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**Questionnaire on the positions of education councils regarding the Corona Crisis**

**Input by Vlor (Flemish Education Council)**

1. **Policy issues**

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| Describe the main policy issues regarding the COVID 19 education policyWhich were the main measures adopted during the lockdown (particularly those measures related to teaching and learning), Specify if relevant the education level concerned e.g. primary, vocational, higher education, special needs, others, … |
| Describe the ‘normalisation’ process Which were the main measures adopted during the normalisation process (particularly those measures related to teaching and learning)? Specify if relevant the education level concerned e.g. primary, vocational, higher education, special needs, others, … |

Short overview:

* March 16 to Easter holidays 2020: closing of all schools. Schools organize themselves independently for the new situation.
* After the Easter holidays 2020: stabilization within the closure with the prospect of a possible reopening on May 18. Pre-teaching is prescribed in that transition phase.
* From May 18, 2020: relaxation of measures regarding the opening of schools: not for all levels and grades of education.
* Early July 2020: the option to send all students to school on September 1, 2020. Plans per phase (color codes).
* Mid-July 2020: flare-up of the crisis with adoption of yellow phase for the schools.
* Mid-August 2020: decision to allow all students to go to school full-time on September 1, at least for the first week of the school year.

Basic assumptions[[1]](#footnote-2)

*Pre-primary, primary and secondary education*

The basic principle is to guarantee **the right to learning of every child**, every pupil in pre-primary, primary and secondary education. And that right is guaranteed by a maximum of lessons in the classroom given by the teacher. A digital offering is an excellent addition, but distance learning is merely an alternative when safety regulations require it.

When talking about the concept of 'bubble' in the pandemic scenarios and scripts, **the class is the contact bubble.** Where it is required to reduce the contact bubbles (only applicable to secondary education), the class groups are halved, which means that the students also come to school less days.

Concrete **security measures** are linked to each pandemic level. A **safety plan** has been developed for each pandemic level. The plans are a guide to the pandemic scenarios and clarify obligations, but do not impose any extra obligations. They provide additional advice that can support a local risk analysis.

The education field and the education ministers of the different communities decided to start full education (mainstream and special pre-primary, primary, full-time and part-time secondary, higher, adult and part-time arts education) in **pandemic phase yellow with great vigilance.** From phase yellow onwards, each educational institution draws up a local risk analysis, on the basis of which it is established under what conditions it can be fully or partially open.

Only in municipalities **where the pandemic situation is acute**, it is possible to switch to the orange phase. On the basis of the data supplied by Celeval/RAG, the existing local crisis cell is convened. This crisis cell is supplemented by representatives from education, guidance services and the Agency for Care and Health, is convened. They communicate the proposal for decision to the relevant minister of education. The education minister can approve or reject this proposed decision.

For the safety for education staff, pupils and parents, a quarantine can be used. Distance learning is provided for class groups that need to be quarantined.

In view of advancing scientific insights and findings regarding the role of children in the spread of the virus and their vulnerability, primary education is in principle treated equally - with a few exceptions. The crucial age limit seems to be at **the age of 12 years.** Above this age, the risk of spreading and vulnerability increases, for both pupils and teachers; other safety regulations are applicable.

*Part-time art education*

For part-time art education (dko), depending on the age of the learner, we consider the rules of compulsory education or adult education. If recognized establishments of the dko are on the campus of a primary or secondary school, the prevention advisor makes a risk analysis for the organization of the change moments (including avoidance of gathering, hygiene measures) so that the learning activities of both levels of education, depending on the phase, can take place.

*Adult education (CBE and CVO)*

For students in adult basic education (CBE) and secondary adult education (CVO), education is often a necessity from an economic and social perspective. If recognized establishments of adult education share classrooms with other levels of education or other services, the prevention advisor makes a risk analysis for the organization of the simultaneous teaching moments and the changing moments (including avoiding training, hygiene measures) so that the learning activities of both can take place, depending on the phase.

*Higher education*

The Flemish universities and university colleges will work with different pandemic levels, as schools of compulsory education do. Only in the green level, higher education is organized as in the pre-corona era. In the yellow, orange and red levels, higher education will become hybrid: on campus if possible, online because possible. The aim is to achieve a feasible balance between distance learning and physical educational activities on campus or in the field. Local risk analyzes are carried out everywhere. In all scenarios, all institutions respect the applicable safety regulations regarding hand hygiene, healthy distance, mouth mask, disinfection, ventilation etc. They also keep a finger on the pulse of advancing scientific insights.

Pandemic levels or stages

In the pandemic scenarios, 4 pandemic levels or phases are distinguished:

* Green level, zero risk.

A vaccine is available and/or there is group immunity. All contacts can take place. Hand hygiene (before eating and after going to the toilet) remains necessary.

* Yellow level, low risk.

There is a limited transmission of infections, so increased vigilance is indicated. Contacts between potential distributors are limited. Functionally necessary contacts can continue, subject to the applicable safety measures.

* Orange level, moderate risk.

There is a systematic transmission of infections in society. There are single or isolated cluster outbreaks. Contacts between potential distributors are limited to the essential and take place within a context where risk factors have been brought under control as much as possible.

* Red level, high risk.

There are widespread infections in society and new outbreaks and clusters. Contacts between potential distributors must be avoided as much as possible

What were the main innovations that opened new opportunities for renewal in education policies? Are there any lessons learned for new approaches in education (e.g. added value of blended learning, blended counseling of pupils, …)?

What was the role played by distance learning? Blended learning? What are the lessons learned by these innovations?

A reflection on new opportunities offered, pitfalls to overcome and lessons learned during the crisis is ongoing at the Flemish Education Council. A recommendation on ‘Crisis-resistant education for the future’ is being prepared and will be discussed at the General Council on 22 October 2020.

This is the scope of the recommendation:

Based on the experiences with the current corona crisis, the Vlor will make recommendations for policy measures that are necessary for an education that is more resistant to these types of crises in the future. The advice focuses on measures for the medium term, and not for the restart this school year or September. The Vlor wants to make a strategic reflection with all levels. We start from an analysis of the risks to which education is exposed and the problems that have manifested themselves, but also of the opportunities that have emerged. What new insights have emerged in recent months about the impact of such a crisis on the organization of education, the teaching staff, the pupils,…? What does that mean for policy at school and macro level?

1. **Positions and recommendations of education councils**

Did your Council release recommendations on education in pandemic times? Or are recommendations planned? In progress? What is the main focus of those recommendations? What are the most relevant recommendations produced by your Education Council?

Functioning and position of the Council during the crisis

To ensure the organization of education, the government had to take measures very quickly at the start of the corona crisis. Minister Weyts (Flemish minister of education) brought the education providers and the trade unions together in the ‘crisis meeting group’ to consult and to jointly draw up a plan of action. The other education partners (pupils, students, parents, civil society organizations, …) did not take part in those meetings.

The Vlor has been insisting on **the need of participation of all education partners, also in times of crisis.** The exceptional circumstances cannot be a reason not to involve everyone involved in education when it comes to measures that affect them. The Vlor understood that within these exceptional circumstances the usual policy processes were not followed. Still, the council sounded the alarm. In a letter to the minister on April 7, 2020, he asked to involve all education partners in the crisis consultation on the measures that affect the entire education field. As a consultation platform, the Vlor attaches great importance to the participation of all stakeholders.

The minister responded to these concerns and added de Vlor as an observer to the crisis meeting group. The council expressed the concerns of the other education partners represented in the Vlor. Thus, the concerns of the pupils, students and parents also came to the table of the crisis consultation. Their concerns about the need for transparent communication, clear guidelines about the exams, the restart of the schools and the concerns of the socio-cultural sections about the impact of distance learning on vulnerable groups were partly taken into account in the plans for the restart of the schools. De Vlor reiterated that concern in a letter to the minister on June 15, 2020 and asked to be able to **take up his advisory role in full again.**

Recommendations on education in times of crisis

As mentioned before, the Vlor is working on an encompassing recommendation on ‘Crisis-resistant education for the future’, planned to be approved by the General Council on 22 October 2020.

It goes without saying that the corona crisis also impacts on ongoing processes.

* Transition from secondary to higher education

During the corona crisis, the members of the consultation platform discussed the impact of the measures on the transition from secondary to higher education. They made an inventory of the consequences and exchanged how they see the start of the next school and academic year.

* Commission diversity and equal opportunities

Just before the outbreak of the corona crisis, the Vlor issued a new advice with proposals to strengthen the equal educational opportunities policy of both the government and the educational field. The corona crisis has sharpened the problem of inequality of opportunity. Even more than usual, it is a challenge to guarantee equal opportunities for children and young people who, as a result of social factors, start their educational career from a disadvantaged position.

De Vlor argues for a common objective, namely to ensure that differences between pupils in learning outcomes and school careers cannot be explained on the basis of background characteristics such as socio-economic status (SES) and origin. The government and the educational field must strive to realize this shared general objective. They each have to work out a policy from their own role to achieve that goal. We put forward a broad approach to combating poverty, which requires collaboration with various other policy areas and partners. Schools can pursue an integrated equal opportunities policy based on the educational quality reference framework. The government must stimulate this through resources and space. Schools, in turn, have to justify their policy and that can be done in a constructive way.

All partners in the field of education involved in compulsory education signed the engagement declaration ‘Diversity as added value’ in 2014, confirming their moral commitment to education that guarantees optimal growth opportunities for all children and young people, whatever their background. During the past working year, work was done on an update of that statement. The education partners will sign the renewed commitment statement in the autumn of 2020.

* The teacher

Last working year, the Vlor started a multi-year project about the teaching profession. The project focuses on the attractiveness of the teaching and workplace of the teacher, the conditions for being able to function professionally and draws attention to the image and social appreciation of the teaching profession.

The project has completed its preparatory phase: the past months were dominated by positioning the project in the Vlor, concretizing its contours and determining the substantive pillars. The project was also involved in the preparation of advice on crisis-resistant education. On June 24 there was a digital teacher table about the impact of the corona crisis on being a teacher.

1. Free translation of information found at <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/uitgangspunten-en-pandemische-niveaus-of-fasen#uitgangspunten> on 25 September 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)