

**TEAR  
DOWN THIS WALL!  
BUILDING A UNITED  
COMMUNITY IN  
BRUSSELS BASED ON  
MULTILINGUALISM  
IN SCHOOLS**



FRIDAY  
GROUP

# I LINGUISTIC WALLS IN BRUSSELS SCHOOLS?

**A.** . . . In November 2014, Europe celebrated the **25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall**. The existence of this wall arbitrarily separating human beings does not make any sense today, and especially difficult to imagine in a country like Belgium, the capital of the European Union. As Marcello Di Cintio wrote: *"By reducing the prospects for dialogue, walls in society create two sides and force us to choose one of them"*.

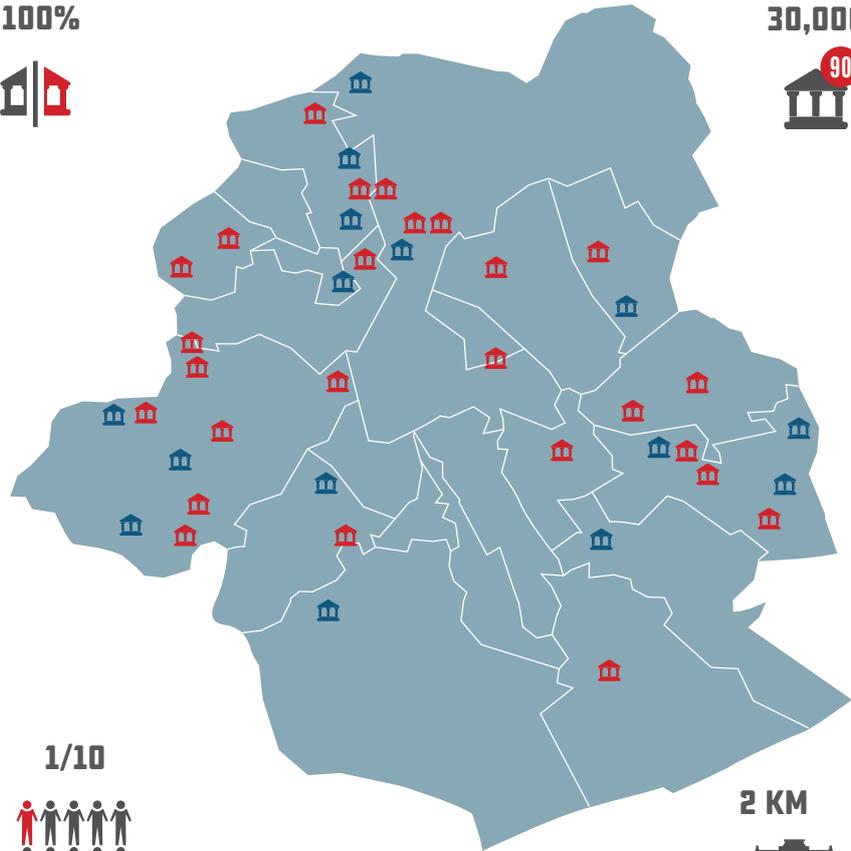
**B.** And yet, today, **a wall more than two kilometers long does exist in the middle of Brussels**. The playgrounds, dining halls and corridors of more than 90 schools are physically separated by barriers or red lines into a section reserved for children being taught in French and a section reserved for children being taught in Dutch.

**C.** What exactly are we referring to? What are these walls in practice?

100%



30,000



1/10



2 KM



**2 KM** : The Brussels-Capital region is littered with walls that, if placed end-to-end, would form a wall / barrier nearly two kilometers long, the distance as the crow flies from the Manneken Pis to the Cinquantenaire park.

**30,000** : Each day, around 30,000 children are confronted with these physical barriers in 90 schools across Brussels.

**1/10** : Of adults aged under 45 who went to school in Brussels, nearly one in ten faced these walls between communities.

**100%** : These walls between the communities prevent all these children from experiencing fully the linguistic diversity of Brussels, which would be considered anywhere else in the world to be one of our capital's strengths.



## II HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The current structure of the education system organised by Belgium's communities (Gemeenschappen in Dutch, Communautés in French) and the resulting physical segregation of Brussels schools is the outcome of a long process of devolution of the powers of central government in Belgium.

Historically, the 'Frenchification' of the masses in Brussels throughout the 19th century and in the first part of the 20th century, through education among other things, (prompted) triggered real concerns among the Flemish population that it would lose its linguistic and cultural identity. Education in Dutch gradually emerged in Brussels from then on, often within existing schools. This linguistic dualisation of many schools has intensified the feeling – sometimes real, sometimes less definite – of belonging to a separate community in Brussels.

The background of the federalisation of the Belgian institutions and the handover of responsibility for education to the communities has divided schools in the Brussels region definitively according to their linguistic identity. That has led to physical barriers being put up in many schools where infrastructure had previously been communal/local. There were few protests at the time since this separation reflected the prevailing community-based policy approach. A romantic vision of pupils railing against the separation would be completely wrong. In other words, the policy of division, which is still apparent today in the physical barriers in some Brussels schools, was in part a response to a significant sociological reality at the time.

In the meantime, the sociology of Brussels has drastically changed since the community-based approach was introduced. Significant numbers of pupils at Brussels schools come from new communities outside this Belgian 'Cold War'.

MOTHER TONGUE	2001	2011
FRENCH	71.0	63.2
ENGLISH	2.9	2.5
DUTCH	19.3	19.6
ARABIC	9.7	21.1
SPANISH	2.5	3.0
GERMAN	1.6	0.9
ITALIAN	2.5	2.5

Mother tongue of the population of Brussels / Source: [www.marnixplan.org](http://www.marnixplan.org)  
(VUB – Taalbarometer)

Within a single neighbourhood, communities that sometimes have much in common in terms of linguistic community identity find themselves on opposite sides. In other words, those pupils, living in the same neighbourhood could be either in the French-speaking or in the Dutch-speaking section of the same school. The choice of type of education these days is often more related to parents' educational concerns than it has to do with their identity as Dutch or French-speaking. Reproducing Belgium's community divisions in the current reality of Brussels now seems to many to be completely outdated. Applying an outdated approach to a modern situation is not recommended. So let's change it!

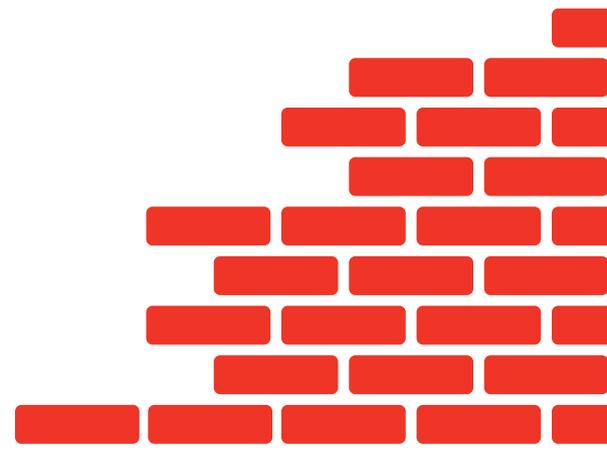
# III BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS: THE FRIDAY GROUP'S VISION FOR TURNING MULTILINGUALISM INTO ONE OF BRUSSELS' STRENGTHS

At a time when Brussels is seeking to strengthen its position as the central crossroads of a multicultural Europe, it is quite clear to the Friday Group that its model of education based on linguistic differentiation has to change. Dividing pupils according to the education system they are in, belongs to the past. Education in Brussels needs to be reinvented to reflect in its essence the region's "multilinguism".

There are various international experiences that could be studied and adapted to the situation in Brussels. Of these, the Catalan system stands out as a potential inspiring model. Like the Brussels-Capital region, Catalonia has two official languages, Catalan and Spanish. However, unlike Brussels which has two single-language education systems run by the communities (a French-speaking system and a Dutch-speaking system), the Catalan education system guarantees that pupils learn both official languages:

"The presence of Catalan and Spanish must be guaranteed within curricula so that all children, regardless of their usual language when they start school, are able to use both official languages fluently and correctly by the end of their compulsory education[i]". The law also states that, to achieve this objective[ii], "pupils must not be put into separate schools or sub-groups according to their usual language<sup>[iii]</sup>".

The case of Catalonia demonstrates that it is possible to define a bilingual education system in a bilingual region where linguistic diversity is not used as a criterion for setting up divisions between pupils but is viewed as an asset and a common basis for enabling all children, regardless of their community of origin, to achieve effective bilingualism and thus improve the sense of community in Brussels.



## IV CONCRETE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE FRIDAY GROUP FOR BREAKING DOWN THE WALLS WITHIN OUR SCHOOLS

Fundamentally overhauling the linguistic identity of education in Brussels along the lines of the Catalan system is a long-term project that would demand to get rid of a number of taboos from the past. That is why the Friday Group is recommending a gradual approach that would remove the taboos little by little and deconstruct the linguistic walls within Brussels schools.

### LEVEL I MAKE SOME HOLES IN THE WALLS

This first level aims to encourage dialogue between the two sides of the walls and the sharing of certain practices. These recommendations are inspired by practices already followed in some schools. Practically speaking, making holes in the walls could take the following forms:

#### **RECOMMENDATION I.1 • Encourage joint pupil supervision and management of premises:**

Some schools introduced the physical separation of pupils essentially for practical (accounting and administrative) reasons. For example, in some schools the pupils have separate toilets to make cleaning and maintenance budgets easier to manage. In other schools, joint supervision of break times and joint study sessions are not possible for administrative reasons.

#### **RECOMMENDATION I.2 • Allow the organisation of joint extracurricular events:**

These days very few schools take the step of organising joint events between the French-speaking and Dutch-speaking sections on a single school site. However, this has not always been the case. Although some neighbouring schools, even recently, have organised joint school celebrations and other social events, unfortunately they are only isolated cases. So that a sense of community can be reinstated and people can spend a bit of time meeting their neighbours, it would be worth listing the administrative obstacles to this so that they can be overcome.

#### **RECOMMENDATION I.3 • Encourage and reward language teacher exchanges:**

The presence alongside one another of French-speaking and Dutch-speaking teachers is an asset for pupils in Europe's capital. Unfortunately schools do not work together, though they could. If the legal and administrative framework were to change, Belgium could grant pupils the benefit of being taught their second language by a native speaker. In other words, this measure would enable pupils being taught in French to study Dutch with Dutch-speaking teachers, and conversely, pupils being taught in Dutch could be given French lessons by French-speaking teachers. Schools conducting these exchanges should be given special support by the two communities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION I.4 • Turn the bonus for Dutch-speaking teachers into support for accommodation in Brussels:**

The Flemish government currently pays a bonus to Flemish teachers teaching in Flemish schools in the Brussels region. If this system achieves its objectives, in particular that of safeguarding levels of Dutch-speaking education in Brussels, we believe it would be appropriate to transfer the budget to provide relocation assistance for Flemish teachers coming to live in Brussels. Providing a subsidy for relocation rather than daily travel would foster a stronger sense of identity with Brussels among those teachers, i.e. a better knowledge of the realities of the capital. It should also encourage contact with teachers from other schools, and thus stimulate collaboration.

#### **RECOMMENDATION I.5 • Obtain specific data for the Brussels-Capital Region in international surveys of educational performance:**

At present, major international surveys (e.g. the OECD's PISA study) do not produce specific indicators for Brussels. The data are published for the level at which education is organised, i.e. the communities. Obtaining these data for Brussels would provide a clearer understanding of the challenges of the regional educational system.



## LEVEL II BUILD BRIDGES ACROSS THE WALLS

The second level aims to improve versatility in the use of languages within Brussels schools and thus enable bridges to be built across the divide between French-speaking and Dutch-speaking pupils. This could be achieved partly by encouraging the use and learning of the language of the other community but also by introducing a third language into education to acknowledge that the linguistic landscape of Brussels in 2015 has long since left behind the traditional division between French-speakers and Dutch-speakers:

**RECOMMENDATION II.1 • Introduce pupils' mother tongue (or a third teaching language) for some lessons:** The linguistic reality of Brussels in 2015 has moved far beyond the debate between Dutch and French. An increasing proportion of pupils (now nearly 30%) do not have either French or Dutch as their mother tongue. Introducing a third teaching language such as English or Arabic for some subjects could weaken the French and Dutch dualism in schools. In addition, it would better reflect the multicultural identity of young people in Brussels in the 21st century and could reduce educational underachievement in certain subjects (e.g. mathematics and science), where this is not due to a pupil's specific lack of ability but to difficulty understanding the teaching language.

**RECOMMENDATION II.2 • Offer training that enables bilingual teachers to work in both communities:** A region that claims to be bilingual, like Brussels-Capital, should be able to offer training for bilingual would-be teachers and award them teaching qualifications allowing them to teach in both linguistic communities. At present, no such training exists and our teachers, even if they are bilingual, are restricted to teaching in one or other of the linguistic communities.

[i] Law on Language Policy, 1997, Art. 21.3

[ii] Quoted in PERE J., FITE M., Deux langues officielles ! Une communauté bilingue, le cas de la Catalogne, Revue internationale d'éducation de Sèvres, September 1998

[iii] Idem, Art. 21.5

