

# The French Republic

France is the largest nation in western Europe and the third-largest European country (after Russia and Ukraine). It faces the English Channel in the north-west, the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay of Biscay in the west, and the Mediterranean Sea in the south, and it shares land boundaries with Andorra, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Monaco, Spain, and Switzerland. With Paris as its capital city, the French Republic includes metropolitan (or European) France and also the remnants of its colonial past, such as the overseas departments of French Guiana (in South America), Guadeloupe and Martinique (Caribbean islands), and Reunion (an Indian Ocean island); and other territories or dependencies such as French Polynesia and New Caledonia (island chains in the South Pacific). In July 2009, France had an estimated population of approximately 64.1 million, with more than 62 million residing in metropolitan France. At present, the French economy is transitioning from extensive government ownership to greater reliance on market mechanisms. While considerable privatization has occurred, government controls remain over such sectors as the power, public transport, and defense industries. The government also continues to use laws, tax policies, and public expenditures to reduce socioeconomic disparities.<sup>1</sup>

*Education in France.* In 2007, educational expenditures in France amounted to 28 percent of the national budget, one of the highest in the world. Approximately 14.6 million students attended schools, from preschool through higher education, with more than 973,000 teachers employed across the institutional spectrum. School governance is centralized in the national Ministry of Education, which controls curriculum, pedagogical standards, and teacher salaries. Compulsory education begins at the age of six and ends at age 16. France has a preschool education program for all three- to five-year-olds. Primary schools serve students for the first five years of formal schooling, while secondary schools are divided into two levels or cycles, the first being the *collège* (for ages 11–15, roughly equivalent to the American middle school), and the second is the *lycée* (for ages 16–18, roughly equivalent to the American high school). At the *lycée*, students are placed into one of three tracks: a general or liberal arts curriculum, a technical/scientific curriculum, or a vocational curriculum. To gain university entry, students must pass the *baccalauréat* examinations, usually taken at age 18 at the end of the *lycée* cycle. Others may seek additional education in various technical and vocational schools. At age 16, some young people may end further schooling and go into apprenticeship programs or pursue other vocational options. Although the dropout rate has been reduced, it remains a concern.<sup>2</sup>

Most students attend schools governed by the Ministry of Education, while some with special needs may attend schools run by the Ministry of Health. Around 15 percent of primary and 20 percent of secondary schools are private and mostly Roman Catholic, but the Ministry of Education has oversight of and pays teacher salaries for most private schools as well.<sup>3</sup>

*Teacher Preparation.* The education, preparation, and recruitment of teachers come under the purview of the Ministry of Education. In the past, many teachers were prepared in *écoles normale*, but a 1989 law created *institutes universitaire de formation des maître* (IUFMs), which are affiliated with universities but provide teacher preparation in each region. In 2005, the IUFMs were placed within the universities and, in 2008, were made standard university programs. Today all initial teacher education is provided through universities.<sup>4</sup>

In France, higher education begins after students successfully complete the *lycée* cycle and pass the *baccalauréat* examinations. Initial university studies typically take three years, the successful completion of which results in a *licence* in a field of knowledge (somewhat akin to American undergraduate degrees). Competitive exams called *concours*, which include both oral and written exams, must be passed to begin professional studies in an IUFM. Beginning in September 2009, however, all students seeking admission to an IUFM must also have a master's degree or be registered in the second year of a master's program before they can take the *concours*. It is interesting to note that university education in France, as in its elementary and secondary levels, is free to all qualifying students.<sup>5</sup>

Recently there has been a move toward decentralization of governance in the French educational system. One result is more diversity between and decision-making power within regional and local educational authorities in regard to such things as selecting, promoting, and reassigning teachers. Head teachers (or principals) have a degree of financial independence and less rigid control over deciding how to implement national objectives and curricula. However, France's long tradition of national control over education remains strong.<sup>6</sup>

*The Teaching Profession.* Teachers in France face challenges that have interesting parallels with American debates about educational reform. In November 2003, a national debate was undertaken about the future of French education that involved such issues as equal educational opportunity, the mission of teachers, school behavior problems, educational objectives, parent-teacher relationships, and the religious and secular aspects of education. Wide participation was encouraged through internet connections and numerous public meetings across the nation, with the consultation and participation of educational experts to aid the various efforts and venues. One of the aims was to understand better how French citizens viewed the educational challenges facing them in the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

**For Further Reflection:** What do you think causes the difference between teachers' status in France and in the United States? What can be learned from comparisons of this kind?

Where only a few years ago public attention was directed toward improving education across the board, more recently the public seemed distracted by a controversy concerning the wearing of headscarves in schools.<sup>8</sup> This, too, indicates how the teaching profession in France faces challenges encountered in other countries. Attentive public engagement is probably the essential ingredient to bring about fundamental change in education, but when the public's attention is drawn away to other, more controversial issues, momentum for reform could be lost that takes years to recover.

Teachers in France are said to enjoy a great deal of parental trust, a condition that might encourage too much deference and too little engagement in educational concerns; however, it could be that French children generally accept teacher expectations about behavior and that most parents simply respect teacher authority. It has been observed that the trust is due to parental perceptions of the quality of France's teachers and their knowledge of the curriculum. For example, teachers from early childhood through secondary education complete similar preparation and examination sequences, and they are viewed as professionals who enjoy similar status, salary, and prestige. Teachers are also paid to engage in additional professional development periodically throughout their careers. A comparison of French and American educational systems concluded that the French system offered consistent quality, rigorous teacher preparation, substantial funding, and good governance, an examination of which might profit American educators.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Central Intelligence Agency, "France," *The World Factbook*, at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/fr.html> (accessed on January 20, 2010).
- 2 "French educational system," at [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/article\\_imprim.php3?id\\_article=1964](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/article_imprim.php3?id_article=1964); Organization of the education system, at [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/article\\_imprim.php3?id\\_article=1467](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/article_imprim.php3?id_article=1467); and Population and society: Key statistics of French society, at [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/article\\_imprim.php3?id\\_article=1400](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/article_imprim.php3?id_article=1400) (all accessed on January 27, 2010).
- 3 Florence Raynal, "A debate about the school of the future," *Label France Magazine*, no. 54 (April 2004), at [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/france\\_159/label-france\\_2554/label-france-issues\\_2555/label-france-no.-54\\_3505/feature-what-schools-for-tomorrow\\_3506/debate-about-the-school-of-the-future\\_4518.html#nh1](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/france_159/label-france_2554/label-france-issues_2555/label-france-no.-54_3505/feature-what-schools-for-tomorrow_3506/debate-about-the-school-of-the-future_4518.html#nh1) (accessed on January 22, 2010).

- 4 “France: Initial teacher Preparation,” in INCA Education around the world, at <http://www.inca.org.uk/France-initial-mainstream.html?p=1> (accessed on January 28, 2010). For a further breakdown of recent changes, an English translation by Google of recent changes can be found at <http://translate.google.com/translate?tl=en&sourceid=ie8-activity&u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.iufm.education.fr%2Fdevenir-ens%2Ffaq-sigles.html> (accessed on January 30, 2010).
- 5 “France: Initial Teacher Training,” INCA, at <http://inca.org.uk/france-initial-mainstream.html?p=1> (accessed on January 30, 2010). For another overview, see “Eurybase: The Information Database on Educational Systems in Europe,” EURYDICE, at [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/ressources/eurydice/eurybase/pdf/section/FR\\_EN\\_C8.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/ressources/eurydice/eurybase/pdf/section/FR_EN_C8.pdf) (accessed on January 30, 2010).
- 6 M. Fernandez Astiz and others, “Slouching towards Decentralization: Consequences of Globalization for Curricular Control in National Education Systems,” *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 46, no. 1: 75–76 (February 2002); and Sjoerd Karsten and others, “Another Side to the Coin: The Unintended Effects of the Publication of School Performance Data in England and France,” *Comparative Education*, vol. 37, no. 2: 231–242 (May 2001).
- 7 Raynal, 1–3.
- 8 Harry Judge, “The Muslim Headscarf and French Schools,” *American Journal of Education*, vol. 111, no. 1: 1–2 (November 2004). See also Elaine Ganley, “France moves closer to banning full Muslim veil,” Associated Press, at <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/34874754>; and Angelique Chrisafis, “Nicolas Sarkozy says Islamic veils are not welcome in France,” *The Guardian*, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/22/islamic-veils-sarkozy-speech-france> (both accessed on January 27, 2010).
- 9 Bonnie R. Hurless, “Early Childhood Education in France: A Personal Perspective,” *Beyond the Journal* [new title: *Young Children*], 1–6 (September 2004) at <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200409/Hurless.pdf>; Velma L. Cobb, “An International Comparison of Teacher Education,” *ERIC DIGEST* (November 1999), ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education, Washington, DC ED436486, at <http://www.ericdigests.org/2000-3/teacher.htm>; and “Teacher Education,” *La lettre d’information*, no. 13 (December 2005), at [http://www.inrp.fr/vst/LettreVST/english/december2005\\_en.htm](http://www.inrp.fr/vst/LettreVST/english/december2005_en.htm) (all accessed on January 28, 2010).