

An e-mail that should have remained confidential

Translation of

Un courriel qui aurait dû rester confidentiel

<http://www.ihes.fr/%7elafforgue/dem/courriel.html>

Wednesday November 16, 2005

Dear Mr. President of the HCE,

I thank you for your message, attached below, providing the agenda for our next meeting.

I cannot refrain from responding to certain points that bring me to despair.

The main point is the following:

- > *appeal to the experts of the Ministry of National Education:*
- > *Inspectors General and Directors of the central administration,*
- > *in particular the Directorate of Evaluation and Planning [DEP]*
- > *and the Directorate of Education in the Schools [DESCO],*

For me, it is exactly as if we were a "High Council of Human Rights" and were planning to appeal to the Khmer Rouge to form a group of experts for the promotion of these Rights.

Let me explain: in the year and a half since I began to take a serious interest in the state of education in our country -- by reading all books of teachers' first-hand accounts I could find, by systematically collecting all oral or written testimony from teachers I was able to contact, by questioning young people myself in order to gauge what they do or do not know -- I have come to the conclusion that our system of public education is on the path towards complete destruction.

This destruction is the result of all the policies and all the reforms carried out by all governments since the end of the 1960s. These policies were intended, approved, carried out and imposed by all governing bodies of the National Department of Education [EN]; that is in particular: the famous experts of the Department of Education; the corps of Inspectors (recruited from among the teachers most docile and most deferential to official dogma); the directors of all branches of the central administration (including DEP and DESCO); the directors and professors at the University Teacher Training Institutes [IUFM], which are staffed by famous theorists of pedagogy and other specialists in the so-called "sciences of education"; the majority of experts on curriculum committees -- in sum, the entire Nomenklatura of National Education. These policies were inspired in all these people by an ideology that no longer values knowledge, and that mingles the wish to give schools other priorities than teaching and transmitting knowledge with the obligatory belief in absurd pedagogical theories, the contempt for simple things, the contempt for fundamental learning, the refusal of direct, explicit and logically sequenced teaching, the contempt for basic knowledge, coupled with the mandatory teaching of nebulous and extravagantly ambitious contents, and the doctrine of the student "at the center of the system" who must "construct his own knowledge". This ideology has been adopted as well by governing bodies of the trade unions, first and foremost by the SGEN.

Today all these people have only one aim: to deny their responsibility and thus mask, by all possible means, the reality of the disaster.

I admit that I do not know if they acted in good faith or if they deliberately organised the destruction of the schools.

I also do not know who among them -- a minority in any case -- did not participate in this collective madness, nor who did participate but are today aware of the dramatic consequences of the errors accumulated over decades, and would be ready to start over in a better direction. A priori, I have the deepest distrust towards all the members of the Nomenklatura of National Education.

In order to become aware of the reality of where we are, I urge all members of the HCE most emphatically to read the following works, which are testimonies by teachers of all levels (I have read all of them and more from cover to cover):

Marc Le Bris :

"Et vos enfants ne sauront pas lire...ni compter"

["And your children will not know how to read ... or count"]

(Stock, 2004)

(Testimony by a teacher from the quiet countryside on his practice in the face of all the absurdities imposed by the institution for many years in all possible ways).

A book of pure common sense from the first to the last line. I believe that Marc Le Bris should figure among the first of the experts we could choose.

Rachel Boutonnet:

"Journal d'une institutrice clandestine"

["Diary of a clandestine teacher"]

(Ramsay, 2003)

(A diary kept every day by a trainee at a University Teacher Training Institute about the manner in which it presumed to educate her, followed by her first experiences as a teacher).

In this book, I have noticed with interest that among all the IUFM-experiences this trainee underwent, the only one in which subject-matter came to be mentioned was mathematics. This is a consolation, but a rather slim one.

Fanny Capel

"Qui a eu cette idée folle un jour de casser l'école?"

["Whose this crazy idea was it, to destroy the school?"]

(Ramsay, 2004)

(testimony by a recent graduate in advanced modern literature, daughter of a working class family, teaching at "well reputed" middle and high schools in desirable neighbourhoods).

Here one learns that even in the college-preparatory schools that are "well placed" in all newspaper prize-lists, a large proportion of the students do not know, for example, which century Victor Hugo lived in.

Elisabeth Altschull:

"L'école des ego: contre les gourous du pédagogiquement correct"

["Schooling the ego: an answer to the gurus of pedagogical correctness"]

(Albin Michel, 2002).

(Testimony by an "educational refugee": although her parents were American, her mother chose to bring her to France as a child -- that was about forty years ago -- in order that she might obtain there a quality education. She despairs at seeing that French National Education has in recent decades been following the same path to mediocrity as the majority of American schools.)

Evelyne Tschirhart :

"L'école à la dérive: ce qui se passe vraiment au collège"

["School adrift: what is really happening at middle school"]

(Editions de Paris, 2004)

(Testimony by a teacher of visual arts at a school in an underprivileged neighborhood.)

Agnès Joste :

"Contre-expertise d'une trahison : la réforme du français au lycée"

["Analysis of a betrayal: the reform of French at high school."]

(Edition des Mille et une nuits, 2002)

(Meticulous reading by a professor of literature of texts from the Ministry of Education.)

Collectif "Sauver les lettres":

"Des professeurs accusent"

["Professors accuse"]

(Textuel, 2001)

(A humanist manifesto against the "ultra-reformers and ultra-pedagogues" that have seized power at National Education and are organizing the dismantling of public instruction.)

Guy Morel et Daniel Tual-Loizeau:

"L'horreur pédagogique: paroles de profs et vérités des copies."

["The pedagogical nightmare: teachers' words and students' papers."]

(Ramsay, 1999, commercially out of stock but should be findable)

Jean-Paul Brighelli:

"La fabrique du crétin: La mort programmée de l'école"

["The manufacture of cretins: the programmed death of school"]

(Jean-Claude Gawsewitch Editeur, 2005)

(This is the latest of the teacher testimony books, having come out two months ago. It is by a teacher of literature, manifestly on the far Left: he interprets the destruction of school as the effect of a deliberate plot by the "ultra-liberal" ruling classes. This interpretation is questionable, but when he makes an observation about the state of School, he knows whereof he speaks, and that is what's interesting.)

I also recommend very warmly the books of Liliane Lurçat, an absolutely extraordinary and impressive person (I have recently had occasion to meet her after having read her books and corresponded with her), who devoted her whole life to studying the learning process of children in primary school. I particularly recommend:

"La destruction de l'enseignement élémentaire et ses penseurs: la première cause de l'échec à l'école."

["The destruction of elementary teaching and its thinkers: the leading cause of failure in school."]

(François-Xavier de Guibert, 2e édition, 2004)

"Vers une école totalitaire? L'enfance massifiée à l'école et dans la société"

["Towards a totalitarian school? Massified childhood in school and society"]

(François-Xavier de Guibert, 2e édition, 2001)

"Des enfances volées par la télévision: le temps prisonnier"

["Childhoods stolen by television: Time imprisoned"]

(François-Xavier de Guibert, 3e édition, 2004)

Incidentally, my personal opinion is that, together with the elementary teacher Marc Le Bris, Mme Lurçat is a person whom the HCE should count in the first rank among the experts on primary school (although she is 77 years old, and I don't know whether she would accept). I think that nobody else in France has, at the same time, such concrete knowledge of primary school and such a quality and depth of reflection on the subject.

On the other hand, Mme Lurçat grew up during the 1930s in a poor neighbourhood inhabited very predominantly by immigrants of all origins. She can remember what was at that time a school of the republic, attended mainly by immigrant children and integrating them; this knowledge is apparently lost today, when it might well become urgent to remember it.

I am also sending you, as an attachment, an incredible report published a few days ago by the Association de Professeurs de Lettres (and available on their site). I wrote to one of the authors to ask what proportion of students would be affected by the phenomena described in the report. Here is his reply.

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Sir,

These inadequacies (skeletal vocabulary, rudimentary or non-existent syntax, ignorance of sentence grammar) have become general in recent years and can henceforth be observed in the great majority of students, probably more than 80% of them, and that regardless of their social origin or their attitude in class; of course, this situation, which is bad in general, is so to varying degrees depending on the linguistic and cultural level of the family, but the latter differences manifest themselves more in speech than in writing. Middle school does nothing at all to remedy these deficiencies, which persist and sometimes worsen; you find them again in high school and even in the preparatory classes (a colleague who teaches Latin to candidates for the Cagne [an entrance exam for post-secondary literary studies at an elite institution -- translator], all acting like rank beginners, recently explained to me that his pupils could not make it through an analysis of a relative clause). In fact, from primary to high school, the curriculum assigns to sentence grammar a subsidiary role, so to speak, and the "doctrine" in force (I mean that which transcends the curricula, their accompanying documents, the textbooks they inspire, the recommendations of inspectors and of IUFM teacher-trainers) proscribes the practice of logical analysis and grammatical analysis, and gives pride of place to "youth literature", the classics having been banished from the reading a student might do at home.

I am, of course, at your disposition for any details that might appear useful.

With best regards,

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This report by itself suffices for the realisation that the so-called experts, to whom the design of the French curriculum was entrusted, were quite simply crackpots (and I am weighing my words).

It is impossible for me to understand how they were able to eliminate sentence grammar (subject, verb, object, etc.) and logical analysis in order to replace them by arcane ramblings of the following kind (quoted from a Grade 8 teachers' guide):

"The study of word action is therefore essential. It can be decomposed into three complementary approaches: the dimension of locution, that is, the fact of producing structured, organised and sense-making utterances; the dimension of illocution, that is, the fact of trying to act on somebody by talking to him or her (interrogating, giving an order, prohibiting something, convincing, or persuading ...); the dimension of perlocution; that is, the effect on the person addressed, who will or will not answer the question or execute the order... (...) It is very important to lead the student to an awareness of this triple dimension of word action, in particular with a view toward molding the future citizen."

If the governing bodies of National Education in their entirety were capable of entrusting the design of curricula to such crackpots, of not noticing the wrong-headed character of their recommendations, and of not being moved by the reactions of teachers which came to their attention, I see only one possible explanation:

the governing bodies of National Education are entirely staffed by irresponsible fools (or criminals, in the case of those, if any, who might have organised the destruction of Public Schooling with deliberate intent.)

So far, this has been about French, but we can also speak of Mathematics. Concerning it, I am attaching to this letter a copy of the message sent to me last week by someone who teaches (as an associate professor and remarkable researcher) at one of the "best universities" in France. (I cannot publicly quote the message since it was confidential). If you still have the slightest notion about mathematics, you will understand that these students, in the 2nd year of the DEUG in Science, of whom most will "pass" their exams, hence go on to a B.Sc. (and perhaps become teachers), are at a level which even in my time (twenty-five years ago, and already eroded compared to my parents' would have been lower than middle school, and it seems that they have not quite mastered everything normally belonging to elementary school. However, all these students have their high school diploma (or else they would not be at University) and almost all of them have the "Bac S" (the "elite" or "selective" one, as they say in the media)...

Finally, I am relaying to you a copy of the message I received yesterday morning from a middle school mathematics teacher. (Again, I cannot publicly reproduce it because of confidentiality). What he says bears witness to the loss of a sense of serious teaching, which today affects the whole of our educational system, after having been promoted for such a long time by the governing authorities.

If you desire further testimony, I can supply it in abundance.

As far as I am concerned, I am therefore totally opposed to having even the slightest recourse to the experts of National Education.

Likewise, I am very sceptical regarding experts from abroad (with the possible exception of certain Asian countries like Singapore), since the deterioration of instruction is general all across the Western World. The only difference is that it is greater in France because we have fallen from higher and that it affects the totality of the educational system (because French-style centralisation imposes the same insane methods and curricula everywhere), unlike the United States, for instance, where in spite of an appalling average level, there exist some very good, mainly private, schools.

Until the mid-sixties, I think, the best primary and secondary educational systems worldwide were those of France, Russia, and Israel. In France it has not stopped deteriorating since that time, with ever increasing rapidity. In Israel, according to what I think I know, there was a similar deterioration, but an energetic reaction has begun in the last few years: for example, the Israelis searched for the best mathematical textbooks existing in the world today, concluded that they were those of Singapore, and translated them to make them available to all Israeli schools. (Therefore we could perhaps turn for advice to the authors of the Israeli recovery, Ron Aharoni, for example). The Russian system, finally, remained good until the collapse of the Soviet Union and has since then deteriorated slowly (this deterioration taking place, as it does everywhere, in the name of "progress" and "modernisation"). Nevertheless, even today the Russian system remains much better than that of any Western country: I can testify to this in full knowledge of the facts for mathematics and physics. That is why I spent several hours yesterday afternoon having a Russian teacher of French explain to me the detailed functioning of the Soviet educational system. I took copious notes and will send you their typed version.

This, then, is what I think of help from other countries.

As for the principal unions of teachers and parents, they have all (motivated by the most praise-worthy intentions imaginable) put a shoulder to the wheel in the destruction of the School, and I think that they cannot be trusted any more than the experts of EN. The only teachers' union I know to give priority value to study, knowledge, and know-how is the SNALC. (No doubt there are others, which I don't know, such as the SAGES, I am told).

Among the Associations, I trust only those born in recent years with the explicit aim of protesting the destruction of teaching and of reflecting on means of recovery. These are in particular:

le GRIP (Groupe de Réflexion Interdisciplinaire sur les Programmes) <http://grip.ujf-grenoble.fr/>

Sauver Les Lettres (SLL) <http://www.sauv.net/>

l'Association des Professeurs de Lettres (APL) <http://www.aplettres.org/>

In my opinion, it is from the most active members of these associations (of whom I now know a certain number quite well) that experts should be recruited.

I would be willing and able to submit to the HCE a list of experts from all disciplines in whom I have great confidence, because all of them are teachers who have for years been devoted to the salvaging and recovery of the school system, and have reflected in depth on the problems we must solve.

For me, the first question facing the HCE is the following:

Shall we wear blinkers, not see the state National Education is in, and entrust the elaboration of the advice we are asked to provide to the very experts and officials whose policies have led to the present disaster? In that case, it would have been better not to create the HCE. Or rather, should we realistically assess the situation, act to attempt a recovery, and for that purpose, radically break with the hierarchy of National Education, listen to independent people who have for years sounded the alarm and reflected on means for such a recovery, and ourselves work with the help of such people to design advice on which politicians could draw to save our educational system from complete and irreversible destruction?

With best regards, ...

Laurent Lafforgue

P.S. To get a picture of the actual state of our educational system and find all possible and imaginable information on today's curricula (and their incredible outgrowths) compared to previous ones, from Jules Ferry onward, I recommend the internet site of Michel Delord (a simple secondary mathematics teacher with an impressive knowledge of French educational history). The address is: <http://michel.delord.free.fr>

This site is dedicated to:

"... the parents who worry that their children still cannot do a division in Grade 5 and have received the answer: 'you are behind the times'."

You need to spend some time to visit the site. You can find there, for instance, all primary curricula from 1880 onward and compare them to those of today. It is really fascinating. A hint: the best curricula are those of 1923 (which, incidentally, fit onto five pages, all subjects and grades included). By the way, as far as I know, these are still being used (with upgrades in certain subjects) by the "Hattamer Course" in Paris: a private course "hors contrat", that is, without the least public subsidy, to which some wealthy families (and, it seems some of our ministers past and present) send their children and pay the sizable tuition.