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# The French Educational System: Issues and Debates

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**Q1 Abstract.**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ten years ago, in the mid-1990s, the French educational system seemed to run out of steam. The dropout rate stopped falling, that of students pursuing higher education stopped increasing, and inequalities in school success began to grow again. After decades of expansion, families, especially among the less privileged, seem to have grown more and more distrustful of schools. The abruptness and persistence of the turnaround represent a complex phenomenon, with many causes. First, there seems to be a growing – if still confused – realization that the French educational system is not the universal exemplar many French thought it to be. International comparisons inspire humility: several other European countries do just as well or even better, without spending so much.

France spends a larger share of its resources on primary and secondary education than most other developed countries (notably the United States), but a much smaller proportion on higher education. This can explain the difficulties of French universities when trying to compete with their foreign counterparts, especially American. But the disappointing international ranking of the French 15-year-olds remains to be accounted for. International evaluations have repeatedly shown that their level is only average, and that France is now behind countries such as the United Kingdom, and losing ground against the United States, despite the widespread notion that these countries have sacrificed their primary and secondary education. Only in Germany do these international comparisons of student performance generate even more unease than in France.

The current dissatisfaction with the French school system also stems from disappointing results in terms of social mobility. Everybody stays in school longer now, but the correlation between children's educational attainment and family socioeconomic background remains almost unchanged across cohorts (Albouy and Waneck, 2003; Givord and Goux, 2004; Lefranc and Trannoy, 2004). School is increasingly perceived as a hypocritical institution, whose façade egalitarianism only serves as a disguise for deeply unequal opportunities.

Distrust towards the French educational system is also fuelled by the idea that every possible solution has already been tried, to no avail. Such scepticism has always existed, but today it is reinforced by the apparent failure of efforts specifically targeted at the most disadvantaged children. One such seemingly failed effort is the creation of 'educational priority zones' (ZEPs), areas targeted for special help in education. Nothing seems to be able to efficiently fight failure at school.

In this paper, we will come back to some of these issues and review some of the reforms that have recently taken place. We will mostly focus on primary and secondary school and will in turn examine: pre-primary education and grade repetition in primary school, policies targeted at disadvantaged neighbourhoods, school districts, and private schools versus public schools. We will not provide a detailed presentation of the French educational system, but only some of its most relevant features (for more, see e.g. Lauer, 2003, 2005).

## 2. CONTROVERSY ABOUT NURSERY SCHOOLS

Schooling begins at an earlier age in France than in most developed countries. Since the end of the 1960s, almost all 5-year-olds have attended the *école maternelle* (nursery school). In the early 1990s this became true for most 3-year-olds. One of the features of the French system is that the *école maternelle* teachers are recruited using the same criteria as those of primary schools (they go through the same national recruiting process). This is one of the reasons why primary education expenditure is relatively high in France. The full-day character of schooling as well as a relatively heavy teaching load also inflate educational expenditure in primary and junior high school. Nursery schools have a curriculum of their own, and are a fully-fledged stage in French children's schooling.

After a sharp increase in the late 1970s, the proportion of children sent to the *école maternelle* at age 2 has flattened out at around 35 per cent. There is a major controversy today over the possible extension of schooling to begin at age 2. Many child psychiatrists oppose the idea. A child's third year of life, they contend, is a key moment in his or her development, when a sense of self is first developed. Spending that moment at school, in the midst of other 2-year-olds, would thus be detrimental to the child.

On the other hand, many teachers and educational advisers champion the idea of early schooling, especially for poor children. One of their arguments

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lies in the improved outcomes observed in elementary school for children who benefited from this early year of education. Among children born in 1991, 12 per cent of those who spent the regular three years in the *école maternelle* had been held back at least one year by the third grade versus only 9 per cent for those who had done the extra year (Caille, 2001).

However, such evaluations are rather questionable. It is obviously difficult to rule out the possibility that the families who send their children to school early are more motivated ones, better informed and more convinced of the importance of a good start in school. Under this hypothesis, the edge in later educational success of the children who entered school at 2 may have nothing to do with early schooling, but simply reflect the benefits associated with growing up in a motivated, well-informed, school-oriented family.

### 3. EARLY GRADE REPETITIONS

Another important debate is about early grade repetition in primary school and junior high school, which is much more widespread in France than in most developed countries. Compulsory education in France is divided into five years of primary school (from 6 to 11) and four years of junior high school (11 to 15) and as many as 45 per cent of pupils repeat at least one grade before the end of junior high school. However, the controversy over the usefulness of this practice is far from settled. A majority of French educationalists are against it (see e.g. Paul and Troncin, 2004), and criticize it for being costly<sup>1</sup> and inefficient. In particular, they point out that, after controlling for initial performance, students that have repeated a grade do not perform better in later years than those who were not held back (see Caille, 2004). Again, such evaluations are likely not an accurate measure of the causal impact of repeating grades, because teachers take into account many other elements besides students' marks when deciding whether or not to hold a student back. Inasmuch as these other factors also have an impact on the student's future achievement, the existing estimates may result from their influence as much as that of grade repetition itself. There is, to my knowledge, no study with French data that uses an exogenous source of variation in grade repetition to identify its causal effect within the French system.

In 1991, a reform was implemented with the goal of tailoring the school curriculum more individually in order to adapt to each child's rate of progress, and thus to reduce the number of children repeating grades. Since then, schooling has been theoretically organized in 'cycles' of two to three years, rather than in self-contained academic years. The official syllabi that

1. Given the cost of one year of junior high school, it is estimated that holding 10 per cent of pupils back in sixth grade costs around 400 million euros, which is approximately the amount allocated to the 'educational priority zones' (ZEPs), the disadvantaged areas targeted for special help in education.

delineate what students should learn are now defined for each cycle instead of each year. Shortly after this reform, there has been a sharp decline in the number of students being held back in elementary school. To my knowledge, however, no study has yet analysed the effects of this reform on the children's mean performance, nor has one used this reform to perform a proper evaluation of the causal effect of grade repetition in France.

### 3.1. Class size reduction

Another controversy is about the relevance of class size reduction policies. Average class size has declined over the past 40 years in France, as in most other industrialized countries. Between the mid-1960s and the mid-2000s, the reduction has been about 20 per cent in elementary schools and 10 per cent in secondary schools. Today, French classes contain an average of 22 students in elementary school and 24 in junior high school. As in many other countries, this decrease does not seem to have led to noticeably better performance, which casts doubt on the relevance of any policy aimed at reducing class size. A recent report by the Higher Committee on School Evaluation (*Haut Comité à l'Évaluation de l'École*) advocates targeted individual help for struggling children rather than a general effort at further reducing class size.

There is relatively little French research on the subject, and most of it probably fails to identify the causal effect of class size on student performance. Existing studies confine themselves to comparing the achievement of students in smaller and larger classes, without fully accounting for how teachers sort the children into the different classes, thereby engendering potential selection bias. This being said, these studies find the impact of class size reduction to be small and varying according to the chosen specification (cf. the review by Meuret, 2001). The key issue is of course that small classes are typically those in which teachers put low-performance children. Comparing student performance in small classes to that of students in larger classes says as much about the specific characteristics of the children in each type of class, as on the actual impact of class size.

In a recent paper, Piketty (2004) sheds new light on this question, relying on a method introduced by Angrist and Lavy (1999). He uses discrete jumps in class size that occur when, within a school, a small change in enrolment triggers a change in the number of classes in each grade. There is no national class size rule in France but, in practice, there is an implicit threshold at 30 students per class in the second grade. In a given school, when more than 30 students are set to enter second grade on a given year, the maximum class size rule is triggered and another class is added. This abruptly reduces the size of each class, from 29 or 30 to 15 or 16. The same thing happens at every multiple of 30: when a cohort, within a school, is just over 60, it triggers the opening of a third class and each class goes from 30 to 20 or 21 pupils. Piketty analyses the variation in pupils' achievement as a function of the variations

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in class size that are *only* linked to these threshold rules. The results from this methodology are quite telling: the class size reductions triggered by maximum size rules are actually accompanied by substantial increases in the pupils' achievement, as measured by national test scores. Piketty also shows that the impact of class size reduction is all the more important as pupils come from less privileged backgrounds. He estimates that lowering the number of students in second grade in deprived neighbourhoods' 'educational priority areas' from 22 – their current average – to 18 would reduce the test score gap between the children of these neighbourhoods and the others by 40 per cent. Such an improvement could be achieved on a constant budget, with only marginal changes in the achievement of other children, outside of the 'educational priority areas'.

### 3.2. Assessing the Educational Priority Zones

Inspired by Britain's Labour policies, the Educational Priority Zones (ZEPs, for *Zones d'Éducation Prioritaire*) were first introduced in France by socialists in the early 1980s. The general principle is to give additional human and financial resources to public schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. After a series of extensions, this system now operates on a large scale. Since its latest extension at the end of the 1990s, there are now more than 800 ZEPs in France today. They include more than 15 per cent of all elementary and junior high school students, about 1.5 million in total.

The regional representative of the Ministry of Education has the authority to decide which schools – or, more precisely, which schools enrolment areas – should be classified as ZEPs. Being classified as a ZEP brings more resources to the schools, in the form of more teaching positions and more teaching hours allocated by the state. Furthermore, the teachers who work in a ZEP receive a specific bonus (of about 1,000 euros a year) and are given priority when they later want to be relocated. The financial incentives aim to attract and retain the best teachers. Altogether, in the academic year 1998–99, the extra funds allocated to ZEPs amounted to 400 million euros, 1.2 per cent of France's total spending on compulsory education. This policy is ambitious, and the financial investment it entails quite significant. But the money is shared among so many areas and so many children that, in the end, the resources per student are only 10 per cent higher in ZEPs.

This is part of the reason why the available empirical evaluations of the ZEPs are, all in all, disappointing. Focusing on the first wave of ZEPs, Meuret (1994) studies the progress in maths and in French over the first two years of junior high school, within and outside ZEPs. Controlling for family characteristics and initial achievement, he finds that progress is less within ZEPs. A recent evaluation by Caille (2001), with different data but similar methodology, yields similar results.

In another recent paper dealing with the first three waves of ZEPs, Bénabou *et al.* (2003) also find that when a school becomes classified as a ZEP it has, on

average, no significant effect on the achievement of its students. The study also clearly demonstrates that the main shortcoming of this policy lies in an insufficient targeting of the resources. At the end of the 1990s, there were on average two fewer pupils in a ZEP class than in an ordinary class.

Regarding teachers, when a school becomes part of a ZEP, there is a slight increase in the proportion of less experienced teachers and of non-certified teachers. The financial incentives seem insufficient to convince more experienced teachers to stay, whereas the younger teachers seem attracted by the career acceleration and the easier mobility associated with having held a ZEP position. Finally, regarding the social environment of the schools, Bénabou *et al.* (2003) show a slight deterioration. The percentage of children who cannot afford lunch at school – which is an indication of the proportion of parents without a job and/or with no income – slowly increases once the school gets the ZEP status, moving further away from the non-ZEP schools. Their analysis of departures from ZEP schools suggests a phenomenon of avoidance rather than flight. Middle-class parents avoid moving into ZEP areas, but those who were there before do not move out *en masse*. Wealthier families are not over-represented among those who leave the ZEPs.

All in all, although the total amount of money allocated to ZEPs is important, it is spread over so many schools that, from a local point of view, the ZEP policy offers only few additional resources, while stigmatizing the schools that are so labelled. One wonders whether the stigma does not possibly outweigh the benefits of such a targeted policy.

The thinly spread resources are all the more problematic as this spatially-based policy does not very efficiently target more disadvantaged children. This is a general problem, one that territorially-based policies often have difficulty in overcoming. A comparison of the proportion of children having already repeated a grade as they enter junior high school reveals a strong similarity between ZEP and non-ZEP areas. More generally, Bénabou *et al.* (2003) show that the ZEPs are far from always being areas of socioeconomic deprivation. The increase in the number of ZEPs coincided with a loosening of the classification criteria, while at the same time, the removal of the ZEP status is politically near-impossible.

How to improve the ZEP system is currently being debated. Instead of simply increasing the number of ZEPs, the financial help they provide should probably be increased for, and more focused on, truly disadvantaged children. One possible way to implement this idea would be to help schools, not according to their location but to the actual characteristics of the population they serve.

#### 4. SELECTION OR EXPANSION? THE 'COLLÈGE UNIQUE'

The *collège unique* concept, introduced in 1975, means that all junior high schools are comprehensive schools, with all pupils (theoretically) following the same track. The principle at its root is that of an education common to everyone.

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The introduction of the *collège unique* was followed by a general increase in educational attainment as well as by a sharp increase in the percentage of pupils repeating grades in the 1980s. The increase was, moreover, unevenly distributed across social classes. Still today, more than two-thirds of working-class children have repeated at least one year before they leave the *collège*, compared to less than 15 per cent of white-collar children (Goux and Maurin, 1999). Working-class children stay in school longer and are more likely to graduate from high school, but remain fundamentally disadvantaged in the competition for diplomas. Their *relative* education level has not increased. Sociologists have repeatedly pleaded for a redefinition and reduction in workload called for by the syllabi, in order for the *collège* to actually be 'for all' (cf. the report edited by Dubet *et al.* 1999).

Many on the political left and in education research think that the *collège unique* fails to reach out to the majority of children. It is blamed for never fully integrating working-class children, a major part of its audience since the 1970s. The *collège*, they say, has remained what it used to be before the reform, an institution that prepares for further academic education. In fact, when all the junior high school tracks were merged into one, the curricula more or less became those courses that were previously preparation for upper secondary education and the *baccalauréat*. The implicit hierarchy of the subjects taught also remained unchanged: abstract knowledge is clearly dominant over practical skills.

The conservative side of public opinion, however, has sharply criticized these ideas, and today they are joined by a majority of high school teachers in their hostility to the *collège unique*. Faced with an audience of working-class teenagers, while themselves from a middle-class background, they suffer from having to manage unreceptive classes and from having a difficult time teaching their subject. These issues, which are two aspects of the same problem, have never been fully acknowledged by successive education ministers. This has led to deep misunderstandings and difficulty in convincing teachers of the wisdom of reforms put forward by the ministers (Barrère, 2002). The *collège unique* is now accused by many to rely on a utopian egalitarian vision of children and to sacrifice to that vision those children who, by nature, are not made for the conceptual, academic knowledge it delivers. They advocate the return to a *collège* with high academic standards, whose counterpart would be the re-establishment of shorter, vocational courses for the children not suited to such learning.

The debate is all the more difficult as, to my knowledge, there exists no specific evaluation of the implementation of the *collège unique* or its long-term effects on the children who experienced it.

### 5. PUBLIC SCHOOLS VERSUS PRIVATE SCHOOLS

In France, a relatively large proportion of students attend private schools, at 17 per cent, more than in the rest of Europe (15 per cent) or than in the

United States (11 per cent). In fact, it is estimated that one French family in two resorts to private schooling at least once in one of its children's educational careers. These proportions have been quite steady over time. This can partly be accounted for by the very favourable status granted to private schools by the 1959 Act known as the *loi Debré*. The Act states that as long as a private school agrees by contract to follow the curricula laid down by the Ministry of Education and to have the same recruiting criteria as required of public schools, it can benefit from public funding, just like a public school. A great majority of private schools are thus under contract with the state and benefit from public money. Given these facts, the main differences between French public and private education are (a) the possibility of religious education in private schools, (b) the leeway the school's principal has in recruiting teachers, which may potentially increase teaching staff cohesion, and most of all (c) the ability to select pupils, and to disregard school zoning, yielding a greater homogeneity of students. As a matter of fact, most private schools appear to specialize in a particular type of student. There are elite private schools, which require excellent academic records to enrol. There are also 'second chance' private schools, attended by students – often from well-off families – who were struggling or even failing in the public system. Finally, some private schools welcome children whose parents value a different kind of educational style (with an emphasis on strong discipline, for instance), and/or want the curriculum to include religious education. The available statistics from the Ministry of Education support the notion that students enrolled in private schools are on average from better-off families than those enrolled in public schools (see the special issue of *Education et Formations*, 2004). Still, recent analysis shows that, controlling for socioeconomic background, students' progress is slower in private schools than in public schools, notably in those regions where private education is traditionally strong, such as western France (in such regions as Vendée and Morbihan, for instance) (Valdenaire, 2004). The favourable status of private schools is a very controversial issue and it is unlikely that any government will try to change things in the near future.

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## 6. SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND PEER EFFECTS

Since the early 1960s, France has been divided into small districts defining which elementary school one is zoned to. Other, larger districts define the areas zoned to junior high schools. If they want their child to attend public school, parents must send their child to whichever school they are zoned to. This procedure is theoretically compulsory, and to enrol a child, schools require proof of address. However, in practice there are ways for better informed parents to bend the rules. Many of them use the address of relatives or friends as the child's place of residence. Others say they want their child to learn a more obscure subject (often a foreign or classical language) that is only

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offered by the desired school (or at least not taught in the local school they want to avoid). As a last resort, families can opt out of the public school system and send their children to a private school, if only for the crucial couple of years of junior high school which parents dread the most. According to the French Ministry of Education, about 10 per cent of families have their children attending schools they are not zoned to. This percentage doubles when one of the parents is a teacher or a professor, the best informed about the quality of the schools and the means to obtain a special dispensation. Furthermore, about 20 per cent of families send at least one child to a private school, for which zoning is irrelevant. This percentage is more than twice as high (47 per cent) for families of corporate executives. Tuitions are relatively cheap and do not represent an obstacle for these families.

Local studies also suggest that the proportion of families bending the zoning regulations is particularly high in dense urban areas, such as Paris and its suburbs, where school performance can be radically different from one neighbourhood to another a short distance away. In a nutshell, strategies aimed at avoiding the local school are much more common among wealthier families and give rise to a recurring debate over inequalities in school choice. Yet there is, to my knowledge, no study on the effects of the school zoning system and the impact its elimination could have. Partial elimination has recently been suggested, however, allowing poor families only to send their children to a school outside their zone.

More generally, there are still very few French studies on peer effects in schools (see the review by Duru-Bellat, 2004). Duru-Bellat *et al.* (2004) show that progress made by students of similar academic achievement and social backgrounds is more rapid when they are enrolled in schools attended by others from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Similarly, Feloutzis (2003) shows that pupils' progress is increased when they attend a junior high school in which the proportion of children with African or Turkish parents is low. Also Goux and Maurin (2004) find evidence of significant causal effects of neighbours' performance at school on a child's educational outcomes.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In an attempt to address some of the issues reviewed in this paper, the French government initiated a nationwide debate on education in September 2003 (*le Grand Débat pour l'Avenir de l'École*). Its goal was to pave the way for a new law, which, it was hoped, would then appear as legitimate as possible in the eyes of the public. Between September 2003 and March 2004, more than 26,000 meetings were held, involving more than a million teachers, parents and students. A national commission of experts analysed the contributions and produced two reports: one summarized the concerns that were voiced, and the other put forward a number of proposals to address these concerns (cf. *Commission du débat national sur l'avenir de l'école*, 2004a, 2004b).

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According to these documents, the main problems are that the pupils' workload is too heavy, schools do not really ensure that children actually learn what they should, and there is not enough parental involvement. The main proposal put forward by the Commission was the definition of a 'common base of knowledge', defined as 'what children are not allowed not to know'. The mastery of this common base would be strictly checked at the end of compulsory schooling.

A common set of knowledge and criticism of heavy workloads made the report a little too liberal in the eyes of the (then conservative) government, which tried to distance itself from it. It resulted, in the early months of 2005, in the government facing mass protests and difficulties when trying to introduce the bill, although it still derived much of its substance from the Commission's work. At the end of the day, it is likely that the *Grand Débat* will only produce but cosmetic reforms.

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