FRENCH ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS
OFFICIAL COURSES OF STUDY

Studies of the International Institute
of Teachers College, Columbia University

FRENCH ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

OFFICIAL COURSES OF STUDY

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TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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PREFACE

In view of the changes in German education and in particular in the fields of method and curriculum-making, France to-day furnishes the outstanding example of a country which is clear, logical and definite in the objectives that she has set before herself for elementary education. Because of this clearness in a field which elsewhere is shrouded in increasing uncertainty and because the situation in France has not developed fortuitously but has been carefully thought out in the past few years, the International Institute of Teachers College, Columbia University, has considered it desirable to make available to students of education the most recent revision of the official regulations on the curriculum and methods of the elementary school, together with a model course of study suggested by two principals in public normal schools.

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I. L. K.

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THE ORGANIZATION OF FRENCH EDUCATION

THE MINISTRY

The organization of education in France is in many ways interesting to the student of education administration. One of the leading democracies of the world, France illustrates better than any other country the principle of centralization in government. In education this is not merely due to the Napoleonic tradition but to the clear conception, widely held, that the administration of government is best conducted by experts rather than by lay representatives of the people. There are, of course, other reasons; political and social principles are not determined by one cause alone. There is, for example, the view that through centralization the danger of attack from within and without can best be met and that national solidarity can best be served in this way. Again, the Frenchman is brought up to accept discipline as a matter of course, while his love for orderly organization appears to him merely the natural consequence of logical thinking. At the same time there are safeguards against abuse, if only in the watchfulness of Parliament readily responsive to popular opinion. It must not, however, be assumed that the policy of centralization is accepted wholly without criticism. The movement known as "regionalism" is at once a protest against the overwhelming influence of Paris and the control that emanates from there, and a demand for decentralization into local areas that have community of interests. What the prospects of success are for this movement it is difficult to forecast; to some extent its influence may be recognized both explicitly and

implicitly in the Official Regulations for elementary schools, which constitute the body of the present volume.

France has an area of 212,659 square miles and a population of 39,209,776. In size she is smaller than Texas—about the size of Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin together. There is only one city with a population of over one million (Paris), only two cities with more than half a million population (Marseilles and Lyons), and fourteen with more than one hundred thousand. The greater part of the population is engaged in agriculture, as is indicated in the following figures: 8,517,000 of the population are engaged in agriculture; 5,740,000 in manufacture; 2,053,000 in commerce; 1,543,000 in transport; and 1,292,000 in public services.

From the point of view of the government the President is an honorable figurehead with less influence than the King of England or the President of the United States. The real power is wielded by the Ministers who are responsible to Parliament and who have in their several departments both executive and legislative authority.[1] The Cabinet through the Ministers and cooperating with the permanent civil service superintends the administrative procedures and directs an elaborate machinery of government which reaches down to the smallest hamlet. The Ministers take the initiative in shaping legislation, and in explaining and justifying it to Parliament, to which they are responsible for the smooth running of their departments.

The administration of education forms, then, part of this general system of government. At the head of the system stands the Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, appointed by the President from the dominant political party in power as a member of the Cabinet. He is usually a member of Parliament and may appear in both its houses (the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate). He initiates legislation in the field of education, prepares and presents the budget, and has wide powers of issuing decrees and regulations. While most of his subordinates

[1] The Minister of Public Instruction and Fine Arts, for example, may issue regulations explanatory of the laws or decrees (*Arrêtés*), and may change the laws by regulations which have received the signature of the President (*Decrets*). This was well illustrated in the recent reform of secondary education by M. Leon Bérard, and the amendments of the reform by his successors. See Kandel, I. L., *Reform of Secondary Education in France* (New York, 1924).

are members of the permanent civil service, the Minister may appoint a cabinet of officials to act as his personal advisory council during his term of office. He has the right to appoint and dismiss officials, acts as the intermediary between the Ministry and Parliament, and in general is responsible for the educational policy during his term. The degree to which the theory of centralization is carried is indicated in the fact that all official correspondence of the Ministry must be signed personally by the Minister. It is obvious, therefore, that the Parliamentary, routine, and ceremonial duties of the Minister leave him little scope to carry out the theoretical powers with which he is endowed. Accordingly it is only in exceptional cases that the Minister can exercise the degree of independence which he enjoys by law.

The responsibility for the permanent conduct of educational affairs thus rests on the permanent staff of the Ministry. The educational side of the Ministry is divided into four divisions, as follows: Higher Education, Secondary Education, Elementary Education (including higher elementary schools and normal schools), Finance. Each division is organized into a number of bureaus and the whole is under the supervision of a director. There is in addition a section concerned with problems of physical education in elementary, secondary and higher institutions (*Service de l'Education Physique*); this is under a general inspector assisted by a *Comité Consultatif d'Education Physique et Sportive dans l'Enseignement.*

In order to keep in touch with educational opinion in the field and to counteract the dangers of extreme bureaucracy there is a Higher Council of Public Instruction (*Conseil Supérieur de l'Instruction Publique*), a purely professional body representing every branch of education (except technical) from the elementary school to the university. The members of the Council are elected by their own representative groups for four-year terms; a few are appointed by the President. The Council constitutes in part an educational parliament, meeting twice a year. It is consulted but its advice is not necessarily followed.[1] The scope of its deliberations is extensive and covers such subjects as courses of study, methods of instruction, examinations and marking systems, administrative and disciplinary regulations for public schools, supervision of private schools, scrutiny of textbooks and

[1] The Bérard reform of secondary education furnishes a recent example.

books for prize distributions, and granting of permission to foreigners to teach or open schools. All questions to be discussed are studied in advance of each meeting by a permanent section of the Council, which also acts as a court of appeal in such matters as disciplining of teachers or opening of private schools.

Another advisory body associated with the Ministry is the Consultative Committee (*Comité Consultatif*), composed of three sections,—elementary, secondary, and higher. Each section consists of the respective directors of the particular division, of inspectors-general, of the Rector of the University of Paris, of the director of the Office National des Universités, the head of the personnel bureau in each division concerned, and representatives of the teaching body appointed for each section by a central representative association. Each section meets once a year and at other times at the call of the Minister; its chief function is to make recommendations for appointments and promotions and to advise on all questions submitted to it either by the Minister or its own permanent committee which meets whenever occasion demands.

Finally, the Ministry has the benefit of the advice and experience of a staff of twelve general inspectors, four of whom are women. This staff acts as a source of information on educational matters, supervises the field inspectors, and reports on the progress of instruction. The members live in Paris and make annual tours of inspection to which they are assigned by the Minister. The general inspectors are all persons of experience as teachers and inspectors.

Technical education has since 1920 been placed under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Instruction and under the special charge of an Under-secretary of State in the Ministry. This department is organized along the same general lines as the rest of the Ministry with separate divisions for general administration of technical education, national vocational schools, training and certification of teachers, and finance. The department is assisted in an advisory capacity by a Higher Council of Technical Education (*Conseil Supérieur de l'Instruction Technique*), which also has a permanent section.

The chief features of this organization, in addition to the wide powers enjoyed by the Minister, are the employment of experts, the clear definition of functions, the utilization of expert coun-

cilors, and the control of all by the Minister. All branches of education are clearly defined, all schools of the same grade are of similar quality, instruction is based, with certain modifications which are new, on the syllabi and programs issued by the Ministry, and all examinations for certificates and diplomas are first scrutinized and approved in the Ministry.

THE ACADEMIES

The remainder of the system is largely an extension of the central authority for purposes of administration. For educational purposes only there are seventeen academies, each of which is a replica of the central authority, and with one exception each of the academies has a university. At the head of the academy is a Rector, appointed by the President, and responsible in theory for all branches of education within his area, but in practice concerned mainly with higher education,—the universities and secondary and normal schools. The Rector is the direct and responsible representative of the Ministry and is assisted by an Academic Council which consists of representatives from the university, secondary and normal schools, the departmental council and communal councils. The Council acts as the cabinet of the Rector and advises chiefly on problems of secondary education. Field-work in each academy is entrusted to the academy inspectors, of whom there are one hundred and six, each appointed and removable by the Minister, and responsible for the smooth working of the system of education in all its branches, as, for example, the enforcement of educational laws, the establishing and closing of schools, teachers' conferences, the promotion of public interest in education, normal schools, examinations and granting certificates, and the appointment of probationary teachers. In practice, however, the academy inspectors devote most of their time to the inspection of secondary schools. The qualifications for this position are high and range from experience as primary inspector to that of a university professor.

The government is represented in the field by still another set of officials, the primary inspectors, who are appointed by the Minister on the basis of a competitive examination to which candidates are admitted only after a minimum teaching experience of five years and the possession of the certificates and licenses permitting them to teach in the various types of public

schools. The examination, which is both oral and written, is mainly based on a mastery of professional subjects. The primary inspectors are responsible to the Rector, general and academy inspectors and to the Minister; in other words, they are solely state officials and not subordinated to any local authority. Their field of activity is confined mainly to elementary education, and covers such matters as school attendance, recommending the appointment or dismissal of teachers, disciplinary questions, inspection of public and private schools, advising on the establishment of schools and school buildings, adult courses, the school funds (*caisses d'école*), classification of pupils, and approval of time-schedules. They are also members of the examination boards for entrance to normal schools and for certificating elementary school teachers and teachers' conferences. Finally, they are *ex officio* members of all local committees. The maternal schools are inspected by another staff of inspectors.

It is obvious that after this presentation of the array of governmental officials and authorities little has been overlooked to make the system as national and as centralized as possible. The question at once arises as to the powers and duties left to local agencies. In other words, how much scope remains to the public, represented in their local organizations, to participate in the promotion and administration of education? A distinction has been drawn here between the control of internal and external affairs of education, that is, matters that have to do directly with the educational process in the school, and matters that concern the material essentials of education, such as buildings, equipment, and the like. The French theory is that education is a matter for experts and everything is done to concentrate the control in their hands. Further, such centralization of control is regarded as the best method for securing national solidarity on the one hand and uniformity of quality on the other. The interest and support of the lay public is desirable and essential, but these should be definitely restricted not to the formulation of educational policies but rather to those provisions that make the professional conduct of education possible.

THE DEPARTMENTS

France is divided for administrative purposes into ninety departments, artificial creations formed at the time of Napoleon.

They vary in size from 1300 to 4000 square miles and each is administered by a prefect appointed by the Minister of the Interior but responsible for the discharge of his various duties of civil administration to a number of Ministers, including also the Minister of Public Instruction. The position as representative of various departments of government the prefect combines with that of chief executive officer of the general departmental council, although, subject to the approval of the Minister concerned in all his actions, he is not compelled to accept its resolutions. The prefect in each department is the head of the elementary school system; he appoints teachers to permanent tenure, supervises accounts and expenditures for education, locates schools and supervises the distribution of scholarships to higher elementary schools. The general departmental council, which is an elected body, meets only for two short sessions each year, is mainly advisory in character, and has little power of initiative. Thus it may appropriate money but may not fix the tax, the amount and source being determined in Paris. This council has little authority in education but sends four of its members to the departmental council for elementary education, which in addition includes an academy inspector, primary inspectors, principals of elementary schools, four teachers elected by their colleagues, and representatives of private schools. The prefect is chairman of this council, which meets every three months and at call of the prefect, to whom it serves as an advisory body rather than as a representative of the public. The council supervises the administration of the educational regulations and laws, discusses reports of inspectors, suggests reforms, decides on the number of schools needed, supervises medical inspection, and may visit schools without any right to interfere with instruction and the teachers. The departments bear the cost of normal school buildings and equipment, and of an education office, contribute to the salaries of primary inspectors, and may assist communes to defray the cost of buildings and to provide prizes and scholarships.

THE COMMUNES

The communes, of which there are about 38,000, vary in size from a few to several thousand acres and in population from 500 to a commune of the size of Marseilles. The commune is similar

to the American township and thus is rarely wholly rural or wholly urban. Each commune is administered by a council elected every four years and a mayor who, though he is elected by the council, is responsible to the departmental prefect and to the authorities in Paris. For educational purposes the mayor is the head of the commune and is assisted by a school committee which includes the mayor, the primary inspector, a cantonal delegate, and members appointed by the communal council and whose chief task appears to be to supervise and encourage attendance, to have oversight over school buildings, to maintain a school census, and to advise on the opening of private schools. The committee also administers a school fund (*caisse d'école*) obtained by subscriptions and appropriations to assist needy pupils and to encourage attendance by means of prizes and subsidies. The mayor as chairman of this committee has no authority over the teachers in the schools of the commune. So slight are the duties of these committees that communal councils sometimes refuse to appoint members to it, in which case the right is exercised by the prefect.

THE CANTONS

In spite of the diminished powers and functions of the communal school committee, another body also concerned with education still exists. This consists of the cantonal delegates in the cantons or areas (3019 in number), including an average of twelve communes. The delegates are lay members appointed by the departments to supervise the material welfare of schools, hygiene, attendance, the school fund, private schools, etc., but without any right or authority over teachers.

THE THEORY OF ADMINISTRATION

The theory underlying this organization, which provides no room for direct representation of the public, is well summarized in a circular issued by the Ministry in 1895, which though addressed to the cantonal delegates applies equally to members of the other local bodies:

> It is not your province to burden yourselves with subjects of instruction, the criticism of methods, books or equipment, since the school

programs are to-day prescribed in full detail by the authorities charged therewith.

This conception rests definitely on the theory that the state alone is responsible for education, a theory frequently expressed and in particular by M. Jules Ferry, virtually the organizer of the present system of elementary education in France.

The dominating idea found in Jules Ferry and among his collaborators is that education is an affair of the state, a public service. And this because education is a general interest and should be one of the objects of care for the state, the sole guardian of whatever can be useful to society. The state should organize education; if it tolerates any freedom, it should supervise it. Jules Ferry was opposed to the idea that anything in the field of education should be beyond the control of the state. In all his speeches he frequently comes back to this essential principle which governs all his system: it is the state which superintends the schools and supervises education; powers delegated by it are revocable. None but the state can enjoy the full right of teaching. This sovereign function belongs to the state still more when that state is a democracy. . . . "Let it be well understood," said Jules Ferry on June 4, 1876, "that the first duty of a democratic government is to exercise incessant control over public education. We cannot admit that this control belongs to any other authority than the state."[1]

Educational systems reflect national genius. The French system aims to promote uniformity of quality in education throughout the country and to develop national solidarity. That in spite of the organization the system has not been as rigid as might have been supposed is indicated in the introductory statement to the new Regulations of 1923 (see page 45). During and since the war, however, a considerable amount of criticism has been leveled against the uniformity of the system, led by a group of reformers organized as *Les Compagnons de l'Université Nouvelle*. This group recognizes the right of the state to require education to be compulsory in order to secure an educated democracy but

What is compulsory is not to compel children to go to a particular school but to go to school. What is compulsory is education but not its form or character.[2]

[1] Vaujany, J., *L'Ecole primaire en France sous la troisième République*, Paris, 1912.

[2] *L'Université Nouvelle*, Vol. I, p. 76 (Paris, 1919).