

FRANCE

1) EDUCATION SYSTEM

a) Pre-school education

In France, between the ages of 3 and 6, children go to the *école maternelle*, the nursery school – a mixed institution incorporating aspects of both the kindergarten and pre-school – but attendance is not obligatory. This is a public school taking children free of charge for the entire day, being divided into three sections. Teachers are schoolteachers, with training in both pre-elementary and elementary teaching.

b) Primary education and lower secondary education

In France, education is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16. All children go to the *école primaire*, the primary school, between 6 and 11. This first level education covers five primary classes. Together, the nursery school and primary school combine to form a unit termed the *école élémentaire*, the elementary school, divided into three cycles. After primary school, for the next four years – i.e. to the age of 15 – French pupils go to the *collège* or lower secondary school, a basic secondary educational institution. This transition takes place without any specific examination. The first cycle of standardised secondary education covers sixth, fifth, fourth and third class. All pupils receive the same education during these four years, to the extent that lower secondary education is often referred to as “single school establishment of education for all pupils who have completed their primary schooling” (standardised secondary education). At the end of the third class, all pupils sit an identical examination at national level and conclude their education at lower secondary level with the national diploma, the *brevet*. The corresponding examination is compulsory for all pupils, but has no function as a qualification for any future profession.

Lower secondary education is divided into two teaching cycles of 2 years each: an observation cycle (covering 6th and 5th class) and an orientation cycle (covering 4th and 3rd class), subdivided into general and technological branches.

Within the public education system, parents are generally obliged to enrol their children in the lower secondary school serving the school catchment area they live in.

Normally, pupils remain at lower secondary school for 4 years. However, after two years they may choose to pursue vocationally-oriented branches. Pupils aged between 14 and 16 who, at the end of the 5th class, wish to follow a vocationally-oriented course may either opt for basic pre-vocational classes CPPN or preparatory classes for apprenticeship. The purpose of CPPN classes is to assist children aged at least 14 to decide on a profession, with support here taking the concrete form of information being provided for them on a variety of vocational specialities, along with the opportunity to test their aptitude in these fields. CPA classes are designed for children of 14 and 15 who have already decided on a profession. These pupils are provided with education and training delivered alternately at the school or within a company.

c) Upper secondary education

It is not until they reach the *lycée*, i.e. getting on for the age of 15, that pupils decide to opt for vocational training or to go on studying. Upper secondary education is divided into three distinct branches: general education, technological education, and vocational education.

- general education: the pupil goes to a *lycée* for general education

At the *lycée* for general education, education lasts for three years (second, first and terminal class) in the upper level of secondary education. These institutions take pupils who have been at lower secondary school for four years and lead them to the general *baccalauréat*, which is a national secondary school leaving diploma.

- technological education: the pupil goes to a *lycée* for technological education

This *lycée* also takes pupils who have been at the *collège* for four years and prepares them over three years for the technological *baccalauréat* examination.

However, most *lycées* offer both the general and the technological branch. In the first year, pupils receive the same undifferentiated education in both general and technological upper secondary education institutions. Accordingly, those who wish to leave school at the end of the compulsory term of ten years schooling only complete the first year of the upper level of secondary education (second class). At the end of this school year, a distinction is made between the general branch and the technological branch. So it is not until the end of the second class that there is a great specialisation in the form of priority options which can be selected from the subjects on offer (a choice between three general series leading to the general *baccalauréat* and seven technological series leading to the technological *baccalauréat*).

The *baccalauréat* examinations are centralised national exams.

- vocational education: the pupil goes to a vocational *lycée* LEP

The LEP offers two branches of study in vocational training, aimed at:

- pupils leaving fifth class of a lower secondary school, who have taken the basic pre-vocational class or the preparatory class for apprenticeship, and who are at least 14 years of age;
- pupils leaving third class of a lower secondary school (i.e. after four years of schooling) and who, after two additional years of general vocational full-time training, are looking either to sit the examination for the vocational diploma BEP or the vocational aptitude certificate CAP.

The LEP curriculum brings together general education, technological education and periods of practical apprenticeship in the professional world. The pupil can also receive vocational training or special technological education in agricultural vocational *lycées*.

After achieving a BEP or a CAP qualification, those pupils who wish it so can then take two years to prepare for a vocational *baccalauréat*, which certifies vocational training in a recognised speciality.

Centres for training apprentices (CFA) make it possible for pupils to study for the same diplomas as in all full-time technological and vocational education and training courses in schools. Theoretical training is provided in the CFA, while practical training takes place within a company with which the apprentice signs a training contract.

Because of the transfer of responsibility for ongoing vocational training and apprenticeships over to the regions, in effect since 1983, the system has become extremely complex. Added to this is the fact that within the context of the policy of decentralisation being pursued by the French Government – aimed essentially at reinforcing the powers of the regions – there are some regions, such as Rhône-Alpes, applying themselves to achieving complete responsibility for vocational training for an experimental 5-year period.

d) Higher education

Higher education may be divided into three main branches, being in France at present 86 universities, 3 national polytechnic institutions and a number of *Grandes Ecoles*, prestigious institutes of university level with competitive entrance examinations. All holders of the *baccalauréat* are entitled to go on studying, but it is the universities which decide on which students they admit. The admission procedures for the *Grandes Ecoles*, for their part, are particularly strict.

There is also a system of vocational training of higher level, for example that provided by numerous university institutes of technology attached to universities. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the system there is also extremely complex due to the transfer of responsibility over to the regions.

2) TYPES OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

The great majority of pupils go to schools which are under the responsibility of the Minister for National Education. For their part, handicapped pupils have the opportunity of being schooled in medico-social establishments under the auspices of the Minister of Health.

Apart from the mainstream school sector, there are also modified school systems aimed at children presenting special educational needs. These are often integrated in with primary and secondary schools, in the form of integration classes CLIS, for example, or specialised teaching departments SEGPA). However, special schooling is also provided within specialised institutions under the responsibility of the Minister of Health.

Schools under supervision of the Minister for National Education may be public or private institutions. Since 1954, private educational institutions may choose to pass a contract with the State. This contract places them under State administrative and educational supervision and, in return, allows them to benefit from financial assistance. Private schools under contract with the State take approximately 15% of primary level

pupils and 20% of secondary level pupils. There has been no change in this percentage for many years. Most private schools are catholic denominational establishments. Their work is subjected to a series of constraints (qualifications of the teaching staff, curricula). Schools which do not enjoy state recognition account for fewer than 50,000 pupils and the parents must bear a large part of the financial burden for the education of their children.

3) EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As a country, France has traditionally been extremely centralised and the State retains a determining role in terms of educational policy. It holds the basic responsibilities for the design and implementation of educational policy and the curricula to be followed throughout the country. From his base in Paris, the Minister with responsibility for national education (the “Minister for National Education, Higher Education and Research”) plans, directs and manages the public education system and at the same time exercises control over private educational institutions. The Minister for National Education and the central administration under his authority establish the status and operating rules for educational establishments as well as, in a detailed manner, the curricula to be studied at each level of education, subject by subject. They issue guidelines for teaching and organise examinations, as well as handling the recruitment, training and remuneration of teaching staff, the great majority of whom benefit from the status of civil servant, and are trained in special tertiary educational establishments.

About 20 years ago, France embarked on a route leading to de-concentration and decentralisation. De-concentration meant that a greater number of responsibilities in terms of the management of teaching staff were going to be assigned to external sub-sections of the Ministry of National Education: France is divided up into 30 *académies* (districts with responsibility for the inspection and administration of the educational system for a number of *départements*, generally four or five) each headed by a *recteur*, as representative of the Minister. Rectors are responsible for the operation of the educational system in the geographical area they are responsible for, and each year they receive a package of resources allocated to them by the central administration (in the form of posts, i.e. a specific number of teaching posts) which they themselves allocate to the various educational establishments (in the form of global quota of teaching hours). Since 1999, *recteurs* have also been responsible for transfers and the provision of staff within their areas. The *académies* are all of the same administrative structure with an *académie* inspector (director of *département* services for education), various advisory groups and regional representatives from foundations, information services, advisory services and school health services.

At local level, the result of decentralisation has also been that the parties involved, in particular head teachers, have benefited from greater freedom and enhanced room for manoeuvre. By way of contrast with primary schools, lower and upper secondary schools have become local public secondary education establishments (EPLE – *établissements publics locaux d’enseignement*). This status has made it possible to provide these schools with greater responsibility and, therefore, greater latitude in the use of the public funds allocated to them, as well as the right to exploit new forms of private financing. They have gradually gained a level of pedagogical autonomy which has allowed them to acquire a personal profile, as they develop their own ways of

implementing the objectives and contents of the national curricula. This autonomy makes it possible for them to adapt better to their pupils and to offer a better response in line with their needs.

Furthermore, the 1982 and 1983 decentralisation legislation significantly reinforced the role of the elected assemblies in the local communities operating below national level – regional, *départementale* and commune assemblies – all with their own substantial funds. At present, their participation represents 20% of the total spent on education.

Each local community is responsible for one educational level. Communes are responsible for equipping nursery and primary schools as well as the use to which their budgeted funds are put. They also finance non-teaching staff. The *départements* bear responsibility for the building and maintenance of lower secondary schools (*collèges*) and finance school transport. The regions assume the same responsibility in respect of upper secondary schools (*lycées*) and participate in educational planning (regional education plans, investment plans).

4) FINANCING OF EDUCATION

In France, in compliance with the 1982 and 1983 decentralisation legislation, responsibility in terms of investment and operation has been transferred over to the *départements* for lower secondary schools (first cycle of secondary level) and to the regions for upper secondary schools (second cycle of secondary level) with communes retaining the same responsibilities for primary education. Local community authorities take the decisions on the volume and financing of the resources intended for operating and equipment expenditure, the latter being made up of equipment funds assigned to constructional measures (new buildings, conversions and extensions, major repair works) and materials. The State – or rather the supreme authority governing education, namely the Minister of National Education – continues to provide the human resources for the teaching staff. Accordingly, teachers are still recruited and paid by the State. This rule applies also to non-teaching staff at secondary level (a new phase of decentralisation recently embarked upon does, however, envisage these responsibilities being transferred over to the regions and the *départements*). At primary level, however, there are other procedures envisaged for paying the salaries of non-teaching staff, these procedures being more generally comparable with the regulations governing operating costs. This sees the payroll of non-teaching staff being borne by the local authorities.

For the financing of secondary level schools, the regions and *départements* are allocated a portion of the general decentralisation budget and a specific equipment budget: the regional school equipment budget for *lycées* (DRES) and the departmental school equipment budget for *collèges* (DDCE). The two local communities supplement these subsidies from their own resources. At primary level, communes define their own criteria for the distribution of financial resources.

Taking into account the ways in which funds are allocated to schools, there is a certain latitude available to them. In the first cycle of the secondary level, the autonomy of lower secondary schools extends, for example, to the management of personnel and operating resources. Since 1985, *collèges* have been receiving their resources in terms of teaching personnel in the form of global timetable allocations (global quota of hours

for teaching staff), they determine for themselves the volume of class hours, choose optional subjects and decide on class sizes. This sees them in a position to shape their pedagogical profile in a relatively autonomous manner, without, however, having any room for manoeuvre in terms of finance. The same process applies for those resources intended for operating costs, including management and administrative staff, in which area lower secondary schools benefit from a global grant to cover operating costs in the wider sense, relating to the basic administrative and pedagogical operation as well as the maintenance of schools. Throughout the secondary level, the purchase of material goods and services is the responsibility of the schools themselves. At primary level, conversely, the funds required for operating costs are administered by the communes.

In France, the financing of private schools under contract with the State is comparable with the financing of public schools, in particular as regards the financing of staffing costs and operating costs. The volumes are the same, but there is less of a subsidy provided for equipment costs in private schools under contract than there is in public schools.

In public schools in France, education is free. In the establishments “under contract”, with the significant financing of the State being taken into account, the costs of schooling generally remain low in comparison with non-subsidised private schools.

France is attempting to raise the performance level of certain groups with problems by a variety of measures of an organisational and pedagogical nature. In particular, reference should be made to the priority education zones ZEP, the flagship areas of educational policy, in other words, zones where the social conditions constitute a risk factor, or even an obstacle to the successful education of the children and teenagers who live there, and in the long term, to their social and vocational integration. The schools in these zones enjoy the benefit of additional resources and support systems.

Lower and upper secondary schools are authorised to make use of supplementary resources drawn from sources representing non-public finance. Here we find, among other things, the funds received as a result of the hiring out of school installations, the supply of certain services, the organisation of events and other methods of attracting funding, as well as funds collected from sponsorship, advertising and privately sourced subsidies. The interest received on the reserve funds of schools or share dividends on financial investments also count as authorised income. At primary level, the use of private means of financing is not authorised.

The “apprenticeship tax” is a peculiarly French feature. This represents a legal tax by means of which companies participate in the financing of vocational training. The tax is paid by companies in support of lower secondary schools for the training of future management staff.

School textbooks are supplied free of charge, both in primary and lower secondary schools. In upper secondary schools, the purchase of textbooks is the responsibility of parents. School book bursaries are frequently offered by schools. In addition, families may also benefit from financial assistance, where relevant.

The *départements* organise and finance all lower secondary school transport for the first cycle of the secondary level. The regions do the same for the second cycle. A school

pickup system is organised where the journey involved exceeds a certain number of kilometres.

Part of the cost of meals taken at school is financed by public authorities, with the other part being borne by the parents. At primary level, the dining hall is managed by the commune, and at secondary level by the schools themselves. Children from particularly disadvantaged backgrounds can eat free of charge at the dining hall; in this case the cost of the meal is borne by a special social fund.

5) PUBLIC AUDIT

In France, until 1982, and by application of a legal regime dating back originally to 1934-1935, the auditing of all accounts prepared by public accountants within local community government bodies and their public establishments was entrusted directly or indirectly to a single superior audit institution, the Court of Audit set up in 1807.

The creation of *chambres régionales et territoriales des comptes* (CRC – regional and territorial audit chambers) forms part of a general movement towards decentralisation, the initiating act for which was the Law of 2 March 1982 on the rights and freedoms of the communes, *départements* and regions which constitute the local communities operating with full powers. The legislators wished to see the budgetary, financial and accounting control exercised over local communities and public establishments with enhanced powers being entrusted to independent institutions made up of skilled magistrates, in geographical proximity to the authorities and organisms concerned.

Regional audit chambers were set up, taking as their model the organisation and investigation and judgment methods of the Court of Audit.

This has seen 28 audit offices being set up: one in each of the 22 metropolitan regions; four in overseas territories: three for the three *départements* of the Antilles, with a single head office in Guadeloupe, and one at Saint-Denis (Réunion). The secondary Law of November 1988 created a territorial audit chamber in New Caledonia and since June 1990 French Polynesia has been home to a second territorial audit office.

A number of laws and decrees then specified their powers, operating methods and the status of the magistrates of which they are made up. All the regional (and territorial) audit offices are of the same structure, with a few slight variations.

Apart from some exceptions or additions, the competence of the regional audit chambers extends to include all legal entities under public law other than the State and its public establishments. Accordingly, this therefore applies to local community government bodies (communes, *départements*, and regions) and public establishments for co-operation between communities (inter-community associations, associations of local authorities, urban associations, etc.), health bodies (hospitals) and medico-social institutions (homes for the aged) and secondary educational establishments (lower and upper secondary schools: *collèges* and *lycées*).

This sees regional audit offices being competent to audit lower and upper secondary schools. The substance of their remit is basically to carry out a financial audit. As

pointed out before, lower and higher secondaries have the status of local public secondary education establishments - EPLE. Consequently, each has a budget corresponding solely to the ongoing operation of the establishment.

In primary schools, the audit performed by the financial jurisdictions (regional audit chambers and the Court of Audit) is restricted to inspecting the use of the public grants and subsidies provided by communes.

In France, as we have also pointed out before, local communities have the duty of managing equipment (buildings and materials) and the ongoing operation of primary schools (communes), lower secondary schools (*départements*) and higher secondary schools (regions). Equipment, maintenance and operating funds are traced back to the budgets of the regions, *départements* and communes, and are subject to the external audit performed by the regional audit offices.

The national Court of Audit is responsible for management audits, in particular, those performed on the management of the Ministry of National Education. The responsibilities of this Ministry and its representatives at regional level – *recteurs académie*, comparable to prefects – have already been set out in detail. The Court of Audit carries out both financial audits and audits of performance at regular intervals.

From time to time, the Court of Audit and the regional audit chambers join forces to carry out more work in-depth investigations. It was as a result of a broad-based joint study of this kind that August 2003 saw the publication by the Court of a report entitled “The Management of the Education System”.