

IMPLEMENTATION JOURNEY

1. INTRODUCTION

At present, over 1 in 7 youngsters enrolled in a school localized in Ghent ends up leaving education without any degree or qualification. To tackle that prominent issue of early school leaving (ESL), the City of Ghent decided to take action, and gathered all relevant partners to come up with an integrated plan: the so-called *Gents Plan Vroegtijdig Schoolverlaten* ('Ghent Plan on Early School Leaving', see Annex 1.1 and 1.2 Ghent Plan on ESL_EN). The plan comprises a number of priorities and actions, aimed at reducing early school leaving and ensuring that every pupil in Ghent is able to earn a degree or qualification (see Annex 1.3 Ghent City Goals_EN).

In 2016, together with the launch of the plan, all secondary schools located in Ghent signed a charter, committing themselves to work together to cut back ESL. All of their initiatives, together with those of partner organizations, are combined under the umbrella of *Operatie Geslaagd* ('Operation Pass'), which serves as the header for the local campaign aimed at reducing ESL.

Both the Ghent Plan and the local campaign are coordinated by the Ghent Education Centre (GEC), in close collaboration with local partner organizations (i.e., Urbact Local Group (ULG) *Operatie Geslaagd*, see Annex 1.4 Partner Profile City of Ghent_EN). From the start, reducing ESL was considered to be one of the main objectives of the Ghent Education Centre, which meant that the execution of the local plan and the local *Operatie Geslaagd* campaign were backed by substantial investments, with respect to both the deployment and professionalization of GEC staff, and external funding aimed at supporting and encouraging secondary schools in the creation of school specific plans and initiatives.

In this *OIF*, the focus will precisely be on these school specific action plans, which were a key element in the implementation of the local plan and the associated campaign. As Figure 1 shows, a pilot project started at the beginning of 2017, comprising of two consecutive phases with 6 schools each, who received individual support and also signed a grant agreement, which ensured funding for schools and indicated the expected results (see Annex 1.5 Grant Agreement School 1_DU). Recently, a new project ('phase 3') was launched, reaching a larger number of schools through an online learning platform (a so-called *Massive Open Online Course* or MOOC), combined with offline supervision sessions and followed by individual coaching. In what follows, the implementation journey of these subsequent phases will be thoroughly described and analyzed. Different annexes illustrate the implementation journey and are referred to in text.

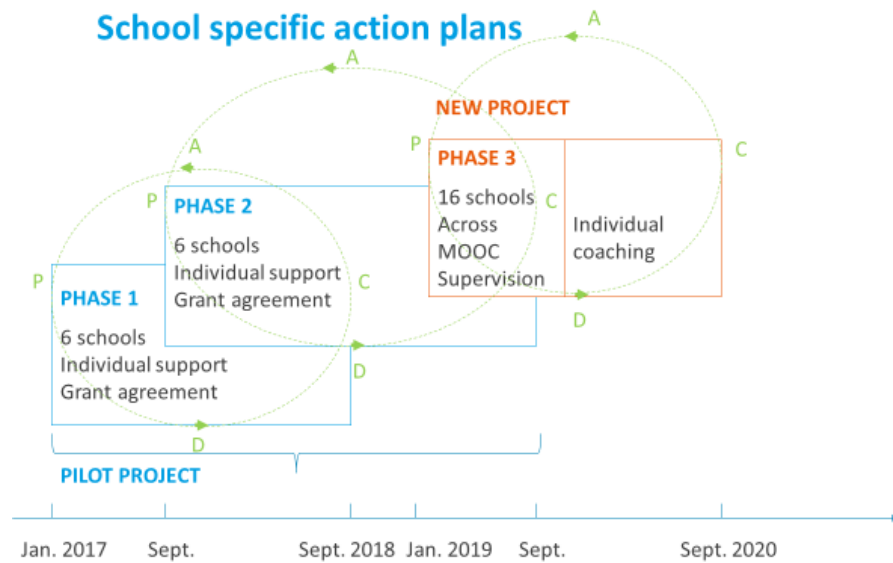


Figure 1: The three consecutive phases set up by the GEC project team in supporting schools to come up with their own action plan

2. BASELINE POSITION

The baseline position describes our starting position and the capabilities of the GEC project team to support the implementation of school specific action plans.

Charter *Operatie Geslaagd* and school specific action plans

Back in 2016, after all secondary schools in Ghent signed the charter *Operatie Geslaagd* and thereby committed themselves to help reduce ESL, the Ghent Education Centre issued a € 60.000 tender for developing suitable instruments and professionalizing the GEC project team in battling ESL. This buy-in of external expertise was needed in order to allow the GEC project team to adequately support schools in setting up school specific action plans, as this expertise was then lacking or at least insufficiently present within the project team. The tender (see Annex 2.1 Tender Professional development and tools on ESL_Pilot project Phase 1_DU) described a number of specific needs and desiderata in order to remedy this:

- The development (and subsequent application) of a ‘**School Mirror**’, as an analytic instrument to map ESL on a school level, both quantitatively and qualitatively. This school mirror takes the shape of a report, analyzing relevant school numbers and indicators, and benchmarking a school in relation to other (similar) schools in Ghent.
- Providing the GEC project team with an evidence-based **knowledge base** that can be used to set up and support initiatives in Ghent schools, building on the ambitions and actions from the local plan, plus the **professionalization and coaching** of the GEC project team.
- The development of a dedicated **intake instrument** that allows to map the baseline position of schools (what are they doing already?) and their desired situation in tackling ESL. The instrument not only makes it possible to analyze current actions and desired outcomes on a school level, but also offers insight in what an adequate school policy in battling ESL could look like.

- The development of a **monitoring instrument**, allowing the GEC project team to define and measure the success of actions in reducing ESL on a school level – both with respect to outcomes and on a process level. In that way, the project team can measure the effectiveness of on-going and future initiatives.

Pilot project

In order to allow the project team to slowly build expertise, a **pilot project** was set up, consisting of two consecutive rounds with six participating schools each. This number was low enough to keep the workload for the project team feasible, but at the same time sufficient to create a well-rounded scenario and seasoned tools, allowing the project team to broaden the scope in the future. These two sets of six schools were selected on the basis of social deprivation indicators impacting education, as these schools have to deal with a substantial number of early school leavers.

What do schools need to set up specific action plans to reduce ESL? **Data literacy (and monitoring)** was considered to be a key element, and the project team also felt that schools needed **sufficient funding** to put their action plans into practice and, in that way, create change. Therefore, all participating schools in the pilot project (i.e. phases 1 and 2 in Figure 1) signed a grant agreement, which entitled them to some financial support.

Capabilities of the project team

Looking at the capabilities of the GEC project team itself, which are described more in detail in the self-assessment sheets (see Annex 2.2 Self-assessment sheets_EN), there are both strengths and weaknesses present. For example, *selling the plan and gaining buy-in* was a strong suit of the project team, as all the secondary schools in Ghent signed the charter on ESL, and it did not prove to be extremely difficult to convince them to participate in the pilot project (or the currently on-going follow-up project, i.e. phase 3). Other stakeholders, such as the CLB's (Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding, 'Centre for Pupil Support') and the PBD's (Pedagogische begeleidingsdiensten, 'Pedagogical Counselling Services') also offered their support. Another strength is the eagerness of the project team to learn from failure or trajectories that did not (fully) go according to plan – using those evaluations to change the flow of a project into a format that suits the expectations and needs of schools and partners better.

In other respect, back at the beginning of the pilot project, the GEC project team could use more expertise, skills and capabilities to build stronger implementation processes. The tender mentioned earlier made it possible to buy external expertise, and moreover allowed the project team to further develop and grow certain skills and competencies. This need to learn and to gain expertise from good practices was also the reason why Ghent wanted to be part of a bigger international network – exchanging implementation practices with other European cities when it comes to tackling ESL. Being a partner (and in this case the lead partner) in *Stay Tuned!* has therefore proven to be very valuable in gaining more knowledge and expertise in what actually works with respect to implementing good practices in the local Ghent plan.

3. WHAT Action Plan and Challenges

This section refers to our Logic Model and gives more insight in our Activity Plan. Moreover, it describes the challenges we have identified starting up the project.

Logic Model and Ghent Activity Plan

Based on the findings in our baseline position, we developed a **Logic Model and Action Plan**, summarizing several points of action, our main outputs and desired (short-term) results (see Annex 3.1 Logic Model and Action Plan_EN). These plans take our assets, related activities and policy goals into account. One of the main actions in this plan is to support schools to develop and implement a school specific action plan on ESL. We translated this ambition in the **Ghent activity plan** in the following activities (see Annex 3.2 Ghent City Activity Plan_EN):

- develop, test and validate a quantitative and qualitative assessment instrument ('School Mirror')
- develop and test a qualitative intake instrument
- running a pilot on developing and implementing a school specific action plan on ESL
- upscaling the pilot to all secondary schools in Ghent

Another important action in the Logic Model and Action Plan is the **Operatie Geslaagd** ('Operation Pass') **campaign**. *Operatie Geslaagd*, as header of the local campaign, helps to create more visibility and identification with our main goal (i.e., reducing ESL). We strive to keep this goal high on the agenda of all schools and partners and the ULG *Operatie Geslaagd* in particular. *Operatie Geslaagd* aims to create a sense of urgency on the topic of ESL and to create a strong and engaged partnership.

Related to these actions, several **challenges** were identified:

- **data literacy and monitoring**
The Ministry of Education and Training (Flanders) provides schools with data in an online system, which is only accessible to schools. However, data management and data literacy is challenging for Flemish schools. Therefore, the development of a 'School Mirror' as an analytic instrument to map ESL on a school level, both quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as the development of a monitoring instrument were included as activities in our local activity plan. CeMIS (Centre for Migration en Intercultural Studies), one of our tender partners, got the assignment to develop these instruments.
- **engagement of secondary school teams and ownership**
How to engage school teams and really make them feel like they have ownership of their school specific action plan and project to reduce early school leaving is a challenge. During the pilot project schools were selected based on social deprivation indicators impacting education. All schools participating in the pilot project (i.e. phases 1 and 2 in Figure 1) signed a grant agreement, which entitled them to some financial support (see Annex 3.3 Grant Agreement School 1_DU). By signing the agreement the schools committed themselves to work with a core team within the school on ESL, to cooperate with the GEC, to make an analysis of their baseline position, to draft and implement a school specific action plan based on their school specific priorities and to invest in the professional development of the school team. First contacts to discuss the schools' commitment were most often with the school

leader only. So the grant agreement was sometimes signed without a prior consultation of the broader school team.

- **supporting schools to develop and implement a school specific action plan**

In order for schools to have a sound understanding of ESL at their school and their past response to it, the project team decided to set up a pilot with respect to developing and implementing a school specific action plan on ESL. This should result in an evidence informed school specific action plan involving the wider school team, coached by the project team of the GEC. We think the lack of readiness of schools to be supported during the implementation and the difficulty to make the school specific action plans really SMART, including a plan of action on the long term, will be an issue. Translating school specific priorities into a specific and concrete action plan is challenging as well. Furthermore, it is still to be seen to what degree the integrated and comprehensive whole community approach (i.e. collaboration with other organizations) can be embedded.

- **sharing good practices across schools**

Schools in Flanders are organized in different networks (i.e., official education, government-aided public education and government-aided private education). In the pilot, project schools from these different networks are participating. They don't have a common organization and rarely meet in practice.

- **professional development project team and GEC**

As mentioned above, the project team sensed a strong need for internal professionalization in order to be able to adequately and qualitatively support schools in setting up school specific action plans. The buy-in of external expertise on project management and school development was needed (see Annex 3.4 Tender Professional development and tools on ESL_Pilot project Phase 1_DU).

A good action plan connects to the existing organization structure as well. Therefore, the project team engages itself to involve the other GEC teams, such as the community school team (i.e., building a network around the school with the surrounding community partners) and the home-school liaisons (i.e., connecting the parents and the school staff).

4. HOW Responses to the Challenges

This part of the OIF describes how we tackled the challenges and built the capabilities to do so. We also illuminate how we define success in terms of implementation.

Tackling the challenges and building capability:

- **data literacy and monitoring**

CeMIS (Centre for Migration and Intercultural Studies) was appointed as an external partner to develop a 'School Mirror' and monitoring instrument in phase 1 of the pilot project. Selecting the right indicators and determining their relative weight proved to be difficult. Obtaining access to data was an obstacle as well. According to CeMIS, no model for the 'School Mirror' can be built that is scientifically sound.

New partners were looked for and found. Arch supported the project team to develop an instrument to monitor the new inspirational professional-development trajectory as a whole,

involving quantitative and qualitative indicators (see Annex 4.1 Monitoring instrument). For the support of schools three partners were selected to jointly organize the trajectory across schools and the school specific coaching: Schoolmakers, Steunpunt Diversiteit & Leren, and CEGO. These partners will support schools to map ESL, monitor and measure effects at school level (see Annex 4.2 Tender inspirational trajectory across schools and school specific coaching_Phase 3_DU).

- **engagement of secondary school teams and ownership**

A voluntary entry seems a necessary condition to evoke ownership and engagement. No grants will be offered in the on-going new trajectory (i.e., phase 3 in Figure 1). A call for action and participation was launched by the mayor of Education Schools to promote the new trajectory (see Annex 4.3 Call for action and participation vice mayor of Education_Phase 3_DU). Schools were asked to inscribe with a core team, consisting of a policy worker, a student counsellor or coordinator (i.e., middle management), and three teachers. The diverse composition of the core team will hopefully help to ensure that support can be created within the whole school team for implementing the school specific action plan at a broader school level.

Case example 1 elaborates on this challenge (see Annex 4.4 Case Example 1_EN).

- **supporting schools to develop and implement a school specific action plan**

After the first phase of the pilot project we have evaluated the developed scenario to support schools, created by the tender partners in cooperation with the GEC project team (see Annex 4.5 Scenario pilot project_DU). We took into account the evaluation forms handed in by the 6 schools involved in phase 1 (see Annex 4.6 Evaluation Form School 1_DU). Positive elements were the templates and steps to visualize the baseline position and priorities of the secondary schools involved, on the one hand.

On the other, more time is spent on the development of the action plan and on follow-up of the implemented actions in the second phase of the pilot project. More specific, we extended the number of sessions with the school team from three to five. A template for the action plan (see Annex 4.7 Action Plan School 1_DU) and a checklist containing an overview of elements to take into account during the development and implementation of the action plan were created and discussed with the school teams (see Annex 4.8 Checklist_DU). The focus on ESL was put more consistently on the agenda during each session. As a result, schools in phase 2 built visibly stronger action plans.

The new ongoing project (phase 3) – which started on the 12th of February 2019 – combines an online learning platform (a so-called *Massive Open Online Course* or MOOC), with offline supervision sessions, followed by individual coaching to implement the school's specific action plan. The voluntary entree in phase 3 makes schools are more welcoming to the support offered. The 16 participating schools inspire each other in different levels and are inspired by experts to build a school specific action plan to reduce ESL, step-by-step. One of the levels in the MOOC is focused on the involvement of partners to put the whole community approach into practice. The individual coaching will make sure school teams are supported to implement their school specific action plans.

Case example 2 elaborates on the related challenge *From priorities to school action plans and implementation of actions on the long term* (see Annex 4.9 Case Example 2_EN).

- **sharing good practices across schools**

As the schools that are participating in our pilot project belong to different education networks, we found it (even more) important to connect them in order to learn, share (good) practices, discuss common challenges etc. We started a learning network, in which the participants were responsible for providing topics and content (see e.g., Annex 4.10 Presentation learning network 3 and Annex 4.11 Minutes learning network 3). Getting input for the learning networks from the school teams was really difficult. There was a difference between participants: some schools valued the learning network more than others. We decided, in dialogue with the schools, not to continue this network.

In the second phase of the project, we asked the new participating schools if they were interested in organizing a learning network. The expectations of these 6 schools didn't match: some wanted a learning network on a specific theme (e.g., co-teaching), some thought it could be interesting (although time consuming) and others weren't interested at all. This is why we decided not to organize this network for schools in the second phase.

The *Massive Open Online Course* or MOOC and offline supervision sessions included in phase 3 offer an excellent opportunity for school teams to learn, share (good) practices, discuss common challenges across schools. The participating schools value these opportunities.

- **professional development of the GEC project team and other teams within the GEC**

During the first phase the GEC project team was trained 'on the job' by the tender partners. These partners took the lead in developing action plans with the school teams. In the second phase, the members of the project team coached the school teams themselves. The degree of success in developing and implementing actions plans differed from school to school. The other GEC teams were contacted to deliver input for and support activities related to their expertise.

To overcome the identified challenges and to further professionalize and support the GEC project team, a new tender was issued for the development of an inspirational trajectory focusing on professional development across schools, combined with individual coaching at school level (i.e., phase 3, 4.2 Tender inspirational trajectory across school and school specific coaching_Phase 3_DU).

Success in terms of implementation:

- **data literacy and monitoring**

We want to provide schools with the necessary tools and training to map ESL and monitor and measure effects of their action plan at school level. Moreover, we will develop and implement a monitoring instrument at project team level to follow-up and evaluate the ongoing inspirational trajectory. This should help us to assess on the long term what adds to reaching our goal of tackling ESL and, thus, should be strengthened and what should be refined or adjusted.

- **engagement of secondary school teams and ownership**

Success means engaged school teams who really feel ownership for their action plan, the implementation of it and a sense of urgency for tackling ESL. Involvement of the whole school team is a prerequisite.

- **supporting schools to develop and implement a school specific action plan**

The main goal of the pilot project was developing action plans with school teams that are goal oriented. This means that action plans are focused on ESL and are linked to the regular

school plans (e.g., equal educational policy). Qualitative action plans are integrated in the regular school work and are focused on the short and long term. In developing these action plans, we focus on the sustainability of actions on the long term, after the pilot phase ends as well. Finally, success means that school teams become learning organizations, evaluating their actions and using the “PDCA” circle in their work.

- **sharing good practices across schools**

Learning opportunities across schools will strengthen school teams in developing action plans and implementing them. Sharing ideas, good practices, common challenges... on tackling ESL can inspire school teams to really put actions into practice and change something at school level. Ideally, the MOOC and supervision sessions continue to exist, nourished by participants.

- **professional development of the GEC project team and other teams within the GEC**

Professional development of our project team means that all of the team members are trained in supporting school teams to develop and implement qualitative action plans. This implies that the GEC project team has the skills and knowledge to assist school teams in evoking change.

5. LEARNING JOURNEY

In the learning journey we give you an illustration of the achievements within the pilot project and summarize our progress in tackling the challenges described above with a focus on the ongoing inspirational professional-development trajectory.

Illustration of the pilot project

To give an impression of how the twelve schools put their action plan into practice, we made a video. The video focuses on three cases in three participating schools (see Annex 5.1 Pilot project Operatie Geslaagd_EN [video]). It zooms in on both the what and how of their activities.

Moreover, we thought it to be important to give young people the opportunity to tell their story and convince their peers that a qualification is important for their future (see Annex 5.2 and 5.3 Importance of a qualification Raisa and Wouter_EN [video]).

Facing the challenges in the inspirational trajectory

An in-depth analysis of the pilot project allowed us to further refine how to deal with the identified challenges. In the third phase – which started on the 12th of February 2019 – 16 schools participate voluntarily in an inspirational professional-development trajectory, followed by school specific coaching.

The challenges we have faced along the way relate to different topics. For each of these topics we defined what success in terms of implementation means (see 4. HOW Responses to the challenges). The level of success reached varies depending on the topic and is to some extent still to be evaluated in the near future (end of the project: June 2020). We give you some first insights, as well as a progress report with respect to phase 3 (i.e., the inspirational professional-development trajectory and individual coaching):

- data literacy and monitoring**

We are still working on the monitoring instrument at project team level to follow-up and evaluate the ongoing inspirational trajectory. A draft version of the instrument is further refined (see Annex 5.3 Monitoring instrument). A log book with intermediate reflections on the trajectory helps to assure the implementation process is well documented.

The tools and training for the school teams to map ESL and monitor and measure effects of their action plans is part of the school specific coaching, starting in November 2019.
- engagement of secondary school teams and ownership**

The kick-off and the first two supervision sessions of the inspirational professional-development trajectory were promising. There was a positive working atmosphere and we saw a lot of commitment of the core teams of the different schools involved. Engaging the whole school team still seems to be work in progress.
- supporting schools to develop and implement a school specific action plan**

The adaptations made after the first phase of the pilot project allowed for schools in the second phase of the pilot project to have built stronger action plans and in most cases the follow-up seems to ensure that schools continue to implement and monitor the actions in a better way. The action plans are mostly integrated in the regular school work and indicate short and long term goals. The finalized school specific action plans for phase 3 are expected at the end of October.
- sharing good practices across schools**

MOOC time during supervision sessions gives the MOOC a real boost in dynamics and posts. But we need to further invest in enhancing the online interaction on the MOOC. The supervision sessions create a good and safe learning environment to share ideas, good practices, and common challenges across school teams. Some schools already made appointments to visit each other, which shows how they are triggered to invest in further and more extensive exchange.
- professional development GEC project team and other teams within the GEC**

The GEC project team is strengthened in its capability to support school teams in developing and implementing qualitative action plans. We still can deepen our expertise in assisting school teams to evoke change at school level and to deal with resistance in school teams. In the Ghent Education Centre a new thematic working group focusing on professional development has started up. Lessons learned during this pilot project and the inspirational trajectory will be translated to other topics addressed in the Ghent Education Centre.

The Ghent's Implementation Journey with Stay Tuned offers an overview of the different steps we have undertaken in Ghent (see Annex 5.4 Solution story_EN by lead expert, Ian Graham).

6. SO WHAT Synthesis

The **Flemish educational system** is complex. As described in the partner profile of the city of Ghent, schools in Flanders have a high degree of school autonomy (see Annex 6.1 Partner Profile City of Ghent_EN). Also the three networks (i.e., official education, government-aided public education and government-aided private education) and their pedagogical services have a lot of influence. The

Ghent Education Centre (GEC) offers support to all schools in Ghent, helping them to deal with the challenges typical to an urban context. In implementing projects, it is important to be aware of this complexity and interplay between influencing authorities.

The **implementation of school specific action plans** in school contexts is challenging. Action plans need to be custom-made, adapted to the local school context. At the same time, Early School Leaving (ESL) is a complex problem, caused by a range of factors at the individual, school, family, society, and policy level and therefore, schools should be supported and embraced by a community of partners (i.e., welfare, work, leisure, culture) to enable them to make a difference in tackling ESL.

Implementing our main action *Supporting schools to develop and implement a school specific action plan on ESL* we identified different **learning points** along the way with which we like to conclude our Operational Implementation Framework (see Annex 6.2 Presentation final conference Stay Tuned_EN; Annex 6.3 Case Example 1_EN; Annex 6.4 Case Example 2_EN):

- an external partner such as the Ghent Education Centre can put important challenges such as ESL on the agenda and support school teams to take action;
- a strong, diverse, and steady core team (i.e., coalition) is necessary to create a strong vision and to enable the school-wide implementation of related actions. Teachers in particular can help to put the vision into practice;
- to evoke change extensive support and coaching on school level is needed. Moreover, schools need a better understanding of expected outcomes;
- definite and specific tools can be supportive in a process of change;
- investing in the professional development of school teams and their policy-making capacity is important to tackle ESL;
- building networks around the school involving partners of different domains (i.e., whole community approach) is a must to tackle a problem as complex as ESL;
- a MOOC offers opportunities to develop common expertise with the entire school team.

Being part of the **Stay Tuned network** over the past few years has been of big value in strengthening processes of professionalization, implementation and capacity building on a local level, aimed at bringing about change in and with schools. By co-operating and exchanging expertise and experiences with 8 European partner cities, we have been able to acquire a more in-depth understanding of how plans and actions can be implemented more successfully. Especially with challenges as complex as ESL, it is crucial to set up robust and flexible project methods, rather than traditional top-down or linear approaches. The stories of the 8 other cities in the Stay Tuned network have been inspirational in learning how to bring this about – a well-needed boost to help us along on our continued journey towards a better support of our schools tackling ESL.

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