

Français**A ready and easy way to handicap young minds :****The new and "Improved" curriculum for French elementary schools,
or how to prevent students from acquiring basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic**

The French Ministry of Education, with much media support, has boasted time and again that French elementary schools are excellent, all the while delivering scathing criticism of middle schools. Secondary schools, however, must have foundations to build on; and the different disciplines taught in secondary school curricula take for granted the solid acquisition of basic language and mathematics skills.

Although current middle-school curricula actually make satisfactory scholastic achievement even more difficult, many of the problems that students are facing today can be put down to elementary schools. Which is why Mr. Ferrier, a high-ranking Inspector of French schools had, in a 1998 study entitled "*Improving the Performance of Elementary Schools*," already pointed out that *"From 21-42% of eight-year-olds (depending on the year) appear unable to master basic skills either in language or mathematics or both. The numbers are between 21 and 35% as they enter middle school. Schools cannot turn a blind eye to the serious problem that this study brings to light : approximately a quarter of all children entering French middle schools are experiencing significant or even serious difficulties"*.

Acquiring "*basic skills in reading and arithmetic*" implies practice --- exercises requiring repetition and imitation that develop a child's memory. Such practice activities take time and are best performed at an early age, when children often like to learn the same facts and skills that adults know. But certain measures adopted by educators and school systems prevent the acquisition of basic knowledge and elementary skills and at the same time make these much harder if not impossible to acquire at the higher levels of middle school, to say nothing of high school. Among these measures :

- The abandonment of all forms of memorizing or "rote-learning" in favor of more "creative" and "rewarding" or "fulfilling" exercises.
- The drastic reduction of the overall time allotted to the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills. Over the last 30 years, for example, French first-graders have lost six hours a week of language instruction --- 15 hours a week in 1967 compared to a mere 9 hours today. Within the elementary school cycle as a whole, such reductions mean, in practical terms, the loss of an entire year of schooling in that subject area.
- The constant "streamlining" of school curricula, which means placing less and less emphasis on content-based education and basic skills.

The learning difficulties that students encounter at higher levels are often the direct result of the fact that they have never been required to exercise their memories; instead, they are often instructed in "methodology" or encouraged to be "creative". And it is understandable that later on, at an age where youngsters often yearn for greater autonomy, they should no longer want to devote long hours to memorizing the basic rules of mathematics and grammar, however essential these rules are. Hence the official views on education are deluding the public : students are expected to think and work autonomously, yet they have never been given the intellectual wherewithal --- the basic knowledge and

training --- that would enable them to achieve that autonomy.

Proposals for new curricula for French elementary schools were unveiled in 1999. These proposals called for a reduction in class time devoted to the learning of basic mathematics operations, including, for example, basic division problems ("What is 43 divided by 3?"). No justification was provided for the decision to eliminate such division exercises, even though the proposed changes were made after what was termed a positive reaction from educators "consulted" by the Ministry. These proposals have since been superseded by a new reform project which will also be submitted to French educators for their comments.

We have examined this reform project, as it has emerged from the proposals of the Joutard Commission.

We would like to make the following observations on this revamped project :

IN FRENCH

Less time devoted to French. The weekly course time for eight-year-olds has been slashed to 6 hours --- representing a loss of one-third of the class time spent on this subject.

"Grammarless" French instruction. The weekly schedule proposed in the new project draws a distinction between "training in linguistic competence", which is allotted no specific or minimum number of classroom hours, and "grammar". This distinction, in other words, implies that studying grammatical rules has no direct connection to achieving "competence" in language skills.

Drastic reductions in curriculum content. When official curriculum guidelines for 1995 are compared to those in place ten years earlier, in 1985, it is obvious that a significant number of the fundamentals of logic, conceptualization, grammar and expression have already disappeared from instruction in French; in 2002, further cuts will be made in the list of fundamentals. What will be left? How will students be able to "tell a story" and thus to "exercise their creativity," for example, if they cannot differentiate between the different forms of the past tense?

Teaching methods. Methods relying on memorizing or "rote-learning", which are essential if students are to acquire the "reflexes" that any solid education depends upon, have been banned from primary schools. Students are no longer required to learn by heart irregular verbs or the different rules of grammar or spelling.

IN MATHEMATICS

Since 1995, students finishing their elementary school instruction no longer know how to multiply decimals and still less how to divide them. Why? Because "*calculating the product or the quotient of two decimals is not among the aims of this learning cycle*". Required skills are limited to operations involving "*small numbers*". Teaching of volume units is restricted to liters. Nor is there any place for learning to calculate in square kilometers. And yet, these are fundamentals that will be required by the early sessions of geography class. How can students be expected to "*discover the complexity of relations between population density on the one hand and wealth and poverty on the other*" ? Apparently, they are supposed to "discover" the complexity of mathematical operations that they are unable to perform and to calculate in measuring units that they have never encountered before. Ushering in the tenets of the Joutard Commission, some regional school

inspectors already recommend that teachers simply "discuss" population density --- but of course without going to the "bother" of calculating it!

The new propositions for curriculum reform in mathematics simply make a bad situation even worse.

NO MORE "DUMBING DOWN"

The signers of this petition insist

- 1. That the new "reform" be dropped altogether.** If implemented, it will lead to yet another increase in the number of students who cannot read and write, and who are thus incapable of learning anything in any subject.
- 2. That the supposedly inevitable chain of reforms be resisted. While these reforms have long purported to enhance understanding by undermining fundamental knowledge,** they have produced the reverse effect: the fragmented structure of current syllabi makes it very difficult, let alone impossible to acquire the few basics that have made it through the reforms. This will quite naturally help warrant further streamlining and, worst of all, stamp out every child's ability to gain access to rationality, since thinking patterns cannot be acquired, much less mastered, without a modicum of critical intelligence!
- 3. That there develop strong opposition to the hazardous dogma according to which "conceptual intelligence" can be nurtured regardless** of concrete facts, background knowledge and memory. Indeed, students will never comprehend the mathematical concept of "division" without actually dividing numbers; they will never understand population density unless they can calculate it; and they will never be capable of telling a story if they cannot differentiate between the various verb tenses. Talking about anything without knowing anything will never *do the trick*, contrary to what the pompous terminology of syllabus writers would have us believe.

We invite French educators and scholars, and others with a connection to our educational system, to read and sign the French petition through the following link :
<http://www.sauv.net/prim>

Foreign educators and scholars are invited to sign the following :
As foreigners we are not well acquainted with the details of the education policies of France, and it would therefore be inappropriate for us to sign this document. However, our signatures signify our support and sympathy for the general thrust of this petition.

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