

# French Education: Back to Basics

*Paris.* The French government has announced new moves designed to reinforce the teaching of basic educational skills in the nation's primary schools. At the same time, it is aiming to reduce the time spent on broader pedagogical objectives, concerned with what is called the "awakening" of personal and social awareness, which has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years.

Reflecting a broad trend toward renewed emphasis on academic achievement and economic relevance that is being promoted in almost all European countries, the minister of national education, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, has set out a list of the basic knowledge which all school children will, from the beginning of the next school year, be expected to have acquired by the time they move on to high school at the age of eleven or twelve. Particular emphasis will, for the first time, be formally given to the amount which has been learned in science and technology subjects. In the case of science, for example, all students finishing primary school will be expected to know some simple principles of astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and geology.

Similarly for technology, a student on entering secondary school should "have an awareness of the importance of the technological inventions which have marked the history of mankind up to the present," as well as a basic idea of how machines are made and a simple introduction to the use of computers.

In other subjects there will be a renewed emphasis on the acquisition of useful knowledge rather than broad cultural sensibility. All schoolchildren will, for example, be required at this age to know the key dates of French history (a personal preoccupation of President François Mitterrand) and the key characteristics of French geography.

If these moves reflect similar trends in other European countries, less conventional is Chevènement's suggestion that there should be a decrease in the importance traditionally given in France to the teaching of pure mathematics, often regarded as the key criterion for academic success in fields ranging from philosophy to business management.

Chevènement has made it clear that, although an elementary grounding in mathematical ideas remains a central element of the new core curriculum, it should not be given the prominence that it has enjoyed in the past, and that the emphasis should shift from the teaching of abstract principles to their application in concrete situations. "We are not trying to suppress mathematics, but to introduce a new balance between disciplines that will prevent mathematics [from] becoming a major obstacle for many students, and allow all forms of intelligence to develop," he said in a recent magazine interview.

According to Chevènement, the review of the whole of the French curriculum, which his ministry is currently engaged in (similar changes are expected to be announced for high schools next year), has two principal objectives.

The first is to develop a form of education more relevant to the demands of the contemporary world, and in particular the economic and technological challenges that French industry is currently facing from Japan and the United States, as well as from its other European partners.

His second goal is to reintroduce a sense of academic competition at all levels of the educational system. This has been somewhat controversial within a Socialist Party that has always emphasized its egalitarian principles and its tradition of liberal reforms in education. Ironically, Chevènement has long been one of the party's most outspoken and hard-line members.

A graduate himself of the prestigious *Ecole Normale d'Administration*, Chevènement now says that "Republican elitism" is acceptable if it is based on "hard work, merit and talent" rather than wealth and social standing. In line with this philosophy, for example, he is already introducing various measures aimed at identifying centers of both teaching and research excellence in the highly homogenized university system.

Not surprisingly, his views on the need for educational reform have been generally welcomed by parents and employers but have received a more qualified—although still largely favorable—reaction within government ranks and the teaching profession. Indeed, Chevènement's warmest applause has come from the right-wing press, which is not usually a fan of his, welcoming what is widely regarded as a return to traditional standards and a repudiation of liberal reforms.

Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, in contrast, is said to have intervened to head off two of Chevènement's most radical proposals. The first was a suggestion for the reintroduction of an examination in basic knowledge for high-school entrants; the second was the introduction of compulsory homework for all children from the age of six (this is in fact already the practice in many French schools). A meeting of the Council of Ministers also rejected Chevènement's proposals that all "awakening" courses be removed from the primary school curriculum.

Many teachers, however, feel that Chevènement has exaggerated the depth of the current problems. They point out that educational standards tend to be relatively high in France, that the more radical impact of the 1968 student revolts have long disappeared from the curriculum, and that, as one physics teacher from a school near Paris puts it, "what we really need from the minister is new resources to do the things he wants."

Politically, the educational reforms have already achieved two significant objectives for the government. They have successfully united the majority of the population, which had been deeply divided over the government's previous campaign to integrate private and public schools, abandoned after mass protests last year from parents and conservative political parties in a move which subsequently led to a major Cabinet reshuffle.

It has also boosted the personal standing of Chevènement, who had dissipated much of the credit built up between 1981 and 1982 as Mitterrand's first research minister by adopting a strong interventionist stance when he was promoted to minister for industry and research, a post he resigned last March. An opinion poll published last week showed that in recent weeks, Chevènement's popularity has increased by 11 percentage points, placing him in the front rank of influential politicians in France.

—DAVID DICKSON