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EDUCATIONAL PRIORITY - A GOVERNMENT PROGRAMME TO CUT THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INEQUALITIES

- **Priority education reform** aims to reduce differences in attainment between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and other pupils
- **More than 1,000** educational priority networks throughout the country
- **Fourteen key measures** to help pupils, support teachers and provide an appropriate learning framework

Stated aims

The "educational priority" policy aims to reduce the impact of social and economic inequalities that affect pupils' performance and attainment at school. It acts through positive educational action in those schools that have the greatest number of disadvantaged children.

The 2013 framework law *Loi d'orientation et de programmation pour la refondation de l'école de la République* says the aim is to close the gap in educational success rates between disadvantaged pupils and other pupils to below 10%. At present, a child from a working-class family has half the chance of one from a professional family of passing the general *baccalauréat* or obtaining a higher education degree.

In January 2015, President François Hollande told the educational community:

❝ *We want to guarantee equality, first, by reforming priority education – that means by allocating resources better, to take into account the social and geographical realities in which schools are placed.* ❞

Najat Vallaud-Bellakcem, Minister for National Education, Higher Education and Research, said:

❝ *Without a coherent policy to reduce inequalities, fairness is not possible. If we insist on preschooling for the under-threes in the educational priority networks, it's because it helps them learn the basics, particularly comprehension and oral expression.* ❞

❝ *From the age of three, at the start of nursery school, children from well-off families have a vocabulary three times richer than those from low-income families. Wealth is not only financial, it is also linguistic,* ❞ said the minister.

As of September 2015, the priority education system comprises 739 educational priority networks (*réseaux d'éducation prioritaire,* REP) and 350 reinforced networks (*réseaux d'éducation prioritaire renforcés*, REP+) throughout France. They include nursery, primary and *collège* (lower secondary) schools, and concern 19.8% of primary schoolchildren and 20.5% of *collège* pupils.

In REP+ schools, teachers' schedules are organised differently, giving them more non-teaching time for such activities as organising their teamwork, undertaking continuing training, devising innovative lessons and monitoring pupils, and collaborating with parents. From September 2015, 200 specially trained teacher trainers have been working in REP+ schools.

How we are delivering

Priority education was created 30 years ago by Alain Savary, the education minister then. After that time no comprehensive reform took place, but over the years successive changes piled on top of each other made the system increasingly inefficient and complex. Now the government is introducing a coherent reorganisation of priority education, which includes 14 key measures to help pupils, train and support teachers and provide an appropriate learning framework.

The key measures

Help for pupils

– **Schooling for under-threes,** identified as giving a powerful boost to success of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds;
– **More teachers than classes in the schools** to help teachers plan their work in teams, and help them identify pupils' needs and support their learning processes by alternative teaching methods;
– **After-school supervision for pupils in their first secondary year** for help with homework, methodological support or tutoring;
– **Extending the "D'Col" scheme,** which since 2013 has given first-year secondary pupils in difficulty individualised digital support in French, maths and English;
– **Developing pupils' ambition and curiosity** to help them decide their education plans;
– **Providing local boarding facilities** for *collège* pupils who would benefit from adapted accommodation and study conditions.

Trained, stable and well supported teaching teams

- **Time for teachers to work together,** with periods devoted to training, organising teamwork and monitoring pupils in REPs with most difficulties: at *collège*, an hour and a half weekly; at primary school, nine days a year;
- **A major inservice training and support plan for teachers working in REPs,** with three days a year training guaranteed in the most difficult networks; hands-on experts to work with teams; mentoring for new teachers;
- **Incentives to retain the teacher teams,** with higher pay, training in priority education reflected in prospects for career advancement, and allowances taking account of local needs and the educational project.

An appropriate learning framework

- **Sustainable projects based on best practice** thanks to a reference document devised by priority education experts which serves as a foundation for building REP projects and developing educational practices. Resources for these are guaranteed for four years;
- **A fund to finance educational activities and for running REPs,** for local teams to set up innovative activities for pupils;
- **A welcome for parents every morning** and an open-school policy so parents can follow their children's education;
- **13,500 safety and security assistants,** first appointed in 2012, have contributed to a more peaceful atmosphere in schools;
- **Extra school nurses and social workers** in the most challenging areas, to safeguard pupils' health and wellbeing from primary school onwards.

In addition to the REPs, the minister has also called for social and geographical criteria to be taken into account in allocation of resources to all primary schools and *collèges* in France.

> *This change in philosophy will, in successive school years, help make education more just. And so reduce inequalities from the start,* said Najat Vallaud-Belkacem.

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