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ABSTRACT

France and the United States share a belief in equal educational opportunity for all children. Despite efforts by both nations, equal educational opportunity has remained a elusive ideal, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and even more so in the United States, where studies have shown that poor children typically enter kindergarten a full year-and-a-half behind their better-off classmates in language ability. Over the past 20 years, France has developed some impressive strategies to support young children in poor and immigrant neighborhoods. Recognizing that the French strategy cannot and should not be imported wholesale, this report explores what the United States might still learn from the French approach, and what elements of this approach might be modified to help the United States achieve the goal of giving all children a more equal start. The report first identifies and discusses the following key attributes of France's approach to early care and education for disadvantaged children: (1) voluntary, free preschool available for all children; (2) education policy that "gives more to those who have less"; (3) additional resources that flow in a non-stigmatizing, inclusive manner to "priority education zones"; (4) emphasis on very young children; (5) integration of children from immigrant backgrounds through immersion in French language and culture; and (6) comprehensive support for children's and families' needs. The report then proposes the following steps that U.S. policymakers can take to improve early care and education, especially for disadvantaged: (1) develop a system of early care and education for all children; (2) target additional resources in low-income communities to help narrow the achievement gap; (3) focus more on social and educational needs of children from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds; and (4) coordinate universal preschool with health and human services. The report concludes by reiterating that a universal, comprehensive approach is the best way to ensure that children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds receive the quality early learning experiences they need. (Author/HTH)

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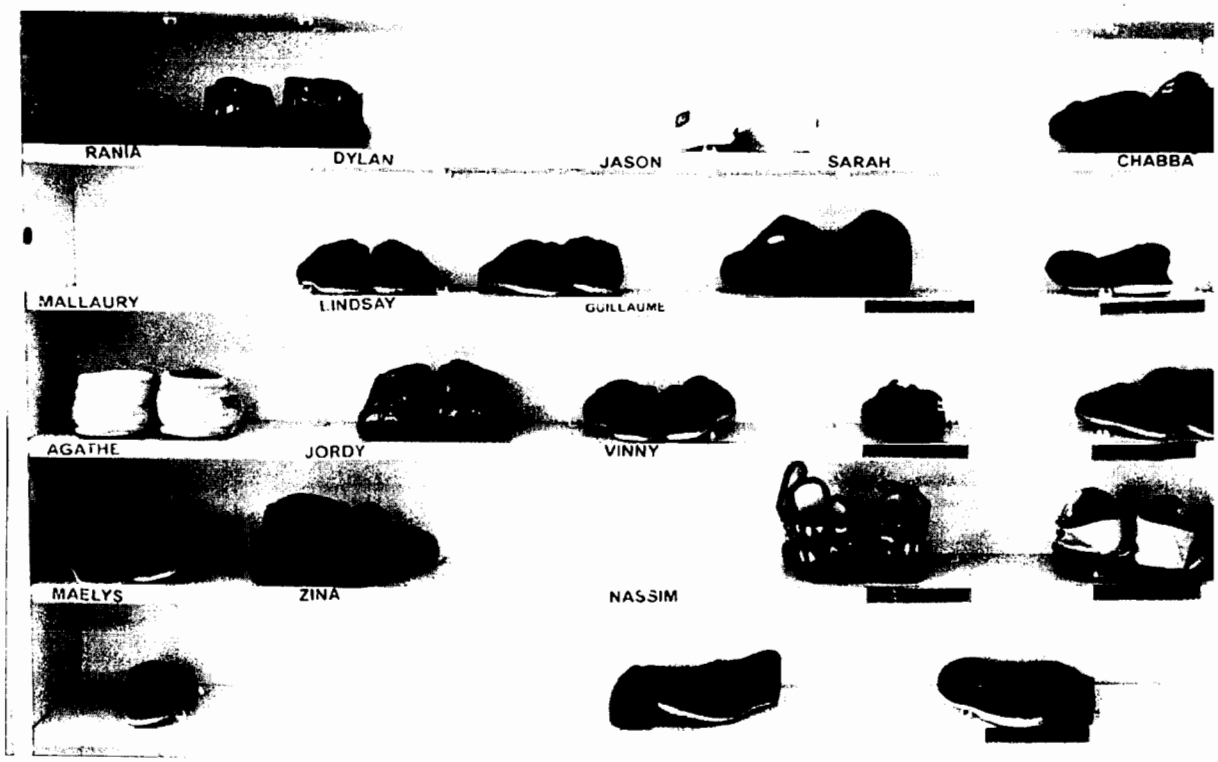

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Promoting Educational Opportunity for All Preschool Children – Learning from the French Experience

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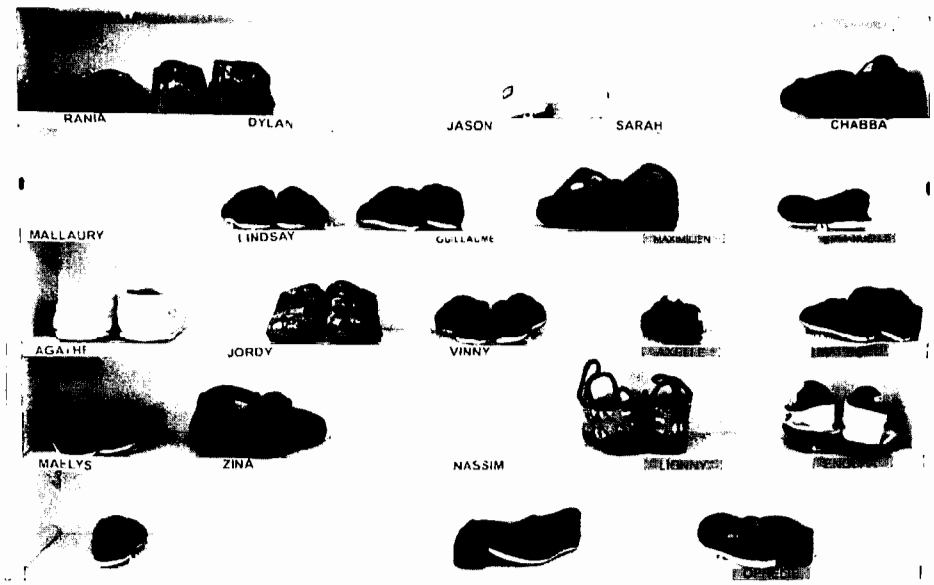

Promoting Educational Opportunity for All Preschool Children – Learning from the French Experience

By Michelle J. Neuman
and Shanny Peer

A Report of the
French-American Foundation

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For further information or to purchase publications, contact:
FRENCH-AMERICAN FOUNDATION
509 Madison Avenue, Suite 310
New York, NY 10022
Tel: (212) 829-8800. Fax: (212) 829-8810
E-mail: info@frenchamerican.org
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It is with profound respect and gratitude that the French-American Foundation dedicates this publication to the memory of Edward Hallam Tuck, one of its founding members and former president. His vision and dedication laid the cornerstone of the Foundation's work in early childhood policy, and our continuing commitment to these programs will serve as a testament to his inspired leadership and remarkable accomplishments.

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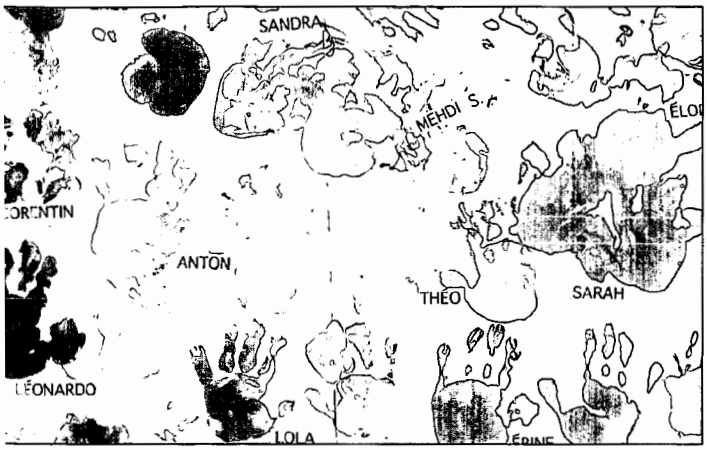

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The Foundation relies on the expert advice and guidance of delegates it invites to participate in study tours to observe first-hand the French system. We were fortunate to have as delegates on this project Barbara T. Bowman, professor and past president of the Erikson Institute; Richard Clifford, Ph.D., a Senior Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Linda M. Espinosa, Ph.D., now the Co-director for Research and Policy at the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University; Jane Henderson, Ph.D., Executive Director of the California Children and Families Commission; and Donald J. Hernandez, Ph.D., Professor in the Department of Sociology and Center for Social and Demographic Analyses at the State University of New York at Albany. For this project, as for previous FAF reports, the observations made by the delegates and the questions they raised during the study tour helped shape the writing of the report and recommendations. We are also thankful to the delegates for sharing their expertise and for providing invaluable feedback as we carried out the research and writing of this report. We would also like to thank delegates on the previous FAF early education study tour, particularly Joan Lombardi, for encouraging us to explore French priority education policy and its potential implications for the United States.

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At the French Ministry of Education, Anny Aline provided us with a national perspective on ZEP policy

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and graciously answered our many questions about how the policy is implemented and financed.

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For his extraordinary hospitality, we would also like to thank Alain Bourgarel, former teacher and current director of the non-profit association, Observatoire des zones prioritaires (OZP), and the numerous individuals involved in early childhood policy and urban reform in the town of Gennevilliers, who participated in a meeting Mr. Bourgarel arranged for our delegation at the Espace des Grésillons.

We are indebted to Jean-Pierre Delaubier, education inspector for the Val-de-Marne, and to inspector Marc Bablet, who coordinated site visits for our delegation at preschools in the Val-de-Marne. Our thanks go to Mr. Delaubier and Mr. Bablet, and to two other inspectors, Mrs. Mettoudi and Mrs. Sarrazin, as well as the ZEP coordinator for the Val-de-Marne, Mr. Tancelin, the school principals and several teachers at the École Octobre, who accepted Mr. Bablet's invitation to meet with our delegation over a delicious Armenian lunch in Alfortville.

We thank the school principals and teachers who welcomed us into their classrooms in preschools located in and around Paris and in Nantes. In Paris, many thanks go to: François Bonnard and the teaching staff at the École maternelle Marx Dormoy; Régine Bramnik and Nadine Schmitz at the École maternelle de la Goutte d'Or; Mr. Sabre and Armelle Namy and the teaching staff at the Groupe scolaire Octobre in Alfortville; Marie-France Scheller and the teaching staff at the École maternelle Frédéric Mistral in Villiers-sur-Marne; Alain Cure, Madame Rascon and Madame Giraudon at the "Model of Excellence" preschool on the rue d'Orsel; and Isabelle Haton, CLIN teacher at the École elémentaire on the rue Doudeauville. In Nantes we would like to thank Jean-Marie Grégoire and Francoise Gravouil at the École maternelle Françoise Dolto; and Michelle Libot at the École maternelle Paul Gauguin.

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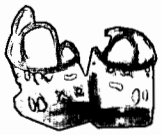
This Report including its recommendations, reflects the view of the French-American Foundation and not necessarily those of members of the Foundation's delegation.

PREFACE



For American supporters of universal preschool for three- and four-year-olds, the outlook is bright. The country's business leaders, speaking through the Council on Economic Development's report *Preschool for All* (2002), strongly endorse an educational program for all young children, beginning at age three. States and counties are initiating and expanding their preschool programs, aiming to reach all children. An emerging framework for public education begins before K (Kindergarten), at P (preschool). Leading researchers and economists, including the Nobel Prize honoree James Heckman, argue compellingly that investment during the preschool years has benefits not only for children's life prospects, but also for the nation's social and economic vitality. Early childhood education investment, they maintain, also is crucial to the well-being of children who grow up in low-income families.

More and more victories can be claimed for the expansion of universal prekindergarten programs for America's children. What is disappointing, however, is that the United States still lacks the necessary policy and program infrastructure to assure that prekindergarten programs can achieve their promised outcomes. The excitement and real possibility that American children will have the early educational experiences of their counterparts throughout the industrialized world must be tempered by the challenges of delivering the best programs children deserve.

This is why the study tours organized by the French-American Foundation (FAF), and supported by private foundations, are so timely. The FAF report, *Ready to Learn*, concluded that the French *école maternelle* is one universal system of preschool education that the United States can learn from and adapt to our national circumstances. The critical lessons of that 1999 report are that all children can benefit from good educational programs, based on their needs, from an early age; that well-educated and specially prepared teachers are essential to provide children with meaningful, stimulating learning experiences crafted around children's enormous capacity and eagerness to learn; that theory- and research-based curricula and pedagogy are required for good outcomes; and that an articulated partnership among national, state, and local government is necessary for stable, adequately financed programs and to assure their accountability.

In the three years since the FAF released *Ready to Learn*, the United States has started heeding the first lesson by expanding the availability of universal preschools. FAF's efforts to work with a variety of organizations and policymakers at state and national levels have contributed to the higher visibility of universal preschool. In 2001, the number of children in universal prekindergarten in America exceeded the number of children enrolled in Head Start. Commitment to well-trained teachers, common standards for practice, and systems of governance and accountability are beginning to be addressed, but much hard work lies ahead.

This report, *Equal from the Start*, focuses attention on how France, building on a strong foundation of a universal pre-elementary school system, is providing earlier access and more resources to low-income and immigrant children who are at risk for educational underachievement by investing additional resources in *écoles maternelles* located in education priority zones or ZEPs. As the United States seeks to address the dual challenges of helping the growing number of children being raised in immi-

grant families and reducing the persistent inequalities in the educational attainment of children from lower-income families, the preschools in the ZEPs offer a new lens through which to view the current chaotic situation of pre-elementary education in the United States.

In May-June 2002, a delegation of five Americans with different perspectives but sharing a common interest in the potential of the ZEP *écoles* to inform U.S. policies and programs, traveled to France to observe preschools located in education priority zones. The study tour participants included: Barbara Bowman, one of the country's senior authorities on early education, teacher education, and cultural diversity; Richard Clifford, a leading researcher on public financing of early education programs and appropriate learning environments for preschool children; Linda Espinosa, an expert on bilingual early education, and Latino families and children; Jane Henderson, a former foundation officer and state policymaker and administrator; and Donald Hernandez, a social demographer with expertise in the health and well-being of immigrant children. Several participants also were former preschool teachers and directors. All have had extensive experience in shaping state and national policies concerning the education and health of young children.

The participants studied schools in a variety of urban, suburban, and provincial settings, and met with French teachers, school directors, and parents at each school. Delegates also interviewed French education officials and inspectors, zone coordinators, urban planners, community leaders, and nonprofit directors responsible for implementing education priority policies at the local level. They met with researchers who have studied the influence of the ZEP policy on children. The co-authors of this report, Shanny Peer and Michelle Neuman, also reviewed the available French research literature on education priority policy.

We thank the members of the delegation and the co-authors, and we recognize the leadership of former FAF presidents Edward Hallam Tuck and Michael Iovenko who were enthusiastic supporters of these tours from the beginning of the partnership between the FAF and the Foundation for Child Development.

Both France and the United States share a passion for equality of educational opportunity. France shows the United States that universal preschool is attainable. Americans must now renew their commitment to assure every child an equal chance as he or she enters the schoolhouse door. In France today and in the United States tomorrow, that door opens during the prekindergarten years.

Ruby Takanishi
President
Foundation for Child Development
New York, New York

Anthony Smith
President
French-American Foundation
New York, New York

October 2002

Executive Summary:

Equal From The Start

France and the United States share a belief in equal educational opportunity for all children, recognizing it as critical to an individual's success in life and to society's continued vitality. Yet, despite efforts by both nations, equal educational opportunity has remained an elusive ideal. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds continue to lag behind their more privileged peers in achievement, although the gap is wider today in the United States than in France. The disparity is evident even before compulsory schooling begins, especially in the United States, where recent studies have shown that poor children typically enter kindergarten a full year-and-a-half behind their better-off classmates in language ability.

Quality, intensive early childhood education can help children from low-income families begin school on a more equal footing. Children from immigrant backgrounds who attend preschool can learn the language and traditions of their adopted country at a young age and be better prepared for kindergarten. Yet, in the United States, disadvantaged children who are most likely to benefit from early education are the least likely to receive it. Only 45% of three- to five-year olds from lower-income families are enrolled in some kind of preschool program, compared with 75% from higher-income families.

How can we provide all children with the tools they need to fulfill their full potential in school and later in life? As we look for answers to this challenging question, might France, a country with similar goals for its children, have promising approaches to share? Over the past twenty years, France has developed some impressive strategies to support young children in poor and immigrant neighborhoods. This report explores what we might learn from the French approach.

It is important to recognize that the French strategy cannot and should not be imported wholesale to the U.S., since it stems from a different history, philosophy, and tradition. For example, the French education system is a centralized responsibility of the federal government, whereas in the U.S., it is a decentralized duty of the states. The U.S. must build on its own distinctive system and capitalize on its strengths, but elements of the French strategy could be modified to help the U.S. achieve the goal of giving all children a more equal start.

French Keys to Success

The authors of this report identify and discuss the following key attributes of France's approach to early care and education for disadvantaged children:

Voluntary, free preschool available for all children. France offers free schooling to all its children, including preschoolers. Virtually all three-, four-, and five-year olds are enrolled in *école maternelle* on a voluntary basis. About 35% of French two-year olds also attend preschool. Quality standards are high for all *écoles maternelles* and even higher for those serving a large proportion of poor and immigrant children.

Education policy "gives more to those who have less." France spends an estimated 10% more per student on schools—including preschools—located in disadvantaged areas. These additional resources are used, for example, to reduce class size, award teacher bonuses, hire additional specialists and support staff, enroll more two-year olds in preschool, and develop community partnerships.

Additional resources flow in a non-stigmatizing, inclusive manner to "priority education zones." France invests these extra resources in geographic zones where children face a greater risk of school failure. Rather than creating a separate educational program for disadvantaged children along the lines of Head Start, the French area-based approach emphasizes instead the benefits of "social mixing" within a universal system that holds all children to the same high standards. Disadvantaged areas classified as priority education zones are governed locally, and the national Ministry of Education ensures that schools meet educational objectives outlined in a "contract for success" developed by each zone.

Emphasis on very young children. France believes in a very early start to intervention, as young as age two, and particularly for the most disadvantaged children. While nationally about 35% of French two-year olds attend *école maternelle*, 40% of two-year olds in priority zones are enrolled. Experimental transitional programs called *lieux passerelles* have also been successful in helping disadvantaged two-year olds make the transition from home to school. French authorities believe that a very early introduction to school gives these children the boost they need to develop the linguistic, cognitive, social and physical skills that will help them thrive in school and beyond.

Integration of children from immigrant backgrounds through immersion in French language and culture. The French believe strongly that one of the goals of education is cultural integration. Transmitting the French language and culture to all children, but particularly for those from immigrant or non-French speaking backgrounds, is a fundamental objective of the *école maternelle*. The guiding philosophy behind this immersion approach is that feeling comfortable with the French language and learning the values of French society will facilitate learning and improve chances for success. At the same time, teachers do value and encourage the retention of native languages and cultures in the home.

Comprehensive social support for children's and families' needs. Perhaps most importantly, the French approach to early education for disadvantaged children fits into a comprehensive framework of educational and social policies that support all children and families. Within this framework, France's priority education policy strengthens existing links between schools and other services, including health and social services, and encourages schools to reach out to parents and use mediators from local communities to facilitate relations between schools and the neighborhoods they serve. Priority education policy is also tied to urban and community development efforts, and relies on partnerships with community associations, cultural institutions, university or research laboratories, and businesses.

Recommendations for Action

Based on analysis of the French system and comparisons with the U.S., the French-American Foundation proposes that American policymakers take the following four steps to improve early care and education for all children in the U.S., and especially the most disadvantaged:

- *Develop a system of early care and education for all children.* Provide universal access to high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year olds whose parents wish to enroll them. Strengthen the U.S. mixed-delivery system with a common core of high-quality standards and operating principles.

- *Target additional resources in low-income communities to help narrow the achievement gap.* Within a universal system, target additional resources to socioeconomically disadvantaged geographic areas rather than to individual children. This area-based approach reduces stigma, attracts broader political support, and avoids segregation of services by income and ethnicity.

- *Focus more on the social and educational needs of children from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds.* American schools and communities should try to build more consensus among stakeholders around issues relating to the education of children from immigrant backgrounds and English language learners. Early access should be provided to preschool or transition programs for children from immigrant backgrounds to facilitate their adaptation to school.

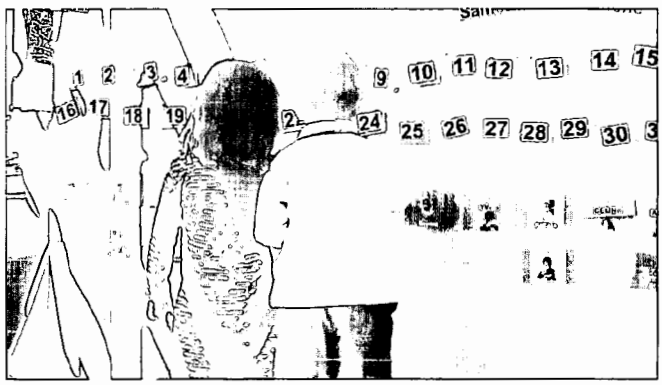
- *Coordinate universal preschool with health and human services.* Universal preschool is critical, but not sufficient to reduce the achievement gap. As France has recognized, narrowing this gap in the U.S. will also require efforts to ensure good health, good nutrition, adequate housing, and economic security for all children and their families.

The most important lesson from the French experience is that it is possible to provide additional resources and support to disadvantaged children within a high-quality system of universal services. A universal, comprehensive approach is the best way to ensure that children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds receive the quality early learning experiences they need.

A four-year old preschooler contemplates her painting

Early Education in France and the United States:

Similar Goals, Different Approaches



Children posting their names at the beginning of class

"We, in the U.S., love our children and care for our future just as much as the people of France, yet we lag far behind the French in our commitment to and investment in education during the early, critical years." – Donald Hernandez, Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York, Albany

Emily and Luigi are American cousins. Both five years old, they live in lower-income communities populated largely by recently arrived immigrants. Both children attend public school. But here their experiences diverge. Emily lives northeast of Los Angeles in Palmdale, California. She began school just this year with her entry into kindergarten in the fall; until then she had been mostly at home with her mother, who set up an informal family child care program in their residence to bring in income lost while caring for her daughter. Luigi dwells with his mother in the heart of Paris. In contrast to Emily, he has been attending school since age three. His *école maternelle* or preschool, located on the rue d'Orsel in the shadow of Sacré Coeur cathedral, offers a program specially enriched to serve its disadvantaged student population.

Luigi's mother Dawn notes that attending *école maternelle* has nurtured her son's intellectual curiosity and his openness to the world, and that he has made more progress in important learning areas than his cousin Emily. He also has cultivated early friendships and practiced social skills, gaining self-confidence and independence. Dawn says her son learns a great deal through play at preschool: " He comes home and asks ' What can I learn, Mommy? ' " Luigi has acquired fluency in French, and he continues to speak English with ease, moving comfortably between the two languages.

Luigi's preschool teacher, Michèle Giraudon, has used some of the additional resources she receives to enhance her curriculum with writing and art projects built around visits to museums. Luigi continues to talk for months about these visits, and his art work is often inspired by exhibits like the one by a Belgian artist about imaginary forest creatures called *Arboniens*, crafted from sticks and leaves and other natural materials. "I am so pleased with the rich education Luigi is receiving," Dawn says, adding, "The number one thing that would keep me from leaving France and returning to the U.S. is Luigi's education."

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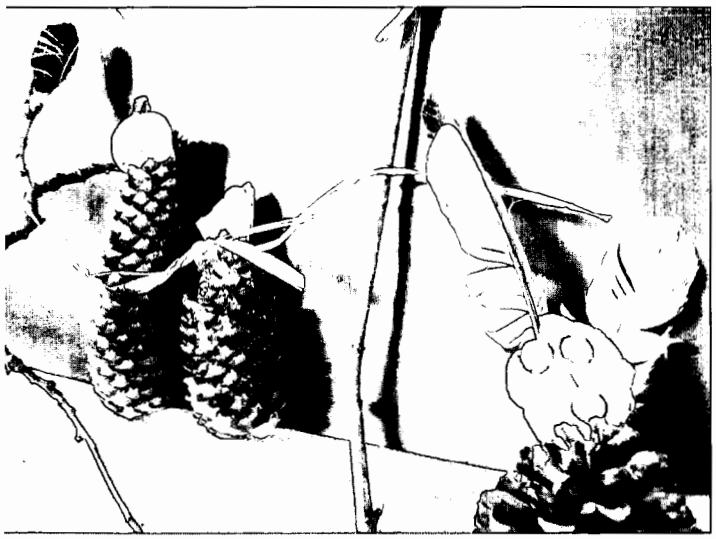


Luigi's version of "Arbonien" imaginary creatures inspired by a museum exhibit by Belgian artist Jephan de Villiers

Dawn's fondness for the French public school system is not surprising "We, in the U.S., love our children and care for our future just as much as the people of France," says Donald Hernandez, Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York at Albany, and a member of a recent delegation of U.S. experts who visited France under the auspices of the French-American Foundation. "Yet we lag far behind the French in our commitment to and investment in education during the early, critical years."

The gap is not a matter of beliefs and goals. Indeed the U.S. and France share the ideal of equal educational opportunity for all children, recognizing that it is crucial to an individual's later success in life and also to a society's continued cohesiveness. Rather the discrepancy stems from the divergent ways each country has attempted to realize those goals, a matter of history, policy, and will. The U.S. and France have built notably different systems of public education, and within that framework, they have developed significantly different approaches to the early education of children at greatest risk of school failure.

Similar Goals

Both the U.S. and France regard education as a right that must be made equally available to all children. In the U.S., the principle was affirmed by the Supreme Court in its landmark 1954 decision *Brown v. Board of Education* striking down segregation in schools. That decision held that education is vital to a child's future achievements. "In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education," said the Court.

Both countries also view education as crucial to integrating new generations of citizens and building social unity. "Education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society," avowed the U.S. high court in another 1981 decision, which ruled that children of illegal immigrants are entitled to a free public education. "We cannot ignore the significant social costs borne by our Nation when select groups are denied the means to absorb the values and skills upon which our social order rests." Says Dick Clifford, Senior Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, "We recognize that education is the way that societies transmit their culture to future generations of citizens."

Equal educational opportunity for all children has remained an elusive ideal in both nations, however. In France as in the U.S., significant numbers of students come from disadvantaged homes and communities and need help in taking on the tasks of learning. Recent studies have shown, for example, that poor children in the U.S. typically enter kindergarten a full year-and-a-half behind their better-off peers in language ability. In both countries, children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to succeed in school, though the achievement gap is wider today in the U.S. than it is in France.

The numerous children from immigrant backgrounds living in the U.S. and France face additional linguistic and cultural hurdles to school success. In the

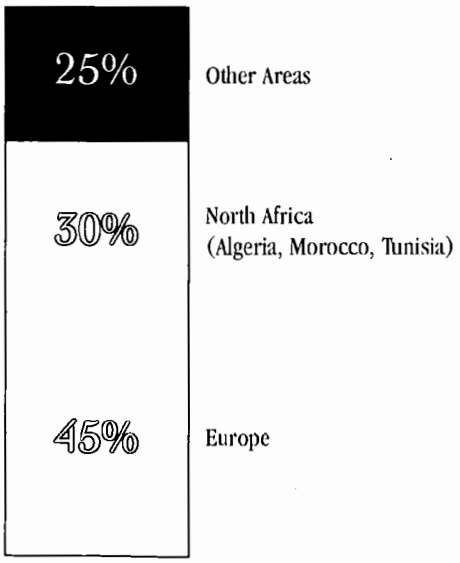
U.S., where 10% of the population is foreign-born, up from 5% in 1970, the percentage of school-age children who use a language other than English at home and have difficulty speaking English has nearly doubled over the past thirty years. In France today, one in five people has at least one parent or grandparent who was born in another country. Throughout the nineteenth century, immigrants trickled into France primarily from the neighboring countries of Spain, Italy, and Belgium; by the 1880s newcomers also began coming farther distances and their numbers swelled. During the 1920s and the decades following World War II, when the French economy expanded more rapidly than the population, new arrivals came from Poland and Portugal, and later from former French colonies in North Africa, West Africa, and Asia. Today, immigrants represent 7.5% of the French population, and many of them are French language learners.

The U.S. and France have adopted different policies to address these inequities in educational outcomes even before compulsory school begins. In the U.S., the federal government in 1965 launched Head Start, a program for four-year olds living in poverty. Head Start currently provides educational, nutritional, health, and other services to 900,000 preschoolers and their families whose annual income falls below the poverty line (about $14,000 for a family of three). In 1994, a smaller new program was created, Early Head Start, to offer developmental and health services to infants and toddlers in low-income families. Also in 1965, the U.S. Congress passed the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA), now called Leave No Child Behind; Title I of the bill is designed to help educate children, including preschoolers, who attend schools in high-poverty areas.

Efforts are being made at the state level as well. Forty-two states and the District of Columbia have created pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year olds, most of which are designed to serve children living beneath a certain low-income threshold. Only Georgia has fully put into practice a universal, voluntary pre-kindergarten program for all

Figure 1.1

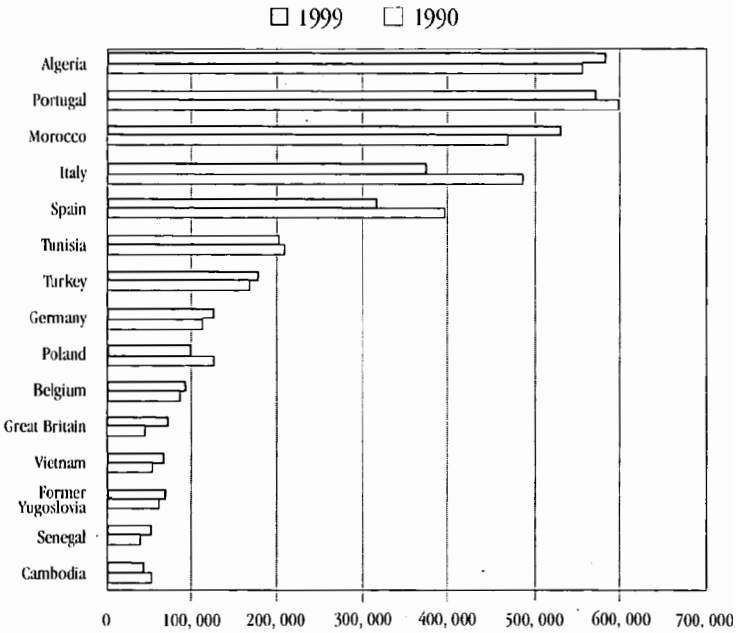
France: Foreign Born Population by Region of Birth in 2000
(Percent Distribution)



Source: INSEE

Figure 1.2

France: Countries of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population:
1990 and 1999



Source: *Recensements de la population de 1990 et 1999*, INSEE

four-year olds who wish to attend; Oklahoma, New York, Illinois, the District of Columbia, and now Florida, are in various stages of implementing universal statewide pre-kindergarten initiatives. Federal and state policymakers also have expanded funding for child-care services for low-income families to make early care and education more affordable and ensure parents' economic self-sufficiency.

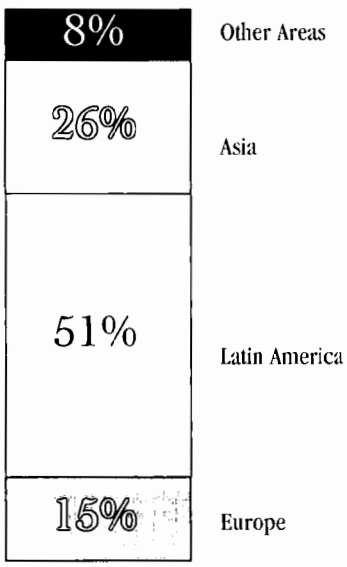
The architects of the new French approach embraced the principle of unequal treatment—"giving more to those who have less"—in order to achieve a more equal outcome in the school system.

French efforts to provide an "equal chance"—*une égalité des chances*—for all school children began more than a century ago in the 1880s, when free universal preschool and primary education was first established. Steps taken since then to reduce social barriers in the education system have included eliminating the entrance examination and fees for secondary school, and postponing the tracking of students into specific courses of study until late in their school careers. Despite such efforts, studies done in the 1960s and 1970s by sociologists, among them Pierre Bourdieu, explained how French schools continued, in fact, to reproduce social inequalities. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were much more likely to fail in school and to drop out, and less likely to pass the pass the *baccaulauréat* examination at the end of high school that is required for higher education.

In 1981, France's newly elected Socialist government adopted a policy of "priority education" to help students in areas with higher rates of school failure to overcome these barriers to success. Inspired by the ideas behind affirmative action and other positive discrimination programs in the United States and England, the architects of the new French approach embraced the principle of *unequal* treatment—"giving more to those who have less"—in order to achieve a

Figure 1.3

United States: Foreign-Born Population by Region of Birth in 2000 (Percent distribution)

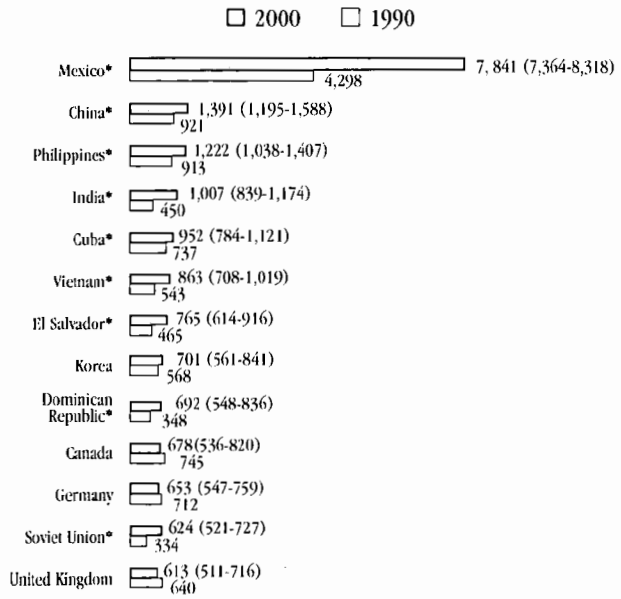


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, P23-206, Figure 2-2

Figure 1.4

United States: Countries of Birth of the Foreign-Born Population with 500,000 or more in 2000: 1990 and 2000.

(Numbers in thousands. 90-percent confidence intervals in parentheses for 2000 estimates. For 1990, resident population. For 2000, civilian noninstitutional population plus Armed Forces living off post or with their families on post.)



* Change from 1990 to 2000 is statistically significant.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, Table 3, and Table 3-1, 3-2, 3-3, and 3-4.

more *equal* outcome in the school system. Like compensatory education programs such as Title I in the U.S., France's priority education policy applies to all levels of the public school system, but France concentrates special effort on the *école maternelle*, the preschool system serving children from age two to age six.

Both the U.S. and France understand that "enriched early education programs can contribute to overall development and educational achievement for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds," says Linda Espinosa, Co-director of Research and Policy at the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Findings from model early intervention programs in the U.S., such as the Abecedarian Project, Perry Preschool Project, and Chicago Child-Parent Centers, show that intensive, quality preschool programs can help reduce the early achievement gap between middle-class and poor children, and increase their likelihood of long-term school success. Other long-term benefits of participation in high-quality preschool programs include increased employment and earnings and decreased crime and delinquency. Both the U.S. and France understand that "enriched early education programs can contribute to overall development and educational achievement for young children from disadvantaged backgrounds," says Linda Espinosa, Co-director of Research and Policy at the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Different Approaches

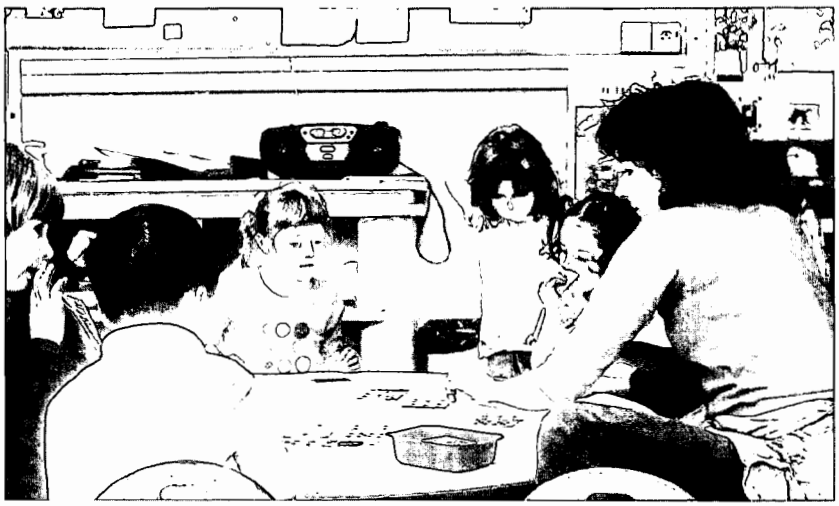
Despite such parallels, the U.S. trails behind France in providing equal educational opportunity for all children, especially during their preschool years. In the U.S., children who are most likely to benefit from early care and education remain the least likely to receive it. Only 45% of three- to five-year olds from lower-income families are enrolled in preschool, compared with 75% among higher-income American families, and nearly 100% of all children in France.

France and the U.S. have developed very different approaches to meeting the goal of equal opportunity for all children, based on their unique historical, political, and social contexts. What works well in one country is not necessarily appropriate for another, but can still be informative for policy discussions. The French approach has several distinct characteristics that set it apart from the U.S.:

Universal, voluntary, free preschool. France offers free schooling to all its children, including preschoolers as young as age two. About 35% of French two-year olds attend *écoles maternelles*, and virtually all three-, four-, and five-year olds are enrolled, on a voluntary basis. In contrast, American children typically enter the public school system at age five. Access to education programs for younger children in the U.S. is limited, quality is uneven, and the cost—often prohibitive for better programs—is borne mostly by parents. The most ambitious free early childhood program in the U.S., Head Start, is limited to preschool-aged children living under the poverty line, who must be individually means tested to ensure that they are poor enough to qualify for the program. Head Start reaches only 53% of eligible four-year olds, 28% of eligible three-year olds, and a tiny 5% of eligible infants and toddlers.

A centralized system. French schooling is centrally administered by the national government. The French Ministry of Education provides all teachers, including those assigned to preschools, with the same high level of training at teacher training institutes, and teachers are employed and paid by the Ministry. It also defines a common curriculum and standards for schools and preschools throughout the country. In the U.S., the framers of the Constitution decided that education should be the responsibility of the states, not the federal government. Each state sets its own policy, and local school boards also exercise some autonomy. As a

result, school curricula and standards vary widely from one state or school district to the next. Variability is even greater among early childhood programs, which are usually independent of the public school system. Early childhood teachers in the U.S. receive training of uneven quality, with some getting inadequate preparation and others earning teaching certificates and higher degrees.



Children practice numbers with their teacher using a deck of cards

More money for schools in disadvantaged communities. Most of the funding for public education in the U.S. comes from the state and local level. A recent report by the Education Trust shows that in all states but New Jersey and Connecticut, school districts with the neediest students receive far less funding from state and local taxes—an average of $1,000 less per student each year—than schools serving the fewest poor children. Districts serving the most minority students suffer from similar shortfalls across the country. While Title I federal funding helps provide additional resources to schools serving the most disadvantaged students, inequities in funding per poor child persist across states, school districts, and schools. In France, the situation is reversed. Whereas the United States spends less money educating its poorest students, France spends an estimated 10% more on students—including pre-schoolers—attending schools in disadvantaged areas.

Priority Education Zones. France invests these extra resources in geographic zones where children face a greater risk of school failure. This area-based priority education policy avoids stigmatizing individual children, unlike Head Start and other U.S. targeted early childhood programs, which have resulted in the creation of a separate system for the poorest young children. Instead of creating a specific preschool system for poor children, the French approach emphasizes the benefits of "social mixing" within a universal system that holds all children to the same high standards. To place the country's poorest children in a separate pre-kindergarten program would run counter to the French goals of educating all children equally and promoting social cohesion.

In the U.S., some argue that a more universal approach that serves a broad socioeconomic mix of families would also lead to higher-quality services for all children. On the other hand, those who support targeting in the U.S. point to the research showing that disadvantaged children especially benefit from quality early education and argue that for equity reasons, scarce resources should go to those who need them the most. One problem is that targeted programs such as Head Start have difficulty garnering strong public and political support because they are not universal entitlements like Social Security or Medicare. In contrast, the French policy of providing universal access, with additional support for those in greatest need, has been embraced by the population. They see it, says Linda Espinosa, as "flowing from a national will to provide high quality early education to all children."

French Language Immersion. The French believe strongly that one of the goals of education is cultural integration. As a result, public schools provide cultural and linguistic immersion in French for all chil-

dren, including those from immigrant backgrounds. "This is a sensitive topic for most Americans," says Jane Henderson, Executive Director of the California Families and Children Commission. "Attitudes about cultural integration and bilingualism are profoundly different." Still, says Donald Hernandez, "the French experience offers intriguing, practical possibilities for helping immigrant children and their families adapt to American culture."

A Social Safety Net. Perhaps most importantly, the French approach to early education for disadvantaged children fits into a comprehensive framework of educational and social policies that support all children and families. "The French believe in supporting the whole family from the beginning," sums up Linda Espinosa. The French view children not as the purely private concern of their parents but as a shared societal responsibility. Thus, they expect government policies and programs to help all of them grow up to be healthy, educated, and productive citizens. Every young child living in France is entitled to free health care, subsidized child care, and free education from preschool through college. Generous parental leave policies give parents the option of staying at home with their children for up to three years, without losing their job. All families with two or more children receive cash allowances to help defray the costs of raising them. In addition to these subsidies, lower-income families in France benefit from other forms of support, including housing allowances and cash grants for children's schoolbooks and vacations. These policies, along with a more progressive tax structure, reduce the percentage of French children living in poverty from 29% (based only on family wage income) to 8% (after taking into account taxes and benefits).

In contrast with France and with many other industrialized countries, the U.S. lacks an integrated, universal system of supports for all children during their early childhood years and beyond. Educational policies aimed at disadvantaged children cannot assume that children's other requirements—for healthy bodies and healthy teeth, good nutrition, decent housing, access to social services, or good child care—are being met. Head Start and other early childhood programs are forced to tackle many of these needs while also providing a preschool education. With such scant support, U.S. tax policies and government subsidies only manage to reduce the child poverty rate from 27% to 22%.

Despite our commitment to the ideal of equal opportunity, millions of American children do not get an equal start and continue to lag behind in elementary school and beyond. France, a country with similar goals of equal educational opportunity and social integration, has adopted a decidedly different approach to education policy for disadvantaged young children. For Linda Espinosa, the French example demonstrates that "When a country believes in the value of early childhood, it can develop a system that promotes equity before disparities in home background create a need for remediation."

"When a country believes in the value of early childhood, it can develop a system that promotes equity before disparities in home background create a need for remediation." – **Linda Espinosa, Co-director of Research and Policy, National Institute for Early Education Research**

By deepening our understanding of the French approach to the education of at-risk children during their preschool years, this report aims to help Americans think creatively about the challenges to our existing policies and new initiatives in these areas. Says Donald Hernandez: "France's best practices offer great promise for highly effective innovations to improve early education policy in the U.S. for children in low-income and immigrant families."

What is Priority Education and How Does It Work?

When in 1981, France's Minister of Education Alain Savary announced *la politique de l'éducation prioritaire* or priority education policy, he said the intent was to "correct social inequalities by strengthening educational activities in zones and social milieus with the highest rates of school failure." To do so, the government planned to "give more to those who have less," funneling extra money and resources to schools with high proportions of children who were performing poorly, for whom French was a non-native language, or whose parents were working class or unemployed. The *écoles maternelles* have been a focal point of this policy.

Over the years, the criteria for selecting these priority education zones or ZEPs (*zones d'éducation prioritaire*) have changed. Since 1998, the Ministry of Education has encouraged regional education officials, known as *Recteurs,* to make socioeconomic indicators the major factor in determining which schools belong in ZEPs. The Ministry de-emphasized academic performance so as not to penalize schools in disadvantaged areas (by withdrawing their additional resources) where students are doing well academically.

ZEPs now are defined as areas with high proportions of working-class families, parents who are unemployed or have no more than a primary education, and recipients of public assistance. Some regional officials also continue to take into account the number of children from immigrant backgrounds, although this is no longer a formal criterion; the French are reluctant to view nationality and ethnicity in and of themselves as risk factors. Most ZEPs are located in the urban periphery of France's largest cities. There is regional variation in the size and number of ZEPs with, for example, 40 in Aix-Marseille and 14 in Paris.

ZEPs generally include a middle school along with its feeder preschools and elementary schools and sometimes a high school. This approach provides continuity for children during their school career and encourages teachers and other staff to collaborate across different levels of the education system. Several schools we visited have developed joint preschool through middle school projects on topics such as civic education and violence prevention.

In 1998, the Ministry began to link ZEPs into geographically broader "networks" of priority education. A *Reseau d'éducation prioritaire* or REP may include the schools of one or more ZEPs as well as neighboring schools that serve similar but less needy populations. Across the country, priority areas have been reorganized into 695 ZEPs and 770 REPs. (For the sake of simplicity, the term "ZEP" or "priority education" will be used to refer to geographic areas defined as either a ZEP or a REP.)

ZEP policy uses an area-based approach to buffer children from the effects of living in areas of concentrated disadvantage. About one child in five attends a public school that is in an area classified as a ZEP.

Over the years, the number of schools in priority education areas has expanded dramatically, and today, about one child in five attends a public school that is in an area classified as a ZEP.

An Area-Based Approach Reduces Stigma

ZEP policy uses an area-based approach to buffer children from the effects of living in areas of concentrated disadvantage. While priority education resources are targeted to schools with more disadvantaged students, teachers and administrators in ZEPs often stress that their schools serve a diverse group of students from the surrounding neighborhoods. More than 62% of students in ZEP schools come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, compared with only 39% in regular schools. About a fifth of students in ZEP schools are from middle-class families and another 17% are from more advantaged backgrounds. This socioeconomic diversity helps reduce the stigma of students who attend schools in ZEPs. French studies have shown that children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do better in school when their classmates are from a range of backgrounds. The "degree of concentration" of disadvantaged students is considered an additional risk factor for learning difficulties and school failure.

The area-based approach in ZEPs is similar to the federal Title I program in the U.S. Individual schools with more than 50% of children living in poverty may use Title I funds to improve the instructional program for the whole school. About 60% of Title I funds support school-wide programs, and other schools target assistance only to students at risk of failing. Although France recognizes the importance of early intervention, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, most of Title I funding in the U.S. is allocated to students in grades 1 through 6. Only a small proportion of funds—about 12%—goes to preschoolers and kindergarteners.

The value of targeting disadvantaged areas, not just individual students, is supported by U.S. research, which suggests that neighborhood poverty and unemployment can have negative effects on children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes, above and beyond the influences of family characteristics. A recent study by the Century Foundation in the U.S. found that children from all economic backgrounds benefit from attending predominately middle-class schools, and profiled successful efforts at social integration.

There are challenges to implementing this approach in France. Despite the political commitment to equality of opportunity and social cohesion, residential segregation has increased in recent years in France, leading to more segregated schools as well. Many middle-class families use strategies to avoid enrolling their children in schools with large numbers of students from working-class or immigrant backgrounds. Some families request

waivers to allow them to change their children's school, others enroll their children in private school, and still others may move out of the district.

When the State "Gives More to Those Who Have Less," What Does it Give?

In 1999, the French government spent about $400 million or a little less than 1% of its total national education budget of $59 billion on priority education policy. At least two-thirds of this extra funding goes to hiring additional staff to lower child-staff ratios in the classrooms and to hiring specialists, such as speech therapists, special education teachers, and social workers. There is great flexibility at the local level. Some ZEP schools hire artists or scientists to work alongside teachers, while others use the funding to give school principals more time to coordinate and develop school activities.

The French government awards salary bonuses to recognize the extra commitment of administrators, teachers, social workers, and support staff who work in priority education. Teachers receive an additional $1,000 per year. Staff in ZEPs also receive preference in promotions and other forms of career advancement.

The Ministry of Education as well gives about $15 million in competitive pedagogical grants for school projects in priority education areas. One school we visited, for example, received additional computers, after teachers argued that many of their students do not have access to them at home. Also, ZEP schools often obtain additional funding from a range of national, regional, or local initiatives, in particular urban development efforts.

Despite the policy of promoting positive discrimination in favor of the most needy students, some schools in wealthier neighborhoods continue to receive more funds from local authorities and parents than do many in ZEPs. These funds may be used, for example, to hire more paraprofessionals to work alongside teachers and provide more after-school activities. Also, although the national government estimates it spends an additional 10% per student in ZEP areas, critics argue that it may spend less on teachers' salaries in ZEP schools than in other schools, if they employ less experienced teachers.

A Local-National Partnership

Priority education policy departs from the traditional centralized approach of the French education system. ZEPs are governed locally. A Council of school principals, education inspectors, social workers, local urban policy officials, and other local public and private partners meets at least once a year to define objectives and activities for the ZEP. A Director, typically an education inspector or a middle school principal, handles day-to-day management of the ZEP, chairing Council meetings, organizing the designated activities, meeting with national and local agencies, and overseeing budgetary spending. Coordinators, often teachers or administrators, work full- or part-time assisting the Director to meet obligations. "Local variability and local control of education within a broader national commitment in France reflects concerns and priorities similar to those in the U.S., and these parallels suggest both the viability and enormous potential value of adapting approaches successful in France to a U.S. setting," says Donald Hernandez.

ZEP leaders have enormous latitude in allocating money and other resources they receive from the Ministry of Education and in designing programs to meet local as well as national needs. Teachers and administrators in every school devise a *projet d'école* or "school project" to be carried out during the year, and classroom activities link to its themes. School projects

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"Local variability and local control of education within a broader national commitment in France reflects concerns and priorities similar to those in the U.S., and these parallels suggest both the viability and enormous potential value of adapting approaches successful in France to a U.S. setting." - **Donald Hernandez, Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York, Albany.**

in ZEPs often emphasize strategies to help students with difficulties in school, or to reduce violence and address other environmental conditions that affect children's learning. In the *écoles maternelles* the delegation visited, several projects focused on promoting civic education and respect for others.

At the École Octobre in Alfortville, outside of Paris, for example, three-year olds sat in a circle, discussing their summer plans. One child presided over her classmates' discussion about whether it would be more fun to spend the summer at camp or with grandparents. As the teacher looked on, the youngsters listened respectfully to their peers' opinions. Another school project at the École Octobre is aimed at instilling children's confidence in speaking French.

"Zip-Zap-Zep" is a newsletter distributed by the ZEP in Sartrouville, west of Paris

The ultimate goal, says Marc Bablet, an education inspector, is to "empower children in their learning and in their school life."

ZEPs are not totally free to do as they wish, however. The Ministry of Education maintains responsibility for ensuring that schools meet all objectives. As part of the accountability process, officials of each ZEP sign a three-year *contrat de réussite* or "contract for success" with regional education authorities. The contract defines the ZEP's pedagogical priorities within the framework of the national goals set by the Ministry of Education (see Box 2.1).

Teachers and administrative staff, social workers, health professionals, local civil servants and elected officials, and other community actors take part in drawing up the key elements of the contract: the educational objectives, the

Box 2.1: Ten Goals of Priority Education Policy

1. *Equal access to knowledge:* Reaffirm shared expectations to ensure equal access to knowledge for all children.
2. *Acquiring reading and language skills:* Ensure the acquisition of reading and language skills.
3. *Sports and cultural activities, including media literacy:* Develop sports and cultural activities including media literacy.
4. *Early learning:* Encourage children to start school at the age of two.
5. *Academic support:* Provide academic help to students with the greatest difficulties and combat school failure.
6. *Citizenship:* Reinforce civic education and civic values.
7. *School-parent relations:* Encourage better relations between schools and parents.
8. *Neighborhood schools:* Open schools to neighborhoods to create the conditions for effective partnerships.
9. *Evaluation tools:* Give administrators and teachers effective tools to evaluate their progress.
10. *Support for teachers:* Improve support for teachers and create conditions for more efficient management.

Source: French Ministry of Education website: http://www.education.gouv.fr

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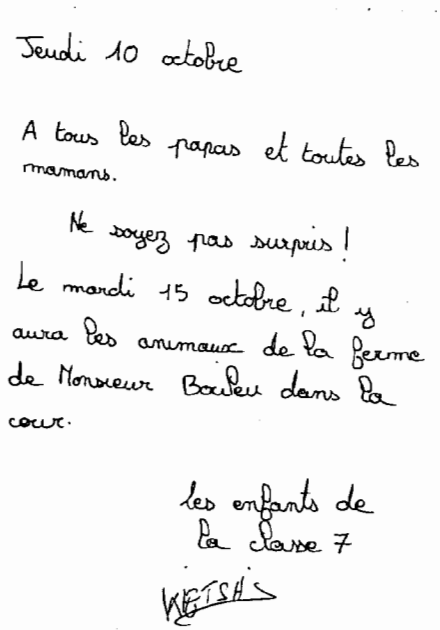
Box 2.2: ZEP des Grésillons' "Contract for Success"

Les Grésillons, a working-class neighborhood in the town of Gennevilliers, on the northwestern outskirts of Paris, was among the first designated priority education zones. Once a neighborhood known for its *maraîchers* or vegetable farmers, who sold their produce in Paris, the community turned into a manufacturing center when factories started to be built in the early decades of the 20th century. The prospect of good jobs attracted workers from all over France as well as Belgium, Portugal, and North Africa, and most recently, from Mali, Senegal, Cambodia, China, and Vietnam. Today, though, the factories have largely closed, causing widespread unemployment for residents, many of whom live in densely populated public housing projects.

The ZEP des Grésillons includes one junior high school, two elementary schools, and two *écoles maternelles*, serving a total of 1,960 students. The principal of the junior high school, Noëlle Villatte, is the Director of the ZEP, and she provides leadership for the zone along with the zone coordinator, Jean-Luc Faïsse, a school teacher whose pedagogical talents, diplomatic skills, and energy, have earned him respect among his teacher colleagues. Noëlle Villatte and Jean-Luc Faïsse are joined by the principals of the two elementary schools and two preschools on the Zone Council, which meets on a regular basis, distributes a newsletter, and arranges professional development days for teachers.

Jean-Luc Faïsse spearheaded efforts to define the "Contract for Success" for Les Grésillons, based on guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education and the regional education inspector. The "Contract for Success" cites two primary goals: to raise scores of third-grade students in the zone on national French and math tests and to improve students' oral and written language skills.

The teaching staff at the École Maternelle des Grésillons translated the zone's "Contract for Success" into a "school project" designed primarily to develop children's "cognitive clarity in relationship to language." In one exercise conceived to promote oral communication and emerging writing skills among *les petits* (three-year olds), the teachers invited a local farmer to bring some farm animals to the school. Before his visit, the teachers showed the children photographs and discussed with them the role farmers and animals play in producing food. The teachers asked, "What shall we write your parents about this coming event?" They decided together what to put down in the notebooks students keep to carry messages between teachers and parents. These oral and written exchanges also help develop the young children's meta-cognitive skills, by encouraging them to reflect on how to communicate about past, present, and future experiences.


Jeudi 10 octobre

A tous les papas et toutes les mamans.

Ne soyez pas surpris !
Le mardi 15 octobre, il y aura les animaux de la ferme de Monsieur Boulen dans la cour.

les enfants de
la classe 7
KETSHS

A letter composed by the three-year olds at the École Maternelle des Grésillons informs parents about an upcoming school visit by a farmer and his animals

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means to accomplish the objectives, and the evaluation strategy. The contract makes the ZEP's goals visible to the staff who will implement the policy, as well as to the parents and children who are the intended beneficiaries (See Box 2.2). At the end of the three-year period, the ZEP provides the Ministry with an assessment. "This approach to implementing national-local partnerships is quite compatible with the emerging idea in the U.S. that local schools should be held accountable for results in return for substantial infusions of federal funding," notes Donald Hernandez.

Regardless of family income, social class, or ethnic background, all French children benefit from the same high-quality system of early childhood education.

Preschool is a Special Priority

While priority education policy extends to all stages of the educational system, it accords special attention to the *écoles maternelles*. Regardless of family income, social class, or ethnic background, all French children benefit from the same high-quality system of early childhood education (see Box 2.3). Within this universal approach, children attending preschools in ZEPs receive additional resources and support.

"Qu'apprend-on à l'école maternelle?" a booklet outlines the national curriculum for *école maternelle*

What makes the French universal preschool system "high quality?" Previous French-American reports have documented the strengths of the *écoles maternelles:* Teachers are well-trained professionals, who are fairly compensated for their important roles in children's early development and learning. Activities are carefully orchestrated to build on a national curriculum that promotes children's holistic development. The facilities are spacious, cheerful and bright, and generously supplied with art materials, gymnastic equipment, books, instructional materials, and play materials. Wrap-around services meet the needs of working parents. Direct services are supported by an infrastructure of funding, training, and technical support at both national and local levels of government. A major lesson from France, says Dick Clifford, is that "it is possible to have an early childhood program tied to the schools that is not overly structured and is able to meet the full range of needs of children, including children of immigrant families, poor families, and middle-class families."

Some American observers express concern about certain aspects of the preschool system. In particular, they note that the child-staff ratios—about 25 children for one teacher and a part-time aide—exceed recommendations by U.S. professional associations. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that teachers in France have a strong professional preparation, which may help them manage larger class sizes, and they are assisted by aides with tasks such as cleaning and meals.

These ratios are consistent with a pedagogical approach in France that places less emphasis on individualism than in the U.S. and more focus on children's socialization. Some American observers find that there is too much use of structured, whole-group activities in French preschools, but the French consider these class discussions as opportunities for children to learn to listen and respect other children. The large class sizes do mean that teachers may have less time to work individually with each child, but children are encouraged to learn independently, as well as to help their peers.

Quality standards are high for all *écoles maternelles* and even higher for those schools serving a large proportion of poor and immigrant children. For example, there are at least two fewer children per class in *écoles maternelles* in priority education areas than in regular schools, and most classes are capped at 25 children, so that teachers can provide disadvantaged children with more individual attention. Early childhood classrooms in ZEPs also benefit from educational aides (*aide-educatrices*), who are participants in a national youth employment program. The aides receive a small stipend from the national government as well as 200 hours of training toward a permanent job placement. After working with young children, many of the young aides pursue training and certification to work in early childhood settings or as teachers. In this

Box 2.3: The French System of Early Education

Priority education policy builds on an existing high-quality universal preschool system that has been described in previous French-American Foundation reports:

- *Universal, voluntary access:* Every child has a right to attend the *école maternelle* free of charge starting at the age of three. (Compulsory school begins at age six). Over 99% of three- to five-year olds attend regardless of family income or parental employment status. Since 1989, a national policy initiative has expanded the enrollment of two-year olds in educational priority areas. About 35% of all two-year olds attend nationally, and 40% in ZEPs.
- *Quality standards and accountability:* All preschools follow the same national curriculum, which structures children's learning around five domains of activities: (1) developing oral language and an introduction to writing; (2) learning how to work together; (3) acting and expressing emotions and thoughts with one's body; (4) discovering the world; and (5) imagining, feeling, and creating. The curriculum is organized around three overlapping cycles that bridge children's learning from preschool to primary school, and it defines competencies that children are expected to meet by the end of the *école maternelle*. Educational inspectors monitor schools' progress toward meeting these pedagogical objectives.
- *Highly-trained teachers:* All teachers in the *école maternelle* are civil servants qualified to work with children age 2 to 11. After three years of university education, teachers obtain a bachelor's degree in a subject such as science or history; to earn a master's degree in education, they study for one or two more years at a teacher training institute and do several months of fieldwork. Teachers have access to 36 weeks of paid in-service training over their careers.
- *Well-paid teachers:* French pre-kindergarten teachers are well-paid, earning the same salaries, and generous vacation, health, and retirement as elementary school teachers. The average French preschool teacher's salary is around $25,000, above the average national income of $23,400. Teachers who work in ZEPs receive additional bonuses. By comparison, in the U.S., the average salary for a child care worker is about $15,000 per year, well below the national average U.S. income of $25,000, and there are few or no benefits. Preschool teachers in the U.S earn less than $20,000 on average, whereas the average kindergarten teacher earns $37,000.
- *Secure funding for services and the infrastructure:* The national and local governments have clearly-defined roles and responsibilities for supporting the preschool system. The Ministry of Education is responsible for teacher training and salaries, and defines national educational objectives, while the local authorities pay for the capital and operational costs of the school facilities, hire additional support staff (such as paraprofessional aides), and organize after-school activities.

way, the program not only provides needed resources to the classroom, but also nurtures the development of future early childhood professionals.

Well-trained and Well-paid Teachers Work in ZEP Preschools

Official documents and people in the field stress that teaching in a ZEP is not a distinct profession. Regardless of whether they work in less advantaged or more advantaged areas, all preschool teachers are trained professionals, and the quality of children's educational experiences does not depend on their families' incomes.

While in the U.S. local school districts recruit teachers, in France, the Ministry of Education assigns teachers to schools throughout the country based on job availability and seniority. The least experienced teachers are more likely to begin their teaching careers in educational priority areas, where there are more job openings and more experienced teachers are sometimes reluctant to work. Early burnout and staff turnover are much higher in ZEP schools than in other schools. While bonuses improve staff morale, as one principal of a ZEP school explained, "You don't work here for the money, you need to be a real activist to work here."

A teacher at the Ecole Octobre reads to students gathered on benches arranged in a typical open square facing the chalkboard

The Ministry requires teacher training institutions to help prepare teachers to work in ZEPs through workshops on such topics as teamwork, intercultural education, reducing school failure, and preventing social exclusion. All future teachers in Paris must complete one out of three required field placements in a priority education area.

New teachers in priority education areas receive various forms of initial and ongoing support for working with parents, partnering with local services, and handling such issues as violence prevention through workshops and in-service training. Teachers are closely monitored by the school principal and education inspectors and guided by veteran colleagues. In Alfortville, new teachers are dispersed across local schools so that they can be mentored by more experienced teachers.

From Policy to Practice

There is no distinctive pedagogy in educational priority areas. Whether they attend preschools in a ZEP or not, children are expected to learn the same curriculum, acquire the same knowledge and skills, and develop the same learning tools. Teachers organize the day to balance free play with more structured activities. Above all, the *école maternelle* seeks to foster children's love of learning. The preschool curriculum stresses the development of children's oral language in French, based on research showing that early verbal ability is a predictor of later success in reading and writing. "In both the U.S. and France, language is seen as the key to success and is heavily emphasized," notes Dick Clifford. "But the French seem to be attuned to both written and spoken language while the U.S. has been moving toward a heavier emphasis on written language—reading and writing."

Like Head Start programs, ZEP schools are often viewed as "laboratories for innovation" for the French educational system, and teachers are encouraged to experiment with different methods to promote learning. Methods of teaching writing and ways of working with cultural institutions outside the classroom were initiated in the ZEP schools before they were implemented on a larger scale.

Cooperative learning—students helping each other learn new concepts through play—is integral to the pedagogical approach in French preschools. On the day we observed Luigi's class at the École Maternelle on the Rue d'Orsel, for example, the children practiced clapping patterns first by echoing their teacher's rhythms, then by reading musical notes. The teacher asked one boy to give the other children guidance on how to "read" the rhythm. By encouraging children to articulate the thought process behind the activity of reading notes, the teacher was encouraging metacognitive strategies that the children could use to solve other problems. "Eventually the children will not need to say the notes, but will just be able to read them, just as they will eventually shift from reading words out loud to reading silently," she explained.

Children learn important social skills and enjoy nutritious French meals at lunch times

Collaboration is another key aspect of priority education, and receives special emphasis in the early years. Teachers have developed special outreach efforts to work with families in ZEP *écoles maternelles*. By starting early, the hope is that strong relationships between families and schools will endure throughout a child's education. In addition, preschool teachers have developed partnerships with other teachers of older children, particularly to smooth children's transitions from the last year of preschool to first grade.

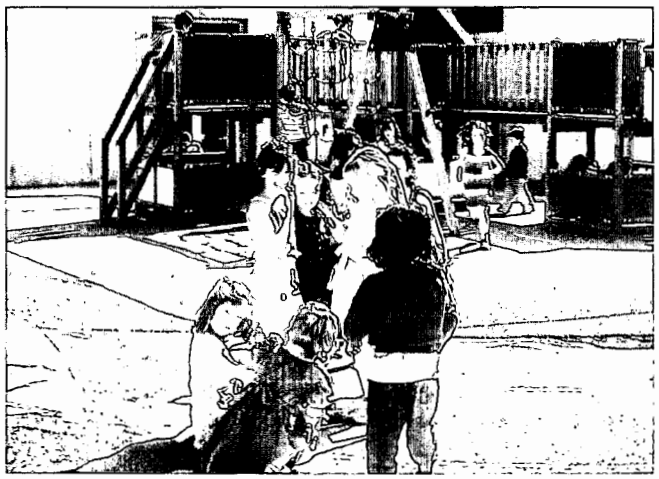
In addition, early childhood teachers in France often collaborate with social workers, nurses and doctors, and community associations, who work with the same population of children and families outside the school system, to ensure that their holistic needs are being met. Cities and partner organizations also play an important role in supporting children's learning outside the classroom. The city of Paris is working to foster early literacy and prevent early reading difficulties, beginning in education priority areas. Pilot preschools around the city are developing a "first books space" to bring five-year olds in contact with books after school hours.

"The most striking difference between the U.S. and France is that France has developed a true system of services for young children," says Dick Clifford. "The preschools are part of the normal school system and have the same supports—that is administrative and financial support, consulting support from school personnel, professional development opportunities, building and maintenance support—the full range of infrastructure support needed by any major educational enterprise."

"Keys to Success" in Priority Education Zones

Assessments of the overall effectiveness of priority education policy are mixed. National evaluations in French and math conducted in the third and sixth grades indicate that the achievement gap between students attending schools in priority education zones and those in non-ZEP schools has not been significantly reduced. On average, students in priority zone schools score 8 to 10 points lower (out of a maximum of 100 points) than students in regular schools on the tests. Moreover, the proportion of students who have not mastered basic competencies is almost twice as high in priority zones. The gap is smaller when comparing students of similar socioeconomic origin, but this still means that a child of working-class parents in a ZEP school scores lower than his or her counterpart at a school in a better neighborhood. Some critics of priority education policy contend that lower student scores result from teachers expecting less of ZEP students and consequently watering down curricula.

Defenders of priority education policy find reasons to be more optimistic. They point out that the achievement gap has not widened in the 1980s and 1990s for students living in urban areas where socioeconomic conditions have worsened as a result of increased unemployment, residential segregation, juvenile delinquency, violence, and racial tensions. Defenders argue that education policy cannot wholly make up for such influences, nor can it erase all traces of class distinction. Social class differences, notably the father's profession and the mother's educational level, continue to have the most powerful impact on student outcomes in France.



Recess at the Ecole Octobre

Observers stress that research on the effectiveness of priority education policy shows considerable variability in student outcomes among departments, districts and zones. Some schools have failed to raise student performance and even seen their scores decline. Others have experienced remarkable success, getting their students to perform as well or even better than more privileged student populations in schools outside priority zones.

In 1996, French education inspectors Catherine Moisan and Jacky Simon carried out a study with thirty colleagues aimed at uncovering the "keys to success" in the highest performing French priority zones. They analyzed data collected for more than 80% of the zones and did more detailed case studies on thirty-six ZEPs. Student success was measured in terms of scores on national evaluations in the third and sixth grades, student trajectories at the end of junior high, and teachers' assessments of their performance.

Moisan and Simon's report noted several external factors that may influence student outcomes in priority zones. For one, as the "degree of concentration" of students from lower socioeconomic categories goes up, student results go down. The more successful zones in their study often try to combat this "ghetto effect" by dissuading middle-class families from moving their children to other schools. They do this by attracting students with more interesting courses, offering special classes for more gifted students, selling parents on their schools' good performance,

or even asking school officials to deny parents' requests for waivers. Other external factors include the percentage of children from immigrant backgrounds, rates of parental unemployment, instability of the school population, levels of violence and delinquency, urban neighborhood conditions, and problems associated with *grande pauvreté* or extreme poverty such as child malnutrition and poor health.

Moisan and Simon found that many ZEPs still manage to surmount such difficulties and they identified some characteristics of well-performing zones. The most successful priority zones tend to be smaller in size (fewer than 1,100 students), and thus easier to manage and lead effectively. Smaller zones also tend to enjoy better steering and more visionary leadership. It is also easier to define and apply a coherent school project for a smaller zone than for a larger one; projects in the best ZEPs typically have only a few clearly-defined objectives and to focus on academic learning.

Good ZEP schools have stable teaching staffs, with a good balance between newcomers who bring enthusiasm and fresh ideas and seasoned teachers who provide continuity and mentoring. In the best schools, teachers see themselves as members of a "team," and they share ideas and experiences in a supportive atmosphere that minimizes feelings of isolation and discouragement. The teachers in these schools maintain high standards and believe in their students' capacities to learn and progress.

"The most striking difference between the U.S. and France is that France has developed a true system of services for young children. The preschools are part of the normal school system and have the same supports—that is administrative and financial support, consulting support from school personnel, professional development opportunities, building and maintenance support—the full range of infrastructure support needed by any major educational enterprise." - Dick Clifford, Senior Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

The most successful ZEPs maintain calm, respectful school environments, with a focus on good citizenship, violence prevention, and conflict resolution and they cultivate positive relationships with families. Finally, and one of the most striking findings, is that the best priority zones have more children entering *école maternelle* at age two, 62% on average, compared to an average of 32% for the lowest performing ZEPs.

These "keys to success" shed light on possibilities to explore and pitfalls to avoid in developing educational policy for children at risk of school failure. While the results of this policy are mixed, there are still many lessons to be drawn from priority education in France. In the rest of the report we explore three areas with the potential to inform policy and practice in the U.S.: getting children off to a very early start in preschool, supporting children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and building bridges among schools, families, and communities to foster children's learning.

Starting Very Early on the Path to School Success

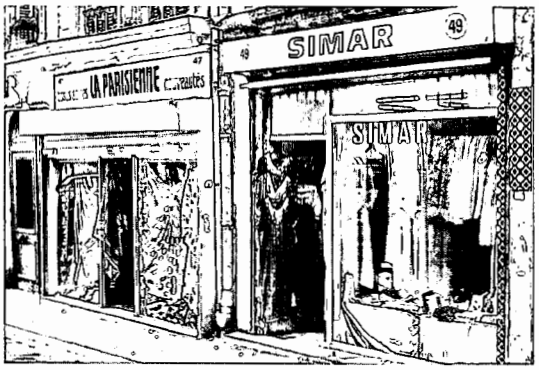
The Goutte d'Or preschool is a modern, two-story building located on a narrow street across from a bakery, corner grocery, and tobacco shop. Inside the school, the bright interior is decorated with children's artwork and photo collages showing the colorful diversity of the students' faces. The Goutte d'Or neighborhood, in northeastern Paris, is home to first- and second-generation immigrants from former French colonies in North Africa, West Africa, and Asia, who live alongside more recent arrivals from India, China, and Eastern Europe (see Box 3.1).

Since 1989, the French Ministry of Education has encouraged the enrollment of two-year olds in *écoles maternelles* situated in priority education zones. The preschool in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood, which is classified as a ZEP because of its high concentration of low-income and immigrant families, was the first in Paris to open a pilot class for two-year olds, in the year 2000.

Nadine Schmitz, a young and enthusiastic teacher with several years experience, is in her first year at the Goutte d'Or preschool. Her class of twenty students is composed of two- and three-year olds. Nineteen of the youngsters have parents who emigrated from Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Senegal, the Ivory Coast, or India, or most recently from Mali and China; only one, Etienne, is white and the child of French-born parents. Some mothers, like the Senegalese mother of two-year old Ibrahim, drop their children off wearing traditional, ankle-length African dresses and matching headdresses, others wear Muslim head scarves, and some wear jeans and tennis shoes or other Western attire.

Many of the children live in crowded apartments with few books or educational toys, cared for by a mother who speaks Arabic, Malinke, or Mandarin, rather than French. When the children first entered school "the class was so quiet you could hear a pin drop," Madame Schmitz recalls. "Three-year olds started out speaking more like an 18-month-old child, repeating one word such as *'velo'* (bike) over

Box 3.1: The Goutte d'Or



On a street in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood, a store selling African formal wear sits beside a fabric store called "The Parisian"

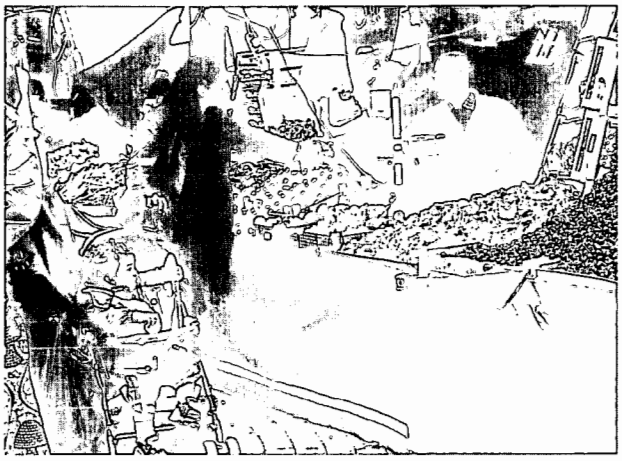
The École Maternelle de la Goutte d'Or sits in the heart of the Goutte d'Or neighborhood in Paris' 18th *arrondissement*, one of the city's most diverse districts. The architecture offers a mix of older buildings from the Haussmann era of the mid-nineteenth century and more modern buildings dating mostly from the 1970s. The shops lining the crowded, lively streets are eclectic. Some sell African formal wear. Others showcase in their windows food products imported from the Middle East, and sell dates, figs, nuts, and spices in bulk quantities. One block-long shop displays fabrics of every color and pattern imaginable—silk, chiffon, gold threaded, batik—on sidewalk tables, attracting local shoppers and wholesalers hunting for the best deals on fabric in the city. Restaurants catering to different clientele serve couscous, curry dishes, or *thiebu diene*, a Senegalese fish stew. During weekdays, men can be seen milling about and chatting on the street corners and in cafes, many of them presumably unemployed. An open-air market on the pedestrian Rue de Jean is crowded with people who come to buy fresh cherries, asparagus, and other seasonal produce as well as meat and fish. Many of the shoppers are mothers who carry babies on their backs, African-style, or push children in strollers on their way home from preschool.

and over again, but their French improved a lot over the course of the year."

On the day we visited, the children spent their time after free play in a variety of activities, listening to a story about a mischievous boy named David, singing songs, matching colored cut-outs of clothing to bodies outlined on paper, and painting with brushes, sponges, corks, and other tools. Jane Henderson noted that in the *école maternelle*, "every activity is carefully planned to build on a national curriculum that focuses on oral-language skills, art, music, physical education, and pre-mathematics." In gym class, children were developing their large motor skills while learning to "take risks" by climbing up a high ladder, crossing a plank suspended four feet above ground, and jumping onto padded mats. Barbara Bowman was impressed by the degree of competence these two- and three-year olds displayed in performing physical feats that would be considered very challenging for children their age in the United States.

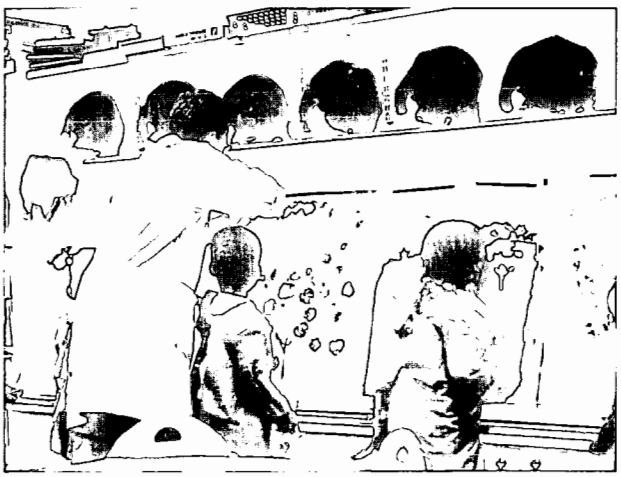
The school principal, Régine Bramnik, and teaching staff at the École Maternelle de la Goutte d'Or have made a conscious effort to accommodate the particular needs and rhythms of their two-year-old charges. With only twenty students, Nadine Schmitz's class size is smaller than the average twenty-five, and she has a full-time teaching aide, instead of the usual half-time helper. This smaller adult-to-child ratio allows the teaching staff to provide more individual attention and work with small groups. Although mixed-age classrooms are relatively rare in France, the staff at this school decided to place two- and three-year olds together, believing it would help two-year olds develop their language and social skills.

Whereas the normal school day lasts from 8:30 to 4:30, with a two-hour break for lunch and naptime, the two-year olds attend Madame Schmitz's class only in the morning, and return home at lunchtime to eat, rest, and spend the afternoon with their mothers or other caregivers. The decision to shorten their school day came from a recognition that very young children may not be developmentally ready for a full day of school. The staff also decided not to require that two-year olds be toilet trained before enrolling in the Goutte d'Or preschool—bucking the widespread notion in France that children must be trained before beginning school—but they noted that most children were out of diapers just a few weeks after school began.



Mothers with children shop in an open-air market in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood

The school principal also set up an informal arrangement with the neighboring *crèche*, or child care center, in which two-year olds from the *crèche* visit Nadine Schmitz's classroom once every two weeks, and during alternate weeks they receive visitors from her class. The staff believe this exchange benefits both groups of children in different ways. The school children are exposed to the developmental emphasis of the child care educators, using ride-on toys and doing tactile play with the water and sand tables set up in the *crèche*, for example. The children from the child-care center are introduced to the rhythms and activities of the school they will later attend. This exchange is typical of the growing tendency for *écoles maternelles* and *crèches* to collaborate, rather than work apart or even at odds, as they sometimes have in the past. Like the École Maternelle de la Goutte d'Or, many French preschools accepting two-year olds are beginning to make similar accommodations to help their youngest students adjust to the school environment and provide for their developmental needs.



Two-year olds at the École Maternelle de la Goutte d'Or do easel painting using brushes, sponges, and corks, with help from the classroom aide

Focusing on Two-Year Olds

In the United States, where most children enter the public school system at age five for kindergarten, concerns about "school readiness" focus on four- and sometimes three-year olds and federal and state aid initiatives target this age group almost exclusively. One exception, Early Head Start, serves poor children under age three, but it remains sorely underfunded and reaches only 5%, or 55,000, of the estimated 2.1 million eligible children.

In contrast, in France, where virtually all three-year olds are in *école maternelle*, school readiness concentrates on two-year old children, particularly the most disadvantaged. The policy is based on studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s indicating that two-

year olds who attend *école maternelle* do better than their later-starting peers in elementary school, and that the benefits of early school entry are especially pronounced for children of working-class and immigrant origins (see Box 3.2).

Nationwide, about 35% of French two-year olds are now in preschool, up from 10% in 1960. The percentage of two-year olds enrolled in preschool varies considerably according to region, school district, and social class. For example, more twos attend school in northern France than in the South by historical tradition, and Parisian preschools have lagged behind the rest of the country in opening their doors to two-year olds because they lack space. Demand for early enrollment has been higher in the past among middle- and upper-class families than among working-class and immigrant families, in part because better-off parents believe that an early start will help their children develop and perform well in school. However, efforts by the French Ministry of Education have raised the percentage of two-year olds attending preschool in educational priority zones to 40%, above the national average.

In gym class, two- and three-year-old children climb ladders and walk along suspended planks to develop their large motor skills and learn to "take risks"

In France, where virtually all three-year olds are in école maternelle, school readiness concentrates on two-year old children, particularly the most disadvantaged. The policy is based on studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s indicating that two-year olds who attend école maternelle do better than their later-starting peers in elementary school, and that the benefits of early school entry are especially pronounced for children of working-class and immigrant origins.

Despite the government policy, the schooling of two-year-old children is a contentious issue in France. Critics point out that two-year olds may be developmentally ill-suited to a school setting. A typical child of that age is frequently in motion, running and jumping, pushing and pulling, climbing and falling, and getting up again. He or she is still developing self-control and has a hard time sitting still for long periods of time and needs to change activities frequently. Moreover, the average two-year old is still learning to speak clearly and to form words into sentences. Motor skills are also limited; a two-year old must work to master holding a pencil or paintbrush or use scissors or glue. He or she also needs continual reminders to share and take turns.

Critics of early schooling policy further point out that preschool class size is large, capped at twenty-five students per class in ZEP schools, with one teacher and a teacher's aide. The regular school day is long, activities are often quite structured, and pedagogy is traditionally more teacher-directed in France than in the United States. The class set-up, materials, and furnishings also have usually been designed with older preschoolers in mind. Our study tour delegates observed that activities for the two-year olds do not always seem age-appropriate. "The main weakness of this policy is how little the teachers seem to know about two-year olds or how to organize a full-day

Box 3.2: French Research on the Schooling of Two-Year Olds

Several French studies provide evidence for the benefits of very early school entry.

- A survey by the Ministry of Education of 20,000 students leaving primary school in 1980 found that each additional year of preschool reduced the likelihood that a student would repeat a grade in elementary school. The French educational system does not use social promotion. Only 10% of students with three years of pre-kindergarten education repeated a grade, versus 14.5% of those with two years, 18.3% of those with one year, and 30.5% of those with no preschool. The benefits were greatest for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- In 1992, researchers at the University of Burgundy reported that among 1,900 children who were given achievement tests in the first, second and fifth grade, those who began preschool at age two and had four years of preschool, scored better than their peers who entered school at age three and had three years of preschool. Indeed, the advantage conferred by early school entry even increased by the end of elementary school and was greatest for students of working-class parents.
- In another study begun in 1997 by the French Ministry of Education, 10,000 school children from 1,500 schools throughout France were followed through primary school, and regularly tested on their general knowledge, oral and pre-reading skills, logic and pre-math skills, understanding of concepts of time and space, and class behavior. The results at first grade show that children who had enrolled in preschool at age two performed somewhat better than their classmates who began at age three in almost all areas. Children in ZEP schools and those from the lowest socioeconomic categories derived the most benefit from entry at age two. The authors hypothesized that for these children, an early start in *école maternelle* provides a richer language environment, more exposure to vocabulary, and a better structuring of their time and environment than their homes can provide.
- A follow-up study done in 2001 on the "1997 cohort" found that students who entered *école maternelle* at age two were somewhat less likely to repeat a grade during the first three years of primary school than children who began at age three. Children of working-class parents and immigrant children gained the most from early school entry. Paradoxically, the immigrant children in the study were also less likely to have entered school at age two.
- A landmark 1997 study by Education Inspectors Catherine Moisan and Jacky Simon found that an important factor contributing to the success of schools in priority zones was the percentage of ZEP two-year olds enrolled. As noted earlier, the most successful zones in their study had on average 62% of two-year olds enrolled, compared to an average of 32% for zones with the worst performance. The researchers identified a number of conditions which helped make early school enrollment successful in particular *écoles maternelles*. These included: adapting the classroom set-up and furnishings for two-year olds, having a well-trained teacher and carefully selected teacher's aide, working with personnel in other early childhood settings such as *crèches*, and reaching out to parents in disadvantaged communities to explain the benefits of enrolling their children in school at age two.

In reviewing this research on very early school entry, Agnès Florin, a French researcher in child psychology, sounds a cautionary note. She points out that having an early-in-the-year birth date or a higher socioeconomic status account for gains in test scores that are three to five times greater than those associated with starting school at age two. Nevertheless, "school entry at age two, at least for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, can be justified by the results of several studies using different methodologies," concludes Florin. "These studies show better results for children who began school at age two in certain areas of cognitive and language development in the medium term—even if these effects are limited in comparison with other factors."

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Perhaps the most promising new development has been the creation in priority education zones of more formalized "lieux passerelles." These programs are designed to help disadvantaged two-year olds—and their parents—make a successful transition into school.

program for them," says Barbara Bowman. Many schools require children to be toilet trained before enrolling in class. Most importantly, most teachers in the *école maternelle* have not had special preparation for working with two-year olds.

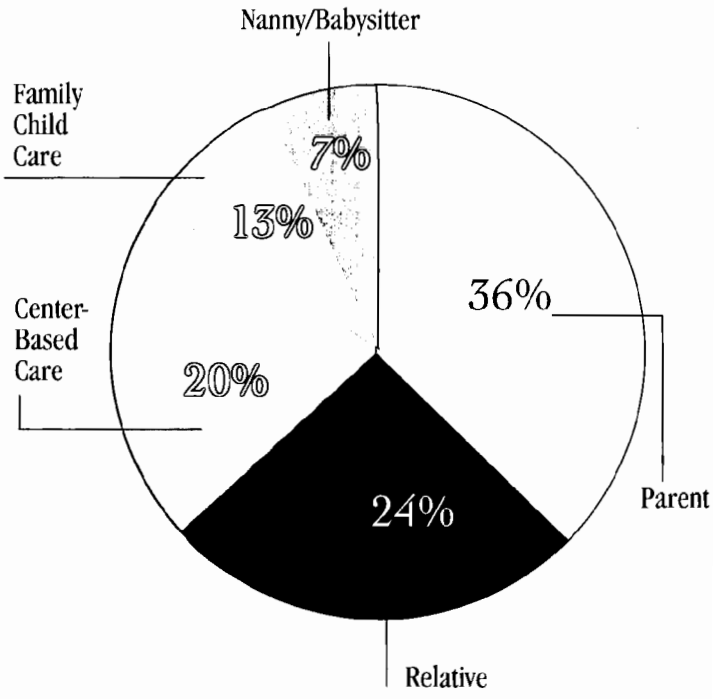
Defenders of the policy point to research showing benefits, and argue that many two-year olds living in ZEP areas are better off in school for part of the day than in home settings which may not provide enough stimulation, social interaction with peers, or exposure to a rich French language environment. Many preschools, like the one we visited in the Goutte d'Or, are making significant changes to create a better environment for their youngest students. Dick Clifford noted, "It appears that the French are learning how to accommodate the needs of twos within their traditional school-oriented approach. The practice we observed was more child-centered than the policy as described." Barbara Bowman expects that "the teachers will get better as they gain more experience with younger children because they have a good professional background." Moreover, the national curriculum began in 2002 to explicitly address the needs of *"les tous-petits"* or two-year olds.

Jane Henderson wondered why "the use of *crèches*, with their developmental focus, does not appear to have been considered as an alternative to enrolling young children in a formal education program." Some argue that the *crèche*, or child-care center, may be a more appropriate setting for some two-year olds than the typical *école maternelle*. *Crèches* are licensed, subsidized child-care centers for children between two months and three years of age. They contrast markedly with child-care services for infants and toddlers in the U.S., which tend to be staffed by poorly paid personnel with little or no training in early child development, and to be often no better than mediocre in quality.

Crèches differ in many respects from the *écoles maternelles* designed for older French preschoolers. They are usually directed by a *puéricultrice*, a pediatric nurse with additional training in child development. The licensed "educators" who work with the children in the *crèches* have two years of training in child development, children's health, and early childhood pedagogy, and they strive to nurture the children's growth in all developmental areas. Activities are less structured and less teacher-directed in the *crèche* than in the typical *école maternelle*, and

Figure 3.1

United States: Primary Forms of Care for Children Age 0-3



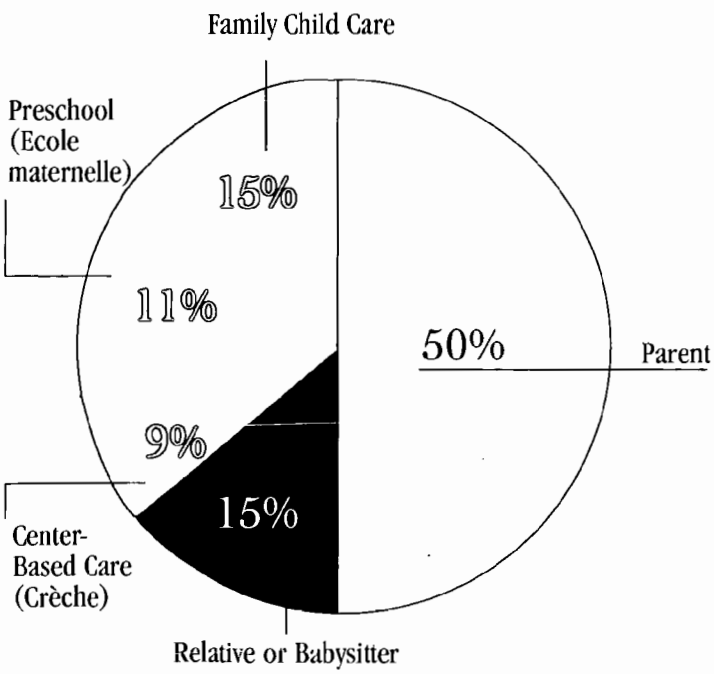
Source: Child Trends calculations from 1997 National Survey of America's Families

children are given more time for free play. Ratios are also smaller, with one adult for every eight toddlers, and one adult for every five infants. One small-scale 1990 French study suggests that children who attend a *crèche* may do better when they enter school than those who are home full time.

However, even if it wanted to, the French Ministry of Education could not decide on its own to use *crèches* to implement an early education policy targeted at children living in poor neighborhoods, since these child-care centers are operated by the Ministry of Health. Furthermore, the demand for *crèches* already exceeds supply, largely because these centers are expensive for municipalities to build and operate. Access is usually limited to children of two working parents or single working parents, who pay a sliding-scale fee to enroll their children. For these reasons—availablity, eligibility requirements, and cost—*crèches* are often not an option for disadvantaged families.

Figure 3.2

France: Primary Forms of Care for Children Age 0-3



Source: Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales, 2000

Transitional Programs for Two-Year Olds

Hesitations about the suitability of the traditional school setting for two-year olds in France have led to new experiments designed to introduce children to school more gradually. Some ZEP schools, like the École Maternelle Françoise Dolto we visited in Nantes, collaborate with a nearby child-care center or drop-in center to arrange several school visits for two-year olds in the year before they enroll. Other *écoles maternelles* phase in two-year olds over the course of the school year as they become sufficiently mature to begin, and sometimes allow parents to stay in school with their children until they feel comfortable to remain on their own.

Perhaps the most promising new development has been the creation in priority education zones of more formalized *lieux passerelles*. These programs are designed to help disadvantaged two-year olds—and their parents—make a successful transition into school, and are officially encouraged by a joint agreement of the French Education Ministry and the ministry responsible for family policy. They are usually cooperative ventures initiated by local partners interested in early childhood, such as the *école maternelle* and perhaps the ZEP coordinator, a child-care or drop-in center, the local health care clinic, the Department of Social Services, or a non-profit association.

The *lieux passerelles*, many of them still in an experimental phase, may be housed in an apartment, child-care facility, or school, or even—as in the case of several programs for Gypsy communities—in a trailer or bus that moves around to serve children living in different trailer parks. They

Box 3.3: Chocolatine, A Transitional Program for Two-Year Olds

Chocolatine is a transitional program for two-year olds set in a housing project in La Source, a neighborhood located on the outskirts of Orleans. La Source is a ZEP; many of its families, half of whom are immigrants, struggle with poverty and unemployment as well as such related problems as alcoholism and domestic violence. Chocolatine was designed to prepare two-year olds who have never experienced out-of-home care for a successful start in school, and to provide a supportive environment for their parents. Although the Ministry of Education supports many similar projects, this one is sponsored by the Community-based Support Services and Social Assistance Center *(Centre communal d'action sociale)*. However, the staff collaborates closely with the two *écoles maternelles* nearby, and arranges for the children to participate in various activities at the schools they will attend the next year. The Chocolatine staff includes a full-time early childhood educator qualified to work in a *crèche* with children under three, one full-time and several part-time *puéricultrices*, or pediatric nurses with training in child development, and occasionally a psychiatric nurse and specialist in "psycho-motor" development.

Chocolatine is quartered in an apartment overlooking a garden. One room is furnished with a sofa and chairs to provide comfortable seating for parents and a calm place to read stories with children. The children can also climb up to a wooden loft, which overlooks a second room reserved for puzzles, blocks and other construction materials. Another room is set up with play areas for art projects, dress-up, and other activities. The apartment kitchen is used for snack time and water play.

Eight children, ranging in age from 20 months to 30 months, are enrolled for the full school year and come two mornings a week, from 9:00 to 11:30. Another eight youngsters, between two-and-a-half and three years old, attend three mornings a week. Parents accompany their children initially and are welcome to come as long as they want. Chocolatine also offers once-a-week afternoon programs for the mothers. Speakers lead discussions about children's health, development or other issues, and field trips are organized to the library, museum, or botanic garden.

typically bring together small groups of eight to fifteen children once or twice a week for sessions lasting two or three hours. Programs usually last one to a few months, but some occasionally continue for a year until the child enrolls in school. The transitional programs are designed to introduce young children to a variety of lightly structured activities and free play in a comfortable group setting away from home. A typical morning might include greeting the group in a circle and singing some songs, working on an art project, exploring at a water or sand table, playing with puzzles, blocks, or dolls, having a snack, playing outdoors, and listening to a story.

Mothers usually accompany their children initially, but leave for progressively longer periods as their children become more comfortable and learn to trust the adults staffing the program. Most of the *lieux passerelles* are conceived as supportive programs serving the parents' needs as well, preparing them for separation from their children and cultivating their involvement in their children's education.

These programs can reduce the isolation experienced by mothers in particular and introduce them to other parents as well as to the schools.

Nadine Schmitz helps her two- and three-year old students

Teachers we interviewed spoke very favorably of the transitional programs. According to them, children who participate in such programs have an easier time adapting to school. "No more tears at the beginning of the year," said one teacher at the ZEP preschool in Nantes who works with a transitional program called "The Path to School."

French efforts toward children from lower socioeconomic and immigrant backgrounds begin even before age three, when almost all children participate in the formal school system. The policy of enrolling two-year olds living in priority education areas in *école maternelle* or transitional programs provides them with a more equal start with other children. French authorities believe that the very early start gives these children the boost they need to develop the linguistic, cognitive, social and physical skills that will help them thrive in school and beyond. The French approach may help the U.S. think more creatively about how to meet the developmental needs of all children well before kindergarten.

CHAPTER FOUR

Educating Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children

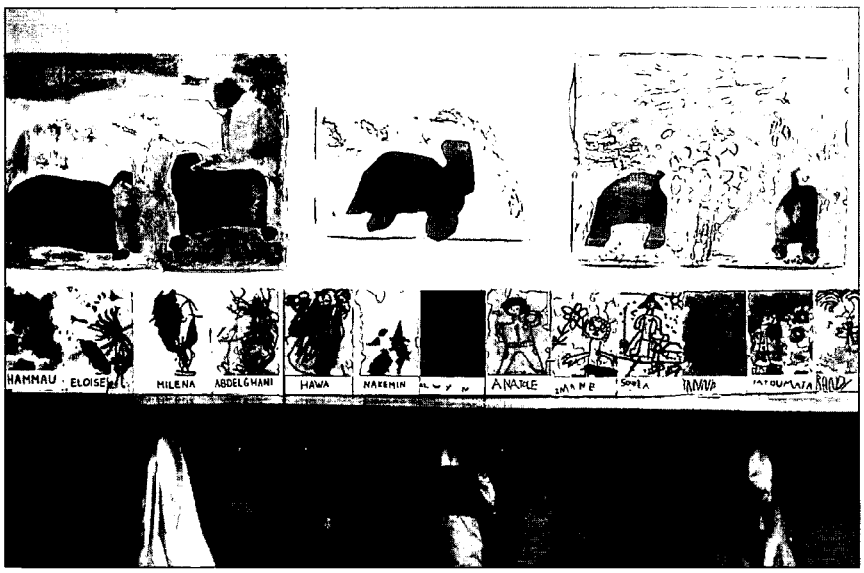
Mothers drop off their children at an *école maternelle* in a ZEP in Nantes

There is consensus in France that the best strategy is to "bathe" all children in the French language from the age of two or three in école maternelle so that they develop proficiency by the time they enter primary school.

"The national language builds and unites us," writes former Minister of Education Jack Lang in the preface to the new national curriculum for preschools in France. "Every child should be able to enter this common house and feel at home."

In both France and the U.S., learning the language of the country is viewed as a critical tool for economic integration and social cohesion. In France, this process begins in the preschool years. Transmitting the French language and culture is a fundamental objective of the *école maternelle* for all children, but particularly for those from immigrant or minority backgrounds. Some of these children may speak a bit of French in the home, but for others—and their parents—preschool is the first opportunity to be exposed to the French language and traditions. For all children, the guiding philosophy is that feeling comfortable with the French language and knowing and respecting the values of French society will facilitate learning and improve chances for success in school and later life.

There is consensus in France that the best strategy is to "bathe" all children in the French language from the age of two or three in *école maternelle* so that they develop proficiency by the time they enter primary school. We observed this strategy in practice at several preschools. At the École Maternelle Marx Dormoy, for example, located in a priority education area in northern Paris, children in the class for two-year olds represent many countries: China, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, Morocco, Tunisia, and Vietnam. Most were born in France, but few speak French at home. As none of the children were in child care before entering *école maternelle*, the teachers pay considerable attention to this first transition from the home. At the beginning of the year, for instance, the teachers organized a two-week period to ease the children's sepa-



The variety of names on children's artwork in the Ecole Marx Dormoy in Paris attests to their ethnic and cultural diversity: Hammau, Eloise, Milena, Abdelghani, Hawa, Nakemin...

ration from their parents. Teachers also asked the parents to put together a family photo album to help them communicate with the children at school *and* to get to know their families better. In order to communicate with parents, the teachers work with a translator or other parents who can help with interpretation. Also, the school uses very little written correspondence because the parents do not read French (many are not literate in their native language).

This preschool has adopted a fairly typical approach to working with children from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The teachers talk a lot with children during the day, so that they become familiar with hearing French. They use varied verbal and non-verbal strategies for communication, such as trying to match actions and words through games. Sometimes they show children photos that correspond with certain vocabulary words. Through closely observing the children, the teachers have discerned how every child learns, and they support each one in tailored ways. Teachers also have learned a few words in the children's home languages in order to show that they value and support their charges' linguistic and cultural diversity; the main objective, however, is to have the children learn to say the same words in French. Several of the preschools we visited also offer French language courses to immigrant parents, as a way of easing the transition of children's families to their new country.

At the École Maternelle Marx Dormoy, as in other preschools in France, teachers encourage parents to engage their children in more conversation at home. "We want parents to speak with their children as much as possible—regardless of the language they choose to use in the home," explains a teacher of two-year olds. "Our concern is that some parents communicate very little with their young children in any language." A preschool director told us that emphasizing the home language also cuts down resistance to learning French in school. Besides, she noted, "knowing several languages is enriching and necessary in today's global society." Most people in France agree, however, that it is not part of the school's responsibility to promote bilingualism during class hours. Private bilingual schools in some areas provide an option for families who can afford them.

Both France and the U.S. face increasing demographic heterogeneity as a result of immigration. In the U.S. today, children of immigrants are the fastest growing segment of the population under 18; one out of every five children is an immigrant or has immigrant parents. Both nations recognize, too, that early language competency is important to children's

cognitive, emotional, and social development. Lack of proficiency in the adopted country's language, aggravated by problems resulting from linguistic isolation and disadvantages associated with minority status, is a severe challenge to assimilation and societal unity in both France and the U.S.

France and the U.S. differ significantly, though, in their attitudes about, and approaches to, cultural and linguistic diversity. France, like several other countries with growing immigrant populations, including Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands, favors language immersion and training to help build a shared culture and language. The U.S. has taken a bilingual and multicultural approach that is more similar to practices in some other nations. In Sweden, Norway, and the United Kingdom, for example, bilingual assistants work in preschools with new immigrant children and parents to help strengthen their home language and develop proficiency in the adopted country's language. Teachers are encouraged to recognize and build upon children's cultural, religious, and ethnic differences as a means of fostering learning and tolerance.

English language acquisition is a politically-charged issue in the U.S. with much disagreement about the appropriate strategy to be pursued. Most of the debate focuses on the K-12 public school system, but the issue trickles down into the preschool years, especially given the increasing role of the states in pre-kindergarten programs. Advocates of an "English only" approach argue that schools should teach children English as quickly as possible, even at the expense of their home language. They claim that bilingual education prevents children from mastering English and succeeding in school. On the other hand, advocates of bilingual education view English language learners as resourceful, rather than deficient, in language. Pointing to research showing the cultural, economic, and cognitive benefits of bilingualism for children, they support programs that provide instruction in both the children's primary language and English. They argue that the quality of English exposure counts more than the quantity.

There is more agreement on goals and approaches in France. All the teachers and immigrant parents we interviewed cited learning the French language and culture as a primary goal of the *école maternelle.* There are few formal attempts to support home language development, but parents are encouraged to do so outside of school. "The unambivalent commitment to having every child speak standard French is the most important aspect of the French system," says Barbara Bowman. "Whether such a commitment could work, or should work, in the U.S. is another issue. Nevertheless, community agreement that this is the number one goal makes designing a program easier and probably makes it easier for children to learn." In the U.S., conflicting perspectives and expectations around children's early language development often lead to inconsistent practices in the classroom. The lack of clarity of goals can have negative implications for children's learning, with children mastering neither English nor their home language. Caught between multiple languages and cultures, children's self-esteem may suffer as well.

"The unambivalent commitment to having every child speak standard French is the most important aspect of the French system. Whether such a commitment could work, or should work, in the U.S. is another issue. Nevertheless, community agreement that this is the number one goal makes designing a program easier and probably makes it easier for children to learn." – **Barbara Bowman, Professor at Erikson Institute**

Republican Model of Integration in France

The approach toward the education of children from immigrant backgrounds in France is strongly influenced by an ideology of integration known as the Republican model, because it was initiated during the Third Republic (1870-1940). First developed as a means of integrating regional groups in France, and later extended to individual "guest workers" of European origin, the Republican model now applies to both recent immigrant families and those of immigrant background. According to French sociologist Agnès Van Zanten, the model seeks to progressively assimilate children into the cultural system, integrate them into the economic and social system through work, and eventually accord them rights to political participation as full members of French society.

A mother of West African origin picks her daughter up from school.

This model relies on state institutions, particularly schools, for its transmission. In theory, schools have offered all children an equal opportunity to successfully integrate into French society. Equality was synonymous with uniformity, including a homogeneous teaching force that would teach the same curriculum to a variety of children throughout France. This approach was little questioned until research in the 1970s found that equal treatment did not ensure equal educational results for lower-class French children and immigrant children. As noted earlier, French priority education was the first major acknowledgement in policy of the inequalities in schooling and the need for differential treatment for different school populations.

Many immigrant families in France still come from former French colonies and are familiar with French language and culture. The growing diversity of origins and cultures among immigrants has tested the Republic model of integration. Children and their families now emigrate from countries such as China and the former Soviet Republics. Another challenge is increasing residential segregation, as the middle class departs poor neighborhoods in cities around France. There are now schools in urban areas where 90% of students are from immigrant backgrounds. This lack of diversity makes it difficult for schools to promote cultural and social integration. Moreover, it is hard to "bathe" children in the French language and culture when few children in the classroom speak French at home. However, while social and ethnic segregation exist in France, there is still more heterogeneity in low-income neighborhoods than in American inner cities. In neighborhoods like the Goutte d'Or in Paris, many ethnic and cultural groups coexist, and the local schools include children from many backgrounds and languages.

Today, about 6% of preschoolers and elementary school children in France are non-French nationals, most commonly from Morocco, Algeria, other African countries, Turkey, and Portugal. The proportion of immigrant or foreign children in preschools in ZEPs—20% on average—is five times

higher than the proportion in non-ZEPs. Until recently, Republican laws in France have forbidden national census data to distinguish individuals or groups in the population by national or ethnic origin, seeing it as a form of discrimination.[1]

Overall, children from immigrant backgrounds are more likely to have difficulties in school initially than are other children, but their risk of school failure decreases over time. At the primary school level, immigrant children are more likely than their French counterparts from similar social and family backgrounds (and twice as likely as French children overall) to repeat a school year or to be assigned to special education classes. The situation changes as children progress in the education system. By the end of junior high school, after controlling for social and family backgrounds, foreign children are less likely to be placed in special education than are French children from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Immigrant children improve academically as they become more acquainted with the education system.

The aforementioned report by Catherine Moisan and Jacky Simon indicates that a combination of three factors affect the school performance of children from immigrant families. Children who have trouble with French because another language is spoken at home, those who arrived more recently or are less well integrated into French society, and those who live in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations or with tensions among immigrant groups, are more likely to experience difficulties in school.

Language as a Tool for Integration: The Primary Years

Following this Republican model of integration, since 1970, primary schools have implemented short-term interventions of language support for children ages 7 to 11 who arrive in France without adequate French proficiency. Small "initiation classes" (*classes d'initiation* or CLIN) familiarize children with the French school system as well as with the French language. About 60% to 70% of children in initiation classes are foreign nationals, mostly from Algeria, Morocco, and other African countries. More than half of the initiation classes are located in ZEPs. Children spend at most a year in these settings and are mainstreamed into regular classes with their peers as soon as possible. The teachers of initiation classes generally do not have specific training to work with children from immigrant backgrounds, but some are familiar with methods for teaching French as a second or foreign language. The approach in the CLIN resembles the pull-out English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in some U.S. schools, which focus on English-only instruction.

Currently, about half of the 11,400 new immigrant children in elementary school with limited French proficiency attend initiation classes, and about a third begin directly in regular classrooms and receive supplemental tutoring to help them "catch up" with the rest of the class. The remaining students do not receive any additional support. As the number of supports has not kept up with the need, schools have developed patchwork solutions to accommodate children who speak little, if any, French in their classrooms.

We visited an initiation class at the École Élémentaire Rue Doudeauville, in the northern part of Paris. Pictures of children and flags from around the world decorated the walls to help welcome the children from Algeria, Bulgaria, China, Guinea, Morocco, Russia, and Sri Lanka. The days of the week were posted in five languages and French.

[1] In addition, the definitions used and data collected on "foreigners," "immigrants," and "minorities" are not always clear and vary across studies, leading to difficulties in interpreting the findings.

Isabelle Haton, the teacher, conducted the class entirely in French. We observed a session during which the children listened to a tape about a young girl who was going to the market for her mother. Madame Haton asked the children questions about what they had heard—"What can we find at the market?"—and the children practiced vocabulary, using pictures of bread, milk, and fruit.

Even though the children's language proficiency varied greatly—some children spoke French with apparent ease, while others had great difficulty putting together a sentence—the teacher made sure that every child participated in the lesson. Several children eagerly waved their hands in the air and some expressed great disappointment if they were not called on immediately. The children in the initiation class currently attend math and gym class with their age peers, and after one year, most children will enter mainstream classes for the full day. Madame Haton stressed that ongoing communication with other teachers helps assure that her students successfully integrate into regular classrooms.

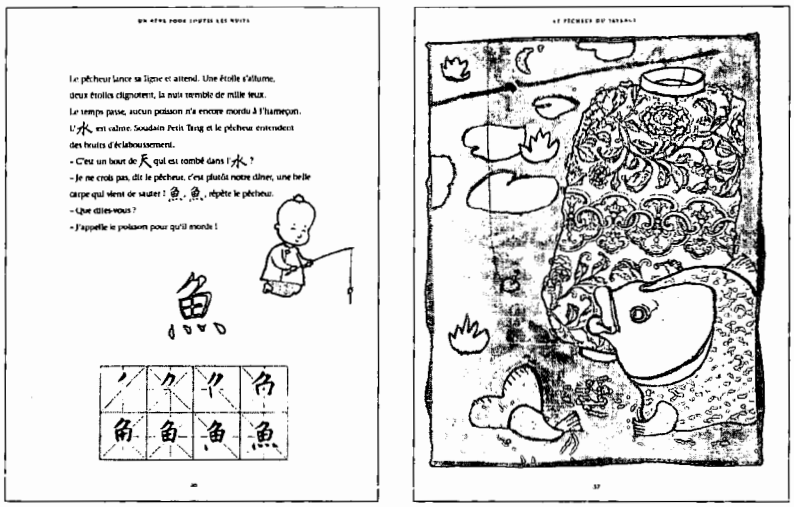
The Association *Cultures en Partage* distributes multicultural materials like this book, called "Playing at Writing in Chinese"

Debates About Multicultural Education

In a ZEP classroom in Belleville, an immigrant neighborhood in Paris, children play a memory game to learn how to recognize Chinese characters and the words they represent. In a reading corner, beautifully illustrated Chinese stories introduce young readers to Chinese calligraphy incorporated within the French text. One book called *Playing at Writing in Chinese* teaches young readers how to form their own Chinese characters. Since 1999, the non-profit organization called *Cultures en Partage* or "Sharing Cultures" has made and distributed a variety of such bilingual educational materials to preschools and elementary schools. Funded by local governments, the association is currently working with ZEP schools in three neighborhoods in Paris. About 50% to 60% of children in these schools are from China, mostly from the region of Wenzhou. The children speak a regional dialect and often Mandarin, too, but the activities are targeted at all students to promote cross-cultural learning.

After teachers discovered that first-generation immigrant children from China were arriving in first grade without strong French and often ending up in centers for children with learning and behavioral difficulties, Sharing Cultures started working with *écoles maternelles*. Many of the children's parents are quite young and do not have extended family in France to help them with child rearing. As part of their community outreach work, staff meet regularly with teachers and parents to translate and facilitate discussions about how to support their children's learning.

While some schools have experimented with multicultural education by partnering with non-profit organizations, like Sharing Cultures, other schools with large immigrant populations have tried offering courses in children's home languages and cultures (ELCO or *Enseignement de langues et cultures d'origine*). These courses are taught by native speakers, usually through a contract between the French government and the embassy of the country concerned. As part of its recent emphasis on the study of foreign languages, the French Ministry of Education has opened these



Traditional Chinese stories in French introduce young readers to Chinese characters

courses to children who are not immigrants.

Another tool is regional resource centers for the education of new immigrants and gypsies (*Centres académiques pour la scolarisation des nouveaux arrivants et des enfants du voyage* or CASNAV) which provide teachers with information and training about the issues related to immigrant children and multicultural education. These centers encourage teachers to experiment with pedagogy that helps integrate immigrant children into the education system, while respecting the variety of cultures. Unlike the ELCO program, these efforts do not extend to mother tongue instruction.

From an American perspective, there is less support in France than in the U.S. to incorporate different languages and cultures into the curriculum. In American early childhood programs deemed "developmentally appropriate," educators acknowledge and respect children's home languages and cultures in order to strengthen children's connections not only to their home communities and families, but also to teachers and educational settings. For example, children read bilingual books, and pictures around the room reflect the diversity of the children in the program. In programs serving large populations of English language learners, furniture and other supplies usually are labeled in two or more languages. They employ diverse staff who can draw on their familiarity with several languages and cultures in their interactions with children.

In French preschools, teachers try to honor children's cultures and languages in order to make those from diverse backgrounds feel welcome, but these efforts are not a major focus. For example, teachers may invite mothers to cook regional dishes for the class picnic or to celebrate Chinese New Year and other holidays. Parents have the main responsibility of fostering their children's home language and culture. "We did not hear any other languages and saw almost no representations of diverse cultures in books, posters, activities, or other materials," says Linda Espinosa.

Van Zanten and others argue that the impact of multicultural activities has been restricted because of a lack of sufficient funding and relevant education materials, the limited pedagogical competence of teachers assigned to teach native language courses, and the gap between the language taught and the dialects spoken in children's homes. There is also resistance on ideological grounds. French critics argue that one of the difficulties with bilingual and multicultural education is that by accentuating children's differences, these activities interfere with the schools' mission to build social cohesion around a shared language and culture. Also, they point out that what is perceived as a child's culture of origin by the host country is often foreign to the child concerned. This is particularly the case for children who are born in France, who consider

themselves French, and have only a tenuous connection to the country from which their parents or grandparents emigrated.

From a French perspective, expecting children to identify with their so-called culture of origin and reinforcing this group identity in school equates with forcing a particular identity on children. This approach can be particularly problematic when traditions from the home country conflict with French cultural norms. For example, if schools encourage girls to identify themselves with cultures that routinely practice female circumcision, are they condoning this practice? This is an extreme example, but one often cited in French discussions about difficulties in addressing cultural diversity in the education system. Finally, certain political figures and educational authorities have expressed concern that activities which encourage the teaching of immigrant children's languages and cultures will become a vehicle for the transmission of religious values that "threaten" the foundations of secular French public education.

"While the French are averse to singling out and providing special attention to individuals or individual groups, the écoles maternelles manifest a respect for cultural and linguistic diversity and a culture of high expectations for all. However, it's also unambiguously clear that all children are expected to learn French as soon as they can, and preschools play a major role in ensuring children's fluency in French." – **Jane Henderson, Executive Director of the California Children and Families Commission**

For similar reasons, addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in the training of teachers is not a priority in France. If the school is supposed to treat all children the same, according to French values, it is difficult to argue that teachers should pay more attention to children's cultural and linguistic differences. Most preschool teachers have not had any special training to work with children who are French-language learners. In addition, few students in teacher training institutions are familiar with the living conditions in poor, immigrant neighborhoods, where many of their students live. As a result, many new teachers are unprepared to confront issues that arise in the classroom related to children's cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity.

We did hear some concerns expressed about the limited attention to culturally and linguistically diverse children in teacher training. For example, one researcher at the CASNAV in Paris called the pre-service training for working with multilingual and multicultural populations "grossly neglected" and attributed it to a lack of political will to focus on the education of non-francophone children. In response to the needs of practitioners, some teacher training institutions offer modules and workshops related to multiculturalism for student teachers or for those already in the classroom. However, few teachers we interviewed were aware of these in-service training opportunities. "The French approach would benefit from increased foreign-language and other cultural training for teachers, to increase their effectiveness helping children of immigrants adapt to French society," Donald Hernandez suggests.

Another difference is that in the U.S it is viewed as positive for teachers to reflect the diversity of the children enrolled in the program. Efforts to hire multilingual and multicultural staff can help create links between families and professionals, though research shows that it is even more important to hire staff who embrace diversity as an asset and are willing to learn about traditions and backgrounds

that are different from their own. In France, there are few teachers from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. Those who do become teachers are likely to get their jobs through non-traditional routes—for example, non-certified, substitute teachers who are hired for permanent positions in schools with shortages of trained teachers.

When the delegates asked people in France whether there are efforts to recruit teachers from diverse backgrounds, respondents generally opposed what Americans would consider as affirmative action, citing that, according to the values of the French Republic, everyone is given the same opportunity to become a teacher. In other words, it would be unfair if the teacher training institutions changed entry requirements in order to increase representation of certain groups. Moreover, assigning teachers to schools based on common ethnicity or culture draws attention to children's differences and is considered a barrier to children's successful integration into French society. From an American point of view, however, it seems that the French education system has not recognized the institutionalized obstacles that prevent diverse students from passing the entrance exams and joining the teaching profession.

Jane Henderson summarizes the French approach: "While the French are averse to singling out and providing special attention to individuals or individual groups, the *écoles maternelles* manifest a respect for cultural and linguistic diversity and a culture of high expectations for all. However, it's also unambiguously clear that all children are expected to learn French as soon as they can, and preschools play a major role in ensuring children's fluency in French." Even though the philosophy and approach to culturally and linguistically diverse children are very different in the U.S., the delegates were inspired by this unwavering commitment to helping children from immigrant backgrounds adjust to the language and traditions of French society. In particular, they found that there is much we can learn from the shared vision among families, professionals, policymakers, and citizens which embraces early education as a vector for social integration. As Donald Hernandez notes, "Both nations seek policies and programs that assure equality of educational opportunity for all children, but especially for children in immigrant, racial/ethnic minority, and other social and economically disadvantaged circumstances. The aim is to create a fair and just society that allows all children to enter adulthood achieving their full potential to contribute to the economy and society."

Artistic expression is an important component of the curriculum in *école maternelle*

CHAPTER FIVE

Bridging Families, Schools and Communities

A group of mothers and the school principal meet with FAF study tour delegates at the Ecole Frédéric Mistral outside Paris

As the bell rings at the École Octobre, mothers, fathers, friends, and relatives line up at the entrance to greet their children and take them home for lunch. They chat informally about the upcoming school fair as they wait. Several parents have younger children in tow or in strollers. Established in 1934, the École Octobre is the oldest school in Alfortville, a town located on the southeastern periphery of Paris, and is classified as a historical monument. There are two doorways—one for girls, one for boys—left over from the days before coeducation. The school was selected as a ZEP in 1998. Most of the gathered families live across from the school in the Cité Veron, a large public housing project built in 1933. Administrators, teachers, and parents tell us that the residents of the project have a negative reputation in the town, because many are poor and many are immigrants.

Today, the atmosphere in the Cité Veron is warm and friendly. People stop and greet each other by name as they pass in a courtyard with trees and benches. The men shake hands and the women kiss each other lightly on the cheeks. As the leaders of the school's *Comité des Mamans* or "Mommy Committee" guide us farther through the neighborhood, a group of eager young children surrounds us. "What are you doing here?" the children ask, curious to know about the strangers. "We are showing visitors from America our *quartier*," the mothers answer. They explain to us that this community spirit prevents violence and other forms of delinquency that characterize many disadvantaged neighborhoods in the Parisian suburbs. "Young people are less likely to act out here, because they know that everybody is watching," says one mother.

Adultes-Relais Link Families and Schools

One of our guides in Alfortville is Solange. Originally from Cameroon, Solange has a daughter who attended the École Octobre. Solange is what the French call a *femme-relais* or "resource woman"

who links schools with the community. She first did this informally in the neighborhood, just by talking to families with school-aged children. "I saw children were playing in the streets and told the parents, 'You can't leave them here. They need to be in school.' " Then for several years, she volunteered to act as an intermediary between schools and families, including those from other immigrant communities. For example, she became friendly with some Mali families, even though she does not speak Malinke.

When the school needed a mediator, they decided to hire Solange because of her already established network of families. She has earned the families' trust, and is well-known and well-respected in the community. She goes to families' homes, talks to them about their problems, and connects them with the appropriate health, housing, and social services. By helping families navigate the French bureaucracy, a daunting task for those with little French proficiency, mediators like Solange help relieve the isolation felt by many immigrant families. Many immigrant parents fear the staffs of official institutions, like social welfare services and even schools, but they accept Solange, having no worry that she will ask them for residency permits or working papers.

Leaders of the Mommy Committee at the École Octobre give a tour of Alfortville

The *adulte-relais* program is a recent initiative, created by the French government just two years ago, to officially recognize and incorporate the role that women like Solange had assumed in low-income neighborhoods. Over the past year, the government has signed 2,000 conventions with employers (almost exclusively nonprofit associations) as part of a national effort to strengthen the social ties of families living in the most disadvantaged communities. The government plans on recruiting 10,000 workers in the program over the next three years.

According to then Minister of the Cities, Claude Bertolone, who launched the program, *adultes-relais* facilitate social relations between neighborhood residents, and between residents and public services, by helping to remove barriers to communication and to resolve misunderstandings and conflicts in the daily lives of the cities' most marginalized inhabitants. As part of the program, schools, hospitals, or government offices (for example, health, housing, family services) can directly hire *adultes-relais* with three-year contracts. The jobs are reserved for people over the age of 30 who live in a disadvantaged urban area, and who are either unemployed or in a government employment program. The French government covers 80% of the

cost of the mediator's salary and the employer, association, and/or local authority pays the remaining 20%.

In the education sector, *adultes-relais* like Solange provide outreach to parents on behalf of teachers. They encourage parents, particularly those who are least likely to visit the schools, to come in and meet with teachers, and sometimes they accompany parents to school meetings and help translate. They explain to parents why they need to fill out school-related forms and help them to do so. "Some parents do not understand the role and function of the school," Solange explains. "They expect too much from the school and the teachers." By bridging cultures and languages, she adds, "mediators can help create more cohesion in the community."

During the school lunch break, families with young children gather outside a public housing complex across from the École Octobre in Alfortville

Working with *adultes-relais* sends the message that teachers recognize the gap between schools and the social and cultural experiences of many families, and that the school accepts and values cultural diversity. As one school official in Paris put it, "schools sometimes have a hard time accepting that not everyone is made out of the same mold." In addition, many teachers are not familiar with the cultures of immigrant families, and mediators can help inform them about the diverse families they serve.

With the growing recognition of and need for *adultes-relais*, many regional governments have developed specialized training courses for mediators. A credential is being developed for the new profession. Solange is currently participating in mediator training that includes 11 months of fieldwork and courses at an Adult Education Center in the nearby town of Créteil. In these and other courses, mediators develop such skills as how to manage stress, control crises, and lead groups. They also learn how to demystify the French bureaucracy by studying the legislation, regulations, and public institutions and their representatives which affect the daily lives of families in their neighborhoods. Some employers also take part in training to learn how to best use adultes-relais as resources.

In the U.S., schools, early childhood programs, and family support services commonly employ family workers who are familiar with the communities of the children served. About one-third of paid Head Start staff are parents of former or current children in the program. Family resource workers and teachers in early childhood education often live in the communities served by the program which helps them bridge the worlds of home and school.

In France, the introduction of the *adultes-relais* program has prompted some concern. Some fear that these paraprofessionals will compete with social workers and other civil servants. Others view hiring staff based on where they live or their ethnic or cultural background as more divisive than inclusive. These are the same arguments we heard to explain why France does not actively seek to promote diversity in the teaching profession. Relying on mediators, some worry, may lead to a false belief that communication between teachers and parents is only possible when a third party is involved. Others fret that because the vast majority of mediators are women, fathers will be further marginalized from the education system. Despite these concerns, the recent development of an organized mediator occupation, with formal training and government support, is a promising strategy to link public services and families.

Early Education as a Vector for Social Integration

The neighborhood around the École Octobre in the northern part of Alfortville is very urban and diverse. The area is being revitalized to improve the poor housing stock; run-down and boarded-up buildings are being refurbished and decrepit buildings torn down. In addition to the many recent immigrant families who live in public housing projects, there are low-income, working-class families who dwell in apartments and small houses and have lived here for generations. Known as the *grande pauvreté de France* or "France's extreme poor," these low-income families often lack the family networks and supports that exist in some of the communities of recent immigrants.

The French government recognizes that the concentrated deprivation in ZEP schools and neighborhoods compounds the underachievement of many students and impedes the realization of national goals of social inclusion. Increasingly, priority education policy is linked to urban and community development policies.

On the opposite side of the school from the Cité Veron is Apollonie, a new complex of attractive townhouses painted white and pink and other soft colors with bright shutters and well-tended window boxes of flowers. Our guides from the Mommy Committee tell us that Apollonie residents regard families from the public housing project as if "we come from another planet." Indeed, the tree-lined street named after Simone de Beauvoir seems a world apart from the hustle and bustle of the Cité Veron. As we pass a small square with a children's playground and a view of the Seine river, we see a sign announcing that the park is "reserved for the residents."

Families in Apollonie have been requesting derogations or exemptions to enroll their children in other public schools in the area. Our guides from the Mommy Committee explain that residents do not want to send their children to the École Octobre because it has too many immigrants. The school has encouraged local elected officials to refuse these requests for waivers in an effort to prevent segregation of children by socioeconomic or ethnic background. The staff at École Octobre is working to improve the image of the school so that more affluent parents are less wary of enrolling their children. Agnès Van Zanten's research shows that parents of preschoolers are more willing to have their children attend the local *école maternelle* than they are to have them attend the local elementary or junior high school, in part because they can decide who plays with their children when they are young. The French acknowledge that overcoming negative stereotypes and getting families to improve their views of the school and to appreciate the diverse com-

munity it serves is a challenge that requires intensive work with parents.

The French government recognizes that the concentrated deprivation in ZEP schools and neighborhoods compounds the underachievement of many students and impedes the realization of national goals of social inclusion. Increasingly, priority education policy is linked to urban and community development policies. As part of the *politique de la ville* or "urban policy," more than 250 mayors have signed seven-year contracts with the national government to improve the living conditions of families and foster social integration in disadvantaged urban communities. Mayors develop the objectives, budget, time frame, and evaluation plan, tailoring the contracts to local economic and social conditions. The local initiatives are intended to be cross-sectoral and involve a range of partners from education to law enforcement to housing authorities. Thus, for example, some cities have used this program's funding to change the urban landscape—demolishing big towers of subsidized apartments and building smaller structures for mixed-income residences—while others put the money towards employing young people to help curb violence on buses and subways or in schools.

School is out at the École Octobre

The *politique de la ville* encourages cities to develop their plans for urban and community development to coincide with the educational objectives of the ZEP "contracts for success." Indeed, many of the same partners are involved in developing the plans for the two initiatives. In particular, the ZEP Coordinators are actively engaged in activities that meet objectives of both priority education policy and the *politique de la ville*. Several schools we visited were able to implement outreach programs with parents and residents in their community with the additional resources from urban policy. For example, in Alfortville, the funding for the *contrat de ville* helped fund both the mediators and the Mommy Committee in Alfortville. The city of Gennevillers used a grant to support a drop-in child-care center run by immigrant women in a public housing project. The French collaborative, interagency approach draws residents into efforts to improve social cohesion and quality of life in their communities.

Reaching Out to Parents

Solange points to a dismal and neglected empty lot across from the École Octobre and proudly tells us that this is the site of the annual year-end *Fête des écoles* or "school festival," a grand celebration organized by the children, parents, teachers, and residents of the town of Alfortville. At the party, the men take brief breaks from their games of *boules* to share heaping plates of couscous, bacalau, baba ganoush, and

other culinary delights with their families. A few youngsters with their faces painted in vivid colors hug their preschool teachers, as if by letting go they will lose the memories of the experiences they have shared during the school year.

Over the years, the school staff has worked hard to create a place in school for parents from diverse backgrounds. Alfortville was part of the *banlieue rouge* (the Communist "red belt" around Paris) with the political will to accommodate refugees. A strong Armenian community has lived in the area since 1915, and the Deputy Mayor is of Armenian origin. The school population also includes *primo-arrivants* or "new arrivals," mostly from Algeria and Turkey. There are also second- and third-generation immigrants from Portugal who are well integrated into French society. Teachers seek to address immigrant mothers' worries about school and build their self-confidence, and they are starting to see the results. For example, several Mali mothers who had moved into better housing conditions in other towns come back to the school to participate in the school fair. Some remain involved in activities even though their children left the school more than three years ago.

The Mommy Committee at the École Octobre supports the school's efforts to engage parents. All French schools have an elected Parent Council that participates in the School Council. The Mommy Committee is a more informal organization that complements the work of the official Parent Council. Created three years ago by a group of concerned mothers, the school's *Comité des Mamans* nurtures links between the schools and the community by providing opportunities for parents to support each other and to exchange information about education-related issues. The group has organized a range of activities, from after-school homework help to cultural events that stimulate children's interest in learning. One very popular evening featured storytellers from African, French, and Asian backgrounds who told traditional cultural tales. According to the primary school director, "the committee's work gives children another perspective and shows them that they can learn in environments outside the classroom." At the beginning of *école maternelle*, the committee sponsors a welcome session for the new parents to address their concerns and answer questions.

The Mommy Committee's work probably would not be as successful without a school management team which takes "a whole-family approach." Since the 1980s, schools in France have developed closer relationships with families and view them increasingly as partners in education. Teachers working in ZEPs have mobilized to make the schools more understandable to parents, and particularly to communicate the schools' expectations of their children. One common tool is the *cahier d'élève* or "student notebook" that children carry between parents and teachers on a regular basis. A preschooler's notebook may contain examples of artwork and emerging writing, school announcements, comments from teachers, and comments and questions from parents.

Working in partnership with parents represents a shift in culture for French schools which traditionally have not included outreach to parents as part of their mission. From the perspective of the teachers, some parents seem disengaged from their children's education, or even neglectful. They rarely show up for meetings, fail to fill out required forms, and seem disinterested in their children's progress or challenges. Yet research in France shows that far from being disinterested, working-class parents, regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, have strong expectations of the

schools as a means of their children achieving a better life than they themselves have had. One mother from the Ivory Coast explained: "I am pleased my child will have more educational opportunities than I did." The parents with whom we spoke were extremely supportive of the work of teachers, recognizing that school can provide enriching experiences. "My child is more alert and fulfilled than if he had stayed at home," says one mother. Most parents value the *école maternelle* for giving children opportunities to share, follow rules, and get along with other youngsters, as well as preparing them for elementary school.

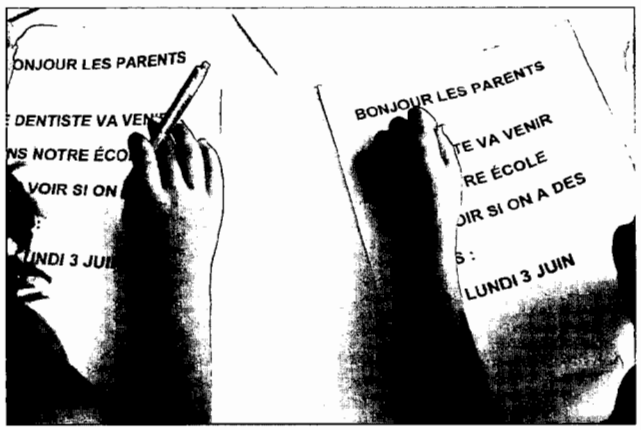
According to French sociologist Daniel Glasman, teachers need to understand that families from working-class backgrounds can have remarkably diverse responses to their children's education. Many parents in France view teachers as experts and accord them complete authority when it comes to the content and methods of education. Some parents will actively seek out teachers and enthusiastically respond to their invitation to meet, while others are reluctant to get involved because they have painful school experiences in their pasts, face difficulties in communicating in French, or have problems related to unemployment, substance abuse, and poverty. At times, styles of communication and attitudes between parents and teachers may differ and conflict.

While similar obstacles exist in the U.S., parental involvement is viewed as a more integral part of early education than in France. Parents in America see themselves as partners with teachers in their children's early development and learning. Jane Henderson believes that France could learn from U.S. practices. Parental participation is "a key to the success of improving student performance in K-12 schools," she says, "and the younger it starts, the more lasting it is." Parental involvement is a central component of American early intervention programs, such as Head Start and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers.

Some preschools in France have surmounted the barriers to parental involvement. The École Maternelle Françoise Dolto, situated in a ZEP in Nantes, has made outreach to parents a priority. From the look of the well-kept, low-rise residential buildings shaded by large pine trees around the school on a calm and sunny spring day, it is difficult to imagine that youth gangs set cars on fire in the neighborhood almost every weekend and recently vandalized a child-care center in the local social services center. Fear of bombings has led police officials to place barricades in front of the school to prevent cars from parking. Parents and teachers complained to us about fights in the schoolyard. Some of the conflict arises from the fact that children who attend the school belong to two distinct social and residential communities. On one side of the school, a public housing project houses the most disadvantaged families of Nantes' working class. Many of the parents are quite young, with little formal education. A sedentary community of gypsies lives on the other side. While the two communities rarely mix outside of school, when they do interact, tension is common.

A goal of ZEP policy in Nantes is to reduce violence by encouraging dialogue, communication, and other forms of conflict resolution. This goal complements the school's efforts to promote parents' involvement in their children's learning. The school leadership has pursued various strategies to bring the two communities in contact, allow them to discover what they have in common, and, in some cases, build better relations outside the school. Staff participated in a workshop to learn

how to listen to families and to familiarize themselves with different cultures. Although at some preschools in France parents must leave their children at the gates, it is becoming more common for teachers to welcome families inside the school and the classrooms. The École Maternelle Françoise Dolto has created a common space in the front foyer where children from all classes and their parents mingle for an hour every morning. Parents help children put their name up on the board to mark attendance, sign up for lunch using a pictogram, and choose a snack for the day. Mothers we interviewed described the school as a "meeting place" for getting to know other families. Staff have noticed that the climate has improved in both the school and the neighborhood and that there are fewer violent incidents.



Letters to parents announcing "the dentist is coming to our school"

A teacher using plaster molds of teeth in a lesson on oral hygiene also meant to foster analytical skills

While teachers are hesitant to interfere in the private lives of families, they do seek to address issues that affect their children's learning. They approach delicate subjects with families such as sleep, hygiene, and eating habits by including them in different educational activities. For example, as part of a nutrition unit developed in cooperation with the local maternal and child health clinic, the École Maternelle Françoise Dolto invited parents and children to eat a healthy breakfast together at local cafés. Last year, teachers were concerned that children were watching television until late at night and were coming to school exhausted. In response, the school spent a week instructing parents about sleep by sharing films and books about children's biological rhythms. To address concern about dental hygiene, children learned how to brush their teeth at school and parents were given the chance to ask a dentist questions. These messages spread from children to parents throughout the neighborhood. According to the principal, the school is becoming "a center of learning for the community."

A recent national survey of ZEPs found that teachers' views about parents have evolved considerably in recent years. According to Anny Aline, a senior official at the Ministry of Education, teachers in ZEP schools increasingly recognize parents as "true partners who are capable of igniting the spark of children's learning." She feels that efforts to involve parents in meaningful partnerships have visibly improved the climate and the image of the schools. Yet from an American perspective, efforts to involve parents seem limited—for example, they may include one-time activities,

such as chaperoning a field trip, rather than ongoing collaborations. Similarly, most school efforts involve either making the educational system more transparent or informing parents about how to be better parents rather than drawing on parents' knowledge and experience. "Although the concept of working with families varied by program, several appeared to want to fit the family into the program and not adjust the program to the needs of the family," says Linda Espinosa.

A common challenge in both France and the U.S. is how to reach the most isolated families who are the most reluctant to participate in an educational system that they perceive as foreign or unwelcoming.

Partnerships Support Children's Learning

Recognition is growing in France that schools alone cannot address all the challenges faced by children, particularly in disadvantaged communities. In priority education areas, forming linkages, not only with parents, but with other services is considered good practice and essential to supporting children's development and learning. Preschool teachers, who have a strong professional identity as educators with a clear set of responsibilities, are quick to explain that they are not social workers. Teachers are not expected to conduct home visits or to counsel families on their personal problems. Instead, they can call on a network of specialists—health, nutrition, dental, psychological, special education—who are trained to identify and address the needs of children and families. These specialists are assigned to fewer schools in ZEPs than in other areas, which allows them to spend more time serving students in disadvantaged communities.

During our visit to the École Maternelle Françoise Dolto, for example, we met a school nurse who was conducting visual and hearing screening and a family counselor who was helping families with budgeting and other economic strategies. Doctors regularly visit preschools to see children for their obligatory check ups. For more serious problems, teachers can summon an interdisciplinary team of professionals, including psychologists, doctors, and social workers, to address children's needs holistically.

"Models of Excellence" Link Schools to their Communities

Priority education policy also aims to expose children from an early age to the traditions and institutions that form part of France's national heritage. Three-, four-, and five-year olds in *écoles maternelles* often go on field trips to museums, châteaux, and parks in France. Not only do these visits foster children's independence and understanding of the world around them, but they also provide them with resources that their families may not be able to provide. In priority education areas, schools can apply to the Ministry of Education to become a *pôle d'excellence scolaire* or a "model of excellence" through which they develop formal partnerships with cultural institutions, university or research laboratories, and businesses. Creators of the program hope alliances with prestigious institutions will improve the image of schools in the eyes of children, teachers, parents, community resi-

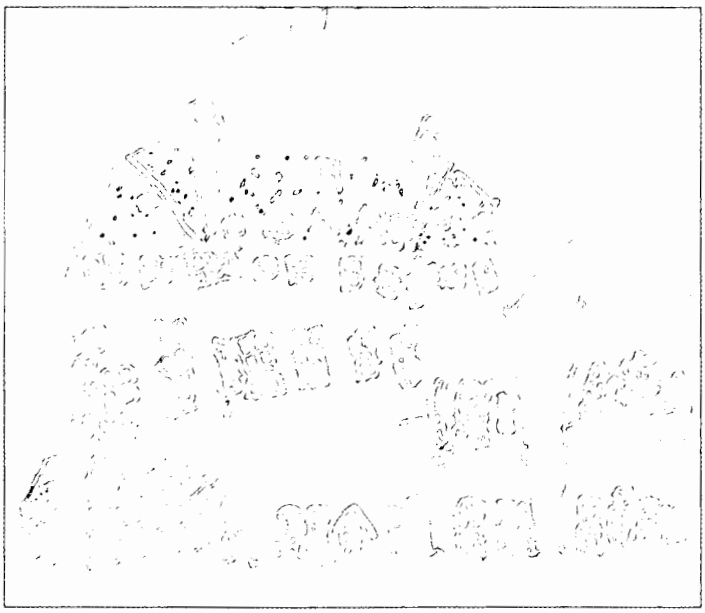
Recognition is growing in France that schools alone cannot address all the challenges faced by children, particularly in disadvantaged communities. In priority education areas, forming linkages, not only with parents, but with other services is considered good practice and essential to supporting children's development and learning.

dents, and local officials so that they will attract a more socioeconomically diverse student body.

One "model of excellence" is the École Maternelle de la rue d'Orsel in the 18th *arrondissement* in Paris. Preschool classes have formed a partnership with the Jeu de Paume museum of modern art. "The role of the school is to familiarize children with diverse places and diverse forms of art," explains a teacher in the program. "While the needs are stronger for this type of cultural exposure in ZEPs, because children may not otherwise go to museums, all children in France can benefit from such activities." Over the past three years, preschool teachers have taken part in workshops on modern art to prepare themselves for guiding the children through museum exhibits. The five-year olds in the *grande section* go to the museum three times a year and complete related projects before and after the visits. Teachers integrate themes from the exhibits into classroom activities, for example, by having children prepare a class summary of the exhibits they have seen.

"A major strength of the French approach is that the educational system hires members of local immigrant communities to act as liaison between the schools and community to foster understanding and close working relationship between parents and educators." – **Donald Hernandez, Professor of Sociology at the State University of New York, Albany.**

The teachers at the École Maternelle de la rue d'Orsel have extended this creative learning approach beyond the museum exhibits. The preschoolers recently went on a field trip where they spent four days in a château called "Les Fauvettes." Some children had never spent any time in the countryside and most had never spent so much time away from their families. During the trip, children rode ponies, went on nature walks, and learned to feed chickens, goats, and pigs on a nearby farm. The American mother we met, Dawn, described her son Luigi's experience as "important for his independence." After the field trip, the students made a model of the room where they stayed in the castle to learn about shapes, forms, and space. These cultural and outdoor activities broaden children's horizons and reinforce their learning in the classroom.



Luigi drew this picture of "Les Fauvettes" château where he and his classmates went on a four-day field trip

These efforts to bridge schools, families, and communities are an important pillar of priority education policy and offer three important lessons. First, those involved in similar initiatives in the U.S. might learn from the close relationship that has developed between priority education policy and urban development strategies. This approach acknowledges how the broader contexts of families and communities shape children's learning. Second,

because parents in France tend to be more involved in preschool than they are in later grades, the staff at some exemplary *écoles maternelles* in ZEPs find ways to reinforce this relationship and set a good tone for school-family relations in later grades. As Donald Hernandez notes, "A major strength of the French approach is that the educational system hires members of local immigrant communities to act as liaison between the schools and community to foster understanding and close working relationship between parents and educators." Finally, while American early care and education programs have a strong tradition of parental involvement, they might learn from how the French "models of excellence" expose children to the rich cultural and natural resources of their communities.

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CHAPTER SIX

Recommendations for Action

What can we take away from priority education policy in France? While there is much to be gained from studying the French policies and practices explored in this report, it is important to remember the unique historical, political, economic, and social contexts of the two countries. What works in a country with a more centralized public education system like France, for example, may not be feasible in the U.S., where education is a highly decentralized state responsibility. Also, as we have noted, the two countries have different starting points. France developed its early education system within the public schools over a century ago and it enjoys widespread support, but in the U.S. public backing for universal pre-kindergarten has begun to emerge only within the past decade and is still not widespread. Moreover, while the U.S. and France see education as key to achieving the common goals of equality of opportunity and social integration, the two countries have developed distinctly different approaches to the education of young children at risk of school failure.

As we consider what lessons America might adapt from the French experience, we need to take stock of our strengths and build on recent progress in early education policy and practice. One important asset is that a variety of programs already exist under different auspices—non-profit and for-profit centers, public schools, family child care, Head Start—offering choices to families for their children's early care and education. We do not need to start from scratch in building a system of services. On the other hand, families' choices are often constrained by the availability of options in their communities and by their limited ability to pay for quality programs. A second U.S. strength is the value placed on cultural diversity. The best American early childhood programs foster children's cultural and

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linguistic differences, and they seek to attract and retain a diverse teaching staff. Indeed, some American experts believe France could learn from the American approach to cultural diversity. A third strength is the value placed on parental involvement in education, and on parenting education. Efforts to reach out to families, particularly the most vulnerable, should continue to be supported. Fourth, the U.S. has a strong body of research on early learning which demonstrates the crucial importance of access to quality early care and education for the well-being of both children and their parents. Research has identified not only the attributes of quality early childhood programs, but also the necessary components of an infrastructure to support these services. U.S. research tells us what works and why, and should be used in policy decisions in a more systematic way.

Building on these U.S. strengths, we highlight four lessons that American policymakers can take away from the French experience and apply to their own efforts to support early learning and development for all children, and especially for the most disadvantaged.

1. ***Develop a system of early care and education for all children:*** France recognizes universal pre-kindergarten as the first building block of a child's education, and as a mechanism for ensuring greater equality of opportunity for children across the socioeconomic spectrum. Federal and state policies in the U.S. are needed to create a system of early childhood services, beginning with universal, voluntary access to high-quality preschool for all three- and four-year olds.
   - An early education system should include a coordinated infrastructure of governance, financing, training, monitoring, and evaluation. Clear goals and responsibilities for various components of the system need to be developed at the federal, state, local, and program levels. Careful attention to how the system is financed is required in order to ensure equity of access and high program quality to all children and families.
   - Within a mixed-delivery system of early childhood programs, a common core of high-quality standards and operating principles is needed to support children's early development and learning. A broad framework of standards and principles should be developed at the national level to guide states as they define specific criteria which take into account local needs and circumstances. Adherence to these standards should be required for all programs wishing to participate in a publicly-financed system. These standards can build on existing guidelines, such as the Head Start performance standards and the accreditation criteria of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
   - In France, *écoles maternelles* are an integral part of the public education system, and teacher training and curriculum that bridge preschool and elementary school ensure a seamless transition into the elementary grades. In the U.S., even within a mixed-delivery system, better continuity could be provided between preschool and K-12 education to facilitate the transition for children and promote continuity in their learning. For example, states and localities could support joint in-service training for preschool and elementary teachers, develop transition plans and activities, align learning goals for preschool and primary school, and continue to deliver support services offered

through programs such as Head Start in the elementary grades. The Education Commission of the States and Council of Chief State School Officers both recommend creating a stronger continuum from preschool through high school or college ("P-12" or "P-16").

- In France, preschool teachers receive the same pre-service and in-service training as other teachers in the education system. Teachers who work with young children in all early education settings in the U.S. should be fully certified professionals with training in child development and early education.
- Increasing pay and benefits for early education teachers is necessary to attract and retain a high-quality, well-trained teaching staff. Increased wages and benefits must be tied to the education and training of teachers.

2. ***Target additional resources in low-income communities to help narrow the achievement gap:*** France's universal early education system ensures that all children receive a high-quality preschool education in their local *école maternelle*. The goal of French priority education policy is to "give more to those who have less" within this universal system in order to reduce social inequalities in educational outcomes. This approach contrasts with the Head Start program, which offers some low-income children a preschool education within a separate system. French schools with higher percentages of children from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds receive more resources that can be used, for example, to reduce class size, hire additional support staff, provide extra educational materials, serve more two-year olds, and award teacher bonuses.

- The U.S. should articulate a consistent policy strategy to address the persistent achievement gap between children of different socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Universal access to preschool education, with common standards and high quality for all children, should be a centerpiece of such a strategy.
- The French experience demonstrates that within a universal system, additional resources can be targeted successfully to geographic areas, based on socioeconomic need, rather than to individual children. This area-based approach reduces stigma, attracts broader political support, and avoids segregation of services by income and ethnicity.
- While current efforts to reduce the achievement gap in the U.S. focus mainly on K-12 education, states should be encouraged to use Title I funds from the Leave No Child Behind Act, along with other federal and state funding streams, to expand early childhood education.
- In response to research illustrating the benefits of a greater "social mix" within classrooms, France has developed strategies to promote more socioeconomic diversity within schools. In the U.S., schools in more disadvantaged areas could receive additional resources to develop partnerships akin to the "models of excellence" in French priority education zones, that are aimed to attract and retain families from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds.
- The U.S. should explore the French "contract for success" as a means of allowing schools serving disadvantaged student populations to develop and pursue objectives tailored to local needs and circumstances and as a tool for accountability.

3. ***Focus more on the social and educational needs of children from immigrant and non-English speaking backgrounds:*** The French have found that early education provides the opportunity for all young children to learn the national language and take part in activities that are essential to their cognitive, social, and physical development, and to their later school success. The French approach to linguistic and cultural immersion for children from immigrant backgrounds and for French language learners differs from that favored by most American policymakers and educators, but much can be gleaned from the French clarity of goals and approaches.
   - The U.S. should provide access to quality early education on a voluntary basis for all children from immigrant backgrounds and for English language learners.
   - American schools and communities should do more to facilitate the social integration of immigrant families. Efforts should also be made in the U.S. to encourage dialogue and build consensus among stakeholders around issues relating to the education of children from immigrant backgrounds, particularly with regard to language learning.
   - Dual language and multicultural competencies are recognized by early childhood professionals and many others in the U.S. as critical assets in a global society, and these skills should be encouraged in early education programs. Early childhood settings should foster children's home languages while also facilitating their acquisition of English.
   - French efforts aimed at children from immigrant backgrounds and French language learners begin even before age three, when almost all children participate in the formal school system. The U.S. can learn from French policies that encourage an early start in preschool and facilitate the transition from home to school for children living in low-income and immigrant neighborhoods.
   - In the United States–and also in France–professional training should prepare early childhood teachers to work with children from diverse backgrounds. For example, teacher training for early childhood professionals should include education about different nations and cultures and instruction in approaches that foster second language acquisition and dual language competency.

4. ***Coordinate universal preschool with health and human services:*** One of the strengths of French priority education policy is that it recognizes that education issues are intertwined with, and shaped by, other influences affecting the lives of young children — starting with the families and communities in which they live. Universal preschool is critical, but not sufficient to address all of the factors contributing to inequalities in educational outcomes. As France has recognized, narrowing the achievement gap in the U.S. will also require efforts to ensure good health, good nutrition, adequate housing, and economic security for children and their families.
   - Schools should work collaboratively with Head Start and other early care and education programs to provide a better coordination of services for children and families. In addition, it is critically important for public policy to foster linkages among allied services such as education, health, nutrition, housing, and social

services to ensure that basic needs of children under age five are being met. These services should accord particular attention to identifying and supporting young children with special needs.

- A strength of Head Start is that it is designed to address the comprehensive needs of young children and their families. Public policy should reinforce this comprehensive approach and ensure that it is evenly implemented across early childhood programs. In addition to providing direct services within a universal, mixed-delivery system, Head Start and other sources of funding could be used to ensure that low-income children in other pre-kindergarten programs have access to comprehensive services and full-day child care. Early Head Start could be expanded to provide flexible, comprehensive services to all eligible families with infants and toddlers.
- To address children's development and learning more holistically, education policy ideally should be linked with urban planning and community development initiatives.
- In France, mediators are recruited from local communities to strengthen links between home and school, and to help integrate children from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds into school. The U.S. should explore this promising strategy, especially in communities with large immigrant populations.

These four lessons from France, taken together, would lead to a more systemic and comprehensive approach to supporting all children in the important early years of their development and learning. Perhaps the most important lesson from the French experience is that within a system of universal services, it is possible to accord additional resources and support to children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, we have learned that without this universal approach, it is difficult to ensure that children from low-income and immigrant backgrounds receive quality early learning experiences. We acknowledge that implementing these recommendations would require more public support and commitment to young children and families and a secure funding source. We are confident that these challenges can be surmounted—if Americans are truly committed to having all children begin school *equal from the start.*

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Adultes-relais (femmes-relais):
"Resource people" (usually "resource women") from low-income neighborhoods who are trained and compensated to serve as cultural and linguistic intermediaries between residents and schools or other public services. These mediators help promote mutual understanding and cooperation between parents and teachers about children's education.

Cahier d'élève
"Student notebook" or portfolio containing examples of children's schoolwork (e.g., art projects, math problems, writing samples), commentaries by teachers and parents, and general announcements. The notebook is exchanged between parents and teachers on a regular basis to facilitate parental involvement in children's education.

Contrat de réussite
"Contract for success" which outlines the pedagogical requirements of a priority education zone within the framework of the national goals defined by the Ministry of Education. Key elements of the contract are the educational objectives, the means to accomplish the objectives, and the evaluation strategy.

Crèche
Subsidized child care centers (literally "cradle") for children of working parents between two months and three years of age. These centers are staffed by licensed pediatric nurses and early childhood educators trained in child development.

École maternelle
Universal, voluntary, preschool (literally "maternal" school) for children ages two through six, administered by the French Ministry of Education. See Box 2.3 for a summary of essential characteristics.

Head Start
Federally funded U.S. program, created in 1965, providing educational, nutritional, medical, social, and parental services for four-year-olds and some three-year-olds living below the poverty line.

IUFM
Instituts Universitaires de Formation de Maîtres. Graduate level teacher training institutions providing common training for preschool and elementary school teachers, operated by the French Ministry of Education.

Lieu passerelle
Transitional program (literally "footbridge") for two-year-old children living in priority education areas designed to help them and their parents make a successful transition to *école maternelle.* Programs often involve local collaboration among a preschool, child care center or drop-in center, and social or health services.

Pôle d'excellence scolaire
The status of "Model of scholastic excellence" is granted by the Ministry of Education to schools in priority education zones interested in forming partnerships with cultural, educational, and other local institutions. Creative projects and field trips to visit partner institutions, such as museums, serve to enrich and reinforce classroom learning.

Politique de la ville (contrat de ville)
Seven-year "urban policy" contract between the national government and local authorities which authorizes funding for cross-sector local initiatives in urban renewal and desegregation. Urban policies are pursued often in tandem with local priority education policy objectives.

Projet d'école
Annual "school project" developed by the teaching staff and administrators for each French school. In ZEPs, the school project is developed in consultation with the zone coordinator and Priority Zone Council, and intended to be consistent with the broader goals and objectives of the zone's "contract for success."

Recteurs
Regional education officials appointed by the Ministry of Education, who are responsible for administering education policy and managing the budget for their region or district (*académie*). The recteurs propose which areas should be designated as education priority zones. They also determine which schools receive additional funding through priority education policy, and the amount of resources allocated to those schools.

REP-ZEP Coordinator
An experienced teacher or administrator whose role is to help define and coordinate the objectives, projects, and activities within a zone, and help decide how to allocate resources and work with local partners involved in priority education policy. REP-ZEP coordinators are often actively involved in bridging the activities that meet objectives of both priority education policy and the *politique de la ville.*

REP
"Network of priority education" or *réseau d'éducation prioritaire* that groups together schools serving disadvantaged populations within a broad geographical area, and provides them with technical support, pooled resources, and opportunities to exchange innovative practices. Usually, a REP covers a larger geographical area than a ZEP, and it includes the schools belonging to one or more ZEPs as well as neighboring schools that serve similar, but less needy, populations. A REP may include schools that were formerly classified as ZEPs, but that no longer meet ZEP eligibility criteria. Each network is directed by a junior high principal (or education inspector) and governed by a Council, which defines and oversees the "contract for success" of schools in the REP.

ZEP
An area is designated as a *zone d'éducation prioritaire*, or "priority education zone" because it includes a high proportion of children deemed to be socio-economically disadvantaged, according to a variety of criteria outlined by the French Ministry of Education. Each ZEP is entitled to receive additional funding and resources from the state for its junior high school and its feeder elementary schools and pre-kindergartens. These financial resources may be used, for example, to lower staff-child ratios, hire social workers and other support staff, fund staff bonuses, and invest in pedagogical materials. Usually, a ZEP is affiliated with a larger network of schools, known as a REP.

APPENDIX B

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APPENDIX C

SITE VISITS AND MEETINGS PARIS AND NANTES, MAY 26-31, 2002

PRESCHOOLS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS:
École Maternelle, rue Marx Dormoy, Paris
École Maternelle, rue de la Goutte d'Or, Paris
École Elémentaire, CLIN class, rue Doudeauville, Paris
École Maternelle (Pôle d'excellence), rue d'Orsel, Paris
École Maternelle et Élémentaire Françoise Dolto, rue de Concarneau, Nantes
École Maternelle et Élémentaire Octobre, rue de Seine, Alfortville
École Maternelle Frédéric Mistral, Villiers-sur-Marne

OTHER PROGRAMS:
Crèche des Grésillons, Gennevilliers
Lieu Passerelle, "Le Chemin vers l'ecole," Nantes

TEACHER TRAINING INSTITUTION:
Institut Universitaire de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM), Paris

NATIONAL MINISTRY:
Ministry of Education

RESEARCH CENTERS IN PARIS:
Centre Académique de Ressources pour l'Éducation Prioritaire (CAREP)
Centre Alain Savary
Centre de Formation et d'Information pour la Scolarisation des Enfants de Migrants (CEFISEM)
Centre National de Documentation Pédagogique (CNDP)
Centre de Ressources Ville-École-Intégration
Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique (INRP)

ORGANIZATIONS:
Association Cultures en Partage, Paris
Halles Saint Pierre Cultural Center, Paris
Espace des Grésillions, Gennevilliers
Observatoire des Zones Prioritaires Association (OZP), Gennevilliers
Plein-Grés, Gennevilliers

PARENT ORGANIZATIONS:
Comité des Mamans, École Octobre, Alfortville

APPENDIX D

MEMBERS OF THE DELEGATION AND PROJECT STAFF

Top row, left to right: Michelle Neuman, Jane Henderson, Barbara Bowman, Richard Clifford
Bottom row, left to right: Shanny Peer, Anne Fagnani, Donald Hernandez, Linda Espinosa

Study Tour Delegates

Barbara Bowman
Professor and former President of the Erikson Institute, Chicago

Richard M. Clifford, Ph.D.
Senior Scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina

Linda M. Espinosa, Ph.D.
Co-Director, Research and Policy, National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers University

Jane Henderson, Ph.D.
Executive Director of the California Children and Families Commission

Donald J. Hernandez, Ph.D.
Professor in the Department of Sociology at the State University of New York

Project Staff

Shanny Peer, Ph.D.
Project Director
Report Co-Author

Michelle J. Neuman
Research Associate
Report Co-Author

Anastasia Toufexis
Report Editor

David Douieb
Photographer

Anne Fagnani
Program Assistant

APPENDIX E

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FRENCH-AMERICAN FOUNDATION
509 Madison Avenue, Suite 310
New York, NY 10022
Tel: (212) 829-8800 Fax: (212) 829-8810
E-mail: info@frenchamerican.org
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