

Drop-out Network and Central Helpdesk in Antwerp

1. What is the need/challenge addressed?

The ESL rate for Belgium-Flanders in 2010 was 14% while that for Antwerp was 28%. The ESL rate of Antwerp was believed to be contributing substantially to the relatively high ESL rate in Flanders. This made ESL a critical issue that needed to be addressed through a cross-sectoral wide ranging action plan. Typically, early school leavers are young people from non-native speakers of Dutch, who find it difficult to engage at school, move from one school to another, and more likely to be male than female.

Reasons that turn young people into potential or effective early school leavers are socio-economic deprivation, ethnicity, gender, truancy, exclusion from school, moving from one school to another, and school fatigue. These factors are exacerbated by such pull factors as availability of jobs for low skilled workers. A need was felt to make structural changes that would address ESL in Antwerp, particularly by looking into the quality of guidance services for students, language support to non native speakers as early as possible, possible alternatives to grade repetition and the creation of flexible learning pathways.

By the end of the millennium the Antwerp City Council had already established a City Education Council that started building consensus around policy and implementation, based on a stakeholders' network. The City Education Council identified three particular challenges: Grade repetition, Truancy and an increasing expulsion rate from secondary schools.

Grade Retention: This is a relatively frequent occurrence across all school levels from kindergarten through to secondary education. For example, the latest figures up to mid 2014 showed that 10.5% of students in Antwerp in the 1st year of the primary school repeated the grade.

Truancy: Truancy was considered to be a strong predictor of early school leaving. However, the cause was not necessarily related to particular learning difficulties but could also be linked to external factors such as family problems including older children taking care of younger siblings in single parent families or in families where it was difficult to make work arrangements when young children are sick or cannot attend childcare for various reasons.

Expulsion rates: School expulsions increased from 556 in 2010-2011 to 628 in 2012-2013. Expulsions could vary from very short periods to up to two years. Expulsion is accompanied by corresponding procedures and interventions. However, a need was felt to look towards alternative forms of discipline that would make more educational sense.

The strategic decision at policy level was to tackle the problem by sustaining a network approach managed by the City of Antwerp Education Council and that would bring together essential stakeholders that include the school networks, teachers' unions, chamber of commerce, parents' associations and pupils' representatives.

2. Brief description of the measure

The Drop-out prevention network: The network provides a whole suite of services and expertise. Each project is unique, focused on specific target groups and attracts its own level of funding. Emphasis is put on prevention and re-integration.

The Central Helpdesk: This provides support to pupils and to schools. When students absent themselves repeatedly from school they are referred to the Pupil Guidance Centre attached to the school network which the school is part of. Where necessary the Pupil Guidance Centre seek the help of the Central Helpdesk. There are 72 Pupil Guidance

Centres (CLB) across Flanders. Every school is attached to a CLB. The CLB aims to provide holistic support to students in four different areas:

- Learning and studying
- Educational career
- Psychological and social behaviour
- Preventive health care

This process of networking to tackle ESL followed a very clear path:

- Identifying and involving all stakeholders right from the start;
- Coming to a common commitment towards tackling ESL through a common understanding even if from different perspectives;
- Establishing clear responsibilities for each stakeholder and ensuring effective communication channels between the different actors;
- Working towards a culture change towards one based on collective action, from the top administrative co-ordinating level to school level;
- Establishing a formal network with clear roles within a well-established operational structure;
- Creating a central helpdesk that would coordinate, monitor, evaluate, provide feedback, seek flexibility for adaptation and spur change;
- Creating a culture of acceptance of different viewpoints among stakeholders, viewing different standpoints as a platform towards analysing situations from as many angles as possible but then agreeing on a common way forward;
- Exploring good practices through research and data analysis;
- Creating a common strategy and action plan;
- Accepting that change takes time to happen.

3. Who is involved in decisions about identifying the appropriate type of support, the level and intensity of support? Who is involved in decisions about adapting the type of support and its level and intensity to suit the needs of the learner?

The Central Helpdesk is at the centre of a network that involves a range of agencies and stakeholders at the local (city) level. It is mostly the schools who take the first step. Schools work with the Pupil Guidance Centres (CLB) in the case of individual support to students. CLB staff include doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists and educators. Individual programmes are drawn up and individual services or programmes from within the network are sought to provide support. Youth coaches and peer coaches provide individual guidance. When professional therapeutic services are needed, then individuals are referred to these services. When necessary the police or the justice department are roped in. For school based actions to work with parents, School Bridge, which is in turn funded by the City Council, provides the necessary support to set up the best way to integrate parents within the school community.

4. Who delivers the measure? Which stakeholders/professionals are involved from within and or outside the school (e.g. teachers, social workers, psychologists, therapists, etc.)? How is cooperation between the stakeholders ensured? How are stakeholder supported in their role – e.g. do they receive specific training?

The various support systems are provided by the stakeholders in the Dropout prevention network that is coordinated by the Central Helpdesk.

5. Who has overall responsibility for implementation of the measure?

The Antwerp City Council

6. Were there any obstacles in introducing the measure and which ones? How were these obstacles overcome? If not, why not?

Obstacles	Solutions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of funds, resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Pooling of resources (Flanders government, City of Antwerp, EU projects)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Distance between schools and parents (school and family cultures) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ NGO-run programs for parents (language courses, meetings); programs for student teachers to link with pupils' families
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Different / changing priorities of stakeholders and policymakers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Bringing all stakeholders fully on board (continuous communication and joint work); evidence of positive effects of the scheme (ESL stable/ crime rates decreasing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Incomplete and dispersed data collection systems ■ System not sufficiently child-focused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Central database of files of all pupils at the risk of dropping out (Central Help Desk) with coordination of all the involved stakeholders and registered follow-up (measures taken)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of thorough evaluation 	

7. How is the measure monitored/assessed? By whom?

- **Data collection** on national/regional/local/school level with developed small number of key indicators (attendance, truancy, expulsion etc.) relevant for ESL;
- **Built-in procedures** for monitoring/evaluation from the start (Central Help Desk);
- Regular **follow-up** (reporting, evaluation) **of projects** at city and school level, including follow-up of project sustainability at schools, centralised collection of follow-up information;
- **Pupil surveys** (i.e. within the 'school in the spotlight' actions);
- **Involvement of universities** (academic research involving schools);

- Importance of an efficient **inspection** system with transparent data (results) by school;
- **Dedicated working group** of stakeholders.

The Central Help Desk produces an annual report with regards to the quantity of interventions but also the quality of service provided. Every partner in the service also produces its own annual report.

8. What are the results?

In terms of the extent to which the network has succeeded in reducing overall ESL rates, it was reported that it is difficult to see how individual/isolated projects contribute to reducing ESL. However, individual projects are successful. Furthermore, although Antwerp ESL rates are high, they are stable and without the measures in place, there is likelihood that ESL rates would be higher.

9. What resources are involved? How is the measure funding (please explain if possible)

The Dropout prevention network is funded by the City Council, the Flemish Government and EU funds.

10. Is the measure still running? If not, explain why

Yes.