

Belgium (French)

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Introduction

Belgium is a federated country with three official languages: French, Dutch, and German. The language of instruction depends on which of the three geographic regions the school is in: the Flemish Region, the Brussels-Capital Region, or Wallonia. Some Belgian municipalities situated along the boundary between two linguistic regions have a special status protecting their linguistic minorities and their right to teach both languages in different schools. In the Brussels-Capital Region, for example, a child's language of instruction may be French or Dutch, depending on the choice of the head of the family. The Wallonia-Brussels Federation, which is the focus of this chapter, uses French as the language of instruction. In addition to the official languages of Belgium, immigrants speak languages including Italian, Arabic, Spanish, and Turkish at home.

Overview of Education System

In 1989, the Education Department was transferred from the federal government to the French, Flemish, and German communities, which are defined on a linguistic and cultural basis. Federal authorities are responsible for deciding the extent of compulsory education, minimum requirements for obtaining a diploma, and teachers' pensions, while determining the curricula, skills, and levels of achievement for primary and secondary education lies with the communities. Education is organized by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation or subsidized by it through grant-aided public education and denominational or nondenominational grant-aided independent education. Provided they comply with laws, decrees, and orders, controlling authorities have fairly extensive autonomy, particularly with regard to methods of education and assessment.

Compulsory schooling starts at age 5 and ends at age 18. From ages 15 to 18, students can attend schooling part time. Preprimary education is well developed and free of charge. Children can enter preschool at age 2.5. The vast majority of children regularly attend preschool.

Primary education (Grades 1 to 6) and secondary education (Grades 7 to 12) each last for six years. Continuing the work of primary education, the first stage of secondary education (Grades 7 and 8) aims to build and develop common basic knowledge and skills among all students. As of academic year 2022–2023, a common core curriculum will be implemented gradually from preprimary education (pre-K) to the end of the third year of secondary education (ninth grade) in

the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. In academic year 2022–2023, the three years of preprimary education will be organized according to this principle of a common core curriculum. Then in the 2023–2024 academic year, the first two school years of primary education (Grades 1 and 2) will follow the same organization. The implementation of this common core curriculum (in academic year 2024–2025 for the third and fourth years of primary education, Grades 3 and 4) should be finalized up to the third year of secondary education (ninth grade) in academic year 2029–2030. Presently, from the third year of secondary education onward (Grades 9 to 12), a distinction is made between two main education streams: secondary “transition” education (general, technical, or arts) leading to higher education, and secondary “qualification” education (technical or arts and vocational) leading to the labor market. After graduating from the qualification stream, students who complete an extra year of study become qualified to enter higher education. Part-time education is organized in centers for dual education and training (*centres d’éducation et de formation en alternance*).

At the end of the 1990s, two major decrees for education were promulgated. The first, *décret “Missions”* (Missions Decree), defines four main objectives for the education system of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation (FWB) and the means to reach those objectives.^{1,a} With an emphasis on the development of the individual and issues of equity, the decree strives “to get all students to acquire knowledge and skills which will enable them to engage in lifelong learning and to participate actively to the economic, social and cultural life” and “to guarantee to all students equal opportunities of social emancipation.” The decree also introduces the important curriculum reform of core skills (*les socles de compétences*), which has been drawn up for Grades 2, 6, 8, and 12. New programs congruent with those competencies have been introduced gradually following approval by the appropriate commissions.

The second decree, *décret “École de la réussite”* (Decree for a Successful School), is aimed at organizing primary education in two cycles: Cycle 1 spans the last grade of preschool to second grade, and Cycle 2 spans Grades 3 to 6.² The decree holds that grade repetition should be avoided within cycles; accordingly, this objective was set for Cycle 1 in 2000 and for Cycle 2 in 2005.

In addition to these reforms, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation has regulated the enrollment of students in the first stage of secondary education by a 2011 decree. Furthermore, the Declaration on Community Policy states that the future of Wallonia and Brussels depends on the quality of education.³ The 2015 Pact for Excellence in Education aims to meet the challenge of maintaining high education standards by making the best use of public resources and providing each social catchment area with adequate, complete, and complementary supply.

In 2019, Parliament of FWB adopted the Code of Fundamental Education and Secondary Education (Books 1 and 2). This decree maintains the existing principles of the *décret Missions* that

^a The first text law, this decree defines general objectives for education common to all schools, whatever the organizing authority (state, public, Catholic).

proved to be efficient, but modifies what is less efficient by a gradual implementation of elements from the Pact for Excellence in Education. The Code (*Code – Livre Premier, Titre IV, Chapitre II, articles 1.4.2-1 et 1.4.2-2*) organizes the planning of new competence referentials: initial competence referential for pre-K education, and competence referential of the common core curriculum. These last ones are more precise than the *socles de compétences* since they establish on an annual basis the knowledge, skills, and competencies that students should acquire and develop in seven learning domains, among which are French, art, and culture. In 2021, the *socles de compétences* (core skills) still establish the skills that should be acquired by students in fourth grade (fourth year of primary education). The new core curriculum for fourth grade will come into force in the 2024–2025 academic year.

Use and Impact of PIRLS

Following the results of PIRLS 2011, an information leaflet analyzing student data was released, and two publications devoted to primary teachers were published on the official teaching website of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation.^{4,b} Additionally, four video clips^c were launched to raise awareness about the PIRLS results and demonstrate the importance of using demanding texts in fourth grade and providing tools to enable schools to assess reading comprehension skills. Produced by the research department of the University of Liège with the support of the Institute of Training and Research in Higher Education, the videos highlight the kinds of obstacles experienced by students. Two of these video clips were developed to examine students’ reading processes using a narrative text released from PIRLS 2011, Derek Munson’s “Enemy Pie,” and its related items. Another two video clips are focused on informative texts and related items released in previous PIRLS cycles, “Searching for Food” and “Antarctica: Land of Ice.” An analysis was provided of students’ errors in the open response questions linked to the reading processes where students showed less mastery (interpreting and evaluating). The videos aim to clarify for primary teachers the links between reading comprehension processes, the items’ questions, expected answers of students, and reading obstacles that students encounter.

As was done for the texts of PIRLS 2011, three video clips were produced to analyze students’ mistakes in open ended questions from PIRLS 2016. Two video clips were made about “Macy and the Red Hen,” one focusing on the lower processes and the other one on the higher processes. A document with a critical reading of the gender issue raised in this text was also realized.^d The same type of analysis of students’ mistakes or misunderstandings and a video clip also were produced about the text “The Green Sea Turtle’s Journey of a Lifetime.”

Despite the Wallonia-Brussels Federation not participating in ePIRLS in 2016, three video clips were created to make FWB teachers aware of the theme of online reading and enable them to

^b See <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php> for more information on the website.

^c See <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=27909> for the video clips.

^d See <https://events.uliege.be/pirls-fw/lecture-critique/> for more information.

discover the particularities of this type of assessment. The first video clip presents the reading comprehension approaches in online reading assessed by ePIRLS. The two other video clips focus on the presentation of two tasks presented in 2016, “Mars” and “Elizabeth Blackwell.”

Finally, texts of PIRLS literacy have been made available to teachers with a short explanation of the objective of this option of the survey.^e

The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

Reading Policy

Formal reading instruction normally begins at age 6 (with compulsory legal schooling beginning at age 5, but formal reading learning beginning at age 6), although aspects of using language are introduced as part of preschool education. One of three major priorities throughout the six years of primary education, reading instruction focuses on comprehension, writing, and communication, with an emphasis on topics that are relevant to students. The objectives of the reading curriculum include:

- Progressively developing a broad range of technical abilities and comprehension strategies that gradually foster an autonomous approach to reading acquisition in the context of various supports and situations
- Making reading spaces available for students so they can enjoy the variety and the richness of books
- Considering learning to read as a complex process that focuses on reading strategies and appropriate acquisition approaches, which allow students to explore literal, inferential, and personal meaning from a text in a social constructivist setting

Summary of National Curriculum

The core skills (*socles de compétences*) define the basis of reading instruction for every school, but instructional methodology and classroom activities vary depending on the type of school. The core skills define reading as the construction of meaning as a recipient of a written message (e.g., fairy tale, short story, novel, play, poem, fable, song, letter, article, instructions).⁵ Meaning, in turn, is determined by the interaction among the message (particularly its dominant purpose and structure), the reader (including his or her previous knowledge [e.g., linguistic, literary, artistic, and historical knowledge] and emotional disposition), and context.

Activities involving reading often are incorporated within French (as mother tongue) lessons. The frequent goal of these lessons is to develop cross-curricular competencies within the reading domain that concern information processing, a necessary skill in a variety of subjects. These competencies include:

^e All of the resources mentioned in this section can be found on the Belgian French-speaking website <https://events.uliege.be/pirls-fwb/>

- Rereading texts to strengthen comprehension
- Analyzing texts to find main ideas, link them together, and understand their importance
- Analyzing texts to form hypotheses and extract explicit and implicit meanings
- Synthesizing texts to summarize main ideas

With respect to reading, the core skills primarily emphasize the processes implemented prior to the reading activity; elaboration of the first comprehension strategies; general structure of a text (e.g., typology and organizing signs); and interactions between verbal and nonverbal elements. The core skills include seven competencies specific to reading, with subcompetencies defining the standards more precisely for each grade level:

- Directing one’s reading according to context: This competency is organized into six subcompetencies that involve preparing and managing reading activities, including selecting an appropriate document for a reading project, anticipating a document’s content by considering internal and external indicators, understanding the author’s intentions, adapting the strategy for a reading project to the document type and the time available, and defining an appropriate reading speed.
- Building meaning: This competency is organized into 11 subcompetencies that outline strategies to develop an “expert” reading approach via processes by which readers can understand text and react appropriately. These subcompetencies include extracting explicit information, inferring implicit meaning, and checking hypotheses.
- Determining the organization of a text: This competency focuses on the text structure (e.g., narration, description, dialogue) and the global organization of the text (e.g., layout, sections, textual organizers). Its nine subcompetencies focus on selecting the strategies that are most appropriate for the type of text.
- Detecting the cohesion factors between sentences and groups of sentences throughout a text: This competency focuses on the relationships between textual components and the skills needed to increase reading fluidity and text comprehension. Its four subcompetencies include identifying syntactic factors, chronological marks, anaphora, and pronouns.
- Taking grammatical units into account: This competency is divided into two subcompetencies, one pertaining to punctuation and grammatical units (i.e., organization and syntactic structure) and the other pertaining to the recognition of grammatical indicators of nouns and verbs (e.g., gender, singularity or plurality, tense). These subcompetencies are important in the reading process because the reader must be able to detect the influence of grammar on a text.
- Processing lexical units: This competency consists of four subcompetencies comprising strategies to clarify the meaning of a word: suggesting hypotheses or using the context, using a dictionary, identifying synonyms and antonyms, and identifying different word components (e.g., root, prefix, suffix).

- Detecting interactions between verbal and nonverbal elements: This competency encourages the use of nonverbal elements to clarify reading (e.g., illustration, scheme, typography, keys).

While the definitions of the reading competencies are relatively specific, the divisions between them are theoretical because the competencies must be processed together in learning activities. The teaching methods recommended in the core skills and other curricular documents focus on integrating the reading competencies through activities that are intrinsically interesting for the learner.

At the end of the first phase of primary education (second grade), students have begun developing most of the subcompetencies during reading lessons. At the end of the second phase of primary education (sixth grade), most of the subcompetencies are assessed for the purpose of certification, ensuring mastery of the skills that were introduced in the first phase and their enrichment in the second phase. At the end of primary education, students should have mastered the skills that help them become autonomous readers with the ability to adopt efficient reading strategies in various reading situations. Beyond the fulfillment of these competencies, motivation in reading also is emphasized.

As indicated above, a new curriculum will be implemented for fourth grade in academic year 2024–2025. This referential defines the knowledge, skills, and competencies in connection with reading instruction that need to be mastered at the end of each grade of the related common core curriculum. For fourth grade, the major improvements defined are the following: First, reading basics will be approached in connection with the specificities of informational reading. Then, the analysis of authors’ narrative techniques and their effects on the readers will be taught, as well as critical reading, through skills such as the evaluation of the quality of information or the wording of an opinion about the values approached in a text (similar to one of the four broad-based process of comprehension measured in PIRLS, “evaluate and critique content and textual elements”).

Professional Development Requirements and Programs

Requirements for Ongoing Professional Development in Reading for Teachers

Professional development of teachers is compulsory per decree, although teachers have the freedom to choose among professional development courses covering reading.⁶ The decree also called for the creation of the Professional Training Institute (*Institut de la Formation en cours de carrière*), an organization that implements and organizes professional development for teachers in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. Currently, professional development projects are structured at three levels:⁷

- Micro level (school project)—related to the teacher’s school on topics such as student needs, parental expectations, and the school’s social and cultural background
- Meso level (educational and pedagogical project)—based on the objectives or philosophy of the school’s administration

- Macro level (curriculum project)—related to implementing learning competencies, with the goal of reaching levels defined in the core skills

In-service professional development includes mandatory and voluntary training. Mandatory professional development consists of six half-days per school year, of which two days must be devoted to macro education. Voluntary professional development may not exceed 10 half-days per school year if the training occurs during school hours.

Teacher Education Specific to Reading

No specific education is dedicated to teaching reading instruction. Following graduation from a teacher education program, teachers at the primary level are qualified to teach all subjects. Reading is part of the regular curriculum and is integrated into French language (mother language) didactics.

Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

In 2006, Parliament adopted a decree to organize and coordinate the previous system of external noncertifying assessments into a three-year cycle. In the first year, the assessments concern reading mastery and writing for students in Grades 2 and 5. Mathematics is assessed in the second year, followed by science in the third year. The team that oversees these assessments includes the president of the Monitoring Commission, teachers from various education bodies, inspectors, and university researchers. The assessment results are used to evaluate student achievement, prepare pedagogical recommendations and activities for teachers, develop in-service professional development training, and help pedagogical counselors.

Since 2008, a Basic Studies Certificate has been awarded at the end of primary education based on an external certifying assessment that is mandatory in every school type.⁸ This examination assesses the mastery of the competencies that is expected at the end of primary education in French language, mathematics, science, history, and geography. Alternatively, students can obtain a Basic Studies Certificate through the Board of Examiners at their school.

Various methods of assessment are used in primary education. To enable students to develop at their own pace, teachers should focus on formative assessment and differentiated education to account for students' different abilities. The results of teacher-prepared examinations can supplement classroom observations and notations from formative assessments.

To assist teachers, the Commission of the Assessment Instruments Related to Core Skills (*Commission des Outils d'Évaluation Relatifs aux Socles de Compétences*) provides examples of assessments to all of the schools organized and subsidized by the Wallonia-Brussels Federation. These instruments, available on the education page of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation website,^f

^f See <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php> for more information.

have been developed to align with the core skills.⁹ Prior to their distribution, the assessments are tested in classrooms.

Special Reading Initiatives

National Initiatives for Teaching Reading

Belgium currently does not have any compulsory didactic methods or support for teaching reading. The selection of textbooks varies according to the teachers. They typically use materials from a variety of sources, including exercises and texts from books, newsletters, reviews, and documents provided by the school system.

A 2006 official directive emphasizes the use of school textbooks, software, and other educational tools in classrooms.¹⁰ The use of these materials is intended to support students throughout their learning and help teachers plan and implement teaching activities. This directive is part of the Contract for Schools (*Contrat pour l'école*), which aims for better resourced teachers, better structured teaching methods, and more efficient and equitable schools.

The government of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation has granted schools financial aid for textbook and software purchases. As of 2007, these funds are to be used to purchase textbooks that have received approval based on ethical criteria (i.e., respect for equality and nondiscrimination principles) and education criteria (i.e., conformity with the core skills and other decrees).

Since 2019, literary books can be bought with this financial aid. The agreed-upon books depend on the labeling editors whose list is published each month. The tools agreed on by the former rules still apply.

Initiatives for Students

There is currently no specific initiative in FWB for high-achieving students.

The reform of the education system that includes the gradual implementation of a polytechnic and multidisciplinary common core requires the creation of a specific device to manage the heterogeneity of the students in the classes. This device, called “Differentiation and personalized support,” proposes to provide reinforced supervision (two teachers per class) at certain times of the week. The objective is for the homeroom teacher to manage heterogeneity with the help of another teacher so that they work as closely as possible according to the needs of the students. These hours will be used for the benefit of all students to avoid sending students out of the classroom if they are high performers or if they need more support.

Students with reading difficulties often receive classroom support as a result of formative assessments and the differentiated education system. In most cases, this support consists of repeating activities (i.e., same instructional materials, process, and instructions). Once difficulties are detected, remedial teaching procedures can be implemented in and out of the classroom. In some instances, students may benefit from a supplementary school year. Some schools receive

supplementary funding that allows them to enroll large numbers of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in projects related to reading.¹¹

The special education system serves children and teenagers who require adapted education because of specific education needs or limited learning abilities. Special education is available for students who are slightly or severely mentally challenged and students who have behavioral or personality disorders, physical disabilities, illnesses (e.g., are convalescing), vision problems, hearing problems, or instrumental problems (e.g., language or speech development problems). Like the regular education system, the special education system works to achieve the objectives outlined by the core skills. Depending on the acquired competencies, students may obtain the Basic Studies Certificate (*Certificat d'études de base*) and other education certifications.

Policies for Closing Achievement Gaps

The Differentiation and personalized support tool (described above), which responds to heterogeneity management, also contributes to bridging the achievement gaps between students. In addition, an entire axis of the reform is devoted to preventing students from failing school, repeating the school year, and dropping out of school.

Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

During the 2020–2021 academic year, 1,866 primary schools had to close (including 1,281 for health reasons, 85 for organizational reasons, and 96 that were completely closed). The average closure time was 9.87 days. These are declarative data and therefore not exhaustive.

The Wallonia-Brussels Federation endeavored to strengthen the capacity of schools to provide distance instruction and support for students in the context of hybrid teaching. Therefore, each school was asked to prepare internally a hybrid learning strategy (e.g., training of teaching teams, provision of a digital sharing platform, design of specific learning methods for students without digital access). In addition, the Wallonia-Brussels Federation asked education, cultural, and youth establishments (libraries, homework schools) to make their resources available to students without digital equipment.

Among the measures taken on the pedagogical level, focus was placed on the identification of delays and learning difficulties, as well as on the differentiation practices to be implemented for students affected by this identification. In particular, to mitigate the effects of the health crisis in particularly socioeconomically disadvantaged primary and ordinary secondary schools, additional financial resources have enabled schools to hire staff according to their needs and the profile of their students (teachers, educators, speech therapists, psychologists, social workers, etc.). These schools have been able to set up notable increased education coordination between the members of the education teams as well as personalized support for certain students.

At the same time, the digital strategy was accelerated through the establishment of a Digital Equipment and Connectivity Task Force aimed at proposing equipment models for schools and identifying students' needs, through teachers' support and training in digital technologies (creation of training and self-assessment tools, mobilization of techno-pedagogical advisors in schools), as well as through the design of a digital platform for schools that did not have it.

Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

As of 2022, the impact of the pandemic on learning (especially reading) of fourth grade students has not been concretely assessed. However, meetings have been organized with the management of primary schools to analyze the situation of schools and to inform administration of the situation and the needs on the ground. In addition, all statistical data related to the impact of the health crisis on the education system have been collected, synthesized, and communicated to the Minister of Education.

Policy and Practice Changes

As the health situation has not yet fully returned to normal, the Government and the General Administration of Education essentially have focused their efforts on managing the end of the 2020–2021 academic year and the beginning of the next one. The digital strategy also has been accelerated through the establishment of the Digital Equipment and Connectivity Task Force.

In addition, the health crisis has revealed once again, and even amplified, the social inequalities of the education system in FWB, which is already the subject of a major systemic reform (Pact for Excellence in Education). This reform (implementation of which is staggered until 2028) involves a series of changes in education practices that will be encouraged by the time it is fully implemented:

- Principle of general benevolence in the supervision and assessment of students
- Development of diagnostic assessments
- Personalized support for students and differentiation according to their needs
- Use of information and communication technologies in the lessons

Suggested Readings

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- ⁶ Gouvernement de la Communauté française. (2002). *Décret relatif à la formation en cours de carrière des membres du personnel des établissements d'enseignement fondamental ordinaire* [Decree on the training of career staff of regular primary schools]. Bruxelles: Author.
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