

FRANCE - OPINION

# Macron's 'old school' vision for French education

Monday 4 September 2023, by [GOANEC Mathilde](#) (Date first published: 28 August 2023).

**In a lengthy interview to mark the end of the political summer pause, the French president placed particular emphasis on the role of education. He sees this as the route by which he will accomplish his plan to “re-civilise” a “section of young people” following the recent unrest in the country. And he made clear that he regards education as his “exclusive preserve”, in which he will oversee and guide policy. However, as Mathilde Goanec argues in this op-ed article, the kind of policies that Emmanuel Macron wants to pursue are already outdated - and decidedly old school.**

## Contents

- [A lack of resources and staff](#)
- [A vision of yesteryear](#)

Another minister, another method. Even before the start of newly-appointed education minister Gabriel Attal's first academic year in charge, President Emmanuel Macron has been spelling out the reality of the situation: the school is the president's domain, and his alone. “Because of the stakes involved, education is part of the exclusive preserve of the president,” the head of state declared in an interview last week with the weekly news magazine [Le Point](#).

What seemed little more than a collection of passing fancies when he first talked about the issue in June - such as a reduction in teachers' holidays - is now slowly becoming a fully-formed programme of reform. How will this programme be implemented and where will the money come from? The president seems to think that the logistical details will follow later, forgetting that you cannot just shuffle around twelve million pupils and a million education employees at the mere click of your fingers. Emmanuel Macron is also counting on the speedy actions of one of his most loyal ministers, Gabriel Attal, who in the [July ministerial reshuffle](#) replaced the previous incumbent Pap Ndiaye.

And too bad if the new education boss already faces the difficult task of finding enough trained teachers to put in front of pupils (with vacancies at the annual qualifying exam for teachers this year still running at 20% there is a shortfall of around 2,300 teachers for the new school year which starts on September 4<sup>th</sup>). In the hands of the president, the school is now becoming the central tool for policies that are drifting ever more to the right. “Why do I speak so much about schools? Because it is at the heart of the fight what we must lead, because it's there that we'll rebuild France,” insists the president.

*Emmanuel Macron photographed in the classroom of a middle school in Jarnac in south-west France, February 28<sup>th</sup> 2023 © Photo Jean-Michel Nossant / Pool / Abaca*

Elsewhere in this lengthy interview in *Le Point* the president was questioned about the unrest that

took place after the [police shooting of 17-year-old Nahel in the Paris suburbs in late June](#). He promptly returned to the idea that he shamelessly pinched from far-right thinkers. “I spoke of [decivilisation](#) some months ago. That’s absolutely what we have seen. So we have to buckle down to re-civilising,” he told the magazine. Central to this is the school where no longer will “any form of compromise with principles, with the authority of knowledge and the authority of the teachers” be tolerated. Meanwhile, there was another presidential thumbs down to “[pédagogisme](#)”, once again reviving the hackneyed debate that this much maligned approach to education in France has led to schools placing more emphasis on pupil fulfilment than on learning.

“It’s in the classroom that France perpetuates itself and where our values are learnt,” said the president. “It’s there that you learn about France, understand it, pass it on.” While Emmanuel Macron is here quoting the philosopher, educationalist and secular thinker Ferdinand Buisson, it is [Jules Ferry](#) – the 19<sup>th</sup> century politician who made primary school education free – whom he really has in mind. And in particular he is thinking of Jules Ferry at his most simplistic, a man who not only developed the school during the Third Republic but who was also a fierce champion of colonialism, and of the idea of France’s “greatness” and “civilising mission”.

To achieve this Emmanuel Macron is keen to overhaul what he called “civic instruction” lessons in schools (a comment which teachers say is a telling mistake, as “civic instruction” was replaced long ago by “civic and moral teaching” and was also allocated fewer hours in the curriculum). He also wants to see changes in history courses to make them more “chronological”.

“Is it really necessary to lie by suggesting that history courses are no longer chronological and need to become so again?” was the swift reaction of the history teachers’ group the Association des Professeurs d’Histoire et de Géographie (APHG). “At the very least that’s fake news, at worst a misreading of the school courses,” it said in a statement. In addition to showing a lack of knowledge of this domain, this attachment to linear history, which is supposedly taught without any angle or selection (something which just about every serious historian disputes) should be seen as an expression of the president’s enthusiasm for the good old “national narrative” of France.

The president does not really hide this. For on top of daily dictations and half-an-hour of sport each day to channel the energy of “distracted pupils”, he wants weekly reading of the “great texts” that deal with “our values” to be put on the curriculum. This is not yet quite at the level of saluting the French flag and singing the national anthem in unison in the playground, but it is starting to resemble it...

### **A lack of resources and staff**

The rest of the formula is well known: pupils have to know how to “read, write and count” but also – a noteworthy addition – to be able to “behave themselves”. Who are the children targeted by most of these announcements? It is young people from working class neighbourhoods for whom there apparently always needs to be more school: from the age of two if possible, and from 8am to 6pm in “difficult districts”. And earlier in the year, too, as Macron wants to bring forward the start of the school year to August 20<sup>th</sup> for struggling pupils.

For children from the middle and upper classes there will continue to be a change of scene, the outdoor air and that marvellous break known as the school holidays. For children from less well-off backgrounds there will be “learning holidays” in July – a measure launched under another of Macron’s education ministers, Jean-Michel Blanquer, which is still not working at full capacity because of a lack of willing pupils and volunteer teachers – and a return to school before fellow classmates, some time in mid-August.

We should recall that, all the while, the level of resources allocated to [popular education](#) and to leisure centres and holiday camps, places which have provided liberating experiences for children from less well-off backgrounds, has fallen at a rate of knots in recent years. In any case, holidays and the non-classroom learning they bring are increasingly just a luxury for the better-off; 40% of French people did not go away on holiday this year, not even for a week, because of underlying poverty and a significant increase in the cost of living.

Targeting August in this way also means overlooking what happens in September and all the following months. If too many pupils are struggling in schools, and even more so children from working-class families, it is down to a lack of resources, because of a lack of staff in areas where pupils most need the help, and because of a general lack of adults in primary, middle and high schools (teachers but also staff trained to deal with children with special needs, and welfare and medical personnel).

And while it is good to have a debate about school timetables and also about the best approach to learning, the president is running the risk of staging this debate without the support of teaching personnel, who are already fiercely opposed to the idea of having to work more to earn more from the start of the 2023 academic year as part of a [Faustian pact](#) with the government. This deal was offered by ministers in a bid to honour a promise to boost teachers' pay while at the same time tackling the issue of teacher shortages.

In order to stream pupils in terms of ability, the school of Macron's vision becomes a veritable credit rating agency. It will be down to the Ministry of Education to take on the headache of managing staffing levels as required in the middle of summer for the extra classes, to have to provide different educations for siblings, and to find the right budgetary stratagems to fund such operations. To carry out the streaming, ministry officials may end up relying on the "evaluation inflation" that has been in place since previous reforms under Macron that were designed to build "trust" in schools, according to education expert and essayist Philippe Meirieu in his [latest work](#).

In fact, ever since 2017, when Macron first came to power, there has been a flood of administrative demands trying to find out what pupils have learnt and the level of classes and of schools, as part of a broader global move to [measure competency](#) in education.

Though teaching unions contest these pupil evaluations both in their content and the way they are implemented, the president promises that they will be "shared between teachers and parents". All this is happening as part of a move to give greater autonomy to schools, an agenda that Macron has never hidden. He wants to hand over more power to school managements in the hiring of teachers, and backs funding deals based on the "plans" of individual schools, including those relating to teaching itself.

### **A vision of yesteryear**

The only concession to this agenda is likely to be over those reforms to French high schools - *lycées* - that were brought in by Jean-Michel Blanquer but which were met with little enthusiasm by his successor Pap Nidaye. "We're pragmatic and we can't have tests so early in the [*school*] year, said the president. This is a reference to the fact that many exams for the high school *baccalauréat* currently take place in March, meaning that students are then left to their own devices three months before the formal end of lessons. The government has just [announced](#) these exams will now be held in June.

Macron's vision is, ultimately, that of the school of yesteryear with a veneer of liberalism on top.

Such a vision seems even more deeply deterministic than the current system, while being dressed up as a fight against inequalities.

This is the case, for example, when the president talks about reform of vocational high schools – the *lycée professionnel* – which have become the refuge or dead-end for pupils from working class origins, and for many with immigrant origins too. “Around a third drop out and too many have neither qualifications nor training,” said Emmanuel Macron. As a result, he said, it was necessary to “close training courses where there are no job prospects and open those where there are needs”. In other words, bringing the world of business even more into the school, as early as the *cinquième* (7<sup>th</sup> grade in US terms and Year 8 in the UK), without striving to improve the conditions for core learning, whether pupils have chosen the vocational or the general route.

This utilitarian vision is reflected, too, in the president’s views on university. “It’s not true that everyone is destined to go to university and that university is an end in itself,” said the head of state. “We will be clear over how many go to university, how many obtain a degree, how many go on to get a job, and we will endeavour to develop training provision that relates to the nation’s jobs needs, in the same way as for vocational high schools.”

Paying no heed to the benefits of making university knowledge more widely available in society, especially with the advent of major climatic change, Emmanuel Macron sees himself as a pragmatist and intends to restrict access to higher education. He is right on one point: the university system really is in a sorry state.

But in his diagnosis the head of state could also have pointed to the teacher/student ratio in higher education, growing staff insecurity, low student grants, and a fierce and often unfair selection process for first degrees and master’s degrees. And the reason numbers are down 3% in universities and public training establishments is partly because students have, for a fee, been turning to private higher education institutes.

The social and school segregation between the public and private and public sectors which reigns with ever greater force in primary and secondary school education now seems to be [gaining ground in higher education](#) too. Is this a good way to bind the nation together? On this point the president uttered not a word.

**Mathilde Goanec**

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**P.S.**

- MEDIAPART. 28 August 2023 à 09h13 :  
<https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/050522/dans-la-societe-mobilisee-l-union-gauche-fait-aussi-d-es-perdants>

- English version by Michael Streeter.

*Les articles de Mathilde Goanec sur Mediapart :*  
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