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School Education: a Plan to Close France's Performance Gap

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The French education system has been marked by a concerning decline in student achievement since the 1990s, particularly in mathematics, together with social and territorial inequalities. Beyond its individual and social consequences, this decline in learning outcomes has lasting effects on productivity, innovation capacity and growth potential.

International comparisons shed light on the scope for improving educational outcomes. Faced with similar difficulties, several countries have succeeded, within about a decade, in raising achievement by the equivalent of one year of learning by the end of schooling, while sharply reducing the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold.

A comparative review of the policies implemented points to a set of common levers: intensive continuing professional development and instructional coaching for teachers, improvements in teaching approaches, tutoring for struggling students, the use of student assessments to better target certain resources, and precise learning objectives by grade and subject. While the French system has been slow to implement these levers, the economics of education literature makes it possible to quantify their potential effects and to identify complementary measures, such as reducing class sizes in primary school.

This Note shows that a set of priority measures, informed by international comparisons and adapted to the French context, could achieve demanding objectives — raising average achievement and reducing inequalities — over a ten-year horizon, at a cost of EUR 4 billion per year. This amount is lower than the savings associated with the decline in the number of students over the next ten years as a result of lower birth rates. We therefore recommend using this "demographic dividend" to finance a package of measures whose effectiveness is supported by research and international practice.

Achieving these performance and equity objectives requires a transformation strategy that is credible to frontline stakeholders. Such credibility is currently difficult to build in a context marked by mistrust of reforms and discouragement among part of the education community. The Note proposes several avenues for a concrete transformation of the school system: moving towards a long-term approach through a ten-year programming law that sets a national direction with quantified objectives and secures funding for reforms; strengthening links between classroom practice, research and evaluation; and reinforcing the role of schools in implementing the measures. A survey of 800 teachers shows a high level of support for these reforms.

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Human capital is one of the drivers of long-run growth, making education a central lever of economic performance. Yet in France, the education system is characterised both by a concerning decline in student achievement since the 1990s, particularly in mathematics,[1] and by substantial social and territorial inequalities.[2] This deterioration in learning outcomes has structural consequences for productivity, innovation capacity and, more broadly, long-term growth potential.[3]

This situation is not inevitable. International comparisons show that struggling education systems have managed to reverse the trend through targeted reforms. Empirical research based on causal evaluation methods makes it possible to identify the levers that effectively improve student outcomes.

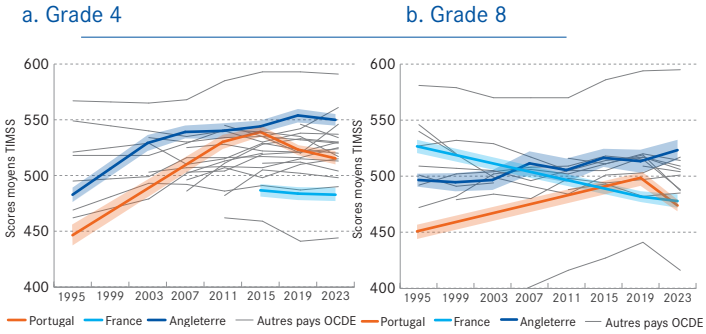
This Note aims to identify the reforms that have produced concrete improvements in educational performance and to consider how they might be adapted to the French context. It first sets out the lessons from international comparisons, then identifies a package of measures that could be implemented in France and estimates the cost of rolling them out. Finally, the Note examines the organisational changes that would support effective and collaborative implementation.

Lessons from international comparisons

Ten-year objectives calibrated to what has been achieved elsewhere

International comparisons make it possible to identify cases in which educational performance improved rapidly and durably.[4] This section focuses mainly on mathematics, but the levers identified are also effective in other subjects, particularly reading, as shown by the scientific literature. Several education systems have achieved, within about a decade, improvements in student outcomes equivalent to an additional year of learning, or 0.6 standard deviation (SD).[5] Such an improvement would mean that the achievement level of students in 9th grade would be more than one year ahead of its current level.

Figure 1. Educational recovery in mathematics in England and Portugal



Reading note: At Grade 4 (students after four years of compulsory schooling, equivalent to CM1 in France), Portugal's average score in the TIMSS mathematics assessment rose from 442 points in 1995 to 541 points in 2015, before falling to 517 points in 2023.

Note: The highlighted area represents the 95% confidence interval. The grey lines represent the other OECD countries that took part in the programme.

Source: TIMSS.

For example, in primary-school mathematics, England recorded a gain of 0.57 SD on the TIMSS scale between 1995 and 2007, the largest improvement among European countries over that period (Figure 1). This overall increase in achievement was accompanied by a substantial decline in the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold, from 18% to 6%.[6] Mississippi, a US state that ranked among the lowest performers in the early 2000s according to NAEP assessments,[7] improved by around 0.64 SD in mathematics at the end of primary school between 2003 and 2019, while the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold fell sharply from 38% to 16% (Table 1). According to PISA, Poland improved by 0.27 SD in mathematics between 2003 and 2012, and Portugal by 0.26 SD between 2003 and 2015. In an educational context different from France, the evaluation of the Pioneer Schools programme in Morocco shows large short-term learning gains following changes in classroom teaching practices: in a quasi-experimental

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[1] Martin R., Renault T. and Roux B. (2022), "Baisse de la productivité en France : échec en "maths" ?", *Focus du Conseil d'analyse économique*, No. 91.

[2] Altinok N., Diebolt C. and Diebolt R. (2024), "Le prix des inégalités scolaires", Bureau d'économie théorique et appliquée, UDS, Strasbourg, No. 2024-34.

[3] Guadalupe M., Jaravel X., Philippon T. and Sraer D. (2022), "Building on Human Capital to Restore Productivity Growth", Les Notes du Conseil d'analyse économique, No. 75.

[4] We focus in particular on countries economically comparable to France that improved by more than 0.5 standard deviation in the international TIMSS survey, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (corresponding to France's current gap relative to its 1995 performance), notably Portugal and England. For further details, see Aubin M., Dintilhac C., Latgé C. and Salaün R. (2026), "Éducation : quels enseignements retenir des pays qui ont progressé dans les classements internationaux", *Focus du Conseil d'analyse économique*, No. 138, September.

[5] In the remainder of the Note, we express the impacts of reforms and the effects of measures in standard deviations (SD), the conventional unit used in the empirical economics of education literature, which has the advantage of being independent of the original scoring scale. For further details, see Focus No. 138.

[6] Mullis I., Martin M. and Foy P. (2008), "TIMSS 2007 International Mathematics Report", TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center.

[7] NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) assessments are standardised tests administered periodically by the US federal government to measure student achievement in reading and mathematics in CM1, 4e and the final year of upper secondary school.

Table 1. International comparisons of changes in mathematics achievement

Country/State	Period	Test	Average change (standard deviations)	Share of students below the minimum threshold (%)
England	1995-2007	TIMSS, Grade 4	+ 0.57	18% ⟶ 6%
Portugal	1995-2015	TIMSS, Grade 4	+ 0.99	30% ⟶ 3%
Portugal	2003-2015	PISA	+ 0.26	30% ⟶ 24%
Mississippi (USA)	2003-2019	NAEP, Grade 4	+ 0.64	38% ⟶ 16%
Poland	2003-2012	PISA	+ 0.27	22% ⟶ 14%
Morocco	2023-2024	Quasi-experimental evaluation (J-PAL)	+ 0.93	n.a.
France	1995-2019	TIMSS, Grade 8	-0.47	3% ⟶ 12%
France	2003-2018	PISA	-0.15	17% ⟶ 29%

Reading note: Between 1995 and 2007, England recorded an improvement of 0.57 standard deviation in the TIMSS assessment (Grade 4 level), equivalent to one additional year of learning. Over the same period, the share of students below the minimum threshold (400 points) fell from 18% to 6%.

Note: Changes in average achievement are expressed in standard deviations. This standardisation makes it possible to compare the magnitude of changes despite differences in score scales. The minimum threshold refers to each programme's own proficiency levels: "Level 2" for PISA, "low benchmark" for TIMSS and "below Basic" for NAEP. Changes measured by PISA and TIMSS cover different periods and populations and are therefore not directly comparable.

Source: PISA, TIMSS and NAEP data, and J-PAL evaluation.

evaluation involving 22,800 students, mathematics achievement rose by 0.93 SD.[8]

Finding 1. National experiences in OECD countries show that it is possible, within about a decade, to raise mathematics achievement by the equivalent of more than one year of learning.

International comparisons suggest that an ambitious but achievable objective for France would be to raise educational achievement by 0.6 SD over roughly ten years, equivalent to more than one year of learning.[9] This corresponds both to the improvements observed abroad and to a logic of historical catch-up: France's TIMSS mathematics score at the end of lower secondary school fell from 530 points in 1995 to 483 points in 2019, or -0.62 SD.[10]

Recommendation 1. Set a quantified national objective for improving the performance of the French education system over a ten-year horizon. Target an improvement of 0.6 standard deviation by the end of lower secondary school, equivalent to more than one school year.

Expressed in terms of cohort trajectories, the objective is for each new cohort of students to achieve slightly better results than the previous cohort at each grade level. If each cohort gains 0.06 SD relative to the previous one at each grade level (Grade1, 2, 3, etc.), the cumulative effect reaches 0.6 SD after ten years of schooling, as successive cohorts are continuously exposed to the reforms. On the TIMSS scale, this would correspond to an increase from 479 points (2023) to around 528, placing France above the current international average (507), without reaching the highest-performing systems.[11] The aim is therefore not an immediate jump, but a gradual and cumulative transformation, cohort by cohort.

International comparisons also show that it is possible to improve average achievement while simultaneously reducing the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold. In Mississippi, African-American students, who are on average more disadvantaged, made faster progress. In England, the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold was divided by three in twelve years. Countries such as Ireland and Denmark show that achievement gaps related to social background can be reduced by around 20 points over fifteen years, which is approximately the gap that currently separates France from the OECD average.[12]

[8] For further details on these recovery trajectories and the associated reforms, see Focus n° 138, op. cit. For the J-PAL study, see Ibrahim H., de Barros A., Deschênes S. and Glewwe P. (2024), "The Best Buy? Prospective Evidence on Successful Remediation in Morocco's Public Primary Schools", Working Paper, September.

[9] Delarue M.-C., Heidmann L. and Raffy G. (2024), "Apprentissages hétérogènes : comment les élèves progressent au collège ? Une étude psychométrique de l'évolution des compétences des élèves", Éducation & formations, 107, pp. 7-34.

[10] Martin R., Renault T. and Roux B. (2022), op. cit.

[11] This level would be close to England's 2023 score (525 points), but far below the scores of the highest-ranked countries (605 for Singapore).

[12] See Aubin M. et al. (2026), Focus n° 138, op. cit.

Recommendation 2. Set two quantified objectives for reducing educational inequalities in France over a ten-year horizon: halve the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold; bring educational inequalities associated with parents' socioeconomic status down to the OECD average.

Five recurring reform levers

The comparative review of recovery trajectories shows not only that progress is possible, but also that it rests on a set of five common levers (Table 2).[13]

A simple, clear objective translated into precise expectations by subject and grade level

In the cases examined, reform begins with the formulation of a clear direction: "master reading by the end of Grade 3" in Mississippi, reaching the expected standard at the end of primary school (Level 4+ at Key Stage 2) in England, or the metas curriculares in Portugal.[14] This overall objective is translated into specific objectives by subject and grade, provides a common signal for all stakeholders (teachers, school leaders and families), and makes it possible to measure progress consistently over time.

Improve foundational skills in primary school and prioritise teaching approaches supported by evidence

Education systems that improve are explicit about the teaching approaches expected, and in some cases standardise them, while drawing on scientific research to prioritise particular methods. In several countries, strategies to improve outcomes focused on strengthening mathematics and reading skills in the early years of primary school through "explicit instruction"[15] in these two subjects. This approach includes, in particular, a clear structure for teachers to follow: three-part lessons in England (review of prior learning, direct instruction, synthesis), structured lessons in Morocco, and certified teaching materials and textbooks in Mississippi and Portugal. These teaching resources, based on findings from scientific research and made available to teachers, are directly linked to teacher training and instructional coaching.

Provide intensive support to teachers through professional development and instructional coaching

Effective reforms invest intensively and continuously in teachers' skills. In Mississippi, intensive training in reading and spelling was rolled out for primary-school teachers; today, this training can amount to up to 160 hours over two years, four to five times the French standard. In England, the "Mast" programme trained mathematics specialist teachers so that they could support their colleagues and thereby improve the quality of mathematics teaching in primary schools.[16]

In these examples, training was based on classroom materials and anchored in actual classroom practice (lesson modelling, classroom observation with feedback, analysis of student results), rather than on theoretical instruction.

In addition to training, England and Mississippi drew on former experienced teachers to provide individual coaching to teachers and strengthen their instructional practice, specifically in mathematics or reading.

Measure outcomes regularly to target reforms more effectively

High-performing systems use regular assessments to steer education policy and quickly identify students who are struggling and require intervention.

In Mississippi, all students are assessed three times a year to identify those who are struggling, and students identified as "at risk" are then monitored regularly. The measures introduced in England (Key Stage 2 tests and Ofsted inspections) and Morocco (the MASSAR platform) are described in detail in Focus No. 138.

Target the most vulnerable students, notably through tutoring

All high-performing systems complemented measures to improve whole-class teaching with specific interventions for students who were not progressing at the expected pace. These arrangements are part of a systemic approach combining early identification with interventions triggered by assessment results.

[13] For further details on the content of each reform, see Aubin M. et al. (2026), Focus n° 138, op. cit.

[14] The metas curriculares are national frameworks defining, for each subject and grade level, precise learning objectives and minimum required content, in order to guide teaching and standardise academic expectations nationwide.

[15] Explicit instruction refers to a structured teaching approach in which the teacher breaks learning down into sequenced steps, explicitly models the procedures and concepts to be learned ("I do"), guides students through collective practice ("we do"), and then supports them towards independent practice ("you do"). This method is supported by a substantial body of research in cognitive science and contrasts with so-called "discovery" approaches, in which students are given greater responsibility for constructing knowledge on their own. See Bressoux P., Sprenger-Charolles L., Bocquillon M. and Demeuse M. (2022), "L'enseignement explicite : de quoi s'agit-il, pourquoi ça marche et dans quelles conditions ?", Conseil scientifique de l'Éducation nationale.

[16] In Portugal, the reform focused on teacher selection and initial training: higher mathematics requirements for student teachers, longer teaching master's degrees, and a national entrance examination for the profession. The more modest effects of the Portuguese reform compared with the other cases studied may reflect the choice of a strategy more focused on the long term.

Table 2. Five recurring reform levers

Lever	Mississippi (USA)	England	Portugal
Definition of a simple objective translated into expectations by grade and subject	Mastery of reading by the end of Grade 3	Reach Level 4+ at Key Stage 2 by the end of primary school	Master foundational skills in Portuguese and mathematics; metas curriculares = detailed expectations by year and subject
Evidence-based and standardised teaching approach	Improved teaching materials and explicit instruction	Three-part structured lessons (National Numeracy Strategy)	Textbook certification; alignment of textbooks with the metas curriculares
Teacher training and individual coaching	Intensive two-year training for primary-school teachers (LETRS programme); dedicated instructional coaches	Mathematics teacher training (Mast programme); dedicated instructional coaches	Higher requirements at selection; longer initial teacher training
Measurement of outcomes and frequent adjustments	Assessments three times a year to identify struggling students; "data meetings"	Key Stage 2 tests and Ofsted inspections	High-stakes national examinations at the end of education cycles; data collection in a national information system
Targeted remedial support and tutoring for struggling students	Individual Reading Plans, regular monitoring and small-group interventions	"Every Child Counts" programme: 1,000 teachers trained to support 30,000 students	Academic support and needs-based groups (Fenix and TurmaMais projects)

In England, the "Every Child Counts" programme aimed to train more than 1,000 specialist teachers to support, through tutoring, the 5% of students experiencing the greatest difficulties in the first year of primary school (around 30,000 students).

In Mississippi, students identified through assessments as falling behind receive individual intervention plans ("Individual Reading Plans"), regular monitoring and small-group interventions. These interventions are structured around a proficiency threshold that must be reached by the end of Grade 3.

In Portugal, in the absence of specialist tutors, support relied largely on existing resources: teachers could use their on-site working hours for support sessions, and struggling students were temporarily grouped by level of proficiency while remaining attached to their original class. This relatively light model, reflecting budget constraints, shows that limited remedial support, when combined with a structured curriculum and high-stakes examinations, can contribute to genuine gains.[17]

Morocco provides another example: the TaRL ("Teaching at the Right Level") programme grouped students not by age cohort but by their actual proficiency level, identified through standardised tests, for an intensive remedial support phase lasting several weeks at the beginning of the school year. At the end of the programme, assessments found that the share of students mastering the targeted mathematics skills had quadrupled.

> **Finding 2**. Education systems whose results in international assessments have improved substantially generally combine precise learning objectives, structured teaching resources and practices, stronger teacher training and coaching, regular monitoring of learning outcomes, and targeted support for struggling students.

Effects confirmed by the empirical literature

The economics of education literature makes it possible to quantify the causal effects associated with the main levers. The meta-analysis by Stockard et al. (328 studies)[18] estimates the effect of structured and explicit instruction at + 0.50 to + 0.60 SD under experimental conditions. Large-scale implementations of targeted programmes have more modest but still meaningful effects: for example, Machin and McNally[19] estimate a + 0.08 SD effect on reading outcomes after one

[17] Portugal's improvement in international assessments nevertheless remained smaller than that of jurisdictions that implemented more comprehensive reforms (England and Mississippi).

[18] Stockard J., Wood T. W., Coughlin C. and Khoury C. R. (2018), "The Effectiveness of Direct Instruction Curricula: A Meta-Analysis of a Half Century of Research", *Review of Educational Research*, 88(4), pp. 479-507.

[19] Machin S. and McNally S. (2008), "The Literacy Hour", *Journal of Public Economics*, 92(5-6), pp. 1441-1462.

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to two years of large-scale implementation for one cohort of a structured literacy programme in England.

Continuing professional development and teacher coaching constitute the second core lever. High-quality intensive training can improve student outcomes by around + 0.12 SD.[20] Kraft, Blazar and Hogan[21] show that effects can be larger when training is combined with individual classroom coaching. For this type of programme, their meta-analysis finds an effect of around + 0.2 SD on student outcomes. Visscher et al.[22] (a meta-analysis of 128 studies) confirm the conditions required to generate effects: anchoring in classroom practice, individualised coaching, sufficient duration, and a focus on specific teaching skills.

Tutoring and targeted support constitute the third lever, aimed at students who do not make sufficient progress through whole-class teaching. The meta-analysis by Nickow et al.[23] estimates effects of + 0.50 SD for tutoring delivered by qualified teachers, + 0.40 SD when delivered by paraprofessionals, and + 0.21 SD when delivered by non-professionals. Small-group programmes generate gains of around + 0.3 SD.[24]

Features of the French context

France underinvests structurally in several of the key mechanisms highlighted by international comparisons.[25]

With regard to continuing professional development and individual teacher coaching, France stands out for the low volume of in-service training: 3.5 effective days per year compared with an OECD average of 8 days for lower-secondary teachers,[26] and up to five times less than in the highest-performing systems - Singapore provides around one hundred hours per year, compared with 18 compulsory hours in primary education in France.[27] Moreover, these training hours remain too theoretical, are insufficiently grounded in classroom practice, and are rarely focused on specific teaching skills in mathematics and reading.

With regard to teaching practices and resources, France is characterised by substantial heterogeneity in classroom practice and in the content of school textbooks,[28] partly because there are no certification mechanisms. Without a clear, certified framework indicating which teaching approaches should be used, it is difficult to know how instruction is actually delivered in classrooms. Official curricula set objectives but leave considerable room for interpretation, resulting in highly diverse practices.

With regard to support for vulnerable students, several arrangements already exist (homework support, personalised educational success programmes, specialised RASED teachers[29], needs-based groups), but their effectiveness is limited by their diversity and by the scale at which they are implemented (groups that are too large to allow sufficient personalisation, shortages of specialist teachers or teachers trained for these arrangements, etc.). Personalised support delivered in very small groups, such as tutoring by trained paraprofessionals, whose effectiveness is nevertheless documented in the international literature, remains very limited.

With regard to assessment, France has a substantial national system: DEPP assessments cover CP - with two assessments, in September and January - then the beginning of each school year from Grade 2 to 8, followed by Grade 10, with precise expectations for foundational skills in reading and mathematics. This dense coverage is an asset that should be used more fully: few education systems have such assessments throughout primary school. The problem is not the existence of assessments but how their results are used. Results are returned to teachers, but without any associated systematic intervention protocol,[30] without organised collective analysis time at the local education-district level, and without an automatic mechanism triggering targeted support for students below a minimum proficiency threshold, unlike in other countries that have improved their trajectories.

Finally, France is characterised by larger average class sizes in primary school than in the rest of the European Union

[20] Grenet J. and Landais C. (2025), "Education: how to better target public spending", *Les Notes du Conseil d'analyse économique*, No. 84.

[21] Kraft M. A., Blazar D. and Hogan D. (2018), "The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement : A Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence", *Review of Educational Research*, 88(4), pp. 547-588.

[22] Visscher A. J., Dmoshinskaia N., Pellegrini M. et al. (2025), "When) Do Teacher Professional Development Interventions Improve Student Achievement? A Meta-Analysis of 128 High-Quality Studies", *Educational Research Review*, 49, article 100742.

[23] Nickow A. J., Oreopoulos P. and Quan V. (2020), "The Impressive Effects of Tutoring on PreK-12 Learning : A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence", *NBER Working Paper* No. 27476.

[24] Education Endowment Foundation (2026), Small group tuition : Technical Appendix.

[25] France already has some arrangements that, in theory, cover several of the levers identified: teachers in the RASED network for specialised support to struggling students; reduced class sizes in the final year of preschool, CP and CE1 in priority education networks; homework support programmes for struggling students; local instructional advisers and mathematics specialists to support teachers. Their effectiveness is nevertheless limited by fragmentation, insufficient targeting and the absence of evaluated protocols.

[26] OECD (2025), "Résultats de TALIS 2024 : note par pays – France".

[27] Institut Montaigne (2024), "Mathématiques à l'école : résoudre l'équation".

[28] Grapin N. and Mounier É. (2018), "Vers un outil d'analyse de manuels : exemple d'étude en 1re année d'école élémentaire (3H)", *Revue de mathématiques pour l'école,* No. 230, pp. 30-37.

[29] Specialist support network for pupil in difficulties (RASED).

[30] Initiatives to develop this type of protocol nevertheless exist in partnership with DEPP and the Collège de France.

(19 compared with 22) and devotes relatively fewer resources to primary education than many comparable countries.[31]

More generally, the French system is characterised by a succession of reforms, some of which are announced without being sustained over time because funding is not secured.

Finding 3. The French system has weaknesses in several mechanisms that empirical research nevertheless identifies as effective: explicit instruction, continuing professional development for teachers, support for struggling students, and the use of assessments. In addition, reforms are not embedded in a long-term strategy and are not always carried through because of a lack of funding.

Estimate the budgetary costs and effects on student outcomes in France

In this section, we identify a package of priority measures and estimate their costs and effects on student outcomes in France over a ten-year horizon.

The measures are selected on the basis of empirical evidence of their effectiveness, from both international comparisons and the scientific literature, and of their relevance to the French system, while taking into account the feasibility of nationwide implementation over ten years. Our estimates rely on several methodological choices designed to account for difficulties in ensuring faithful implementation when these measures are rolled out and for "fade-out effects" (the effect on student performance does not persist beyond the year of the intervention).[32]

These budgetary costs should be compared with the savings associated with declining birth rates. By 2035, the number of students in primary and lower-secondary education is expected to fall by around 15%. If the number of students per class is held constant, this demographic dividend would generate at least EUR 5 billion in annual savings by 2035.[33]

Table 3 estimates the costs and effects of the priority measures. Four of them are directly inspired by the reforms described above: intensive continuing professional development and instructional coaching for teachers, improved teaching resources, tutoring targeted at struggling students, and investment in assessment tools to guide the allocation of resources.

As international comparisons have shown, effectiveness does not come from any single lever, but from the coherent combination of three levels of intervention - teacher training and coaching, whole-class "explicit instruction", and targeted remediation for struggling students - implemented continuously and coordinated from pre-school through lower-secondary education, together with closer monitoring of outcomes through assessments. The effects accumulate over time: each cohort that benefits from high-quality teaching from an early age gradually accumulates gains.

Although this measure is not one of the main levers in the national experiences that provide the strongest evidence of educational recovery, we recommend reducing primary-school class sizes in order to bring France back to the European average of 19 students per class (compared with 22 in France). The positive effects of reducing class size in primary school have been established robustly in the international literature.[34] Moreover, because demographic decline will be uneven across the country, class sizes will need to be rebalanced to avoid widening territorial disparities in this area.[35] This measure is strongly supported by teachers and may facilitate the implementation of other measures, notably by making classroom management easier.

Table 3 shows that a scenario combining measures identified internationally with a reduction in class size could raise achievement by 0.53 to 0.60 standard deviation within ten years, thereby meeting the stated objective. In our central estimate, the priority measures would reduce the share of students below the minimum proficiency threshold by around 25 percentage points and bring France below the EU average in terms of the socioeconomic achievement gap (Focus No. 139). The cost of implementation would be around EUR 4 billion, and would therefore remain below the budgetary room created by the "demographic dividend". We regard this package of reforms as a priority.

[31] OECD (2025), "Regards sur l'éducation 2025 : France".

[32] These measures and the estimates of their implementation costs concern all subjects, with some exceptions. For further details, see Aubin M., Dintilhac C., Jaravel X., Maublanc M. and Salaün R. (2026), "Réformes éducatives : chiffrages budgétaires et effets sur le niveau scolaire et les inégalités", *Focus du CAE*, No. 139, September.

[33] Ibid. This conservative estimate simply takes into account the reduction in the number of classes resulting from the fall in student numbers. Other sources of budgetary room (non-teaching staff, equipment, school meals, grants, etc.) could increase the demographic dividend to as much as EUR 13 billion per year.

[34] For a review of this literature, see for example Fajeau M., Grenet J., Laveissière E. and Leonetti O. (2025), "Efficacité économique de la réduction de la taille des classes", *Focus du CAE*, No. 113.

[35] For a possible strategy to reduce class sizes while limiting territorial inequalities, see Charousset P., Grenet J., Guyon N. and Souidi Y. (2025), "Taille des classes et inégalités territoriales : quelle stratégie face à la baisse démographique ?", in Boyer P., Bozio A. and Roy D. (eds.), *Perspectives budgétaires*, Chapter 4, Institut des politiques publiques/La Documentation française.

Table 3. Effects and costs of priority measures

Measure	Description	Target level	Total effect by 3e (SD)	Annual cost (by 2035)
Continuing professional development and instructional coaching	Increase continuing professional development to 80 hours/year (compared with 18 hours currently), targeted at mathematics/reading	Grade 1 to 9	+ 0.23	EUR 715 m
	Network of specialist instructional coaches (20 hours of coaching per teacher per year)	Grade 1 to 9	+ 0.16	EUR 720 m
Improved teaching resources	Certification of textbooks based on pedagogical criteria (explicit instruction, progression, alignment with curricula), teaching guides, high-quality lesson materials	Grade 1 to 9	+ 0.05 to +0.12 (substantial uncertainty)	EUR 90 m
Tutoring	Small-group tutoring (2-4 students) by trained paraprofessionals, triggered by diagnostic assessments, for 10-15% of students	CP-CM2	+ 0.07 to +0.11	EUR 240-360 m
Reduced class size	Reduce average primary-school class size to 19 students (European average)	Petite section-CM2	+ 0.035	EUR 1.9bn
Assessment and steering	Transform national assessments (CP/CE1/6e) into a continuous steering tool: rapid feedback (<1 month), automatic intervention protocols below threshold	Grade 1 to 9	n.a.	Low cost (existing infrastructure to be strengthened)

Reading note: Increasing continuing professional development hours for all grades from CP to 3e is estimated to raise achievement in 3e by + 0.23 SD, at an estimated cost of EUR 715 million.
Note: Effects in SD correspond to average gains in 3e for a cohort exposed to the measure across all targeted grades.
Source: Aubin M. et al. (Focus No. 139) provide details on the assumptions and sources used.

Recommendation 3. Mobilise around EUR 4 billion per year to finance measures whose effectiveness is supported by research and international comparisons: intensive continuing professional development and instructional coaching for teachers, improvements in teaching resources, tutoring for struggling students, reductions in class size, and the use of student assessments to better target selected resources.

Grenet and Landais (2025) estimate, based on the available empirical studies, that in the long run these expenditures could generate public revenues exceeding their cost. By improving students' skills, the proposed measures would support their labour-market integration and raise their future earnings, and therefore the taxes and social contributions paid over their working lives.

Table 4 presents a series of complementary measures drawn from the empirical literature that could help secure the 0.6-standard-deviation objective, at a cost that would remain below the demographic dividend.

To estimate teachers' support for the package of measures presented in Table 3, we conducted a representative survey in July 2026 among primary and lower-secondary teachers (800 respondents). The results, presented in a Focus,[36] suggest a relatively high level of support: 81% of respondents "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" with measures on continuing professional development and instructional coaching, 74% with improvements in teaching resources, 83% with tutoring, 93% with reducing class sizes in primary school, and 48% with the use of assessments as a steering tool.

The estimates in Tables 3 and 4 should be understood as orders of magnitude that help structure the debate rather than as certain predictions. Uncertainty mainly concerns three factors: implementation quality, the coherence of the overall policy architecture, and continuity over time. The next section therefore addresses the practical approach to steering and governance.

Pilot the change

Achieving the performance and equity objectives set out in the previous sections requires a transformation strategy that is credible to front-line stakeholders. Such credibility is currently difficult to build in a context marked by mistrust of reforms and discouragement among part of the education community. The purpose of this section is to propose practical avenues for transforming the school system.

Four dimensions appear critical in this respect: a stable strategic horizon through a national direction set for ten years;

[36] Latgé C. et al. (2026), "Éducation : adhésion des enseignants à différentes mesures", *Focus du CAE*, No. 140, forthcoming.

Table 4. Effects and costs of complementary measures

Measure	Description	Target level	Total effect by 3e (SD)	Annual cost (by 2035)
Digital tools	Adaptive digital tools in mathematics and distribution of computer equipment in CP and 6e for disadvantaged students	Grade 1-9	+ 0.27 SD	EUR 175 m
Socio-behavioural skills	One-off interventions by trained external facilitators	Grade 6-9	+ 0.035 SD	EUR 55 m
Summer programme	One-month programme to strengthen mathematics or reading skills for 10% of primary-school students	Grade 1-9	+ 0.02 SD	EUR 250 m
Boarding schools of excellence	Creation of 20,000 places	Grade 6-9	+ 0.006 SD	EUR 300 m
Links with families	Mallette des parents programme in REP/REP+ priority education areas	Grade 1-5	+ 0.02 SD	EUR 6 m
Collaborative time	Peer learning communities + reciprocal classroom observations	Grade 6-9	+ 0.06 SD	EUR 85 m
Inspections	Increase to the statutory frequency (every four years)	Grade 6-9	+ 0.007 SD	EUR 20 m

Reading note: Supported use of digital tools from grade 1 to 9 is estimated to raise achievement in 3e by + 0.27 SD, at an estimated cost of EUR 175 million.
Note: Effects in SD correspond to average gains in 3e for a cohort exposed to the measure across all targeted grades.
Source: Aubin M. et al. (Focus No. 139) provide details on the assumptions and sources used, as well as on the nature of the programmes.

better integration of research findings and support for bottom-up initiatives, together with their evaluation; teacher professional development that is more closely integrated into the practice of the profession; and, finally, implementation at school level, carried collectively and adapted collegially to students' needs.

The aim is therefore to replace reform as an isolated "event" with a process of continuous transformation, supported by clear objectives, robust data and a collaborative professional environment that supports teachers.

Set a ten-year direction

The French education system suffers from instability in implementation: the accumulation of successive, and sometimes contradictory, reforms has created saturation, while trust in policymakers and the central administration has eroded substantially. For example, primary-school curricula have undergone several rounds of adjustment or rewriting since 2018, culminating in the new 2024 texts for pre-primary education and Cycle 2, whereas the highest-performing systems operate more often within longer policy cycles.

This discontinuity weakens the ownership of priorities, prevents professional practices from stabilising, and exhausts schools' capacity to adapt. According to international surveys,[37] French teachers stand out for a low sense of professional recognition, a perception that decision-makers do not listen sufficiently, and levels of reform-related stress above those observed in comparable countries.

Moving away from this pattern requires combining two conditions if large-scale change is to succeed: a clear national direction and scope for local ownership. The State must set the expected outcomes, guarantee continuity of effort and organise regular evaluation. But this direction can only be effective if it draws on practitioners' expertise and on sustained dialogue between the administration, research and front-line actors.

A citizens' convention bringing together teachers, families, students, researchers, local authorities and social partners could help build this legitimacy by opening discussion on long-term objectives, policy priorities and the conditions under which the transformation would be acceptable. It would prepare the adoption of a ten-year education programming law that would set explicit objectives for improving average achievement and reducing inequalities over ten years, establish monitoring indicators, create genuinely independent evaluation bodies, and secure the funding required for the reforms. Such a programming law would give teachers greater visibility regarding the stability of reforms and their funding.

> **Recommendation 4**. Adopt a ten-year programming law setting objectives for improving average educational achievement and reducing inequalities, the corresponding monitoring indicators, arrangements for independent evaluation, and multi-year funding for the priority measures.

Better integrate research findings, promote and evaluate bottom-up initiatives

Improving the education system requires public capacity to produce, validate, synthesise and disseminate knowledge about what actually helps students learn. In several countries, this function is carried out by dedicated institutions, such as

[37] OECD (2025), "Résultats de TALIS 2024 : note par pays – France".

the Education Endowment Foundation in the United Kingdom, which maintains the Teaching and Learning Toolkit.

France has important assets in this area, but they remain too fragmented and insufficiently developed. The Scientific Council of National Education (CSEN) has produced high-quality research syntheses; the Directorate for Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance (DEPP) collects and analyses detailed data; and the School Evaluation Council (CEE) has begun to structure school self-evaluation processes. However, resources remain limited for producing large-scale impact evaluations and translating their findings into tools that school teams can use directly.

The issue is therefore not so much to create an additional organisation as to build a continuum between research, evaluation and practice. For example, DEPP assessments were moved to the beginning of the school year so that they could serve as a tool to support learning. Their practical use should nevertheless be strengthened: identifying struggling students in order to offer them targeted support (such as tutoring), and testing different approaches for translating assessment results into concrete actions for teachers.

A similar approach can be followed at school level. Data can then become a shared diagnostic tool: they make it possible to identify the students, grades, classes or schools where difficulties are concentrated, so that support, training and resources can be targeted there as a priority.

Similarly, research on pedagogy should be used more systematically to improve classroom practice, by training teachers in teaching techniques that have demonstrated their effectiveness and by making teaching resources available to them - for example, lesson sheets for novice teachers explaining step by step how to teach key concepts such as division.

A central objective is to make assessment data the basis for constructive dialogue between schools and the State, rather than merely a ranking instrument. While school leaders in France make limited use of these data to design school plans or adjust teaching practices, the English inspectorate[38] has developed methodological guidance to help leadership teams build multi-year improvement plans based on assessment results, accompanied by dedicated resources for training and support.

A similar approach, adapted to the French context, would link each school to measurable objectives over a number of years, with reciprocal commitments on resources and support. This would change the culture of evaluation: whereas evaluation can generate reservations when it is perceived as external control, it would become a shared steering tool supporting collective action and the targeting of resources, particularly student support, professional development and work organisation at school level. For example, a school with a larger share of students below a minimum proficiency threshold could receive additional funding for tutoring; assessments could then be used to determine whether tutoring is helping those students make progress.

Recommendation 5. Strengthen support for education research and evaluation. Organise the use of their findings by the education community through accessible syntheses and teaching resources, with a budget of around EUR 60 million per year.

Finally, in order to identify and then scale up effective practices, calls for expressions of interest should be used to finance experiments led by teachers.

Recommendation 6. Launch calls for expressions of interest to finance experiments led by teaching teams or schools, together with independent evaluations of education programmes, with a budget of around EUR 50 million per year.

Invest in professional development

The French school system remains characterised by substantial professional isolation. A large majority of teachers report never having observed a colleague in the classroom, and only a minority of beginning teachers benefit from formal mentoring.[39]

The objective is not to add occasional training sessions, but to make professional development a normal part of the profession. Research findings[40] converge on this point: the most effective approaches are grounded in practice (classroom observation, case analysis, joint lesson preparation), spread over time, focused on the content being taught, and linked to students' actual learning. This direction is particularly important because reforms are often perceived as disconnected from front-line realities.[41]

[38] Ofsted (2008), Using Data, Improving Schools, Office for Standards in Education, Report No. 070260.

[39] Malet R., Condette S., Derivry M. and Le Coz A. (2021), "De la formation continue au développement professionnel des personnels enseignants et d'encadrement éducatif : situation nationale, comparaisons internationales, état des recherches", Cnesco-Cnam.

[40] Wenger E. (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Cambridge University Press; DuFour R. (2008), Professional Learning Communities at Work, Solution Tree Press; Kraft M. A., Blazar D. and Hogan D. (2018), op. cit.; Visscher et al. (2025), op. cit.; Cnesco (2021), op. cit.

[41] This section focuses on in-career professional development. Initial teacher training, whose well-documented shortcomings are a critical but distinct issue, falls outside the scope of this Note.

From top-down training to peer learning

In France, 18 hours per year are theoretically devoted to continuing professional development in primary education; in secondary education, a training obligation exists but without a binding number of hours integrated into teachers' service requirements. In practice, actual participation is modest, and most teachers consider that this training has limited effects on their practice (because of a lack of time, timetable constraints, and provision often perceived as poorly matched to front-line needs).[42] In many systems, regular collaborative time is built into timetables to support peer work, led by experienced teachers who facilitate and coach their colleagues.

The objective for France is therefore to move from occasional training courses to a model of continuous learning integrated into routine work. This requires ring-fencing collaborative time within schools, recognising roles for pedagogical leadership, and linking training more closely to diagnoses based on national assessments and student outcomes.

In France, the "lesson study" approach introduced through the mathematics plan and subsequently extended to French follows this model of professional development based on joint lesson preparation, observation and collective analysis. It provides a promising foundation, but remains insufficiently widespread and evaluated.[43]

Structure mentoring and entry into the profession

The first years of teaching are critical for settling into the profession, consolidating professional practice and, more broadly, the attractiveness of the teaching career. Yet instructional support remains weak in France. The network of local pedagogical advisers has very limited coverage (one adviser for every 100 teachers) and is only weakly differentiated by subject and grade level. In addition, only 17% of beginning teachers report having a designated mentor, compared with an OECD average of 26%.[44]

Strengthening instructional support through dedicated staff should therefore be considered. Effective mentoring for entry into the profession requires experienced teachers trained for this role, time set aside for reciprocal observation, analysis of situations and feedback on practice, and explicit monitoring of the first professional skills to be acquired.

Recommendation 7. Make intensive professional development a normal part of the teaching profession by progressively increasing continuing professional development to 80 hours per year and complementing it with school-based support provided by instructional advisers and peers. Place particular emphasis on access to structured mentoring for beginning teachers.

Schools at the heart of the transformation

The preceding levers can have lasting effects only if schools provide a setting in which they can be collectively appropriated and implemented. The literature shows that this local translation is critical.[45]

Teaching should increasingly be embedded in a professional collective organised at school level and led by a management team able to structure pedagogical work, set priorities and support the use of shared tools.

From this perspective, the role of school leaders should be understood primarily as one of collective instructional leadership. In the highest-performing systems, school leaders do not merely manage administrative constraints: they organise collaborative work, support the use of data, structure professional development, and ensure consistency across pedagogical priorities.[46] Such a shift would require greater investment in their training, support and resources. We estimate that a budget of around EUR 500 million would be needed to develop this role fully.[47]

This also implies giving schools genuine, though bounded, room for action. The objective is neither to import a model of school competition nor to delegate indiscriminately to each school the definition of its own goals. Autonomy is not an end in itself: it is valuable only as a means of optimising the concrete support provided to teachers and the organisation of pedagogical work as close as possible to the classroom. However, once the overall direction, learning expectations and assessment tools are defined nationally, school teams should have organisational levers aligned with their objectives: adjusting collaborative time, allocating certain resources, choosing support arrangements, and drawing on volunteer teachers through targeted calls for expressions of

[42] Only 35% of French teachers consider that the professional development activities in which they participated over the previous 12 months had a positive impact on their practices, compared with an OECD average of 55%. OECD (2026), "Résultats de TALIS 2024 : Où en est l'enseignement ?".

[43] Conseil d'évaluation de l'École (2023), "Comprendre les caractéristiques de la Lesson Study pour les constellations des Plans mathématiques et français", Working Paper, Ministry of National Education.

[44] OECD (2020), "Enseignants débutants : Comment les soutenir et les orienter ? : Données tirées de l'Enquête TALIS 2018", *L'enseignement à la loupe*, No. 29, OECD Publishing.

[45] The Note's focus on teachers and school leaders does not diminish the role of other staff - senior education advisers, support staff for students with disabilities, psychologists, social and health staff - or the importance of essential dimensions of students' lives, such as support for special educational needs, prevention of bullying, or access to cultural and sporting development. These issues are critical, but are not addressed directly here.

[46] Pont B., Nusche D. and Moorman H. (2009), "Améliorer la direction des établissements scolaires, Volume 1 : Politiques et pratiques", OECD Publishing. See also recent IGÉSR reports on the training and responsibilities of school leaders.

[47] See Aubin M. et al. (Focus No. 139), op. cit., Appendice 2.

interest.[48] International comparisons show that autonomy is more effective when it operates within a structured framework of accountability and evaluation.[49]

This development should go hand in hand with a transformation of the role of inspection. Following the German example,[50] a larger share of inspectors' expertise should be mobilised to support schools: analysing outcomes, assisting with improvement plans, and disseminating effective practices.

Recommendation 8. Make the school the central unit for implementing the education strategy by strengthening school leaders' capacity to act. Build around them an instructional leadership team responsible for organising collaborative work, using available data and adapting national priorities to students' needs. Refocus inspection missions by giving priority to supporting teaching teams.

Our representative survey of primary and lower-secondary teachers shows a relatively high level of support for these organisational changes: 85% of respondents "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree" with the principle of a ten-year programming law setting objectives and ring-fencing resources, 77% with the use of calls for expressions of interest, 72% with integrating more collaborative working time and exchanges of practice among teachers, 63% with strengthening the instructional leadership role of primary-school directors or school heads, and 73% with shifting inspection towards supporting teaching teams.

This Note therefore shows that it is possible to raise educational achievement in France by drawing on successful experiences abroad and on the findings of the empirical literature. Moreover, the implementation of these reforms in the French context can be financed by the budgetary room created by the "demographic dividend". ■

[48] Schools with greater room for action are also better able to develop external partnerships with civil society (families, associations and firms). When these forms of cooperation provide structured complements to educational action (mentoring, cultural or sporting activities, parenting support), they can contribute to learning and student well-being. See, for example: Education Endowment Foundation (2025), " Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning"; OECD (2025), "School Partnerships Addressing Child Well-Being and Digital Technology".

[49] Woessmann L. et al. (2009), *School Accountability, Autonomy and Choice around the World*, Edward Elgar Publishing.

[50] See, for example: Dedering K. and Sowada M. G. (2017), "Changing Policies–Changing Inspection Practices? Or the Other Way Round?", in *School Inspectors*, pp. 25-43, Springer International Publishing.

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