

Together to the Finish in Belgium-Flanders

1. Need/challenge addressed

- Motivation
- Family

The project aims to provide the school with information on the negative effects of grade retention and proposes alternatives to grade retention. When the school is making changes, it has to involve the parents and convince them as well of the negative effects of grade retention. It is necessary that the school is first convinced and clear about the benefits, otherwise conflict between parents and schools can take place. The project emphasises the important role of parents and parental involvement in supporting the pupils' education.

2. Level of intervention: universal

3. Intensity of the intervention: ongoing

4. Target group and age group: children from primary to secondary schools

5. Conditions and different steps necessary for the implementation of the measure

Together to the Finish offers a systematic and logical approach as illustrated in the figure below:



The implementation plan for schools that want to reduce grade retention in their daily school practice consists of four phases of implementation:

Phase 1 and 2 focus on causes and effects of grade retention and the necessity to replace this practice. Phase 3 focuses on the choice of alternatives and their implementation. And lastly, phase 4 focuses on the evaluation of the entire process and the evaluation of the selected alternatives.

After the fourth phase, it might be possible that some corrections need to be made in one of the phases of implementation and the evaluation must show exactly where. It could be that grade retention was not contested, or not contested enough, among the school staff; that not all resistance against developing alternatives to grade retention was overcome; or, that some adjustments are required at the level of the (mixture of) implemented measures.

6. Identifying the appropriate type and level of support to suit the needs of the learner

The mentioned alternatives to grade retention are described in the books (*link to the book in English*), grouped in four domains: didactics, evaluation, school climate and organisation. The alternatives from all domains should be combined by the school actors to achieve the best mix for specific school needs. Alternatives may include: co-operative learning, peer tutoring, continuous pupil monitoring system, parental involvement, extra-curricular activities, cross-grade education and multi-grade class groups, etc.

7. Stakeholders involved in the delivery of the measure

The city of Antwerp is involved in the implementation, together with other education partners. Some partners are essential for the success of the project, i.e.: entire school staff embracing the whole school approach, parents, labour market actors, but also leisure organisations and school support services.

8. Overall responsibility for implementation of the measure

The city of Antwerp is the facilitator of this project. The city officials share their vision, content and research as experts. They operate as coaches in the schools. While they are the facilitators, the schools themselves are responsible for the project. As facilitators, the city officials create the context to create choices in the school by bringing together research, sharing methods, inspirational practices and bringing practitioners and experts together to teach and learn from each other. The school leaders are responsible for implementing new practices in the schools, together with the school board and the school staff.

The project can only succeed if the entire school staff is strongly committed to the principles of Together to the Finish and enters this process together. This requires not only agreement on the alternatives to grade retention, but also the rational and emotional conviction that grade retention ought to be replaced with other measures, which will both enhance the school's quality of education and reduce the number of pupils held back.

This requires ownership by the school. The school knows best its own processes and the team. The school leader and the team decide together which steps are needed to improve school quality in their specific school context, so that every child in their school gets maximum chances to develop.

9. Obstacles in introducing the measure

The main obstacle is the tradition in Flanders to use grade retention for students falling behind. In a study conducted by the city of Antwerp, results show that almost 50 % of the teachers believe that grade retention is an effective measure in interest of the student. As national and international studies question the effectiveness of grade retention, it is important to propose valid and efficient alternatives. It remains a challenge to convince teachers to adopt these alternatives to grade retention.

The success of the project depends on the policy capacity of the school (school leader, their team and the school board). While a number of schools have little time to think ahead and to work on a future vision, they also often lack time for reflection and evaluation of their own school processes. This makes the introduction of this initiative and the alternative measures to grade retention a major task for many schools.

10. Monitoring/assessing the measure

Evaluation of the implementation process and of the selected alternatives is an integral part of the initiative (*see point 6 above*) and it takes place at school level. During the whole process the goals set by the school are used as quantitative standard. Individual results are compared to local and more global trends (i.e. in other Flemish cities). All stakeholders are involved in the evaluation process. The results of the evaluation are used in the adaptation of the process and of priorities. The selected alternatives are evaluated and refined if necessary.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation is needed as soon as Together to the Finish starts in schools. This is what we call process evaluation. How do people involved get going? What are their experiences with the initiative? Where do difficulties occur during the implementation? How are new teachers introduced into the developed framework and plan of action? *The questions* of the process evaluation are meant to keep the discussion going among the school staff and other people involved. Alterations to the school-specific plan of action can be made on the basis of this evaluation. In the course of time (e.g. after two years), a comprehensive evaluation is carried out, similar to the initial analysis. It aims to measure the effects of the measure i.e., by considering: has the amount of grade retention in fact decreased and has it been replaced by alternatives without a loss of educational quality and a lowering of pupils' educational achievements?

11. Results of the measure

The decline in grade retention, as measured in the city of Antwerp, is stronger than in other regions in Flanders. It is not yet certain that this is an irreversible trend for the whole city. However, it was observed that some schools made a significant mind-shift in identifying alternative approaches to grade repetition. There are plans to develop a tool for evaluation which would allow a more detailed and systematic monitoring of the trend.

12. Funding/resourcing the measure

The project was financed entirely by the city of Antwerp, with funds delegated from the Ministry of Education. The cities receive funds from the Flemish ministry to work out a local policy on education, in which they set their own priorities, themes and projects depending on the local context.

13. Current status of the measure

Together to the Finish is currently operational. The books have been distributed to all the schools, as well as libraries, Initial Teacher Education institutions and other partners. Schools in disadvantaged areas receive assistance free of charge, while other schools pay for the service.