# Country Report France

## 1. Background

In France the centralised state is traditionally responsible for matters of education as well as for the guarantee of the exemption from fees and the non-denominational orientation of state schools. According to this mission, which is stated in the Constitution, the political authorities have to make sure that education is carried out nationwide according to the Republican values which form the understanding of nation and state in France. This close correlation between school and nation-building forms the French understanding of education to date.

In spite of its centralised structure and its claim to equality of opportunity, the French education system can be characterised by extreme inequalities which mirror the shift in French society, even enforce and partly produce them. In this context the number of repeaters (up to 40% of all 15-year-olds) and the number of dropouts (approx. 120,000 to 150,000 pupils leave school without a leaving certificate) is remarkable. Especially children and young persons with a migrant background are affected. Furthermore, there is considerable tension between mass and elite education. Practically all political powers share the idea of forming an elite for school achievement and see it as an essential responsibility of the educational system. The relationship between public and private schools (mostly Catholic sponsorship – about 20% of sixth formers) is still cause for conflict.

All schools are all-day schools, independent of their sponsorship. All matters concerning education, administration, organisation and educational and non-educational staff in schools are centralised and standardised. Compulsory schooling starts at the age of 6 at primary school but more than 90 % of the children from the age of 3 onwards attend a public pre-school institution which is free of charge. This school type is subordinate to the Ministry of Education and the teaching staff has an equal status to that of primary schools. After primary school, pupils attend secondary school for four years and finish their compulsory schooling there. The 6th grade is divided into a general education, a vocational and a technological branch. All three grammar school types finish with A-levels after 3, resp. 4 years. It is also possible to finish the vocational branch after

2 years. The accreditation to the 6th grade is carried out in a complex procedure by the school and career services where the wishes of the parents and pupils and the admission criteria of the grammar schools have to be brought in line. The A-levels represent the first university diploma as the public universities are admission-free. Another characteristic of the French education system are the post-A-level classes at some grammar schools which prepare for the first courses at universities. Entry to the so-called "Grande Ecoles" (elite universities) are part of this preparatory classes where especially gifted students are prepared for the entrance examination at a "Grande Ecole" in a highly selective and general-education oriented drill for 2 years. Other post-A-level classes offer a more job-related education like for higher technicians which qualify for entrance into working life but also offer the possibility of further studies at a university.

## 2. Context

### National Context

The Ministry of Education is the biggest single budget of the state and therefore the most significant employer. With 1.3 million employees, thereof just under 1 million teaching staff, it represents a highly sensitive policy which mirrors the paradigm shift of governmental actions of the last 40 years. In the 1960s and 1970s, the educational reforms were formed by the perception of governmentally decreed unity as a prerequisite for equality of opportunity. In the 1980s, the idea of decentralising the administration and thereof the education system came to the fore. The 1990s focus on the comprehensive effort to modernise governmental administration through project-oriented actions. This is reflected e.g. in binding programmes to establish temporary competitive profiles at secondary schools and universities which are liable to evaluation. This does not only address administrative autonomy but also asks the question of a bigger range in pedagogical matters. Today school leadership no longer implies only taking orders from a higher authority but is defined as a self-contained task which calls for specialisation and professionalisation based on a conceptual and materialistic infrastructure.

The first decade of the new second millennium shows an acceleration of the previously triggered developments as governmental actions are seen under the aspect of measurability of the quantitative and qualitative outcomes.

The school board members have to work on indicators for the measurement of a school's performance. Regional and local experiments should be carried out within a certain framework, the new version of the education structures law of 2005 codifies negotiations on the target agreements between secondary schools and school authority as a structural principle of steering leadership. The dependence of the official discourse on the school board members as well as their desired leadership skills is obvious in the management literature.

However, the educational political interest in governance questions has got its most prominent expression in the University Education Act on the "liberties and responsibilities of the universities" of 2007. This law also mirrors the difficulties that go along with this development at all levels of the educational system. This is not only about more and more powerful corporate resistance of individual personnel categories to certain reforms, but it is about basic criticism of the deregulation of a core part of governmental acting, which subjected education to the laws of the national and international market, thus betraying Republican ideals of the creation of equality and equity, passionately held by a large part of the public. The decreasing controllability of a former powerful state administration in the achievement of the proclaimed educational targets as well as the contradictory expectations of the protagonists, the growing social and cultural differentiation of the French population, the discrepancy between proclaimed school and educational culture and the real experience of a growing number of children, teenagers and parents are shattering the French educational system much more than in countries where educational matters are institutionally less centralised and less exposed to the view of the world.

## Local context
The integration of regional authorities or the local context in general regarding organisation and administration matters in schools is a

consequence of the decentralisation movements which started in the 1980s. The communities continue to be responsible for building and financing primary schools, the 95 Départements will be responsible for the first secondary level schools and the 22 regions will be responsible for the upper secondary schools. Since 1985, all secondary schools – except primary schools – dispose of the status "*établissement public local d'enseignement*", i.e. as legal entities they dispose of a certain autonomy in administrative, financial and partly educational matters. Additionally to the public resources (state and public authorities) the schools can and should raise further resources; they dispose of their own budget proposed by the head of school and approved by the school's administrative board. This budget fluctuates between €300,000 per year for smaller secondary I schools and €1.5 million per year for large-scale secondary schools.

The administrative board is staffed in a tripartite way: one third are representatives from the responsible local authority as well as external personages nominated by the head master, one third are representatives of the teaching and non-teaching staff and one third are elected spokesparents and students' representatives. The school board members (the headmaster and his deputy) are ex officio members of the administrative board.

The headmaster is chairman of the administrative board and representative of the school administration at the same time. Personnel matters (education and further education, recruiting, evaluation, payment and administration of the non-teaching personnel) remain subject to the ministry or the local school authority respectively. The budget of the individual secondary schools does not include personnel funding. Since the end of the 1990s, headmasters have had the opportunity to recruit support (non-teaching) personnel with fixed-term contracts. Recently, the state has tried to assign the payment of the non-teaching personnel (staff for canteen, break time supervision, library, cleaning, secretary, finance, nurse, counseling) to the responsible school boards.

# 3. School Leadership concepts and practices

Since 1988, in secondary schools the headmaster and his deputy have formed a personnel category of their own, i.e. they no longer have any teaching commitment. In fact, they are not even allowed to teach. The access to this function is not only open to secondary school teachers, but also to candidates from primary schools or personnel categories without teaching experience respectively, as well as to other public administrations and to the free economy. This change in status corresponds to the logic of the specialisation of the headmaster's function in secondary schools that has been practiced since the 19th century. It enhances the separation of competences between pedagogic matters, which are characteristic of French secondary schools, and for which the traditionally still numerous school supervisory boards are responsible, and administrative matters which the school board members are responsible for. This separation goes to the extent that a pedagogic leader role of the school board members may be partially rejected by the teachers. The school board members' main tasks can be subsumed in four points:

Conceptual framework (What does a head teacher have to do?)

## Education and upbringing serve educational success

- Elaborating, formalising and working with the curriculum within the framework of the guidelines fixed by the ministry and the local school authority
- Presidency in the teachers' conference on the students' achievements
- Putting classes together
- Dividing of the global teaching load assigned to the school; drawing up and implementing schedules
- Providing teaching activities considering legal instructions according to the targets of the curriculum
- Developing supportive educational measures and individual support, especially for students with learning difficulties

- Regulating the modalities to check the students' efforts: Elaboration of a school-specific policy regarding the teachers' conference on students' achievements as well as the supervision of the students' efforts; co-operation with the education authorities in the evaluation of the teachers
- Elaborating a concept for counselling school careers and professional careers: Supporting the conditions for the student's individual development, implementing counselling measures (together with the administrative board) considering the guidelines from the ministry and the school authority, implementing these practices by consulting a school psychologist, controlling methods for measuring the professional integration
- Educational measures: supervision of attendance and punctuality, supporting the students' voice, creating free-time areas for students, organising and monitoring the school's health and social service, supporting and organising health care policies, supporting the school's own sports club
- Organising and maintaining the school - parents dialogue

## Human resource development and management

- Guaranteeing a forward-looking human resource development policy, supporting new personnel and staff in dealing with their problems (contact to the school authorities and higher authorities), participating in the elaboration and evaluation of the further education programme, appreciating initiatives taken by the teaching and non-teaching personnel, identifying potentials, utilising the teachers' annual evaluation to exchange ideas to support and lead the temporary staff with contracts subject to notice
- Defining the basic duties for the entire personnel
- Ideally utilising the support personnel's potential
- Organising internal communication and guaranteeing its quality
- Organising and maintaining the dialogue with the staff representatives

## Cross-linking with the local and regional environment

Participating in school networks: Conception for counselling the students' school career and professional career, concepts for the modification of the choice of school depending on the students' place of residence, exchange of educational innovations (such as new educational profiles or training courses), observing the local and regional job market development, designing and participating in the programmes for adult education – as far as they are offered by the secondary school for a territorially restricted area; Co-operating with other schools within the remit of the board for schools, co-operation of first level secondary schools with primary schools in their catchment area, for example, by organising visits of the elementary school final year students in the secondary school;

Expanding relations to the responsible local authority, organising and implementing the dialogue with the local parents' association, the local social partners, partners within the cultural and sports area, and  protagonists from local industry (raising the educational tax in local companies) together with other governmental institutions (judiciary, police, gendarmerie…), with the local and regional media.

This co-operation usually happens within the framework of formalised agreements which the school board members contract with their extracurricular partners.

## The school's administration

- Defining targets, delegating duties to personnel considering their expertise and duties
- Drawing up the budget, presenting it to the administrative board (in the capacity of an authorising officer)
- Guaranteeing regularity and safety for students, personnel and buildings
- Elaborating, writing and updating the house rules as well as guaranteeing their implementation
- Organising elections for the different committees, arranging and chairing meetings (especially those of the administrative board)
- Utilising appropriate instruments to analyse and document the school's function, preparing and presenting the annual report, estimating the school enrolment (and thus the need for teachers) for the coming school year

## Learning and teaching

Defining the school board members' tasks shows that their competence in influencing classes and the teachers' work plus evaluation is restricted or indirect. Some of the headmasters demand the school board members' direct say in the employment of teachers but this has not yet been achieved. The school supervisory board is even criticized by some of the teachers for accompanying the headmaster to periodically visit the lessons. Since 2005, every secondary school has had to form a board as a place of school-specific educational reflection across disciplines. This new board is meant to be a forum for the headmaster where he can – more than before – get engaged with the basic questions of teaching at his school. An evaluation culture regarding the lessons and the students' competences as is intended in international comparative tests, could only be attempted so far since teachers, students and parents are still very much focused on school marks and how to compensate for them.

External evaluations, which are independent of the school supervisory board and follow defined quality indicators, as practised in other countries, have not prevailed yet. Every year, school rankings, especially for upper secondary schools, are published by the print media, but they are usually one-sidedly based on the success rate of the country-wide centralised A-levels as every secondary school published its own results, and therefore hardly any assumptions can be made regarding equal opportunities and the quality of schools since the selection processes that have taken place in the three last years at the secondary school are insufficiently or not depicted at all. Internal evaluation approaches, as written in the school development programme and its required elaboration by all protagonists involved in school life, are perceived only in an insufficient way as modernising factors by persons affected. The administrative board as an institutionalised dialogue place for all groups participating in school life is too often busy with financial and organisational questions exclusively ,whereas educational questions and questions regarding the quality of instruction, school curriculum or school development in the narrower sense are hardly discussed.

# 4. Recruiting and educating school leaders

Until the mid 1980s, the candidates for the headmaster's post (upper and lower secondary school) were recruited from the circle of teachers. The candidates were invited for an interview by the school supervision officials and the results from this interview were forwarded to the head of the local school administration district with the aim of registering the candidate in a nationwide list of suitable candidates. For the purpose of an objective and rational approach to this procedure, a competition (*concours*) with three (partially written) exams was introduced.

In the following years the selection procedure was simplified: now there are two decentralised oral exams together with the submission of the extensive application form that is meant to display the candidate's motivation. The result of this first phase determines if the candidacy is supported or not. In the case of a positive reply, the candidate is invited to Paris in order to take part in a central selection interview where the selection committee can get an impression of the candidate's personality and his knowledge of the educational system.

## Status and qualification measures

Until 1988, the headmaster had the status of a teacher (with restricted teaching load). The introduction of a school's own selection competition was accompanied by the creation of a status for school administration personnel which is uniform for all secondary schools. At the end of a reflection process, which started in 1990 and went on for ten years, in which the ministry had acknowledged the headmaster's basic role for the functionality and the modernisation of the educational system, but also after headmasters had been on strike throughout the country at the end of the 1990s, the ministry and the majority union of headmasters signed an agreement in 2000. The text of the agreement includes an extensive activity and functional description, it provides an increase of financial remuneration acknowledging the increase of responsibility and more transparency in the procedure in the transfer as well as a more precise evaluation procedure for headmasters.

In Poitiers a central academy for education and further education of all leaders from the secondary schools subject to the Ministry of Education, as well as for the administrative personnel of universities, was created in 2003. It has developed from the fusion of different previous situations. This institution, amongst other things, is responsible for the support and the education of the instructors from the school administration districts (usually experienced headmasters and school administration inspectors), for the annually 700 to 800 newly recruited headmasters of secondary schools, as well as for selective aspects of initial training and further education. With the help of common education modules for school administration personnel and school inspectors and creating an innovation and evaluation culture that both personnel categories have in common, as well as overcoming the historic separation between the educational and administrative direction, are the targets being aimed at. The qualification measures for headmasters have adapted to this development. According to the current procedure, straight after the appointed headmaster has successfully passed the selection competition, he receives a post as deputy for three years and during the first two years spends 70 days taking part in qualification measures. Participating is one of the official duties and is therefore free of charge.

In every school administration district there is a group of instructors – usually experienced headmasters – who compile and carry out qualification modules. During the education phase, every headmaster-to-be is assigned to an instructor as a direct contact in the concerning school administration district. The tutor is not identical to the headmaster of the educating school. This education is structured so that phases of individual learning and sequences of learning in small groups alternate. These can be case studies, e.g. which need to be worked out in order to use them in short guest visits in other administrations (e.g. other regional administrative bodies) or companies, to compile reports and evaluations. The strong individualisation of some of the qualification modules is aimed to take account of the new headmasters' different educational backgrounds or careers respectively.

This phase of learning by doing is quite labour-intensive since additionally to the deputy headmaster's routine every day work education modules need to be done as well. Towards the conclusion of the two-year education phase, an evaluation is carried out by the education authorities and by the tutor or the group of instructors. With the help of these evaluations, the head of the school administration district can recommend the definite acquisition of the candidate into the personnel category of school board members to the ministry. After his third year as deputy, the successful candidate can apply for his move to a director's post.

## Career planning, evaluation, further education of headmasters and attractiveness of the profession headmaster

The measures of further education are determined by the school administration district, but have only very restricted budget funds. Since 2002, the school administration districts or the national management academy respectively have aimed at offering further education measures in a distance studies programme or e-learning in co-operation with their own universities and certifying these with a Master's degree. A possible career opportunity for the headmaster is to be moved to a bigger school. The salaries of the currently 13,000 headmasters depend on different factors, amongst others, on the position within the personnel category of the school administration (depending on the initial qualification, the years of service, the proven mobility and the evaluation) and on the size of the school. As a whole, four salary levels can be distinguished. School administration districts have made mandatory the evaluation of the headmasters if they are moved. In this case the school authority defines the duties for the new headmaster appointed for the free job for the time span of three years on the basis of an analysis of the status quo.

The accessibility to the headmaster's function for candidates without teaching experience, on the one hand, and the agreement between the majority union and the Ministry of Education made in 2000, on the other hand, are consequences of the recruitment shortages that have developed since the 1980s. It has become more difficult to recruit sufficiently qualified and motivated candidates from the teaching staff for this post since for most of the highly-qualified secondary school teachers (agrégés) it usually meant a decline in their material wellbeing, let alone the increasing mental demands that are only compensated by certain material benefits.

One of the benefits for example is an official residence that is given to each headmaster and which is usually located on the school grounds. There is a residence obligation for the headmaster to make sure he is able to fulfil his responsibility as supervisor. The development of the profile of the starting qualification shows that in the last 20 years there has, indeed, been a significant diversification. Whereas the proportion of agrégés remained constant, the proportion of candidates from the primary school sector, whose education is more general and for whom the capacity of a headmaster means a promotion, has significantly risen. This post is also attractive for the personnel categories of the Ministry of Education without teaching experience (orientation counsellors, supervisory staff). The agrégé, however, whose professional identity is strongly oriented towards an academic subject, and who used to have the ideal-typical starting qualification, does not comply with the type that is favoured by the ministry today: a manager of human resources who thinks in a project-related way and acts pragmatically.

## To sum up: Challenges, areas of innovation and underlying evidence

The current problems in the French educational system in general and leadership of schools in particular mirror a deep identity crisis. If it is about school failure, violence in schools, the persisting inequality of opportunities, the change in the teacher's role or the still very sensitive issue of the relationship between public and private schools, the former virtually sacred transfiguration of the Republican school as a school for the Republic is not topical anymore.

In the view of the tendency towards individualisation within French society and students who are socially and culturally becoming more heterogeneous as well as the required strengthening of the administrative and educational autonomy of responsible persons in schools on-the-spot at the expense of the former central state that disposed of uniformity as a guarantor for social equality and internal quality and the necessary integration of new partners out of school into the educational process – not least because of the growing competition of socialisation authorities out of school (e.g. new information and communication technologies), the idea of an educational system as a uniform integration and socialisation model for all children and young people is less evident.

The change of the French educational institutions towards locally or regionally distinguished and rooted institutions that are horizontally networked and are open to the outside world – also internationally – and within their internal principles of order orienting themselves towards democratic values, is a task that cannot be managed by the former popular top-down logic of a modernisation carried out by the central state.

To the extent that all protagonists are willing to accept change as a permanent challenge, the educational system will again be seen as an institution that can make a real contribution to the realisation of social equity.

## Annex

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