

Belgium (Flanders)

Unlike in other European countries, parents are free to choose a school here in Flanders based on what they believe is important, and also on the pedagogical vision of the school. We believe that this is one of the strongest points of our education system.

TITLE CARD: Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Flanders, Belgium

KRISTIEN ARNOUITS, *Head of Professional Development Service, Catholic School Teachers Union*: In Flanders, the constitution guarantees freedom of education. This means that anyone can start a school in Flanders. They can be private congregations with some sort of religious belief, but also a municipality, province, or they could be private individuals, parents.

GABY HOSTENS, *Former Director General, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training*: The private schools came mostly from the Catholic Church, organizations affiliated with the Catholic Church, but later on came Jewish schools, Freinet schools, Steiner schools, and also public schools.

TEXT SLIDE: With more very high performers and fewer very low performers than most other education systems, Flanders ranks among the top education systems worldwide. In the 2009 PISA tests, Flemish students scored an average 519 points in reading, 537 points in mathematics and 526 points in science.

TEXT SLIDE: However, the most advantaged 25% of Flemish students out-scored the least advantaged 25% by 100 score points, indicating that socio-economic differences had a major impact on performance.

GEORGES MONARD, *Former Secretary General, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training*: This freedom of choice for parents, and later also for the students, is very important, and our population is very invested in this. People would not accept the government limiting them in this choice. Specifically, that means that parents choose the school that they think is best for their child. Sometimes it's one school for one child and another for another of their children. And in the morning they might drive four or five schools and go to the fifth one.

GABY HOSTENS: This also means that schools have to achieve, have to be excellent, if they want to have customers, want to have students. In a densely-populated country like ours, there are many schools nearby. So it's not a problem to send your kid to another school, because there is such a large variety of schools.

MICHELINE SCHEYS, *Secretary General, Flemish Ministry of Education and Training*: The main responsibility for education lies with the school. But we in the central government have to guarantee that there is a minimum quality and a basic quality in

every school, because we have to guarantee to the parents and the students that when they select a certain school, they can be assured of a certain quality.

TEACHER: *So what are we going to do today? We're going to have a look at the bees to see how they are equipped to do their work. First we will examine the eyes of bees.*

PASCAL SMET, *Flemish Minister for Education, Youth, Equal Opportunities and Brussels Affairs*: Pedagogically, for how they teach, we don't impose norms. That's the school's responsibility. But it is important to know that we, as the government, determine the final attainment levels, the objectives for what the children should know. How the final objectives are to be achieved has to be set out in their curriculum. This curriculum is drawn up by the school. And the government has to approve it. We check the curriculum and how they're going to reach their final objectives, to see whether these objectives can indeed be reached.

TEACHER: *You should be able to see one big circle of light. Look through it, and adjust it so it's in focus.*

MICHELINE SCHEYS: A second way for us to guarantee quality is through our School Inspectorate. The School Inspectorate does two things: it checks whether the final attainment levels are evident in each school's curriculum, and it checks on-site to see whether the final attainment levels are in fact achieved.

KRISTIEN ARNOUITS: A curriculum in a Steiner school will be different from a curriculum in a community school or in a Catholic school. The School Inspectorate looks at the achievement of the final attainment levels and at the final objectives as they are set out in the school's curriculum. And it respects their autonomy.

PASCAL SMET: It's important that these inspectors go to the school, that they speak with the school management and with the teachers, so that they get a real overview. If the audit shows things are fine, then they get a positive review. If it's unfavorable, then the school gets the chance to set up a plan for improvement. Can we approve that? And if after that it's still no good, then we, the government, can shut down the school. That has never happened in the past years, every school has had a plan for improvement and implemented it.

TEACHER: *The exercises are on the green board, starting from number nine. Please follow the order on the board.*

LIEVEN VIAENE, *Inspector General, Flemish School Inspectorate*: We try to inspire schools, to motivate them, and to give them a clear picture of themselves. But we are not the representatives of teachers in the field. We are completely free of political influence and we interpret the data with full autonomy, to assess the quality of teaching in Flanders. The most important thing is we are very independent.

STUDENT: *So that's one fourth.*

STUDENT 2: *So what do I have to do to get to the fourteen?*

STUDENT: *I'm trying to figure that out too!*

GEORGES MONARD: The inspectors check and write a report, but not a report that you can use for a ranking. You can never rank schools, you can't publish a report about the 100 best schools and the 100 weakest schools, you can't do that with the data from the inspection. We think that's better in terms of striving for quality.

TEXT SLIDE: De Wingerd is a secondary school with around 450 pupils in the academic stream. It is under the authority of the municipality of Ghent. De Wingerd follows the Freinet method, a pedagogical approach based on encouraging children's curiosity, creativity and spontaneity.

JEAN-PIERRE VAN ALFAENE, *Co-Principal, De Wingerd*: Indeed, this is a Freinet school, so we are largely based on the methods of the pedagogue Celestin Freinet. So, this school has existed for about 22 years, and we have come a long way. We started with 80 students when we got here, and the school has now grown to 470 students.

STUDENT: *Welcome to my village. There are four streets: Blue Street, Green Street, T Street, and Yellow Street.*

JEAN-PIERRE VAN ALFAENE: On the one hand, we have the opportunity to implement our own pedagogical vision here. On the other hand, of course, we are dependent on the legislation and on Brussels, which we have to live up to here, so we slavishly follow the curriculum and the final attainment levels that are **[phrase repeated twice in the video subtitles]** imposed on us. But the way we work here, that is really up to us.

TEACHER: *Okay! Very good. We're going to do it in harmony.*

GEERT BAUDONCQ, *Co-Principal, De Wingerd*: Of course one of the conditions for achieving this is by protecting the small scale of the school, and in that sense we are quite unique in that our application policy is based on making sure that we don't take in more than 450 students at this school. And in that way you get a school culture that is very personal and, as my colleague says, very warm, and from which the pedagogical vision can be shaped. Well, the learning process is indeed largely prescribed from within the guidelines, the final attainment levels, from the Ministry. But alongside the cognitive requirements we try to give our students a number of skills that are very important later in life. Such as critical reasoning, taking responsibility, independence. And that gets expressed in the various forms of involvement that we have set up in this school.

BASIEL BOGAERTS, *Alumnus, De Wingerd*: My choice of this school was actually a very conscious one. For my elementary school I had been to 'De Harp' here in Ghent,

that is also a Freinet school with sort of the same focus on independence, on taking responsibility, on showing initiative. And 'De Wingerd' is really the only secondary school that continued with those kinds of themes in Ghent. So I was given a lot of freedom by my parents to choose it.

TEACHER: *On the first page of the website you have the registration page. If you want to come here your Mom or Dad will have to call us on the 1st of March.*

PARENT OF DE WINGERD STUDENT: In choosing a school, an important point for us was to select a pluralistic school. My wife and I come from different cultural backgrounds, so we wanted that to be developed at school. And then of course you read the literature and the reports that you find, printed or online, and you base it on that.

GEERT BAUDONCQ: We say to our students: this is not our school, this is everyone's school, and we give them the responsibility to shape it.

INSPECTOR: *We've been here for a week in this school and in the past week we have shared our findings with you. But we've now summarized this in a document that we would like to present to you now.*

GEERT BAUDONCQ: The inspection team came and visited us last year. They stayed for an entire week. It does cause a certain pressure, that's for sure, within the school. But it is surprising to see how soon they get an insight into the workings of this school, and the extent to which the final attainment levels that have been prescribed by the Ministry are achieved.

INSPECTOR 2: *Dutch is an example of one of the subjects where you do not get close enough to the final attainment level. And I think you as principal, and as someone who has studied Germanic languages, I think you can play a role in getting your school closer to those final attainment levels.*

JEAN-PIERRE VAN ALFAENE: *Yes, I think we all agree that we weren't following the curriculum as closely as we should have been, and we will definitely work on that.*

GEERT BAUDONCQ: Within Flanders we are a school that has a unique pedagogical concept. And we very clearly experienced that the inspection team was open to it, was interested, and indicated in certain areas that things were very good. With some remarks of course, which are the action points.

PASCAL SMET: Education is really the only thing we have in our Flemish society to keep Flanders prosperous. We don't have natural resources, we do of course have industry, we have services, but you need highly-skilled people for that. We have always had those, and we would like to keep having them in the future. That's why we invest in education above the OECD average, and above the EU average. And

that's why we try every day to make education better, because it's the only way a society can remain prosperous.