' Council (2021^[80]) recommended that the deadline of 1 February for requesting support be made more flexible. Either more deadlines should be offered throughout the year in order to shorten students' waiting time or students should be able to receive support while they are waiting for an official decision to be taken. Furthermore, the support should not be rigidly guided by a fixed number of hours per student, which are currently defined by Kaleido Ostbelgien. Instead, specialised support teachers should be able to adapt the work and time needed for each student based on more flexible arrangements and their own evaluation of the child's needs. The outputs from the meetings in the Citizens' Council (2021^[80]) also suggested that the core competence of the ZFP should be shifted to advising and supporting mainstream schools and parents, rather than being involved in the actual schooling of children with special education needs. This would focus their competences and expertise on guiding and supporting practitioners, while leaving the classroom choices and activities to teachers and schools, which can more flexibly respond on a case-to-case basis.

Concerning students with an immigrant background and specifically newcomer students, the language support system should be made more flexible and adapted to students' needs. In particular, the language support programme should be more easily extendable beyond two years where necessary, as could be the case for late newcomer students. Although, starting with the school year 2021/22, the length of language programmes can be exceptionally extended by a maximum of one year at the secondary level, schools, teachers and families should be made aware of this option to ensure that students who require it can take advantage of it. Moreover, the Community should ensure that the exceptionality clause to the extension does not become too restrictive for students needing extra support. At the same time, students should not remain in separate settings for longer than necessary and should be mainstreamed into regular classes as soon as possible in order to avoid their exclusion.

The Community should thus strike a balance between the need to support students' language learning and that of integrating them into mainstream education to ensure that they participate in learning of other subjects, develop social skills and take part in the daily life of their peers in mainstream classes. This could be achieved by supporting students' additional language learning needs even after they have been integrated into mainstream classes, which would require teachers to be trained in supporting students with limited proficiency in the language of instruction. Some countries have pursued this goal by adopting practices such as language-sensitive teaching, which is based on the notion that "all teachers are language teachers" and that children's language skills should be developed in all school subjects (European Commission/ECORYS, 2018^[91]). In Austria, for instance, the Ministry of Education's Language Competency Centre set up an online platform with information and tools to support teachers with the subject-oriented language development of students across the curriculum (Sprachenkompetenzzentrum (The language competency centre), 2021^[92]).

Lastly, language support should play a more prominent role in the inclusion of younger students at the pre-primary level. At the moment, language support at this level is only offered in classes with at least 40% of children who do not speak the language of instruction, while others are encouraged to learn the language through play. While younger children do learn through play as well as interactions with other children and with pre-school teachers, structured language learning could support their development at a key age. Studies show that children's development of receptive language and speech production is at its highest between the ages of 0 and 2. Young children are thus learning from their environments well before they enter school and set the foundation for future learning as their brains develop. Investing in children's development at an early age can therefore produce significant gains in language learning (National Research Council; Institute of Medicine, 2000^[93]; Shuey and Kankaraš, 2018^[94]). The development of higher cognitive functions similarly peaks at an early age but it continues for a longer time until around age 16 to 18.

Given the critical role of the early years for language development, it is important that young children are exposed to environments where the language of the country of destination is spoken, as is the case in pre-primary education. If newcomer children are only exposed to the language of instruction once they turn five and enter compulsory education (or later than that), it may be necessary to provide them with additional support for their language learning. Similarly, if a significant share of students in pre-primary education groups are non-native speakers, it may be necessary to help their language learning progress as they may not otherwise be sufficiently exposed to the language of instruction. These interventions may benefit not only immigrant students, but also students from disadvantaged backgrounds that may be lagging behind in their language learning. Box 3.4 describes several countries that provide language learning support for children in pre-primary education.

Box 3.4. Language learning support for children in pre-primary education

Across OECD countries, some education systems have implemented language support for students in pre-primary education, often targeting immigrant or disadvantaged students, who may need additional support to improve their language skills before accessing primary education.

Pre-primary language learning support in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, young children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are entitled to receive language-development support. These children can participate in targeted programmes at the pre-primary level (*vooren vroegschoolse educaties*) that provide support before and during the first years of school. All young children (age 2.5 to 4) who are part of this programme receive 10 hours of language development per week. For the rest of the day, the children attend the same early childhood and education programme as their non-targeted peers. Findings from the Pre-COOL (*cohortonderzoek onderwijsloopbanen*) national cohort study show that this approach is effective (OECD, 2018^[10]; Leseman and al., 2017^[95]).

Pre-primary language learning support in Germany

Germany uses a screening processes to identify pre-school children in need of additional language support, which has been introduced in the majority of the federal states. These assessments are usually implemented 12 to 24 months before children's transition to school. Based on the assessments, the most common practice to improve children's skills in German is the child-oriented "language education embedded into daily routines" (*alltagsintegrierte Sprachliche Bildung*). This seeks to integrate language education into everyday life and apply it to typical daily situations (such as meals, personal hygiene, pick-up and drop times, etc.) as well as planned and free play, and educational situations inside and outside the day-care centres (such as projects, excursions, joint activities and events, etc.). This approach can be aimed at the entire group of children, smaller groups or, if necessary, individual children. Such high-quality, language education support requires pedagogical specialists with specialised knowledge, practical knowledge and skills (especially related to interaction and conversation strategies, observation and analysis) (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (Ministry for Family, Pensioners, Women and Youth, 2021^[96]; OECD, 2017^[97]).

Sources: OECD (2017^[97]), *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264276253-en>; OECD (2018^[10]), *The Resilience of Students with an Immigrant Background: Factors that Shape Well-being*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264292093-en>.

Strengthen differentiated teaching and student learning

Adapting teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of all students in the classroom, for example through differentiation, is at the core of inclusive education systems. Differentiation or differentiated instruction is defined as “an approach to teaching that involves offering several different learning experiences and proactively addressing students’ varied needs to maximise learning opportunities for each student in the classroom. It requires teachers to be flexible in their approach and adjust the curriculum and presentation of information to learners of different abilities” (UNESCO, n.d._[98]).

Systematic differentiated instruction based on a diagnosis of learning levels could support the German-speaking Community in engaging all students and ensuring that teachers respond to different needs and learning styles. Differentiated instruction is particularly important to support the learning and well-being of gifted students, and to respond adequately to the needs and learning styles of students with special education needs (Brussino, 2021_[72]). For instance, to promote the learning of students with learning disabilities or mental disorders, it is important that teachers are adequately prepared to incorporate behavioural interventions and practices (Mezzanotte, 2020_[4]). These include the positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviour (for instance, providing positive feedback and encouragement more frequently than negative feedback), generalised behavioural intervention techniques (for example, allowing for sufficient opportunities for movement) and behavioural prompts (such as visual cues in the classroom or on the desk (Mezzanotte, 2020_[4])). Differentiated instruction can also play an important role for the learning of immigrant students since it takes into consideration their proficiency in the host country language and makes learning contents comprehensible to them (Fairbairn and Jones-Vo, 2010_[99]).

Several OECD school systems have taken steps to make differentiation more systematic, which could provide lessons for the German-speaking Community. In New Brunswick, Canada, for example, “Policy 322” requires public schools and school districts to implement inclusive school leadership. This includes promoting adequate professional learning opportunities for teachers and school staff and supporting teachers and school staff in the implementation of inclusive practices, such as differentiation and the Universal Design for Learning.¹² Under Policy 322, principals should also ensure that all academic and behavioural interventions implemented within the school are evidence-based and aimed at supporting diverse students’ needs and learning styles. Furthermore, the policy requires principals to foster school- and community-level partnerships to achieve the growth goals identified in each student’s personalised learning plan (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013_[100]). This example from New Brunswick shows how legislation could help strengthen measures to ensure that teaching practices are suited for all students and their individual needs. Notably, New Brunswick’s school system appears to be highly successful in keeping students engaged and reports a drop-out rate of only 1.1% (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019_[101]). Applying differentiated instruction could help the German-speaking Community to place its students at the centre of learning and adapt its academic offer to move towards a broader understanding of inclusive education.

Provide (mandatory) modules on inclusive education in initial teacher education and continuing professional learning opportunities for teachers, school leaders and non-teaching staff

For inclusive and student-centred learning to succeed, teachers need to be prepared to teach diverse students in mainstream schools and use differentiated teaching practices to respond to each student’s needs. Inclusion should also be linked to the competence profiles (*Kompetenzprofile*) of teachers. From initial teacher education to continuing professional learning, preparing teachers for inclusive teaching is key to develop inclusive classroom environments (Brussino, 2021_[72]). As mentioned above, ITE is crucial to prepare prospective teachers for classroom diversity through activities that allow them to expand their frames of reference (OECD, 2010_[75]).

Many countries provide teacher education institutions and ITE providers with standards, targets or competence frameworks to guide their initial teacher education programmes. Countries that explicitly recognise diversity and

inclusion among their ITE objectives often operationalise this goal through the development of competence frameworks (European Commission, 2017_[102]). Some countries, including Portugal and Sweden use ITE to promote an understanding of diversity and inclusion among teachers that is based on a recognition of the individuality and heterogeneity of students' needs (European Commission, 2017_[102]). Some systems require prospective teachers to demonstrate knowledge of inclusion (in the broad sense, beyond SEN) and diversity to obtain their degrees. For instance, prospective teachers in Australia need to meet the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST) to obtain their ITE qualification. The APST require teachers to show they possess a solid understanding of diversity and inclusion in the classroom and that they are prepared to address diverse students' needs and learning styles through differentiated instruction (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d._[103]). The APST consist of seven standards, which teachers have to meet at different levels (graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead), depending on their career stage and level of experience. Teachers have to provide evidence of meeting the standards in order to become a registered teacher or achieve a "highly accomplished" or "lead" certification. Some of the seven standards specifically concern the inclusion of diverse students, including students with diverse linguistic, cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students; and students with disabilities (i.e. SEN) (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, 2014_[104]).

Diversity and inclusion can be promoted through ITE curricula using various strategies. These include dedicated courses, horizontally integrated approaches across disciplines, as well as hands-on activities that mix both theoretical and practical contents. In the United States, ITE programmes have increasingly enriched mainstream ITE curricula with courses related to diversity and inclusion, such as multicultural education and urban education, as well as practical, community-based activities in diverse school settings (Yuan, 2017_[105]; Mule, 2010_[106]). Moreover, hands-on practical experience in ITE is key to preparing prospective teachers for classroom diversity, as it allows prospective teachers to become familiar with classroom dynamics, connect pedagogical theories to classroom practices and anticipate the challenges that they might encounter during their first years of teaching. An example of this practice is the Stanford Teacher Education Programme (STEP) in the United States, a year-long teacher education programme, which prepares prospective primary and secondary school teachers committed to values of social justice, diversity, equity and inclusion (Brussino, 2021_[72]). The STEP programme prepares teachers through year-long placements in local schools, followed and supported by mentors and personal advisors (Stanford Graduate School of Education, 2020_[107]).

The German-speaking Community should require inclusive education practices to be included both in ITE and continuing professional learning (CPL) activities for in-service teachers. A Citizens' Council in the German-speaking Community has made multiple recommendations on how to expand teacher's initial education and in-service training in order to strengthen teachers' preparation in the area of special education needs (PDG, 2021_[80]). Integrating topics related to students with SEN in ITE and introducing a corresponding internship period would help the education system strengthen the support it can provide to students with special education needs. However, the Community should aim to broaden these measures and implement them not only in relation to SEN but to address the inclusion of all student groups that may require teachers to undergo specific training and preparation, i.e. including students with an immigrant background, gifted students or members of the LGBTQI+ community. ITE and CPL activities should therefore also cover topics such as multilingualism, multiculturalism, differentiation and beyond.

Aspiring teachers should be required to complete at least one internship in a special school, in an inclusive school or in a mainstream school with an inclusion teacher, either in the Community or abroad. The offer of the *Autonome Hochschule Ostbelgien* could also be expanded to offer a degree with a focus not only on special education teaching but more broadly on inclusive education. Moreover, as differentiated teaching can be a key to achieving more inclusive education systems, modules on differentiation between students and between education levels should be a compulsory element of teachers' studies. Corresponding continuing professional learning opportunities should be offered to allow in-service teachers to become familiar with these topics too.

The Ministry of the German-speaking Community of Belgium also considered training school leaders in the areas of inclusion and special needs education to enable them to better support teachers and other staff in their

schools (MDG, 2019^[20]). These plans should be pursued since a strong culture of collaboration between school leaders, teachers and other teaching and non-teaching staff is critical to bring together the different competences necessary to address specific needs and provide students with a variety of alternative forms of support.

Collect disaggregated data and monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and practices for inclusion

Promoting the monitoring and evaluation of all students' outcomes would be a key step in the German-speaking Community's efforts to achieve more equitable and inclusive schools. Developing indicators on inclusion can be a major driver of reforms since they can help to monitor progress towards the system's goals while also highlighting areas that require significant interventions. Indicators can thereby help school systems to translate their commitment to inclusive education into reforms. As described in Chapter 2, the development of indicators should be considered carefully and aligned with the system's goals in order to "measure what we value" as opposed to "valuing what we can measure" (Ainscow, 2005^[108]). An interesting example on how to develop a framework to monitor the inclusiveness of education systems has been developed by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, which is more extensively described in Box 3.5.

Box 3.5. Example of a framework for developing inclusive education indicators

The European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has developed a framework to help European countries with the implementation of inclusive education indicators, in particular in the area of participation. The Agency proposes following an input-process-output approach with five steps to identify indicators. The matrix in Table 3.5 illustrates the process described below.

1. Make an inventory of available data

This step takes into account all kind of sources of available data, including data from health and welfare systems. Relevant questions that can foster a dialogue among stakeholders at this stage include: "Do data collected by different agencies fit together?" and "How can it be ensured that data complements each other?" The data should be organised in a matrix that considers inputs, process and outcomes on one axis, while considering different levels of the system (classes, schools, system) on the other axis.

2. Identify gaps in available data

Gaps have to be identified using the matrix. What additional data and what efforts are required to fill the gaps? If different countries face the same problem, they should think together of how to overcome those obstacles.

3. Check whether available data can be aggregated and disaggregated across levels

To fill gaps, it may be possible to aggregate or disaggregate data available vertically across cells.

4. Check whether available data can be monitored across the process of education

Data should be able to be monitored over time. Inputs, processes and outcomes should also be linked to better understand why outcomes change if they do.

5. Check whether available data respects the interests of the persons behind the data

Data need to be accessible. If the data stem from information relating to students, teachers and parents, then it should be aimed at benefitting those children and their families.

Table 3.5. Example: Matrix to organise information on participation

		Input	Process of Education			Outcome
Participatory policies and practices		Admission	Assessment/Analysis	Planning, Allocation	Instruction, Intervention, Teaching, School-related activities	Evaluation and Transition
Systems of education	Education system					
	School					
	Classroom					
Participatory relationships as mediators between policies/practices and individuals						
Participation of individuals						

Sources: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2011^[109]), *Participation in Inclusive Education – A Framework for Developing Indicators*; Cerna et al. (2021^[3]), “Promoting inclusive education for diverse societies: A conceptual framework”, *OECD Education Working Papers* No. 260, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/94ab68c6-en>.

In addition to developing indicators to monitor their students’ outcomes, the German-speaking Community should also formulate clear targets to be reached. This effort should involve not only the system level, but also the school and classroom level to support formative evaluation and generate sound evidence for any change in policy and practices. Moreover, collecting disaggregated data for diverse groups of students, such as students with SEN or with an immigrant background, would allow to monitoring their outcomes against those of their peers and evaluate the level of inclusiveness of the system.

Some countries have developed monitoring strategies focusing specifically on promoting students’ well-being. New Zealand’s Child and Youth Well-being Strategy, for example, includes indicators to measure progress on a range of outcomes, including “learning and developing”, which support the Government in monitoring and improving its education sector. As part of this, New Zealand monitors not only participation and achievement in schools, but also developed indicators on social and self-management skills (Child Wellbeing & Poverty Reduction Group of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019^[110]).

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 in the area of inclusive education. These evaluations should generate rigorous evidence to assess which interventions have proven effective in improving the system’s equity and inclusiveness as well as the academic and well-being outcomes of its students. Consistent evaluations of pilot projects would allow to identify local policies or practices that can be scaled up and adapted to different schools or classes throughout the Community.

An interesting example of systematic evaluation practices is that of Austria, which monitors and evaluates policies through the Federal Institute for Quality Assurance in the Austrian School System (*Institut des Bundes für Qualitätssicherung im österreichischen Schulwesen*, IQS). The IQS is a subordinate agency of the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) and supports it in the evidence-based steering and development of the Austrian school system. The IQS created the basis for an even more effective and practical use of the collected data and evidence for quality assurance processes in the Austrian school system. The methodological independence required for the objectivity, reliability and validity of the test instruments and the data collected is ensured by a scientific advisory board made up of experts from Germany and abroad (Federal Institute for Quality Assurance in the Austrian School System, 2021^[111]). In the area of equity and inclusion, the IQS developed a series of reports including a formative evaluation of the inclusive

model regions. The inclusive model regions project lasted from 2013 to 2019 and aimed to support and document the implementation of inclusion models and foster peer learning between regions that had moved towards greater inclusion – particularly concerning students with SEN – at different points in time. The reports provided an assessment of the status quo by relevant stakeholders, documented the implementation process of inclusion in three model regions, and provided implementation strategies related to specific challenges faced (Federal Institute for Quality Assurance in the Austrian School System, 2019^[112]).

Reform the school calendar and seize opportunities to reduce learning gaps

The school rhythm (*Schulrhythmus*) is an important element in the lives of students from early childhood to late adolescence. A reflection on how to optimise these rhythms concerns the well-being of children and young people but also provides opportunities to further strengthen the equity and overall performance of education systems (Fondation Roi Baudouin, 2018^[113]). While a traditional school calendar consists of short breaks during the school year and a long summer break, a year-round school calendar distributes in-school days more evenly across year, providing more frequent but shorter breaks (Graves, 2011^[69]). A 2015 study carried out by the Parents' Association of Catholic School Boards (UFAPEC) underlined the importance of considering the needs of children and adolescents when re-structuring school rhythms to promote memorisation and learning.

In the European Union, the length and organisation of the school calendar varies significantly across countries. According to Eurydice data, students in Europe receive between 165 and 200 days of instruction over the course of the school year. In around half of the 37 countries/regions examined, the year has between 170 and 180 school days (ISCED 1, 2 and 3) (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021^[114]).

Based on system-level indicators collected by the OECD INES network, teaching is generally suspended during a long break at the end of the school year, which lasts from 5 weeks in Switzerland and Australia to 13 weeks in Latvia, Lithuania and Turkey (for lower secondary education). In addition, the regular teaching schedule is interrupted by two to five shorter breaks over the course of the school year, usually lasting one or two weeks (OECD, 2019, pp. 361, Figure D1.a^[115]). Correspondingly, the annual weeks without teaching in OECD countries range from 17 weeks or more in Estonia, Ireland (ISCED 2/3), Latvia and Lithuania (ISCED 1) to 12 weeks or less in Australia (ISCED 2/3), Colombia, Germany, Mexico (ISCED 1/2) and the Netherlands (ISCED 1) (Boeskens and Nusche, 2021^[116]).

There are several examples of countries that have reformed their school calendars over the years. Most recently, the Government of the French Community of Belgium has announced that it will revise the rhythm of the school year. The reform, which is to come into force with the school year 2022/23, foresees that the school year will be divided into alternating periods of seven weeks of lessons and two weeks of holidays (known as “2/7”). The school year would thus start five days earlier in the month of August and end five days later than usual in the month of July. In addition, the All Saints' and Carnival holidays would be extended by one week each.

Distributing school breaks more evenly across the academic calendar generally aims to foster students' well-being as well as to improve the academic outcomes of vulnerable students. Shortening the summer break has sometimes been proposed as an effective means to tackle the relative or absolute learning loss that some students experience during longer breaks in the school calendar (Cooper et al., 1996^[70]; Quinn et al., 2016^[117]; Atteberry and McEachin, 2020^[118]). International evidence shows that longer summer breaks can be a disadvantage for students from lower or vulnerable socio-economic backgrounds, compared to their advantaged peers. Summer learning is rooted in family and community influences, which widen the achievement gap across social lines, while schooling can offset their impact (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2007^[71]). During the summer, skills of children from advantaged socio-economic background continue to advance (albeit at a slower rate than during the school year) while the gains of children's from more disadvantaged background are generally flat (Alexander, Entwisle and Olson, 2001^[119]). This seasonal pattern of achievement gains implies that schooling plays an important compensatory role and raises the question whether policy solutions, including

calendar reforms and summer school offers, could play a role in support disadvantaged children's learning year-round.

A feasibility study commissioned by the French Community of Belgium in 2018 analysed the main advantages that a reorganisation of the school rhythm could bring, not only for students, but also for teachers, families and the economy (Fondation Roi Baudouin, 2018_[113]). The authors argued that the change in the school rhythm could help to support the well-being of students and mitigate the learning losses that particularly disadvantaged students experience during longer summer breaks (Finnie et al., 2019_[120]). In addition, they suggested that the reform could give time to teachers to engage in training activities during the recurring breaks and allow families to enjoy more quality time together.

At the same time, the authors argued that reforms of the school calendar would need to fulfil a range of conditions for their successful implementation (see Box 3.6). This includes the importance of offering alternative student activities during the breaks as well as carefully co-ordinating the school calendar with parents' working schedules (Fondation Roi Baudouin, 2018_[113]). Without compensation, reducing the overall amount of school holidays may also lead to fatigue among both students and teachers and could reduce the attractiveness of working in schools. In addition, keeping schools open for a longer period over the course of the year is associated with an increase in both staff and operating costs (Radinger and Boeskens, 2021_[121]).

Box 3.6. The school calendar reform of the French Community of Belgium

Key elements for the feasibility of a "2/7" reform of the academic calendar

In 2018, the French Community of Belgium's "Pact for Excellence in Teaching" (*Le Pacte pour un Enseignement d'excellence*) proposed, among other measures, to redefine the annual school rhythm in order to better address the physiological needs of students, to promote learning and to allow for the participation in extracurricular activities, sports, etc. The solution put forward was to divide the year into periods of 7 weeks of classes followed by two weeks of holidays and to adapt the summer holidays accordingly ("7/2" rhythm). As such a change would affect many sectors of society beyond education itself, the *Groupe Central* has asked for a feasibility study to be carried out. In this context, between January and June 2018, the Roi Baudouin Foundation investigated the degree and conditions of acceptability of the main groups of stakeholders potentially affected. The representatives of the stakeholders consulted were largely in favour of a "7/2" rhythm, the well-being and learning of the child being at the heart of their motivations.

However, these actors also put forward a series of concerns conditioning their support. These "conditions of acceptability" can be summarised in three main messages:

1. *The reform of school rhythms cannot be done in isolation*

The reform must be part of a larger, society-wide transformation process that incorporates other aspects of the education system that are related to this issue (e.g. the way in which assessment is carried out, the organisation across 'school' and 'extra-curricular' activities, weekly and daily rhythms, support for students in difficulty and the fight against dropping out of school, the planning of cultural and school trips, etc.).

2. *The reform of the school rhythm cannot be undertaken without rethinking the extra-curricular offer (training courses, childcare, etc.)*

Children are not equal when it comes to free time and the organisation of time outside school. Modifying school rhythms without making extracurricular provision a priority, particularly in terms of accessibility, would risk widening inequalities rather than closing them.

3. **A reform of school rhythm cannot be achieved without an alignment and adaptation of other agendas**

It is not feasible to change the rhythm of the school year if the rhythm of other areas based on the school calendar does not follow. A certain re-articulation of the different rhythms and agendas will therefore have to take place. This concerns in particular linkage with the calendars of tertiary education, the correlation with the organisation of family life and the labour market, and the alignment of school rhythms between linguistic communities as requested by families.

Source: Fondation Roi Baudouin (2018^[113]), *Étude de faisabilité - Rythmes scolaires annuels 7-2*.

A 2020 evaluation of the state of the German-speaking Community's education system surveyed stakeholders about their views on the organisation of the school calendar. Among respondents, 56% stated that the current arrangement was adequate, while 34% considered it inappropriate, a large majority of whom called for the summer holidays to be shortened (Stahl-Rolf et al., 2020^[15]).

For the successful implementation of a school calendar reform in the German-speaking Community it would be important to consider the needs of families carefully, including the availability of childcare and the calendar's compatibility with parents' jobs. A school calendar reform would need to be carefully prepared to investigate which impact the change would have on students, particularly on the most vulnerable, as well as their families and school personnel. It would be crucial to take into account the conditions discussed in Box 3.6, and in particular to offer alternative activities during the weeks of holidays that are accessible for all students, including the less advantaged, newcomers, etc. This offer could diminish the risk that students incur learning losses while ensuring that parents – and particularly mothers – do not have to compromise their working life and careers to care for their children during those weeks.

In France, for instance, students between the ages of 3 and 18 are offered cultural, artistic and sporting activities adapted to their age during the school breaks. The summer school break can be an opportunity for students who feel the need to consolidate their knowledge in order to be better prepared at the beginning of the school year. During the spring break of 2021, distance learning courses were offered at primary to secondary level, providing small groups of five or six students with two-hour teaching modules at a rate of three or four per week (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2021^[122]). Sports clubs were also open during the school breaks, allowing children and adults to practice individual outdoor activities. In order to counterbalance the impact of having to finance activities for children in less advantaged families, the French "Caisses d'allocations familiales" (Caf) grant their beneficiaries vouchers that can be used to finance children's leisure activities during school breaks (e.g. summer camps) (Service Publique, 2020^[123]).

Nevertheless, there are clear benefits to shortening the summer breaks for the German-speaking Community. An alignment with the French Community, which is rearranging the school calendar in 2022, would benefit families with children in both systems who would otherwise face significant organisational challenges dealing with two different school calendars. In addition, the non-teaching time should be seen as opportunity to offer additional continuing professional learning opportunities for teachers and learning support staff, who could take advantage of this time to both rest and prepare their classes as well as to receive training in particular areas.

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Notes

¹ The decree's full title is "Decree on the Centre for Special Needs Pedagogy to improve special education needs in mainstream and special schools and to support the support of students with impairments, adaptations or learning difficulties in mainstream and special schools [ZFP]".

² It should be considered that a relevant part of immigrant students in the Community emigrated from a German-speaking country, which entails different needs compared to other OECD countries.

³ Article 61 concerns "special provisions for the support of gifted students" (*Besondere Bestimmungen über die Hochbegabtenförderung*).

⁴ Kaleido is a para-statal public interest institution that promotes the healthy development of children and adolescents from age 0 to 20. Multidisciplinary teams composed of social assistants, psychologists, nurses, doctors and health promotion assistants are available to fulfil this wide-ranging mission. The services offered by Kaleido include counselling, guidance, project work and assessments. Kaleido has a head office as well as four service points that allow it to offer low-threshold support (Kaleido, 2021^[124]).

⁵ The 900 hours of lessons are given by integration teachers either in the classroom or in individual lessons or small groups. This high-threshold support is available for about 390 students.

⁶ Bildungsportal der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens (2021), *Time-out*, https://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3529/6363_read-37748/ (accessed on 15 December 2021).

⁷ <https://uploads.strikinglycdn.com/files/22448d98-2443-4d01-b95f-7e42341b1e88/Kostenbeteil.%20Ausser.%20Betreuung.pdf>

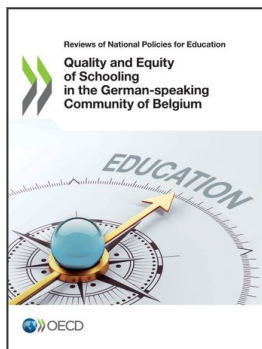
⁸ Ministerium der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft (2021), *Familienportal - Hausaufgabenhilfe*, https://www.ostbelgienfamilie.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-5917/10102_read-54896/ (accessed on 15 December 2021).

⁹ Costs are 85.40€ per child and per week including 3 meals. Reduced rate: 50.30€ per child and per week including 3 meals. Reduced rate is charged for families with a household income of less than 1.800€ net (only with submission of salary certificate).

¹⁰ Examples include the programme *Kultur macht Schule* (http://www.ostbelgienbildung.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3964/7104_read-41299/), the *Schulsportprogramm* (https://www.ostbelgiensport.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-3388/5925_read-36721/), and a drama pedagogy project (*Theaterpädagogik*) run by AGORA and subsidised by the Education Minister.

¹¹ For the academic year 2021/22, the organisation of the school calendar is defined by the Government Decree of 11 February 2021 (*Erlass der Regierung vom 11. Februar 2021 zur Festlegung des Schulkalenders sowie des Kalenders für das akademische Jahr 2021-2022*), see https://ostbelgienbildung.be/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-2212/4397_read-31727/ (accessed on 15 December 2021).

¹² For more information on the Universal Design for Learning, see Brussino (2021^[72]), "Building capacity for inclusive teaching: Policies and practices to prepare all teachers for diversity and inclusion", *OECD Education Working Papers* No. 256, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/57fe6a38-en>.



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