

Research project on joint initiatives on stress prevention

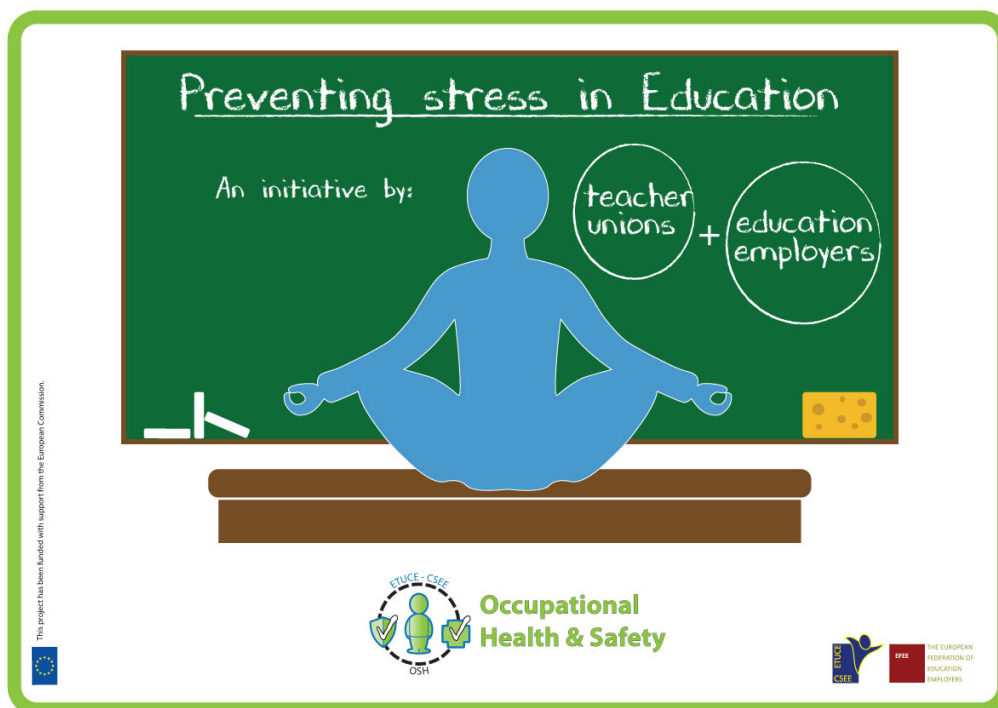
**Social Partners Promoting Decent Workplaces in the Education Sector for a Healthier Working Life**

This project is carried out with the financial support of the European Commission. Grant Agreement number: VS/2015/0030.

# PREVENTING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS AND WORK-RELATED STRESS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## Case study report: BELGIUM

November 2015



The Project is scientifically supported by FFAW (Freiburg research centre for occupational sciences) and ISTAS (Instituto Sindical de Trabajo, Ambiente y Salud.)



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The ETUCE (European Trade Union Committee for Education) – EFEE (European Federation of Education Employers) project advisory group wishes to thank the local study delegation members and all the people interviewed in Belgium for their time and hospitality.



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## **1. FIELDWORK NOTES**

Information used in this report is mainly based on semi-structured group interviews and meetings with a total of 25 participants. On the one hand, the study delegation met representatives from the most important employers' organisations at community level i.e. **SEGEC** (Catholic Education General Secretariat, French and German speaking community), **KOV** (Catholic Education Flanders) and **GO!** (Education of the Flemish Community); and on the other hand, they met with a trade union representative from **CSC- Enseignement** (Confederation of Christian Trade Unions, French speaking community). In addition, the study delegation met with school leaders, teachers, OHS professionals and a trade unionist from the **Institut Saint Joseph** (from now on ISJ) and **Vrij Technisch Instituut** (from now on VTI). Both are secondary schools (12 to 18 year old pupils), which are publicly funded but privately run by Catholic organising bodies. **ISJ** offers general, technical and vocational education profiles and it is located in Ciney (French speaking community). It has 1667 students with a socio-economically mixed background (931 boys and 736 girls) and 184 teachers (73 women and 69 men), 42 being part-timers. **VTI** offers technical, vocational and part-time vocational education profiles and it is located in Aalst (Flemish community). It has 1462 students with a socio-economically mixed background (1319 boys and 143 girls) and 292 teachers (116 women and 176 men), 70 being part-timers.

The study delegation included two representatives from EFEE and four from ETUCE, one representative from each EU level organisation and the other representatives from national level organisations (Belgium, UK and Germany) and one member of the research team.

The researcher conducted semi-structured group interviews and at the end of the interviews, the other members of the study delegation could add more questions following the guidelines agreed at advisory group meetings. All interviews took place in a constructive manner and in an easy-going environment which contributed to achieving the case study goals i.e. to gather country background information and to document and learn about good practices for the prevention of psychosocial risks and combating work-related stress in secondary schools.

All this information was analysed on the basis of audio recordings facilitated by the film team, study delegation notes and discussions. Secondary information was facilitated by interviewees and treated as relevant documentation.

For data protection reasons, the names of the staff interviewed are not disclosed in this report.

## **2. COUNTRY BACKGROUND**

### **Secondary school system**

Belgium has been a federal state since 1989 when education was transferred to the three communities (language-based entities), on the one hand to the *Communauté Française* (French speaking community) and on the other hand to the *Vlaamse Gemeenschap* (Flemish) and the German one.



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In all three communities, compulsory education is from 6 to 18 years; covering primary (until the age of 12) and secondary education (from 12 to 18 years). Secondary education includes four academic profiles (general, technical, vocational and partial vocational education) of which schools can offer one or a mix of them. It comprises three degrees: observation (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> year - students are tested at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year); orientation (3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year) and determination (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year –students must pass an exam to obtain the secondary school certificate, which is mandatory for admission to college or university or to get the qualification certificate).

70% of Flemish schools and 65% of French ones are publicly funded and privately run by catholic institutions. The other 35% are publicly funded schools that are either municipally or provincially run. Completely privately-funded schools are a small minority.

### **Working conditions**

There are 42,283 workers in secondary education in the French speaking community and 67.973 in the Flemish one, 63% being women, around 80% being teachers and 52% of them being between 30 and 49 years old.

The majority of secondary teachers have tenured positions (75% of the teachers in the Flemish community and 68% in the French speaking community) but tenured positions are a minority among teachers under 29 (around 18%). Teachers can be in temporary positions with fixed-term contracts for many years (up to 10 years or more), working for a few days in many schools during the year, working in one school just for a part of the year, working for many schools at the same time during the same year. The earliest this situation can change is after three years of experience within the same school or the school cluster that a tenured position must be offered.

The school year runs from September to June (37 weeks per year), 5 days a week, starting at 8 am at the earliest and finishing at 5 pm at the latest. It means 174 days of teaching in the Flemish community and 182 in the French speaking one. On top of this, teachers have to prepare lessons, evaluate students' work and take part in form teacher meetings to assess students' progress, attend area (subject) meetings and do many other tasks related to the school.

Salaries are linked to qualifications (the higher the qualification, the higher the starting salaries) since master's level is not required to work as a teacher in secondary education. Annual average teacher salaries (including bonuses and allowances) amount to 42,683 EUR in lower secondary education and 55,293 EUR in upper secondary education in the Flemish community and 40,161 EUR and 49,757 EUR respectively in the French speaking community (Chart D3.4, *Education at a glance*, OECD, 2014). Furthermore, seniority implies variance too. For example teacher salaries differ from around 29,765 EUR at the beginning of the career, to 51,576 EUR at the top of the scale for lower secondary teachers in Flemish community. These salaries are in all cases above the EU21 average.

### **Occupational Health and Safety**

The European Directive 89/39/CEE was transposed to Belgium in 1996 by the Law of 4 August on employees' wellbeing at work. A specific Royal Decree covers the prevention of



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psychosocial risks at work since 2007. Both, the Law and the Decree, apply to all workers and companies across all sectors including education.

The decree was updated in 2014 and it reinforces and enlarges the previous definitions of psychosocial risks at the workplace. These are defined as the probability of one or more workers being at risk of or exposed to work environment features or behaviour over which the employer has some control that creates an objective danger. These include: psychological hazards (such as anxiety, depression, burnout, suicidal feelings or post-traumatic stress disorder) and/or physical injuries (sleep problems, of hypertension, palpitations, stomach and intestinal problems, etc.); work organisation features (management style, procedures, structure, tasks allocation); work content aspects (nature of work, complexity, difficultness and variation of tasks, emotional and mental workload); interpersonal relationships at work (communication, inter-group relationships) or other working conditions (evaluation procedures, career management, types of contracts, training plans, etc.). The decree therefore concerns elements on which the employer has an impact, i.e. factors that may contribute to the origin of psychosocial risk exposure.

The law includes as stakeholders on psychosocial risk prevention the employer as having main responsibility, but further also line managers, the health and safety committee, technical experts in psychosocial prevention, and a person of trust (*personne de confiance*) for cases of sexual harassment, violence and psychological harassment at the workplace. The Decree puts special emphasis on prevention based on risk assessment; to this end several procedures have been outlined. For example, it is laid down that a line manager or at least a third of the workers' representatives within health and safety committees can request a risk analysis. In this case, employers have to proceed to a preliminary risk analysis, with the participation of workers and the prevention adviser. This analysis must lead to the definition of measures that change working conditions and which have to be planned and communicated. Then, once a year, the stakeholders involved in risk prevention at the workplace evaluate the risk analysis as well as the measures taken to combat the exposures (<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/observatories/eurwork/articles/working-conditions>).

### **Social dialogue**

In order to follow-up on the 2014 Royal Decree, Flemish and French speaking community social partners started developing support tools for their members. Developments are however still in a preliminary phase.

In the Flemish community, social dialogue is being developed. A new appendix was added to the example of labour standards for catholic schools in order to comply with new obligations regarding psychosocial risks. It was negotiated between Catholic Education Flanders and the trade unions in the educational sector. Furthermore, an ad-hoc task force has been created to adapt the "Welfare Covenant" (the adaptation of OSH laws to the educational sector, done by different governmental bodies and employers organisations) where trade unions has been invited to participate. Task force main concerns are to find or develop tools, starting by instruments to perform compulsory psychosocial risk analysis.

In the French speaking community, the main issues of social dialogue regard external services for prevention and protection.

### 3. STRESSORS

Interviewees agreed to speak mainly about high turnover of teachers new to the profession, which is considered an important problem at Belgian secondary schools. In the French speaking community, in 2011, more than 40% of new entrants leave secondary education in the first five years, more than half of these during the first year <http://www.enseignement.be/index.php?page=27524>. In the Flemish community, drop out rate was 35%, in 2006, when they started to deal with it [http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/personeel/files/AMR\\_2013.pdf](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/beleid/personeel/files/AMR_2013.pdf). This phenomenon was more or less explicitly linked to work-related stress and lack of psychosocial risk prevention.

#### Sources

There were a number of reasons given by interviewees for high turnover of teachers new to the profession:

- **Recruitment conditions**

New entrants can be in temporary positions with fixed-term contracts for many years (from 1 to 10 years or more), working for few days in many schools during the year, working in one school only for a part of the year or working for several schools at the same time during the same year, among other situations.

- **Workload**

Although new entrants have the same course load as other teachers, their actual workload is greater because they have to create their own syllabus for each subject and group they teach.

- **Gap between teacher training and teaching practice**

Demands in relation to class management, students' evaluation or parents' meetings are difficult to cope with by teachers new to the profession since there is a gap between what is taught at university or college and schools' reality or because they have not received any training for teaching at all, since some teachers come directly from the profession, especially in vocational education and training.

All in all this could lead to teachers' harmful exposures to psychosocial risks. For example, insecurity over employment or working conditions (for example, the risk of being fired, the uncertainty of being or not being reemployed if fired, changes in working hours or pay, reallocation regarding subjects or schools every now and then, etc.); lack of social support (for example, isolation, lack of assistance and feedback by colleagues and managers due to constant reallocation regarding schools); lack of recognition (for example, lack of work valuation, work respect or fair treatment); quantitative demands (for example, when teachers have not enough time to complete work tasks during formal working hours, when they have to work fast); emotional demands (for example, when work puts teachers in emotionally disturbing situations, when work demands relate to others' personal problems, when it requires to hide feelings or opinions); or work-family conflict (for example, when work takes so much of a teacher's time and energy that it has a negative impact on her/his family, when he/she needs to be on teaching work and on family care work at the same time).





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## **4. GOOD PRACTICES**

Social partners, teachers, school leaders or workers representatives do not formally deal with high turnover of teachers new to the profession, its sources and its solutions under the umbrella of occupational risks' prevention. Nevertheless, psychosocial risk prevention issues regarding high turnover rates are integrated into the general management processes of many schools and in the communities' social dialogue. Furthermore, psychosocial risk prevention issues have recently become part of the OSH agenda for all stakeholders, pushed by the new law (see background).

### **Community level**

At community level, focus to reduce high turnover rates among teachers new to the profession is on the gap between teacher education and teacher practice. Recruitment conditions or workload are not being discussed as a way to reduce high early drop out rate.

As far as the French speaking community is concerned, in 2010, the Government of the Wallonie-Bruxelles Federation offered trainings for tutoring and mentorship of new entrants, after negotiations at sector level with trade unions and organising bodies' representatives (employers' organisations). In 2014, in the Declaration of the Community Policy 2014-2019 "*To be federal to succeed*", the formalisation of new entrants' professional development as teachers was announced and it became a 'must' in the Decree adopted in October 2015. For example, the Decree obliges as an improvement on welcome arrangements to designate a mentor for teachers new to the profession. Moreover, the projected Agreement for Excellence in Education processes supports this new approach. For instance, developing tools such as "*Accueillir les enseignants débutants (Welcome teachers new to the profession)*" on the basis of the exchange of good practices along with collaborative work, resulting in exchange of experiences of teachers who are mentors, academics and technicians from government. At this level there is no connection with OSH issues.

As far as the Flemish community is concerned, in 2006, the Flemish Ministry of Education identified the problem of high teacher early drop out rates as an employment insecurity problem as well as a lack of initial career guidance and a source of work-related stress. As the main solution the Ministry granted a number of hours to schools for some teachers who saw their course load decrease to devote this time to support new entrants in the teaching profession, the so called "coloured hours". In addition, the Flemish government developed a compulsory "*banaba*" (bachelor after bachelor) 3 year-courses for mentors and organised supervision groups for them. However, in the 2010-2011 school year, the Flemish government decided to end the policy of dedicated hours and training when drop out rate had decreased but it was still 22% in secondary education.

### **School level**

Psychosocial risk prevention issues have recently become part of the OHS agenda (where safety issues were considered more urgent) clearly pushed by the new law. At ISJ Ciney, they had just received the results of their first psychosocial risk assessment and they were about to analyse the results in order to combat the risks at source. At VTI Aalst, the psychosocial risk assessment was undertaken last year and highlighted preventive measures were: 1. better timetables, which were adapted to teachers' needs and preferences in terms of schedule



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(work-family balance), subjects and students' groups; and 2. teamwork and support between teachers. Both measures were highlighted too as being effective at ISJ. Keeping class sizes smallest was also mentioned in both schools, but could not be achieved. At ISJ, this was a major problem: 28 students per class instead of the theoretical 24 because of a gap between the budget that is assigned on the number of previous year students and the actual budget year needs - i.e. 120 additional students.

In both schools, the main measures taken to address high turnover of new entrants are focussed on the gap between teacher training and teacher practice. In both schools, a **mentorship programme for teachers new to the profession** has been developed. Therefore, they are presented together, pointing out the differences when relevant.

- **Basis**

An important pillar in both schools is that a mentor team is a **support team, meaning the team does not assess or control on behalf of the school leader**, they are peers. **Support** (by mentors) **and evaluation** (by management board) **are very clearly separated**. Furthermore, in ISJ supporting and starting teachers sign a contract where confidentiality and an attitude free of judgement are two of the most important values. In VTI school evaluation of a new teacher cannot be carried out before mentors have developed class observation visits and feedback. Another important fundament is that teachers who are members of the supporting teams **have to be trained to be mentors** and they need to have certain seniority (5 years or more) in the school. Moreover they find it very positive to be networking with other mentors in other schools in order to exchange experiences and reflect on them. The third pillar, in both cases, is that all the training activities for new teachers are focussed on developing **teaching skills, how to teach** more than what to teach; it is about the teacher's profession. Field/subject necessities are covered by field/subject coordinators and teams (via educative project, course programmes, handbooks if used, competences and knowledge toolkits...). Last but not least, the fourth base is a **team approach** to exchange experiences on how to deal with challenges, stimulating **reflexivity** (thinking by themselves, asking the right questions), to guide without limiting, to advise without standardising and **to propose instead of impose** a solutions' set, **empowering** the teachers new to the profession.

- **Welcome activities**

Important yet minor activities concern **joining the school**, giving all kinds of practical information that a new teacher might need (who is who, who does what, mail and passwords for electronic materials, building and key spaces, etc.). In VTI most of these activities are carried out by support staff.

- **Support activities**

These are the activities **to support new entrants' integration in the teaching profession**. Since they are about teaching skills they can be useful in any school. Nevertheless, they are accompanied by explanations on actual school specific practices and rules (formal and informal standards) since they look for **incorporation to a specific education team** too.

In both schools, supporting activities are developed **collectively and individually**.



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ISJ works in groups on **peers' case studies** (using tools from a free of charge online platform - NéoPass@ction- which offers resources from research work, based on observations of actual teaching) and new entrants' reactions and concerns regarding their first experiences. VTI works firstly and mostly on **actual new entrants' experiences** alongside informal collective talks on their own concerns regarding their first experiences, on collegiate **observations** of one or two new teachers' lessons with feedback from mentors and **role playing**. In ISJ the collective mentoring is about the challenging times in the school year, so subjects are predefined: **how to deal with class management, students' evaluation or meetings with parents**. In addition, other subjects can be added at the request of the supported teachers. In VTI more out-of-school **teambuilding activities** are being developed to stimulate new teachers to create a group/team between them. In ISJ the bonding centre is the institution as well as the mentoring team. In VTI professionalization, acquaintance and amusement are all aspects of the new teachers' mentorship programme. In ISJ, as well as in VTI, supporting activities are assessed and in both schools, they are very well evaluated by the teachers new to the profession.

In VTI mentors have a reduction in teaching time to develop mentoring role and in ISJ all activities are carried out on voluntary basis. In VTI two years of mentorship are programmed, with the second year more concentrated on the teacher's personal development and improvement based on the self-assessment.

The way these projects began was quite different as well as the resources devoted to these activities. At ISJ it started in 2010 when five teachers from ISJ enrolled in the training offered by the Federal Government (see above) and developed a welcome and supporting team for teachers new to the profession at school, on a voluntary basis, with the approval of the school leader. From 2012 they developed a tutors' network at Diocese level (Namour- Luxembourg) where they exchanged practical experiences and information and reflected on how to support new teachers, their role as tutors and problems around new entrants' enrolment in their organisational framework. Nowadays they are part of a network at Wallonie-Bruxelles level and members of a specific working group on the subject of teachers new to the profession. In ISJ, in 2014, new teachers were 27.7% of 112 teachers, and 63.5% had 5 or more years' service. At VTI it started in 2006 when the Flemish Ministry of Education identified the problem of high turnover of teachers new to the profession and the school was granted 9 hours times 1.8 hours/week to devote to new teachers' mentorship (coloured hours) instead of teaching lessons. The school goal was to avoid work-related stress for teachers new to the profession and appointed a mentor. In 2007 another mentor was appointed and from 2007 to 2010 resources in terms of granted hours by government varied but the school funded the remaining hours needed. From 2010 it is the school that funds the hours from its own resources, without a ministry grant. In the meanwhile, mentors have graduated and they take part in a supervision group of Flanders' mentors. Nowadays new teachers represent between 17 and 20% of the teaching staff.

The most important challenge in both communities is **resources**, much more marked in the French speaking community where all is done on voluntary bases, with no additional means in terms of staff and time available. Mentorship requires time, which can be obtained by a reduction of teaching time, but who (government, schools or teachers) need to assume the costs is key and not clear. Another important weakness highlighted in both schools is teachers who are in the school only for a part of the year: they miss parts or even the complete mentorship programme, that cannot be repeated for them or only on individual basis.



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At both schools, recruitment conditions for new teachers are not questioned (probably because these are not in hands of the schools or dioceses). But when asked about, they are considered the main problem leading to high turnover of teachers new to the profession and even an important obstacle for the mentorship programmes to be completely successful.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Regarding psychosocial risks at work, the Flemish and French speaking community social partners are just beginning to develop support tools for their members. This process is still at an early stage, since the 2014 Royal Decree was the main driver behind these developments. It is the same picture at school level where psychosocial risks issues have recently become part of the OSH agenda. Nevertheless, avoiding this kind of risks is integrated in schools' general management processes.

More than 40% of teachers new to the profession in the French speaking community and 22% in the Flemish community, leave secondary education in the first five years. Reasons for this high early drop out rate are multi-factorial and linked to work-related stress. The most often mentioned stressors were: recruitment conditions, workload and a gap between teacher training and teaching practice. All these factors could lead to teachers new to the profession being exposed to harmful psychosocial risks i.e. insecurity over employment and working conditions, quantitative demands, work-family conflicts, emotional demands, low social support or low recognition.

Both at community and school level, the main measures to reduce high turnover of teachers new to the profession were focussed on the gap between teacher training and teaching practice by means of a mentorship programme for new entrants.

At community level, training for mentors is a common practice. Besides, developing tools is the key focus within the French speaking community and allocating funding for hours to be devoted to mentorship used to be the Flemish governmental focus. However, this policy ended in 2010 and today the schools decide (or not) to allocate them from its own budget.

At school level, the most important issues regarding the mentorship programmes are its basis and activities. Its principal foundations are:

- the creation of a team with no evaluation purposes (reserved to the management board) but only support goals (reserved to trained, senior and networked peers to be mentors);
- focussed on teaching skills (how to teach);
- empowering teachers new to the profession (stimulating reflexivity, teambuilding, proposing instead of imposing, advising without standardisation, guiding without limiting and creating a learning environment on the basis of exchanging experiences about how to deal with challenges instead of providing a set of solutions).

Many activities are developed during these programmes:

- welcome activities (minor, to give key information about working in the new school);
- supporting activities for example on how to manage a class, students' evaluation or meetings with parents by working on peers' case studies, mentor observation and feedback on lessons or meetings and informal collective discussions about teachers' new to the profession concerns.