Chapter 6

The Flemish (Belgian) approach to system leadership

by

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This chapter aims to provide information and analysis on the "communities of schools", a particular Flemish approach to school leadership for systemic improvement. These communities are voluntary collaborative partnerships between schools. The government's objective when establishing them was to make schools collaborate to enhance student guidance systems, lessen the managerial-administrative burden on principals to allow more focus on pedagogical leadership, increase the use of ICT, and rationalise resources through collaboration on staff recruitment and course supply. The Flemish communities of schools were selected by the OECD Improving School Leadership activity as an innovative example of school leadership co-operation for improved schooling outcomes.

This chapter is based on a study visit to Flemish Belgium, organised by the Flemish Ministry of Education at OECD's request. The case study visit included meetings with stakeholders in Brussels and two site visits. The chapter outlines the reasons for exploring the Flemish approach to school leadership, describes the broader context within which the communities of schools operate, defines the communities of schools as a systems innovation, analyses the practice in terms of constructs and impact, and ends with some recommendations on how they can be made sustainable.

6.1 The OECD case study visit to Flemish Belgium

The Flemish communities of schools were selected by the OECD as an example of a systemic approach to school leadership, according to the defined criteria (see Chapter 1). From reading the literature and in discussions with Flemish representatives, it seemed that this approach would represent an example of how to develop models of school and school leadership co-operation for the benefit of students and school outcomes.

In Brussels, the OECD study team met with representatives from the Ministry of Work, Education and Training, the Christian Teaching Union, the group of Brussels community schools, the Antwerp City school system, and the umbrella organisation of Jesuit schools. The site visits covered a community of Catholic schools in Louvain and a community of former state schools in Willebroek. We thank all participants for their openness and engagement in discussions.

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6.2 The Flemish context

Belgium is a federal state with three levels of government: the central state, the regions (the Flemish region, the Walloon region and the Brussels capital region) and the communities (the Dutch-speaking Flemish community, the French-speaking community and the German-speaking community). Education is under the control of the communities. Flanders has merged the Flemish region and community powers so as to create a single Flemish government, with its capital in Brussels. With 58% of the total population, Flanders is the largest Belgian community. It is densely populated and highly urbanised.

System governance

The Flemish education system is based on the constitutional principle of freedom of education, which guarantees every natural or legal person the right to establish and organise schools autonomously. Parents and students can choose any school they want and funding will follow the students. The Flemish Ministry of Education interferes only minimally in the organisation of schooling. It sets final attainment levels for students, provides a legal framework for schooling, and allocates funding for salaries.

Most Flemish schools and educational services are grouped into one of the following three networks (OECD, 2001; McKenzie *et al.*, 2004; Devos and Tuytens, 2006) (Figure 6.1):

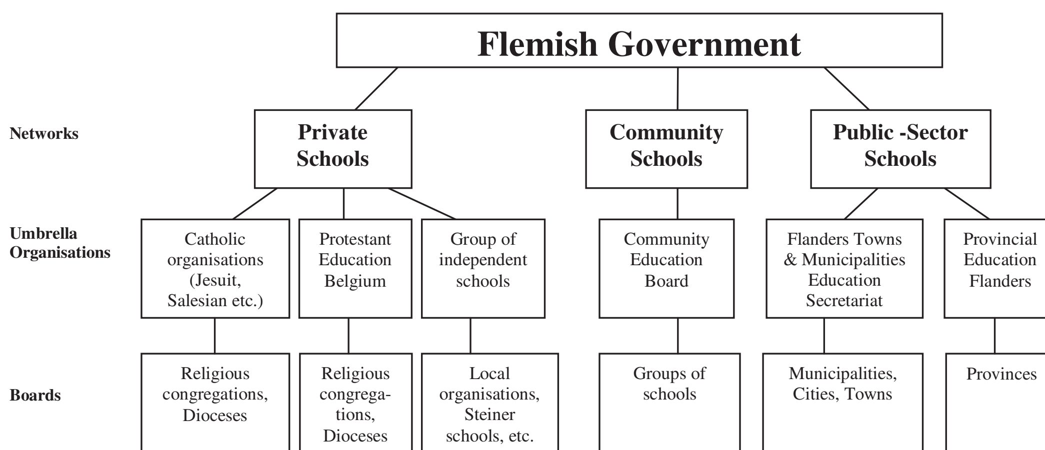
- **Subsidised private schools:** Schools founded by private individuals or associations. The vast majority of these schools are linked to the Catholic church. Private schools enrol about 69% of students (OECD, 2001). Most of the school boards are linked to Catholic dioceses. The Catholic school boards are grouped under different umbrella organisations, such as the Jesuit or Salesian umbrella

organisations. There are also a small number of non-Catholic private schools, including Protestant schools and schools following a specific educational method, such as Steiner or Freinet.

- **Community schools** (former state schools): Public-authority schools provided by the Flemish community government. These schools are required to be neutral in regard to religious or ideological views. They enrol about 14% of students (OECD, 2001). Within this network, the decision making power is held by school boards representing groups of up to 50 schools. At the central level, the groups of schools are represented by the community education board.
- **Subsidised public-sector schools:** Public-authority schools governed by municipal or provincial authorities. Religious and ideological neutrality is also required. They enrol about 17% of students (OECD, 2001). Within this network, the local authorities act as school boards. The school boards are grouped under two umbrella bodies: the Flemish Towns and Municipalities Education Secretariat, and Provincial Education Flanders.

School boards within each network enjoy far-reaching autonomy. In the Flemish system, a school board can be defined as the natural or legal person or group responsible for one or several educational establishments. The boards devise their own curricula, regulations, educational methods and personnel policies. Board members can be volunteers chosen by the parents or professionals paid by the networks. Schools within one geographical unit, such as a town or village, may be governed by different school boards, which can lead to a costly duplication of structures and a lack of co-operation between schools.

Figure 6.1 Governance of the Flemish education system



School leaders are in charge of their school under the supervision of the school board. Status, position, job description, selection, and training of school leaders vary according to the education network within which they work.

Funding

The financing scheme for schooling in Flanders is based on parental choice. The government finances teacher salaries according to the same criteria for all recognised

(public and private) schools. Funding is based essentially on the number of students enrolled. Parents are treated as clients who choose the best quality school. As funding is calculated according to student numbers, the system favours schools that can attract and retain students. Traditionally, schools have thus competed for students and resources.

Assessment and evaluation

In Flanders, there are no standardised tests of learning outcomes, either in primary or in secondary education. Most people interviewed by us agreed that national testing was unnecessary and could potentially be harmful. School inspections are formative in nature and inspection reports are not written in a way that would allow for inter-school comparisons. There is no systematic evaluation of school leadership, and principals are not held accountable for student performance.

There is a growing emphasis on the principals' responsibility to monitor and evaluate teacher performance. But principals do not receive any kind of training to develop their skills in coaching teachers so as to improve students' learning outcomes. The largest teaching union, among others, suggests that the principals' increased responsibilities for teacher evaluation should be accompanied with increased principal training and preparation. Externally organised assessments such as PISA provide some information on the performance of Flemish students. Flemish PISA results stand out in two ways: on the one hand, students' mean PISA scores place the region within the group of highest performing countries for each subject area. On the other hand, Flanders is also characterised by a very wide distribution of achievement scores.

Equity issues

The 2003 PISA results show that there are very large differences between the strongest and the weakest students in Flanders. Belgium as a whole has the largest performance dispersion of all participating countries. Socio-economic status (SES) and language spoken at home have an important impact on the performance of Flemish students in the PISA tests (De Meyer *et al.*, 2005). The PISA results have raised concern about the tail of underachieving students in Flanders.

One of the factors leading to inequality seems to be the secondary education system, which streams students into three types of schools: academic, vocational and technical. Children with lower SES are overrepresented in vocational and technical schools, and there is an image of lower quality attached to these schools.

In practice, the principle of freedom of choice does not guarantee to parents that their children will actually be enrolled in the school of their choice. In prestigious and high achieving schools, the demand for enrolment often exceeds the schools' capacities, so parents may spend hours or even days at the school hoping to be able to register their children. The coordinator of Jesuit schools regretted that the "first come first served" system does not allow for positive discrimination.

School leadership framework

School leaders are appointed by the school boards. The only community-wide formal requirement for school leaders is to have a teaching qualification. The different school boards may set additional criteria. In most cases, school leaders are selected from the teaching staff in a rather informal way. Vacancies are not widely advertised and

recruitment processes seem to lack openness and transparency. As a result, not all interested candidates may get a chance to apply. Many schools, especially in primary education and in "difficult" areas, find it hard to get qualified candidates.

Compared to management positions in other sectors, the working conditions of school leaders are not very attractive. After a 12-month probationary period, school leaders are appointed for a permanent position. They do not have many further career opportunities. Salary differences between school leaders and teachers are small. Remuneration of school leaders is far below the average for management positions in the labour market.

Most stakeholders interviewed agreed that the training and support structures for school leaders are insufficient. Only the network of community education provides mandatory pre-service training for school leaders. The other networks offer some voluntary, mostly in-service training opportunities.

As in many other countries, school leaders in Flanders are faced with a wide range of tasks and challenges. Depending on the boards and networks, they have different degrees of responsibility in administrative, budgetary, pedagogical, personnel and public relations matters. Most of the time, the school boards delegate substantive powers, such as hiring and firing teachers, to the principals. The school leaders' wide-ranging autonomy is not matched with a systematic evaluation or accountability system, and their essential role in school development is not accompanied with central support structures or performance-based remuneration.

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Summary: choice, competition and identity

It is clear from this that there are five key components by which we can identify the educational system in Flemish Belgium. These provide a lens through which we may examine the "communities of schools" innovation:

- **Choice:** In principle, parents choose the school their children attend. Thus, as a group, they determine the size of schools by means of their preferences.
- **Competition:** Traditionally because funding follows the students, schools have varied in size because they have competed for resources.
- **Identity and autonomy:** All education is publicly funded but choice and competition have resulted in the formation of three governing networks representing private (mostly Catholic), public (municipal / provincial), and community (former state) schools. Within these, there also exist special groups, for example, the Jesuit schools have their own umbrella organisation, and the public schools are organised differently according to where they are, urban or provincial. Of these, the network of Roman Catholic schools is by far the largest, representing 68.4% of all students (Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2007).
- **Standards and equity:** We have seen that Flemish Belgium scores highly in its PISA results but that it has one of the widest margins between the levels of achievement of the highest and lowest groups. PISA data also shows that the differences in performance between schools are very strong and that a large

proportion of between-school variance is explained by differences in students' socioeconomic backgrounds (OECD, 2004).

- **Leadership:** Traditionally, schools have been governed by school boards. These have operated within the umbrella board of each network. The school boards are mostly made up of volunteers and while the principals are accountable to the boards, there is a tradition of principal autonomy. More importantly, there is, according to some research, a, "lack of strong participative professionally-oriented leadership in the majority of Flemish secondary schools" which has meant that principals themselves have not significantly affected school practice (Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2007, p. 196).

6.3 Systems innovation: Communities of schools

> A principal: "We have a tendency to do new things and forget to abolish the old…every decision is part of a complicated negotiation."

In 1999, the Flemish Ministry of Education established "communities of schools" for secondary education, having regard to issues of choice, competition and identity. These were also established for primary education in 2003/04. These communities are voluntary collaborative partnerships between schools. For secondary education, 11 "competencies" were set out through which such communities were charged with consulting about staffing, curriculum and resource allocation. Box 6.1 provides a detailed definition of what these communities of schools entail. For primary schools, the collaboration possibilities are more open.

There are now 118 communities of schools in secondary education, covering more than 95% of schools in Flanders, with an average of 6 to 12 schools belonging to a community. There are 367 in primary education, covering 97% of schools. During the site visits, the OECD team focused on communities of schools in secondary education. Secondary school communities have been operational for long enough for stakeholders to adapt and respond to the new framework. Primary school communities, on the other hand, have been given fewer resources and powers during the 2003-05 pilot years. A revised school community policy was launched only in 2005/06, and its impact on the organisation and management of schooling is not yet very visible (Section 6.6).

The objective of the communities of schools was to make schools work in collaboration by sharing resources, to rationalise supply of courses and to promote cost savings across schools. The government's aspirations were that this new system would enable the enhancement of student guidance systems, particularly in relation to their educational career trajectories; the lessening of the managerial-administrative burden on principals in order that they might become pedagogical leaders; the increased use of ICT; and the rationalisation of resourcing both in relation to staff recruitment, functioning and evaluation and in relation to co-operation in curriculum.

Box 6.1 Definitions of communities of schools in Flanders

Primary education communities of schools (created in 2003/04):

In primary education, a school community consists of several schools which belong to either the same or different school boards and/or education networks. The school communities can decide autonomously to make available resources for a co-ordinating director. They can have decision making powers for specific matters. The school board or school boards to which a school within the community belongs decides whether it transfers powers to the school community or not. The powers that can be transferred are: the use of resources as a stimulus within the school community; the use of a staffing points system for care, ICT and administration, ICT staff within the school community; sharing special education school expertise; or the inclusion of additional schools within the school community. The school community can make agreements about these issues and submits these to the school board/boards of the schools that are part of the community.

Secondary education communities of schools (created in 1999):

In secondary education, a school community consists of one school or a group of schools which belong to either the same or different school boards and/or education networks. A co-ordinating director may ensure that the school community operates smoothly in secondary education. They have the following powers (based on decree):

- concluding agreements on the organisation of rational education provision;
- concluding agreements on objective pupil orientation and support;
- concluding agreements on the staffing policy: criteria for appointing staff, for the overall functioning of staff and assessing staff;
- concluding agreements/making decisions on the distribution of extra teacher hours within its establishments;
- concluding agreements on the determination of the criteria and the use of weekly teacher hours that can be combined at a school community level.
- concluding agreements on the distribution of resources for support staff for its establishments;
- concluding agreements on the use of resources for ICT co-ordination;
- making recommendations about investment in school buildings and infrastructure, with the school board using the investment resources of community education or the education infrastructure agency Agentschap voor Infrastructuur in het Onderwijs (AGIOn) (for the other networks);
- entering into collaborative partnerships with one or several other schools outside the school community.

Source: Devos and Tuytens (2006)

The immediate effects of the innovation were to establish internal markets which regulated competition for students between schools and increased opportunities for collective action to be taken to allocate staffing and other resources, and for student guidance systems and curriculum. While these are important features, it must be acknowledged that the scope for collective decision making was at the margins and did not affect principals' autonomy.

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With only a small number of exceptions, the communities of schools remain nested within the traditional networks structure and depend largely on the traditional leadership of boards and directors within that structure.

While it may be said that the innovation added another layer of bureaucracy to the existing system, in practice schools and systems have responded in different ways. This chapter will give examples of these different responses in Section 6.3.

Because the innovation was centrally initiated, a form of "contrived collegiality" (Hargreaves, 1994) was imposed. Thus, schools have clustered in different ways. They are rather loosely coupled within systems which are in different phases of development and may not yet be said to have become communities. There are three government concerns that are key to understanding this innovation:

- "evening out" and raising what was perceived as variable quality of education in schools;
- closing the equity gap between students which had existed over many decades and which is so evident in the PISA results;
- not to "interfere" with the strong sense of identity and autonomy held by the networks, school boards and individual schools.

Examples of systems innovation in Flemish Belgian schools

Table 6.2 below gives an illustration of the different stages of development of a range of communities of schools in Flanders. It shows the ways in which existing network and board managers, as well as individual schools, have adapted to the innovation. The model presents the different levels of change on a continuum from status quo (no evidence of change) to transformation (development of a community identity). We then provide brief examples of the different practices we observed during the visit, explaining how they fit into the framework of change levels. Section 6.4 provides an analysis of the leadership practices at each level of this multi-layered system.

Table 6.1 Adaptations of networks to communities

Change levels	Catholic Jesuit schools	Community schools, Willebroek	Community schools, Brussels	Public sector schools, Antwerp	Catholic schools, Leuven
1. Status quo No evidence of change to structures, roles and responsibilities, culture. Power remains at the network level	✓				
2. Minimum change Evidence of some change to existing structures but not to cultures or roles and responsibilities. Power remains at the network/group level		✓	✓		
3. Adaptation (early signs) Evidence of change in structures, roles, responsibilities and cultures. Power is distributed				✓	✓
4. Transformation Communities of practice have established an identity which supersedes network identity					

Private (Catholic Jesuit) communities of schools

The coordinator of seven Catholic Jesuit school groups with 800 staff spread across Flanders spoke of preserving the special bond between them. Thus, although the schools had joined communities of schools, it was not perceived as a key development tool. There was some scepticism about the extent to which the quality of education would be improved through such membership. Under the pre-existing system, distributed leadership was practised through school group teams of principals, with one of these taking leadership as *primus inter pares*. The school board leaders met monthly, and the leaders' group met weekly. The school board continued to take final decisions, "on everything" and principals were accountable to the board. They had, "a sense of being responsible together" for the education in their region. The coordinator was responsible for system-wide staffing and administration, and staff and principal training. In effect he acted as a director of education.

Communities of schools in community education

According to the director of the regional group of schools, communities of schools were a "theoretical concept". It was the director together with the school group who decided on policy. Two communities of schools had been created within the group of schools (one for primary and one for secondary schools). Although the communities of schools each had a co-ordinating director, they were accountable to the group director who was accountable to the board. As in the Jesuit school network, and as in the example which follows, the director and his staff led the vision and the policy making. They administered the system and had benefited from the establishment of the internal market, which had led to reduced competition between schools. The director was also clearly responsible for hiring and firing school principals, and for steering policy in the group of schools. Within the group of schools, some principals had already been responsible for the system leadership of more than one school before the establishment of school communities.

Communities of schools in community education (Brussels)

This system was managed from the centre by a general director with 30 staff. Unlike the example that follows, however, leadership had not been widely distributed. There were three communities of schools (primary, secondary and art schools) and principals had responsibilities for hiring and firing teachers (responsibility delegated by the board to the principal). The general director and his staff were responsible for all administrative and financial tasks, leaving the principals to concentrate on pedagogical matters. There was no history of cross school curriculum planning, although the communities (and the network as a whole) were now focusing on developing curricula and teaching pedagogies which would help solve the problems of the 80% of students for whom Dutch was not their first language. Support for this was provided at the level of each community of schools. All principals had job descriptions and there were detailed criteria and procedures governing the recruitment and appointment of all staff. Principals met monthly, and there were in-service competency based training programmes. According to the general director, not all secondary school principals saw the need for a full-time co-ordinating director of their community of schools.

Public (municipal) communities of schools (Antwerp)

The network in Antwerp had established itself as a "learning city" department with five to six "companies", each with its own co-ordinating director under the co-ordination of a director who reported to a single board. In this sense it was similar to Willebroek. However, centrally funded cross school projects were available by application, and social policies for disadvantaged students (50% did not speak Dutch as a first language) were centralised. Within each community of schools, principals were beginning to take specialist cross-school responsibilities (*e.g.* ICT, guidance). Hiring and firing was, as in Willebroek, the responsibility of the director of the school board. Antwerp was in the process of establishing campuses with several schools which would specialise in different fields of study, and there was a long and strong tradition of leadership advice, career counselling and development.

Private (Catholic) communities of schools (Leuven)

This community comprises 14 secondary schools, and one campus of three schools and a teacher training institute which had been established with one director 25 years previously. The community of schools had begun, six years previously, with 11 school boards; these had since reduced to seven. It had appointed a former principal of one of the prestigious, respected and high achieving schools as its full-time co-ordinating director. Under her leadership, the principals from the schools had begun to meet monthly and, though they still described themselves as "scanning, getting to know each other and building trust", they have established a clear agenda. This includes improving individual guidance and counselling services for students, agreeing a common process for selection to reduce competition within the community, negotiating common working conditions for teachers, and creating curricula for students with special educational needs. Teachers themselves were described as being, as yet, "barely aware" of changes and despite a collective "vision for integration", different schools still had "distinct visions and interests". The community had recently agreed to provide targeted support (from the envelope of hours provided to the communities) for one of its members which was finding difficulty in recruitment and staffing.

6.4 Multi-layered system leadership

The management and leadership of this systemic innovation may be identified as being distributed across four levels: the central government of Flemish Belgium; the private and public networks (which also have a legitimate vested interest in survival): the communities of schools themselves; and school level.

Central government level

The management of this innovation by the central government may be summarised in the words of one senior official: "We want them to go their own way towards the goal that we want."

This respect for localised decision making within the watchful eyes of the existing networks characterised the approach at this level. It created opportunities for the establishment and growth of communities of schools but did not and does not provide system leadership. For example, there are no centrally provided training resources for system leadership or leadership of communities of schools, no monitoring and evaluation of the use which communities of schools make of additional centrally provided resources, and no systemic efforts to collect and disseminate examples of practice in communities of schools. There has been one government evaluation of the scheme (Department of Education, 2005a; 2005b). It found that the progress of the systems innovation had been, in the words of government officials, "uneven" and "a little bit slow". They suggested that many boards had, "slowed down the pace, in some instances to paralysis" and that the innovation was now "at a turning point".

Network level

> A stakeholder: "Networks are the sparring partners, defending their position against the ministry and the unions."

Networks responded to the innovation in different ways. As we have seen in Section 6.3, in some instances (*e.g.* Leuven) the number of individual school boards had reduced, but only 19 of the communities of schools in the Catholic system are at present under the governance of one school board. This suggests a resistance to change by many school boards. In community education (*i.e.* former state schools) one school board is the rule. At the network level, also, the variety of leadership models illustrates the different responses to the innovation.

These range from those which have changed minimally, to those which have made some changes but retained existing structures, to those which have made moderate changes to structures of governance and whose culture has begun to change in the direction of becoming a more mature community of schools.

Communities of schools level

No communities of schools are self-governing, independent of the networks to which they belong. The nature of the leadership within the communities depends upon two interacting elements: the extent to which leaders within the traditional network structures distribute leadership; and the vision and strength of leadership in the newly formed communities. Thus, in the public schools networks in municipalities (*e.g.* Antwerp and

Brussels), communities of schools are serviced and led by a general director and his staff under a single board (a parallel would be a local city authority in England). In the case of Brussels, there are three school groups but they are communities principally for the purposes of staff recruitment; in-service training and leadership development; and tackling the problem of significant numbers of non-Dutch speaking students in their schools.

In the case of Antwerp, a different, more distributed leadership model exists. A number of municipal companies (sub systems) have been created, each with their own leadership. Leadership training is strong in both sub systems. The public school network in Willebroek (a province) is based on the traditional leadership of large groups of schools by a director and his staff. However, within the group are two co-ordinating directors (one full-time primary, one part-time secondary). In all three cases the directors and the boards have a clear responsibility for the vision and direction of the groups of schools. The same would be true of the Jesuit network. However, in the case of the Catholic system in Leuven, it is clear that the co-ordinating director, working closely with the principals, has taken this responsibility.

School level

> A policy maker: "No one knows about the quality of principals."

While this chapter focuses on system leadership it is, nevertheless, important to discuss briefly the role of leadership at school level. This is for two reasons: the innovation ultimately relies for its success upon principals; and the communities of schools' coordinators are drawn largely from the ranks of existing or former principals. The principals of each school or sub group of schools (which, in the case of Leuven, existed before the innovation) retains responsibility for his/her own schools' direction. Thus, ultimately the impact of the system innovation at school and classroom level depends on the extent to which the principals recognise its benefits and on the quality of their own leadership.

In Flemish schools, although it is the principal who is responsible for pedagogical leadership, in general this leadership does not seem to be exercised. Principals have little time left for pedagogical leadership, as they are increasingly expected to carry out managerial and organisational tasks. In addition to managing relations with students, parents, educational authorities and the local community, they are taking on increasing responsibilities for personnel management, monitoring, evaluating and continuously motivating their staff. A second challenge is for them to ensure student care and well being in environments with growing social and cultural diversity. Finally, as the government is increasingly focussing on the role of individual schools in quality assurance, principals are taking larger responsibility for school self-assessment and evaluation.

Many stakeholders mentioned that middle management is of utmost importance to allow the principal to focus more on the school's educational project. Middle management may also provide opportunities for shared leadership and strengthened policy implementation capacities within the school. During the visit, we observed that some schools (for example the Catholic schools in Leuven) had a well-functioning middle management structure with distributed responsibilities for different aspects of management (ICT, material, student well being). In other schools this seemed to be less

present. In a 2005 study, Van Petegem *et al.* (in Devos and Tuytens, 2006) call for middle management to be further developed in Flanders. According to the director of the Jesuit network, such a structure is an essential precondition for the success of communities of schools.

Part of the stated rationale for establishing communities of schools was that the principal could be freed from many bureaucratic tasks in order to spend more time in pedagogical leadership. We did not always observe this. In some cases the communities of schools even seemed to add to the principal's workload. On the other hand, by compelling principals to work together, school communities are beginning to engage them more in pedagogic leadership: regular meetings between principals, exchange of practices, views and understandings, as well as joint training initiatives were found across all the communities of practice.

By compelling principals to work together, school communities are beginning to engage them more in pedagogic leadership.

6.5 Conceptualisation

System leadership conceptualisation

Communities of schools in Flemish Belgium are a systemic innovation to create a more localised structure of relationships, roles and responsibilities. The traditional networks (public and private) had adapted but, essentially, continue to dominate in the leadership of those communities. After creating and providing some resource for the communities of schools, central government has taken no further direct role in their development (for reasons of choice, autonomy and identity). If there is a theory of action, then it is that networks and communities of schools should be free to find their own ways of providing leadership. Based on a tradition of minimal interference by the Ministry of Education, the Flemish community government provides no guidance on what kind(s) of leadership may be more, or less, effective. Nor has it provided support for communities in developing a sense of community vision, leadership, strategic direction or pedagogical advancement.

Hopkins (Chapter 2) proposes that "a school head has to be almost as concerned about the success of other schools as he or she is about his or her own schools", and that, "sustained improvement of schools is not possible unless the whole system is moving forward". This assumes a reality that is not yet in evidence in Flemish Belgium, since the system of communities of schools is neither monitored nor evaluated. It might be the case, but we did not discern any evidence about how the whole system was moving forward. From the evidence presented, it is also clear that moving forward has different meanings for those within the system.

Hopkins recognises, however, that the aspiration of systems transformation being facilitated by the degree of segmentation existing in the system only holds when certain conditions hold. These are, first, there is increased clarity about the nature of intervention and support for schools at each phase of the performance cycle; and second, schools at each phase are clear as to the most productive ways to collaborate in order to capitalise on the diversity within the system.

In the case of Flemish Belgium the responsibilities and power to determine the nature and direction of the communities of schools may be said to be distributed to those communities. However, the result is that neither of Hopkins' conditions for system transformation are met. Communities of schools are not yet clear about the most productive ways to collaborate in order to capitalise on the diversity within the system because there has not been increased clarity about the nature of intervention and support in the process of the innovation.

Not resolving the tensions between respecting the rights of all communities to exercise autonomy and the responsibilities of government to provide leadership guidance and support for the implementation, continuation and institutionalisation phases of the innovation has resulted in systemic development which is slow and uneven.

Not resolving the tensions between autonomy and guidance on system leadership has resulted in slow systemic development.

Power and responsibility

Power is a fluid, interactive and reciprocal process. School leaders at all levels do have power in their formal position, but at the same time they are aware of the relative nature of power. To see power as a relationship means that power relations are always two-way, even if the power of one actor in a social relation is minimal compared to another. Both the actions of subordinates and the actions of superiors influence the structures of domination. As one of the co-ordinating directors said, "We need to have the principals on board in order to succeed." At central level it was emphasised, that "in this country you convince people to follow. It is a country of negotiation."

The configuration of power relationships in the community of schools is shaped by the mutual understanding of the authority and influence of the school boards and the influence of co-ordinating directors and principals. The principal enjoys a high degree of authority but there are constraints which lead to reliance on a wide range of sources of influence.

Both centralisation and decentralisation of the educational system, irrespective of motives, puts in focus the balance between political and professional power over education (Lundgren, 1990). On the one hand, a system change like introducing communities of schools might be interpreted as a form of centralisation within the context of Flanders where the school boards have enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. A new intermediate level is introduced, the drive for change is top-down, and a potential for a change in power relationship has been created. On the other hand, the Flemish approach has allowed for different interpretations in the different communities, aligned with the history and tradition of the country, and the power structure of the school boards is preserved.

The balancing act of introducing an intermediate level like the communities of schools can be framed as "decentralised centralism" (Karlsen, 2000), and it sharpens the question of who has the responsibility. Such a system change may result in contradictory decisions. Universal acceptance of any balance is difficult to achieve because some stakeholders' interests are always compromised (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). In addition, there will remain a tension between decentralisation efforts and the need for central control (Weiler, 1990).

Similar to the configuration of power relationships, patterns of responsibility are reciprocal. Responsibility concerns the obligations teachers and school leaders have to each other in answering questions about what has happened within one's area of responsibility and in providing reliable explanations about why it has happened. As Elmore (Chapter 3) argues, for each unit of responsibility given, a unit of support must be provided. According to him, the present accountability policy will not increase school performance without a substantial investment in human capital aimed at developing the practice of school improvement in a diverse population of school leaders and teachers.

6.6 Programme effectiveness

> A school principal: "It has been an evolutionary journey of what you hope will become a community in 10 to 20 years. A lot has happened during seven years. Before, we were very competitive. Now we collaborate more, and it is new to work together. It is a small revolution when you look back."

Three broad intended objectives of the communities of schools policy can be distinguished. First, the policy was explicitly aimed at making schools collaborate in order to rationalise and improve the provision of curricula, staffing, facilities, student orientation, administration, care and ICT. Second, a less explicit intention appeared to be to introduce a layer of educational policy implementation based on geographical proximity rather than on affiliation with a board or network. Third, the innovation of communities of schools seems to be ultimately geared towards improving the quality of teaching and learning.

There is little quantitative evidence about the degree to which these objectives have been achieved. The government does not systematically monitor or evaluate its policy of communities of schools, but there have been two evaluations of communities of schools undertaken by the Flemish Education Ministry. One focused on primary school communities (Box 6.2), while a second one evaluated communities of secondary schools after five years in operation.

Box 6.2 Evaluation of primary school communities (February 2005)

After a pilot phase of two years (2003/04 and 2004/05), the Flemish Ministry of Education evaluated a randomly selected sample of 29 primary school communities. The evaluation consisted of a survey questionnaire sent to teachers and principals, and interviews conducted with representatives from each school community. The main findings were:

Usefulness: Overall feedback from respondents was positive. Almost all participants affirmed that school communities were a useful concept, and the great majority believed that the communities helped to increase the schools' capacities.

Positive outcomes: The great majority of respondents (25 of the 29 communities' representatives) considered "co-operation" in itself as the most positive outcome. Others mentioned a "common vision" (4), a common care policy (5), and a better distribution of tasks among schools (4).

Reasons for joining a school community: Sixteen respondents indicated that their major motivation for joining a community was to receive extra resources from the government; 11 respondents stated that the creation of their communities was merely a formalisation of pre-existing school collaboration structures; 8 respondents mentioned pressure from Brussels or from their school boards as a reason for joining.

Domains of co-operation: Material co-operation is very important for the surveyed school communities. Most communities share facilities such as libraries and gymnasiums (19), and combine their schools' purchasing power when ordering materials (17). Many respondents cooperate in ICT (17) and care policy (16). Teacher exchanges take place in only one community. There seems to be very little, if any, pedagogical co-operation: some (9) do not at all cooperate in the pedagogical domain, while some others (9) indicated that they organise common "study days".

Impact: Participants were asked about the perceived impact of school communities on different stakeholders. The majority of respondents agreed that:

- there is no impact on the school personnel (19);
- there is no impact on students (29);
- there is a negative impact on principals because the communities have increased their workload (14).

The results from this evaluation led the ministry to introduce some changes to the design of the school community policy, namely an increase in the amount of resources allocated to the communities. The increased bonus was aimed at allowing primary school communities to appoint a formal co-ordinating director (a principal exempted from some tasks at his/her own school).

Source: Department of Education (2005a).

The evaluation undertaken for secondary school communities shows that some of their objectives have been reached. Communities have strengthened co-operation in some areas, such as developing common policies on personnel and allocation of human resources across the schools involved. There seems to be informal co-operation with other school levels, such as primary schools and special education, and there is still scope for co-operation in the future. However, co-operation could be stronger in some areas such as rationalising education supply and infrastructures across schools and in providing

effective guidance for students. In addition, while some school communities organise working groups with union participation on a broad range of topics, in general, teaching unions complain that school boards and school leaders always want to push through their own proposals rather than work for the school communities (Department of Education, 2005b).

Overall, from the available evaluation of primary school communities (Box 6.2) and secondary education as well as from our observations and interviews, it became evident that the very existence of co-operation between schools was considered as an intrinsically positive development by all stakeholders (even if some remained sceptical whether the concept of school communities was the best way to achieve it).

Perceived benefits of co-operation through communities of schools are:

- the creation of an internal market which has reduced competition between individual schools;
- the possibilities of creating better student orientation and guidance systems;
- the possibilities of creating community-wide curricula which cater for students with special educational needs;
- the creation of an internal labour market for teachers;
- the creation of areas of community based discretionary judgement relating to the distribution of (marginal) resources, HR policy and care;
- reduced bureaucratic workload for principals and new possibilities for pedagogical leadership;

On the other hand, perceived constraints on co-operation are:

- communities cannot offer training or do not have capacity and resources;
- communities do not have significant budgetary control;
- several boards within one community can create tensions and may disagree as to vision, direction and strategy;
- the decision making power of communities is problematic because of their relationships with pre-innovation management structures which persist;
- separate communities of secondary and primary schools, and communities based on network membership, may not be conducive to the development of coherent localised systems of effective schooling.

The intention of creating a more efficient local/regional entity for policy implementation was only partly realised. Government representatives had hoped that the creation of communities of schools would induce mergers of school boards so that eventually all schools in one community would belong to the same board. The rationale behind this was to avoid inefficiencies and duplications of structures. While some mergers have taken place, this process of rationalisation seems to be slow and uneven.

Government representatives had hoped that the creation of communities of schools would lead eventually to all schools in one community belonging to the same board.

As to the third objective of improving school quality, tangible benefits for schools from this innovation seem from the outside to be small. So far, communities of schools do

not seem to have any impact on students, who are generally not even aware of the existence of communities of schools. Though from the inside the innovation has been described as a "small revolution", opening up dialogue and new possibilities for learning and pedagogical leadership, there is as yet little evidence of the effect on teaching, learning and the equity gap.

6.7 Food for thought

It is important to note that the Flemish communities of schools fit well with this OECD activity's focus on school leadership for system improvement. The theoretical construct is that principals will work together across schools and act as leaders of schools as learning organisations which can contribute to positive learning environments and communities. The OECD team agreed that these communities have the potential to raise equity and quality of education outcomes and to improve co-operation in an environment of heavy competition. This can lead to improved learning outcomes in Flanders.

However, the way these communities of schools have been launched and implemented could be revised. Overall, the OECD review team felt that the government did not provide strategic leadership, educational vision, or a theory of action to guide the development of the communities of schools. The Flemish authorities initiated the development of communities of schools, but they did not further influence the development process or outputs. This hands-off policy has resulted in a lack of clarity about the purpose of communities in terms of school leadership and organisational culture. There are many different understandings of the nature and purpose of school communities at the levels of the schooling networks, school boards, communities, and individual schools. As a consequence, there is a diverse landscape of various types of school communities with different degrees of co-operation. Some issues and key tensions may need to be resolved if communities of schools are to be successful.

Leadership or management: Sustaining communities of schools

The evidence from many innovation practices around the world is that innovation is a process rather than an event. The process, therefore, needs to be managed in terms of resource allocation and infrastructure – for example, "in time" training and development programmes. However, while people need to feel involved and to have a sense of ownership through participation, the process also needs to be led. To achieve this requires leadership in, for example, the development of a collective and distinctive vision, sense of direction, collegiality and achievement. This is especially the case where new systems are developed while previous systems remain. At present, there is no evidence of a view of what communities of schools might become. It is a top down innovation for which, viewed from below, the government's vision seems unclear. Maybe that is one of the reasons why we could identify only incremental and very small changes.

It is a top down innovation for which, viewed from below, the government's vision seems unclear.

Improving school quality and equity

From our meetings it became clear that communities of schools did not as yet have any tangible impact on teaching and learning, and they did not seem to reduce the equity

gap. However, we observed that communities of schools can provide a framework to improving equity, as they allow for improved student guidance. Teachers and principals affirmed that thanks to the communities of schools they are more aware of all available study options in the community. This knowledge allows them to better orient students according to their interests and abilities.

There is some evidence of changes in systems of student orientation and educational trajectory, of a focus on students with special educational and language needs, and on care and well being. As yet there seems to be no discernible change in teaching and learning strategies – at least, this did not feature in our conversations with the different stakeholders in the communities of schools. Communities of schools could become important tools to improve equity and quality of education if this was better spelled out and clear teaching and learning strategies were adopted for them.

Choice and co-operation: A dilemma of democracy

As funding follows the student, schools in Flanders have traditionally competed for students and resources. One aim of communities of schools seems to be to make schools work together rather than competing. As schools are allocated resources collectively, school leaders are compelled to get together regularly and consult on the use of these resources. We heard that in some cases co-operation is limited to this single aspect. In many schools, however, the externally imposed co-operation on resource matters has had a spill-over effect: communities of schools provided a structure and platform for knowledge sharing and collective action among school leaders and teachers from all types of secondary schools (technical, vocational and academic).

In order to cooperate it is necessary to give away a measure of individual voice and to accept the will of the majority. Where individual schools on the one hand and school boards and networks on the other are not willing to concede power over decision making it is unlikely that democracy in communities of schools will flourish.

Overall, the nature of collaboration-competition balance as it emerges from the interactions of principals within and across the communities of schools remains unclear. It is an irony that the government introduces collaboration but is in practice also strongly committed to competition as a means to increase effectiveness and school quality, as reflected in Section 6.2.

Identities and change: Bridging the old and new structures

Most communities of schools continue to locate their identity in the traditional networks, and the network managers encourage this. The strong power of the networks has not been significantly altered, as communities of schools remain affiliated to their respective networks. The new structure of communities of schools seems to have had a marginal impact on the institutional landscape of secondary schools. In a way, the creation of communities of schools has added an additional layer of bureaucracy without abolishing any of the old layers. At the same time, however, the intervention has induced a degree of localisation / regionalisation of responsibility from the networks and boards to the school community level.

If communities of schools are to continue to develop as means for improved education for all their students, they need to develop a strong orientation towards that

community. So long as networks and school groups continue to absorb and control significant resources, it is unlikely that community oriented identities will develop.

In Flanders the diffuse borderline between political and professional power and responsibility seems to represent a major problem. Unless both the co-ordinating directors and the principals get better training, the communities of schools are unlikely to gain greater influence because the boards are so strong in some places. The ministry has the power to make leadership programmes mandatory, but so far, in accordance with tradition, it has been reluctant to intervene at the local level. If the intention is to give more power and responsibility to the communities of schools, both a unified board and better opportunities for robust leadership development are required.

Leadership training and support

There is no evidence that the Flemish authorities provide support to strengthen system leadership at the community level. There are no centrally organised support structures for principals, no monitoring and evaluation of leadership, and no dissemination of effective practices. However, we observed that in successful communities system leadership had evolved locally: school leaders had made use of the community structure to establish mechanisms for peer support, school leaders of successful schools had shared effective practices with more disadvantaged schools, and the co-ordinating director of the community had taken on a coaching and mentoring function to provide guidance for principals. We heard about communities of schools in Limburg and Antwerp where shared leadership evolved as each principal of the community specialised in a certain field such as personnel, pedagogy, or infrastructure. The quality of shared leadership at the community level seems to depend on local factors, especially on the involvement of committed individuals at the school, community, or board levels.

While networks have earmarked funding for in-service training for principals and staff, this is not always spent in meeting the needs which communities identify. This lack of training for leadership and management of these new communities of schools is a key reason for their uneven development and a hindrance to the establishment of strong community identities.

It is reasonable to assume that the less preparation co-ordinating directors and principals have, the more likely they are to fall back on their lay theories of leadership – often premised on a very narrow experiential base of prior experience as a teacher. Also, due to rapid changes in society, lay theories are likely to maintain outdated concepts of heroic leadership rather than a concept of sustainable leadership (Møller and Schratz, 2008). Leadership programmes have the potential to influence the principals' learning trajectories and their emerging leadership identities, to develop the form of leadership appropriate to the particular stage in the life cycle of a school (Sugrue, 2005).

Sharing practice: discussion and dissemination

At present there is no mechanism for identifying and disseminating the work of individual communities of schools. This is a responsibility of those who initiate innovation and needs to be addressed with urgency. To engage in this would mean the ministry and school boards representing communities working together in order to understand and define examples of good practice.

The ministry and school boards representing communities can work together to understand and define examples of good practice.

Box 6.3 Summary conclusions and recommendations

Flemish communities of schools fit well with our focus on school leadership for system improvement. The theoretical construct is directed to ensuring that principals work together across schools and can act as leaders of schools as learning organisations which in addition can contribute to positive learning environments and communities. The OECD team agreed that these communities have the potential to raise equity and quality of education outcomes and to improve co-operation in an environment of heavy competition. This can lead to improved learning outcomes in Flanders.

This chapter has revealed some obstacles for these objectives to be fully achieved and it has advanced a number of policy recommendations to address these:

- **Sustaining communities of schools:** Innovation practices like communities of schools need to be managed and led. For stakeholders to develop a sense of ownership through participation, it is important to develop a collective and distinctive vision, as well as a sense of direction, collegiality and achievement.

- **Improving school quality and equity:** School communities could have a stronger impact on quality and equity if this aim was spelled out more explicitly and if clear teaching and learning strategies were adopted.

- **Moving towards co-operation:** As currently the government seems to support both competition and co-operation between schools, there is a need to clarify a broader framework and vision for the communities in relation to an educational system traditionally based on choice and competition.

- **Bridging the old and the new structures:** There is a need to better define the roles and responsibilities of school communities vis-à-vis the networks, boards and individual school leaders. These stakeholders all need to give away some power over decision making to allow for community-oriented identities to develop.

- **Providing leadership training and support:** As communities of schools rely for their success on school principals, it is of utmost importance to provide training and support for them to develop their capacities.

- **Sharing practice:** An evidence-based approach geared towards monitoring and evaluating the development of school communities would allow for continuous learning and development of communities of schools to fit the evolving needs of schools and students. It is therefore essential to define, share and disseminate good practices.

Annex 6.A1
Case study visit programme
22-24 May 2007

Tuesday 22 May 2007, Department for Education, Koning Albert II-laan 15, 1210 Brussels

Time / Subject	Name	Post
09.00 – 10.30 Focus on context for policy making	Mr. Gaby Hostens	Director-General Member OECD Education Committee
10.30 – 11.30 Focus on roles and responsibilities of communities of schools in secondary education	Mrs Hilde Lesage	Head of Division for teaching staff policies
11.30 – 12.30 Focus on roles and responsibilities of communities of schools in secondary education	Mr. Michel Van Uytfanghe	Chairman of the Christian Teaching Union (COC)
12.30 – 14.00	Lunch	
14.00 – 15.00 Implementation of groups of schools and communities of schools Distributed school leadership	Mr. Jacky Goris	General Director group of community schools in Brussels (= former state school)
	Mr. Luc Debacquer	Director Coordinator of community of secondary schools (community schools)
15.00 – 16.00 Focus on roles and responsibilities in communities of schools in primary education	Mrs Sonja Van Craeymeersch	Head of Division policymaking in primary education
16.00 – 17.00 Implementation of communities of schools Distributed school leadership Preparation and development of school leaders	Mr. Luc Tesseur	Head of the Antwerp City School System

Wednesday 23 May 2007, Sacred Heart Institute Heverlee and Paridaens Institute Louvain with Mrs Hilde Lesage

Time / Subject	Name	Post
09.00 – 10.30	School visit Sacred Heart Meeting with school leaders, teachers and students	
11.00 – 12.30	School visit Paridaens Institute Meeting with students and teachers.	
12.30 – 13.00	Lunch Paridaens Institute	
13.00 – 13.30 Focus on distributed leadership within Community of schools Implementation of community of schools.	Mrs A. Claeys	Director of Community of Catholic Secondary Schools in Louvain
13.30 – 15.30 Focus on school leadership Effective school leadership	Mr. Debontridder	School leader technical school VTI
Distributed leadership in the Sacred Heart Institute (a diversity of schools with one board)	Mr Schoenaerts	Headmaster Sacred Heart Secondary Institute
School boards and their search for effective school leaders	Mr Haest	Chairman board of community of catholic schools Louvain and chairman board of the Sacred Heart Institute
15.45 – 17.00 Focus on improving school leadership through networking within community of schools	Mrs Claeys and Mrs Verhavert and Mrs Van Ael	Teachers

Thursday 24 May 2007, Morning: Willebroek Rivierenland Group of Schools

Time / Subject	Name	Post
09.30 – 12.30 Focus on distributed school Leadership and on development of school leaders	Mr. Luc Van Gasse	General director of regional group of community schools (= former state schools)
	Mr. R. Schoofs	Director, CLB (Guidance and Counselling centre)
	Mrs. M. Heynick	Director, primary school
	Mr. J. De Clercq	Senior primary school teacher
12.30	Lunch at school	
14.00	Brussels	
15.00 – 16.00 Focus on assessment and evaluation of communities of schools in the catholic school system	Mr. Geert Schelstraete	Deputy Chief of Cabinet Minister of Work, Education and Training
16.00 – 17.00 Focus on Communities of schools Distributed school leadership	Mr. Paul Yperman	Co-ordination of Flemish Jesuit Schools
17.00 – 18.00	Debriefing with Mr Gaby Hostens	

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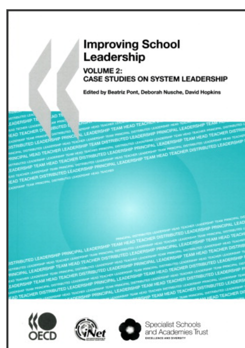

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