

November 5, 2007

Re-educating the French to education

PARIS. Eight-kilo backpacks sagging with books, millions of little kids trudge to France's schools to become informed, clever and French -- not necessarily in that order. Most start classes at age three (some at two) in *l'école maternelle*. There they learn to get along with others, read, count, respect teachers, and sort of sit still. But the world has not sat still for France.

No longer is French education, as national legend long claimed, the "envy of the world." Though often superb for early ages, it is wildly uneven at the top and troubled in mid-years.

In the widely recognized Shanghai Jiao Tong University rating of the world's best universities, the 75 public French universities (there are another 100 of all types) fare dismally. The top-ranked French university, Paris's science/medicine *Université Pierre et Marie Curie*, comes 39<sup>th</sup>, and two others 83rd (Nobel-Prize factory *École Normale Supérieure*, Paris) and 99th (science/technology *Université Louis Pasteur*, Strasbourg). Comparison: broader-based University of Toronto is 23rd and University of British Columbia is 36th.

These numbers mislead. "Universities" in France – just the ones with this formal status – are rarely the cream of higher education. The top institutions for teaching and research are the famous *Grandes Écoles* (the above *Normale Supérieure* being Everest). These still churn out some of the world's best mathematicians, scientists and engineers.

Relatively small elite institutions with wide autonomy, the *Grandes Écoles* recruit by competition. Unlike universities, they're not obliged to admit anybody with a high-school

graduation diploma (*baccalauréat* or *bac*). They tend to specialize in engineering, science and management -- fields leading to top jobs, both government and private-sector.

But state universities are in dire shape. Their duty to admit any and all high-school grads (who pay almost nothing to attend) guarantees tens of thousands of first- and second-year drop-outs. Each year, universities dump on the labour market armies of youths shattered to realize they know little that employers want. Self-reliance is crushed by “anti-capitalist” ideology and suffocating small-business rules.

Low investment in universities leaves many facilities shabby, even dysfunctional. I taught part-time at the Sorbonne (University of Paris-III) for seven years. Historical décors were glorious, but offices and equipment were ramshackle. Vital courses lacked enough benches to accommodate students. Now you find computers, but getting them, and any change, is still guerrilla war.

Rigid rules prevent the best profs from moving around – or, if brilliant and young – up. At age 65, even world-class researchers must leave – Dr. Luc Montagnier, Pasteur Institute discoverer of the HIV-AIDS virus, had to find work in the U.S.

France’s education problems are also glaring in high-schools. Apart from a handful of élite ones, mainly in Paris, many schools suffer a crisis of discipline, even shocking violence. Their teachers’ anything-goes attitudes, plus sloppy dress, invite disrespect. Not only low-income ghettos are academic disaster zones. Renowned critic Alain Finkielkraut says standards have fallen everywhere. He prescribes shorter holidays, “sweat and tears.”

Now – proof of highest priority – President Nicolas Sarkozy has sent a 32-page letter to every teacher in France to launch a new educational culture. Lucid, eloquent and daring, as our many of Sarkozy’s reforms, this constitutes a bottom-to-top reform

manifesto. It has already – an excellent sign – upset old-guard teachers’ unions. And it has outraged officials of the politically correct Education Ministry, that even a Socialist minister nicknamed the Red Army.

Sarkozy’s letter-manifesto dissects the purposes of education, its history in France, what has worked, and what has not. Its central focus: transmitting values, especially respect. Looking at the despair of French youth – whose unemployment runs double older workers’ rates – Sarkozy sees not only ill-adapted teaching and rigid administration. He sees a vacuum of values, a desert of hope.

Hundreds of thousands of French graduates find work only in Britain, Ireland and North America. Younger ones who fail, especially French-born children of immigrants, face lives of double rejection – from ancestral culture and France’s job market. Drugs, riots and car-burning are not far behind.

From this flows anger against authority – of teachers, parents, police and France itself. Sarkozy lays out tried-and-true school guidelines: “Rewarding merit, punishing wrongdoing, cultivating admiration for what is right, just, beautiful, great, true and profound, and detestation of what is wrong, unjust, ugly, small-minded, deceitful, superficial and mediocre...”

Sarkozy once wrote that childhood humiliation was the key to understanding the short, foreign-sounding boy still inside him. Hence, “...respect [must] underpin all education. The teacher’s respect for the pupil, that of parents for their children, of pupils for their teachers, and children for their parents; respect for others and self-respect...”

Napoleon famously said every soldier carried a marshal’s baton in his knapsack. As you watch little French kids hauling knapsacks to school, you wonder which new little

Sarko (who, like Napoleon, never mastered sitting still) holds in his knapsack another education-changing key to the Élysée Palace.