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## School Evaluation Campaign Report 2021-2022 Building up Confidence

Council for School Evaluation  
(CSE)

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The note is a translation of  
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In compliance with the provisions of the July 2019 *École de la Confiance* school act creating the French Council for School Evaluation (CSE), we are happy to present you with this new edition of the yearly *School Evaluation Campaign Report*. Following a rather stressful CoVid-19-impacted 2020-2021 school year, during which almost 10% of all secondary schools were nonetheless evaluated, the 2021-2022 school year, though things weren't back to business as usual, was clearly much calmer, and this resulted in five major achievements:

- The objective of evaluating 20% of all secondary schools during the year was reached;
- Upper secondary schools (*lycées* and vocational schools) were involved;
- Both state-owned and private schools took part in the campaign, with amendments made to the evaluation framework so as to address the specificities of private schools;
- Stakeholders coming from increasingly various backgrounds joined external evaluation teams and got acquainted with the concept, methodology and goals of evaluation;
- A brand-new specially designed evaluation framework for primary schools was developed by the CSE and tested prior to its official introduction in January 2022.

School evaluation is a comprehensive and participative process which focusses on the effect of school-level decision-making. No control or labelling is involved as the aim is not specification compliance but action impact measurement, based upon a contextualised view of the school, the identification of student needs, the setting of goals and the design of related actions. Robust impact measurement implies the collection of data, observation and stakeholders' viewpoints so as to provide a clear view of the results of action. School evaluation is a fairly ground-breaking idea in France landscape, but one which is ultimately a game-changer for schools and the school system alike.

The CSE report is based upon local reports sent in by regional education authorities (*académies*) as well as the analysis of many self-evaluation and external evaluation school reports. It is divided into four parts:

- Part 1.** The 2021-2022 campaign and projected 2022-2023 campaign in figures;
- Part 2.** Issues in focus: contextualisation, participative evaluation, and student needs identification;

**Part 3.** Development axes or strategic directions: building schools' vision over the next five years;

**Part 4.** An enlightening, game-changing experience for schools and the school system.

Evaluation is not just a once-every-five-year event. It is intended to be an integral part of school actors' professional lives as it is centred on the many decisions made in and by schools on a daily basis as part of internal steering and management, as opposed to the external steering provided by local or regional authorities (the so-called 'internal context', institutionally linked to education) and to the schools' social and geographical environment ('external context') which schools need to make do with and adapt to.

Two years after it was first introduced secondary school evaluation has become a well-known and quite well-understood feature in the education world. Confidence has been built and it is now time to strengthen the process by clarifying further the aim of evaluation and the CSE's expectations. This may involve redesigning part of the evaluation framework and CSE training and support resources, and achieving the full integration of evaluation at all levels of the school system.

**Needless to say the CSE will hardly be idle in the months and years to come so as to provide students with the added value they quite naturally expect from school!**

## Part 1. The 2021-2022 campaign and projected 2022-2023 campaign in figures

School projects are requested to cover 3- to 5-year periods. The Council for School Evaluation opted for 5 years so as to make the related evaluation process sustainable, with 20% of all primary and secondary schools evaluated each year. Keeping in pace enables regional school authorities, which are in charge of implementing evaluation, to avoid overlaid years towards the end of the evaluation cycle

### Primary school evaluation campaign

The 2021-2022 school year was year 1 for primary school evaluation. Kick-off has come a year after secondary school evaluation mainly because the highly fragmented primary school organisation in France (with nearly 50,000 schools as compared with just over 12,000 secondary schools) implies the joint evaluation of school groupings, plus the fact that evaluation is an unheard-of, fear-and-mistrust-generating process, which has called for experimentation and progressive implementation locally.

— All-in-all nearly 750 schools were evaluated in 2021-2022 with a one-third, two-third division between the Autumn 2021 experimentation and the post-framework-introduction Spring 2022 campaign. Just under 100 single schools and nearly 200 school groupings were evaluated, groupings having an average size of 2.31 schools.

The primary school framework is quite similar to its secondary school counterpart, with self-evaluation followed by external evaluation and a participative process analysing the school in context and globally with a view to designing the school project. Differences lie in school organisation and legal status, as primary schools are not autonomous entities, as opposed to secondary schools. Special attention is also paid to extra-curricular, off-school-time activities, such as morning and late afternoon day-care and mid-day break, which are provided by city staff.

Implementing such a new approach to schools in a still CoVid-19 impacted world was something of a feat and the CSE wishes to thank all regional education actors for their unfailing commitment to making the 2021-2022 school evaluation campaign a success. Primary schools have clear assets when it comes to evaluation: teachers meet and work together on a regular basis, and they know their pupils extremely well, being with them all day long, which enables them to identify their needs easily.

External evaluation teams are mostly made up of three members, except if the school or school grouping is unusually big. Local inspectors and school heads each account for 30% of all evaluators. Then come 25% local advisors (*conseillers pédagogiques*), some secondary school principals (5%) and inspectors (3%). There are also a few teachers (3%), though they are

quite hard to replace when they leave their schools to evaluate elsewhere. Clearly this is mainly a primary school matter, which is somewhat disturbing as there are proportionally more primary school actors taking part in secondary school evaluation than the contrary, even though mixing up various profiles is key to understanding and organising school continuity.

Self-evaluation takes four to eight weeks to be completed (six weeks on average) while external evaluation is a two-to-six week process (four weeks on average). Estimating time is no easy task as some consider the beginning and end of the process based upon calendar dates while others count how many hours are devoted to meeting, analysing and writing the reports, in which case external evaluation corresponds on average to five days' work. The amount of time needed is also bound to diminish as actors become more acquainted with the evaluation process, thanks to training and experience building.

Supervisory authorities, *i.e.* both the regional education authority and the city for primary schools, county (*département*) for lower secondary schools, and region for upper secondary schools, are sent the self-evaluation and external evaluation reports, which help them plan and optimise school support after evaluation has taken place.

— Projection for the 2022-2023 primary school evaluation campaign shows about 7,500 schools to be evaluated as part of 2,500 groupings, with differences between the thirty academies, as 8 will evaluate less than 10% and 3 between 10% and 15% of all schools, which is quite far from the 20% mark. Most (*i.e.* 17 of them) will evaluate 15% to 20% of the schools and just 2 will exceed the 20% mark.

It is essential to keep the five-year evaluation frequency in mind and have school projects renewed at the same pace, which is why groupings need to be made, except for the biggest schools. Each school in a given grouping self-evaluates and evaluators then decide whether to visit all schools during the external evaluation phase. The creation of relevant groupings is key to the sustainability and success of evaluation and the CSE is quite ready to provide support to regional education authorities.

## Secondary school evaluation campaign

After a 2020-2021 launch year disrupted by CoVid-19, which resulted in a little under 10% evaluated secondary schools, things have been better in 2021-2022, though a few evaluations were put off till the first term of 2022-2023. Nearly 20% of all schools were evaluated, which brings the total numbers of schools evaluated over the last two years to the 3,000 figure.

— Results differ from one *académie* to another, some reaching 100% of their objective while others evaluated only two thirds of the schools scheduled to be evaluated, the average percentage being 86%. Of the 30 *académies*, 3 evaluated between 10% and 15% of schools, 7 between 15% and 18%, about half of them (14) between 18% and 24% and 6 over 24%, which means 100% over five years is attainable provided not too many schools drop out.

While schools in 2020-2021 were mainly lower secondary schools, as it was deemed preferable not to include upper secondary and vocational schools, which were affected by two reforms at the time, nor private schools, pending the adaptation of the evaluation framework, all schools, including agricultural colleges, were part of the process, resulting in a distribution close to overall school distribution.

- **Private schools.** About 11% were evaluated, with various strategies depending on the *académie*, some choosing to start low while others reached 20% directly. One specificity of private schools is that they tend to be K-12 schools (while primary and secondary state schools are clearly separated in France, except for French schools abroad), with evaluation thus encompassing all levels.

- **Agricultural colleges.** Just one or two colleges per *académie* were evaluated. Colleges can be quite complex organisations, mixing up students and apprentices, which supports the progressive introduction of evaluation. The Agricultural Teaching and Research General Directorate sent a report to the CSE, the findings of which are included in this report. Following a successful experiment in 2021-2022, from next year on 20% of the state and private agricultural colleges (*i.e.* 76 schools) will be evaluated. Currently, 'rural family homes' (small schools providing vocational training) are not evaluated

With over 2,000 schools evaluated in 2021-2022, more than 4,300 external evaluators were needed, which implied training sessions designed and implemented by the CSE, regional education authorities and the Institute of Advanced Education and Training Studies (IH2EF, *Institut des Hautes Études de l'Éducation et de la Formation*).

Of all evaluators, 43% were inspectors, 38% were school principals, 10% were local education executive officers, 6% were teachers and 3% had other backgrounds. Inspectors and principals are massively present, which is a good thing as they are quite complementary. Executive officers are quite new to the job and bring another form of expertise. Teachers are still marginally represented in the evaluation teams, with big differences from one *académie* to another: fourteen of them have no teachers at all as evaluators, seven asked less than ten of them to join teams, four have 15 to 32 teachers among their ranks and only one has more than 140 teachers. The remaining four *academies* did not provide the CSE with a figure.

The Council for School Evaluation believes increasing the number of teachers in evaluation teams is advisable for two reasons:

- **Evaluation is and should be everyone's responsibility in schools and the school system itself.** It is therefore essential that all staff profiles be represented among evaluators as long as they adhere to evaluation's code of ethics and avoid conflicts of interest. Teachers strengthen the expertise of evaluation teams as they have primary knowledge of students and their needs. The regional education authorities which included teachers now wish to increase their presence while others are currently starting involving them.
- **Having more teachers means lessening the pressure on inspectors,** who have engaged strongly in this new mission and will also have to accompany schools after evaluation has taken place when it comes to turning strategic directions into actions

According to projections in *académies*, 21% of all schools will be evaluated in 2022-2023, which corresponds to over 2,200 schools. 20% (76) of all agricultural colleges will also be evaluated. All in all, about 50% of all state and private secondary schools will have been evaluated at the end of 2022-2023.

There are significant variations from one *académie* to another, from 9% to 31%, though things look better than in 2021-2022, with six projecting less than 20%, eight between 20% and 24%, and eight over 24%, not counting private schools for some of them. All regional education authorities need to keep in mind the importance of ensuring the latter years of the evaluation cycle are sustainable for all.

## CSE Recommendations

- Diversify the profiles of evaluators, including teachers, so as to strengthen the collective dimension of evaluation; make sure there is no form of hierarchy within evaluation teams; promote the presence of and recognise teachers taking part in external evaluation.
- Keep a steady, robust evaluation pace with a five-year projection to ensure the latter years of the evaluation cycle are sustainable; ensure evaluation is connected to school project renewal.
- Ensure schools know about the next year's programming soon enough to get ready for self-evaluation serenely.

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## Part 2. Issues in focus: contextualisation, participative evaluation, and student needs identification

The analysis of school evaluation reports by the CSE led to the emergence of three key issues: characterising school context, which says something about the school's working environment, promoting participative evaluation, with all stakeholders (teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and students) taking part, and identifying and making use of students' needs.

**Characterising the school's context** must be carried out prior to actual self- and external evaluation taking place. It implies locating the school within its internal (or institutional) as well as external (socio-geographical) environment, *i.e.* identifying all the

elements the school has no control over, though it needs to adapt to them. Combining this with student needs enables the definition of strategic directions that are school-specific.

**Promoting participative evaluation** means confronting the views of all school stakeholders (principals, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, students and partners) so as to build a shared representation of the school and its context and identify relevant objectives.

**Identifying and analysing students' needs** is essential as how they are prioritised and turned into actions says a lot about schools. Whatever section of the four evaluation domains<sup>1</sup> needs fall into, school actors should consider what they wanted to do, what they achieved or failed to achieve, what enabled or prevented achievement, what issues are at stake and why.

## 1. Primary schools

Though the evaluation experience of primary schools is smaller than that of secondary schools, conclusions can be drawn from the 2021-2022 campaign, as some schools came up with promising output, thanks to staff commitment showing local capacity for action.

### Context

Context is taken into account in evaluation reports, albeit in a descriptive rather than analytical way. Most schools are actually only partially aware of their autonomy, that is to say the frontier between what they decide upon and what is contextual. Many reports mention decisions that fall outside of schools' scope of action, such as building and equipment, which cities and towns have direct responsibility upon. Others make little use of the context they have nonetheless described, when it should help them define development axes.

Schools may also fall behind when it comes to data collection and analysis. Not all data is available, especially about school climate, and the systematic use of data to substantiate decision-making implies being trained at understanding and using numbers. Regional education authorities are aware of the situation and engage in data-providing and

-explaining plans, with the help of the Directorate of Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance Monitoring (DEPP, *Direction de l'évaluation, de la prévision et de la performance*).

### Participative evaluation

Participative evaluation involves all stakeholders, among whom parents stand in a special position. As full members of the education community, their point of view must be heard and it was indeed the case in 80% of the schools. Parents' involvement in the evaluation process is diverse: questionnaires were widely used during self-evaluation and interviews were conducted during external evaluation.

Though their role in coeducation is not mentioned in development axes as such, parents are often part of the short- and mid-term actions projected by schools (dialogue sessions on school organisation and the function of staff, documents, videos or digital translating tools specially aimed at non-French-speaking parents, invitation to take part in creative workshops, etc.).

Staff in charge of extra-curricular activities before and after school are also strongly involved, which is only natural since such activities help consolidate learning, provided their working schedule is taken into account and questionnaires are adapted to their situation. Kindergarten classroom assistants were often consulted or interviewed (though not systematically, much like their counterparts specialised in accompanying pupils with disabilities), as their role in the school's collective action is fully recognised. This is why some regional education authorities support training aimed at teachers and non-teaching assistants alike. In a few cases there are indeed signs of tension between what is done during, before and after school time, as educational continuity is essential and must be seen as such by all staff. Shared interest, time and notions are needed for the collaboration to be effective.

### Pupils' needs

Identifying pupils' needs comes with the use of the evaluation chain, linking those needs to goal setting, action planning and impact measurement. The evaluation chain is a tool school actors are not familiar

<sup>1</sup> Teaching and learning, School climate and well-being, School operation, Institutional and non-institutional school partners.

with, though identifying needs is a daily concern for educational advisers and for teachers, who are also invited, with the help of local inspectors, to analyse the results of national standardised assessments. Working on needs is also key to defining relevant development axes and reflect on the role pupils should play in the evaluation process as primary beneficiaries of public education service. Gathering their view is neither natural for teachers, not easy to implement, especially for small children, who may say what they feel adults expect to hear. Using photovoice techniques may prove more fruitful than questionnaires, for example, as the latter are primarily aimed at older children.

School climate is a major issue in primary schools. Surveys show teachers and pupils do not share the same view on the subject, with the former underestimating problems the latter encounter, and analysing those differences can significantly improve school climate and therefore learning. Giving pupils responsibilities is also a way for them to grow confident. Some external evaluation teams were provided with a guided tour of the school led by pupils themselves, which enabled evaluators to ask them about their school and how they see it. At other places focus groups were organised.

## 2. Secondary schools

### Context

All evaluation reports offer context characterisation, a major improvement on the situation that prevailed in 2020-2021. It is recommended that part of the report be dedicated to context so as not to forget anything before making use of the data gathered for the purpose. The context part tends to be longer in self-evaluation reports than in external evaluation reports, one reason being that external evaluation tends to select only items relevant to the strategic directions proposed. Internal context also tends to be presented more at length than external context, due to quick availability of institutional data on student results and teacher profiles as opposed to the more qualitative external information on school environment. Items connected to local authorities (equipment, school buses, canteen, etc.) are also less present.

Quite surprisingly incoming student profiles are seldom present, nor analysed in evaluation reports

even though they clearly help identify students' needs. More generally the analysis of context should be developed for it not to remain a purely factual matter but to help identify the areas schools should focus on. Mentioning incoming students' standardised assessment results or the seniority of hired teachers means little if no conclusions are drawn, nor action taken and gathered into relevant strategic directions.

### Participative evaluation

Participative evaluation is on the rise, especially with students and parents being increasingly involved, though the situation differs from one school to another (for example, in one in six schools of an *académie*, teachers refused that parents and students take part – a phenomenon found more often in upper secondary schools). Evaluation steering committees also tend to be mainly made up of principals and teachers only. Surely participating can be binding, which makes it difficult for students and parents to join, but their presence proves extremely fruitful. There is more diversity in working groups, however, though counterproductive thematic specialisation looms in, with teachers leading the reflection on learning while parents, students and educational advisers actors are expected to tackle school climate issues only. Another questionable choice made from time to time is to have status-based working groups, each engaged in the self-evaluation of the school, in which case there is no collaboration whatsoever and the evaluation pilot (typically the principal) must sum up juxtaposed contributions, with goals left unshared. Some schools conversely make relevant use of video conferencing tools or exchange platforms for everyone to have their say.

Questionnaires are almost systematically employed during self-evaluation and the CoVid-19 crisis has increased their use in order to quickly collect the points of view of many, especially students and parents. The CSE issued examples of downloadable questionnaires aimed at schools and regional education authorities. Many have been 'adapted' to fit school context and some schools have also designed their own questionnaires from scratch, which may be a concern as they do not necessarily respect the rigorous methodological procedures needed to ensure robust, workable results.

While questionnaires are prevalent, the analysis of their results varies from one school to another. Some

merely mention them using graphs while others take context into account or even use them to substantiate the school's evaluative questioning of its action.

In some cases the use of questionnaires is questionable in itself. Either they have become the sole tool used to conduct self-evaluation, ignoring CSE's self-evaluation guide and its corresponding toolboxes, which propose a truly comprehensive view of school issues that is absent from questionnaires, or they have become the only way to involve stakeholders in the evaluation process, especially students and parents. Participative evaluation is not limited to online consultation on a limited number of issues. To the contrary, it is important to combine and compare statistical data, questionnaire results, context characterisation and evaluative questioning by all stakeholders, *i.e.* use methodological triangulation (data, questionnaires, documents/observations) in order to produce solid, relevant evaluative questioning.

#### Students' needs

The very term 'needs' is seldom used and when it is, it is associated with students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), whose needs are seen as imposed by context rather than identified within the school itself. The concern for teachers is to be properly trained on how to 'handle' SEND students rather than to respond to their needs, thus transforming them in a group, and tending to disregard the diversity of individual situations.

When expressed in generic terms, needs refer to the school's rather than the students' with a list of implemented or suggested actions that identify students' needs only indirectly. A finer analysis was conducted on a 40-report sample and it appeared that needs (though the term 'needs' itself was not used) were referred to 250 times and student acquisition, 90 times, ranging from two occurrences of either in six reports to fifteen in one report.

- Explicitly expressed needs come into five categories which are equally present in reports with about 50 examples each: fundamental knowledge, transversal issues (motivation, educational and occupation aspiration, methodology), SEND, school life (well-being and school climate) and generic needs.
- Indirectly expressed needs mainly cover teaching and learning, progress and, to a lesser extent, school characteristics.

Needs are often based on an average student rather than on dispersion analysis, *e.g.* national assessment results, which better paves the way for targeted actions. The CSE believes needs should become a clearly identified feature of self- and external evaluation reports so as to be part of the school's reflection and axes of action.

Student achievement is primarily considered in connection with exam results, student progress after lower secondary school and follow-up, though rarely beyond the first year in upper secondary. Still, going beyond is preferable as it provides evidence of successful school guidance. Results and progress are mainly expressed by raw data rather than in terms of added value. Results are presented as observations and recommendations for staff to keep an eye on. They seldom serve student needs' identification purposes. Needs remain fairly generic, except if connected to school context, in which case it is possible to design a dashboard and question the corresponding relevance and coherence of actions, therefore turning what is basically an activity report into a genuine analytical report prioritising context-related actions in order to build efficient strategies.

Identifying students' needs can be done in various ways. While the point of view of teaching and non-teaching staff is appropriately widely taken into account, that of students themselves is comparatively much less present. Incoming students' profiles in lower secondary schools is also often presented in reports, though more rarely analysed in terms of needs, which is a pity as many sources of information are available: national assessments stating knowledge and skills acquired and still to be acquired, primary/lower secondary and lower/upper secondary liaison committees, and school-based assessments by teachers at the beginning of the year. Provided they are combined, results, progress and guidance all help identify needs and define what the school's strategy on the subject should be.

### 3. Recommendations

- Spend time characterising school context and prioritising its specificities; connect context to analysis in order to identify the school's leeway; set objectives and develop strategic directions.
- Ensure diversity of approaches for all domains and promote participative analysis of

questionnaire results for improved understanding and identification of student and school needs.

- Spend time clarifying incoming students' needs based upon their profiles, achievement during and at the end of compulsory education, progress after school, needs identified by students themselves, etc.; build on the needs to evaluate implemented actions, analyse domains and develop strategic directions.
- Implement, for primary school staff in particular, joint training for teaching state staff and non-teaching local authority staff so as to promote coherent professional practices and improve pupil and student learning efficiency.

## Part 3. Development axes or strategic directions: building schools' vision over the next five years

Evaluation is expected to lead to the production of a school project, *i.e.* the formalisation of the school's action over the next five years. It implies being fully aware of the school's scope of action and leeway, and developing a strategic vision, which means prioritising actions to leverage efficient change in practices and achievements, involve all stakeholders and coordinate actions.

Producing development axes or strategic directions is therefore essential as they are not just the local implementation of regional or national priorities, though national and regional education policies are naturally part of the reference framework for schools, but the contextualised identification of their students' specific needs and how to best respond and thus improve public education service for beneficiaries and staff alike.

### 1. Axes of development in primary schools: getting ready for innovation in schools

Primary schools in France have no legal status, as opposed to secondary schools. They are a service delivered by local authorities (with teaching state staff and national curricula, however), which explains

why they are not really aware of what they can or cannot do. Hence the use of "development axes" rather than "strategic directions". Which doesn't mean they have no room for manoeuvre, as the very existence of CSE toolboxes shows.

External evaluators make methodological and transversal recommendations, inviting schools to explore what autonomy they have, bring people together around the evaluation-driven school project, and base collective reflection on data and indicators.

Schools have a recognised capacity to innovate. They make many decisions on a daily basis, arbitrating choices in various fields, such as class composition, educational activity design and implementation, pedagogical progression, departitioning, or cultural projects.

School evaluation must consider empowerment during both self- and external evaluation phases as the formalisation of development axes implies prior knowledge of what each specific school can or cannot do.

Over the last thirty years regulatory texts have supported the development of school autonomy. The 1990 text about school projects recognised school actors can adapt action depending on local context, thus empowering the pedagogical and educative team. Evaluated schools with innovative projects are also resources for local inspectors for best practice monitoring and disseminating.

Right now evaluation reports tend to contain more actions than development axes, which is a pity as development axes bring coherence to action thanks to a contextualised analysis of needs and the use of indicators for impact measurement. A 84-report sample shows 26 reports have no axes at all, 32 have only generic axes, 18 have action rather than axes and only 8 have contextualised axes. When considering action presented in the sample, 19 reports do not contain relevant elements, 44 provide only a factual presentation, 18 explain their relevance and only 3 include impact measurement.

— Take class composition. The number of teachers depends on school enrolment and the question is how one dispatches pupils. A school may decide to mix K1, K2 or K3 children so as to develop autonomy among the younger and responsibility among the elder. Have the effects produced by such decision



been considered and is it part of a broader strategic objective, such as peer cooperation development, inducing increased performance of the younger and the acquisition of socio-emotional skills by the elder?

At the moment evaluation reports tend to provide schools with accompaniment, which is fine, instead of empowering them, helping them measure the impact of the decisions they make, and design relevant school projects. Though evaluation is supposed to lead to school projects, at the time being school principals and teachers are still left with much to do, which lessens the benefit of evaluation and degrades its appeal among stakeholders when it should be useful and time-saving. The point is to prioritise recommendations so as to make development axes more operational.

As school project renewal schedules vary from one county (*département*) to another, with some counties opting for simultaneous project renewal for all schools, it is essential for school evaluation programming to become the reference, hence directly connecting evaluation and renewal. One regulatory text dating back to 1990 should be modified to smooth things out.

## 2. Strategic directions in secondary schools: a revolution still in the making

### General presentation

The Council for School Evaluation first examined a 160-report sample, with 80 lower secondary schools, 40 upper secondary schools and 40 vocational schools. It considered five parameters characterising how strategic directions are dealt with in reports (presentation, relevance, associated actions, training provided, institutional and school-level monitoring).

As for presentation and relevance, one in six reports does not contain any element, half the reports say little, one in three provides some form of analysis, and just 3% come up with a full, documented reflection on the reasons why those strategic directions emerged. Things hardly look better for the other three connected parameters: no elements were found as for action in 19% of the reports, training in 48%, and monitoring in 84%. It doesn't mean these were totally absent, only that their presence was not made explicit, contrary to what is expected from evaluation, *i.e.* formalisation as a way to make

reflection more robust and sustainable.

A second look, this time at 40 pairs of lower secondary state school self- and external evaluation reports, reveals that the very terms used to refer to 'strategic direction' (*axe stratégique*) are surprisingly varied, with no fewer than 33 different forms, among which 14 contain *Axe*. Here's a few examples: *evolution axis, working axis, major objective, key issue, recommendation, theme, etc.* Such diversity suggests uneasiness when dealing with strategy (in connection with historically-rooted top-down action-centred school management), difficulties sorting out and prioritising within a robust time framework the many actions a school initiates, and unease on the part of external evaluators who do not wish their discourse to sound too prescriptive, hence the regular use of circumvention.

Looking at how many directions are mentioned in reports also brings enlightening results. 15 of the 40 self-evaluation reports have no strategic directions, for lack of time, because some consider this calls for an expertise only external evaluators have, or because top-down culture is so present schools expect to be told what to do, even though evaluation is about the decisions schools do make. Elsewhere, self- and external evaluation reports tend to contain a reasonable number of, *i.e.* between three and five, strategic directions, that's 18 out of 40 self-evaluation and 29 out of 40 external evaluation reports. There are still reports with just 2 and others with 6 to 10 directions but their numbers are fewer than last year.

### Content

The relationship between strategic directions and evaluation domains is another issue worth examining, especially when considering how transversal directions are.

261 directions were identified in the 40 pairs of reports. Three quarters of those are connected to a single domain (199 out of 261), half of which *Teaching and Learning*, with gradual decrease from one domain to the other (*School climate and well-being, School operations, School partners*). The rest is made up of two-domain directions, *e.g.* domains 1 and 2 (half of which about class heterogeneity and inclusion) or domains 3 and 4 (communication, almost exclusively). There are few transversal directions: either it is feared they might become too generic and therefore less operational, or they are simply too close to actions, and therefore naturally lack transversality.

Themes are diverse both in quality and quantity, whether in self- or external evaluation reports.

- Basically themes are equally present in self- and external evaluation reports, and they globally appear in the same order (Collective work, Communication, School climate and well-being, Involvement, Partnerships).
- There are interesting variations between self- and external evaluation reports, such as an 8-to-22 increase for 'Collective work', which suggests either schools don't view it as a major issue or institutional external evaluators consider it is indeed (all the more since strategic directions are often associated with a request for improvement). The same goes for 'Communication' (9 to 16 occurrences). Though it is less salient, performance is associated with an 8 to 4 variation, which suggests schools are interested in performance while evaluators focus on student progress and guidance.
- At the other side of the spectrum, parents, digitalisation and student needs (except for SEND students) seldom appear as such in strategic directions.

As with report length, contextualisation or the number of strategic directions, external evaluation seems to regulate thinking and discourse, subconsciously focussing on what is on the ministry's current agenda, the risk being external decision-making instead of the development of school empowerment and capacity to innovate.

Themes specifically addressed are fairly fragmented but fall more or less into three categories: a. students, b. teaching and student evaluating practices, and c. schools as structures.

#### The 'Students' label includes:

- **Support.** The item encompasses student persistence and completion, equity, educational and occupation aspiration, sense of belonging. Special attention is to be paid to the multiplicity of actions, which are all the more efficient if coherence is attained.
- **Differentiated instruction.** The frequent presence of this item shows the uneasiness of teachers with student heterogeneity, which requires adapting practices and organisation.
- **Well-being.** This is about school as a welcoming

place for students and staff alike, with a focus on failure prevention, attainment support (thanks to the development of student autonomy, commitment and collaboration) and the promotion of school values.

- **Progress and guidance.** Coherent progress and guidance imply links between primary and lower secondary as well as lower and upper secondary schools, tailored communication with families, and student empowerment.

'Teaching and student evaluating practices' is a sensitive issue as the education world is torn between centralised regulation and individual, context-driven practices. **The label includes:**

- **Changing practices.** This is connected to students' needs and implies questioning past and present actions, promoting coherence, innovation, and less addressed skills (oral skills, soft skills, computer literacy).
- **Collective reflection.** The aim is not practice alignment but articulation and resonance. The identification of context-specific students' needs is a key to long-term structured reflection such as found in school projects.
- **Evaluation practices.** This is not just about the basic competency-based vs graded assessment debate. The point is to turn evaluation into levers for better learning and attainment, based on clarity, reliability and coherence, especially thanks to standardised assessments.

**The 'Schools as structures' label is about school operation, strategy and connections:**

- **Operation.** A school is the meeting point of many, sharing space, time, and actions, hence the need for coordination and coherence in order to fully recognise the specific role each one plays. Inspiring, context-driven, need-centred, peer training by regional education authorities is essential, just as much as clear internal and external communication to promote image-building values.
- **Strategy.** Action coherence is achieved through and embodied by a shared school project, which includes needs analysis, clear objectives, and impact measurement so as to give a new impetus to school action by empowering stakeholders, with a view to improving the quality of public education service.

- **Connections.** As the focal point is students' progress and employability, one must enlarge one's vision to get the full picture of what a school does, thus paying attention to connections between primary and lower secondary as well as between lower and upper secondary schools in order to secure best guidance, practice sharing and projects. Connections are also about school and parents on such issues as coeducation, student progress and contribution to school life. Finally connections mean school partners, which can be a tough issue if the school's location is remote or in a deprived area.

#### Form

The very wording of strategic directions says a lot about their aims. Quite expectedly the infinitive form comes first (61%) and, more generally, noun- or verb-based dynamic forms. Verbs such as *consolidate, develop, formalise, improve, or reinforce* show strategic directions are primarily considered as a way to improve the current situation by addressing the needs of students and the school itself. There are also a few occurrences of How to questions and performative statements.

In addition to those dynamic directions there are about fifty sharing a 'notional form', *i.e.* a generic, noun-based wording (*inclusion, progress, teaching, communication, evaluation, etc.*), which suggests action or evolution is either presupposed or independently considered. Still, stating directions explicitly is more immediately meaningful for all stakeholders.

### 3. Recommendations

- Base strategic directions on context and students' needs analysis at self-evaluation stage for improved action-oriented relevance and the promotion of innovation.
- Have between three and five directions for coherence and efficiency, as too many are confusing while only one corresponds to the general appreciation of the school's situation.
- Select realistic, sustainable directions and formalise their implementation with action plan, clear agenda, impact measurement indicators, and training plan.

## Part 4. School evaluation: a new perspective on the school system

The last part of the report aims at opening perspectives, with evaluation an integral part of the lives of schools and the school system as a whole. Such integration can be considered in time (during and after evaluation, and evaluation as a general process), space (from school to its environment and the country at large), and with reference to quality (applied to people, actions and concepts).

### 1. Time integration

Evaluation is both an action and an approach, *i.e.* an institutionalised event combining self- and external evaluation, a once-in-five-year occasion with time in between two occurrences, and a general approach to schools and school operation.

#### During evaluation

Evaluation time is quite packed with action (school selection, self-evaluation, external evaluators' training, document analysis, school visit, report writing, report presentation and finalisation) and because evaluation itself is participative and comprehensive, it is a thorough, time-consuming process. Still, spending time once every five years analysing one's performance is hardly a waste of time and resources, especially since participation adds legitimacy to the process. The school's performance is not something considered from the outside, nor the object of an institutional request, but an insiders' view of operations, with valuable insight as to everyone's contribution to the results. Both school staff and external evaluators emphasise how fruitful it is to better understand a school's ecosystem and improve one's awareness of how important collective action is.

#### After evaluation

What happens after evaluation (or in between two evaluations) is sometimes described as a sensitive issue, which it shouldn't be so long as one moves away from traditional 'action outsourcing', *i.e.* considering the school did its job by self-evaluating while it is now in the institution's hands to provide relevant answers to the school's identified needs. Evaluation is not an external request as it only questions the decisions

made by the school itself. The result of evaluation is thus a new school project and the daily use of the evaluation chain (needs, objectives, actions, results) so as to leave activity reports behind. It doesn't mean the institution is absent after evaluation, as regional education authorities are expected to design relevant training to help schools become full learning communities. Evaluators also gain from evaluation in their everyday professional activity. The point is not to come up with new dashboards and control tools, but to transform the energy around evaluation into a coherent line of thought and action.

### General approach

Evaluation is both a punctual and cyclical event. It is also a concept and an approach with wider implications for the schools evaluated and the other levels of the school system. Evaluation is not just a once-every-five-year event for regional education authorities and the ministry, but a year-round activity from planning to report writing and follow-up. It gives rise to new forms of professionalism that are no longer control-based or specification-centred. It provides new insights into schools and the daily activity of and decisions made by staff and other stakeholders. The point is not to question the inspectors' so-called 'core activities' (individual visits, subject-centred teachers' meetings) but to consider teacher support in connection with schools themselves, where public education service actually takes place.

## 2. Space integration

Space integration corresponds to the effect of evaluation on the different levels of the school system, including and going beyond classrooms, which are historically and culturally considered as the #1 place where users meet providers. Levels comprise schools, local authorities (regional education authorities, cities, *départements* and regions) and the school system as a whole.

### School

Schools are an obvious *and* overlooked part of the system which evaluation helps put front and centre institutionally as user-focussed education providers. Indeed, students surely know more about their schools than some of the staff and have a strong sense of belonging whatever they do later when they leave. A school is a complex human

organisation where individuals with diverse status and expertise meet, as well as internal and external human resources (parents, partners, authorities), all of whom need to share the same values, those of the nation and of education as an institution, and those of their schools in their environment. The collective dimension of schools cannot be imposed. It has to be patiently built, by promoting what brings adults and students together and the latter's success in tomorrow's society.

A school is part of a community (a concept the French are not familiar with, contrary to some of their neighbours) and is also to be considered with reference to the authorities providing external steering. One aim of evaluation is indeed to draw a clear line between internal steering (which is what evaluation looks at) and external steering, so as to promote coherence between the two, beyond a common reference to national and regional education policies. The point is not to instrumentalise evaluation, nor be instrumentalised by it.

### Local territory

Regional education authorities (*académies*) are in charge of evaluation. They make it happen thanks to tailored resource management and send a yearly report to the CSE. They and other local authorities receive school evaluation reports and turn into action and updated steering priorities the lessons learned in the process. Regional continuous training schools (*Écoles académiques de la formation continue*) are expected to play a major part in the capacity development of evaluators, principals and teaching and non-teaching staff by making the most of the training needs identified in evaluation reports. Evaluation also means recognising the autonomy of schools, especially through their projects (which should no longer be the local offshoots of *Académies'* own projects).

The influence of evaluation on local authorities (cities, *départements*, regions) goes beyond local staff taking part in self-evaluation or analysis including pre-school and after-school activities. Data consolidation, space-, equipment- and service-related issues are also on the agenda for quality improvement, just as cultural project support or collaboration with the professional sector. Having local official become external evaluators in other places could also be implemented.

### National level

As counterintuitive it sounds, linking school evaluation to national level is quite natural. True, regional education authorities organise 'real-world' evaluation, but school evaluation was introduced by law, the Council for School Evaluation is a national entity with accounting and public-debate fuelling responsibilities, and evaluation itself, as a comprehensive process, in turn throws light on the school system, teacher training procedures, student performance measurement, the local understanding of national values and objectives, etc.

The CSE's governing body includes the heads of Education, the Directorate of Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance Monitoring and the General Inspectorate, whose job it is to turn evaluation into a game-changing feature of the school system, transforming lessons learned and corresponding recommendations into operational, quality-improving action: data provision and analysis, school and team support stimulating and monitoring, regulation updating and resource providing.

School evaluation is part of the CSE's broader mandate as regards education policy evaluation and the development of evaluation in an otherwise historically centralised ministry. Evaluation is all about increasing the awareness and use of schools' autonomy, and their capacity to innovate. It leads to reasonable empowerment of actors at all levels. With 2,000 secondary schools and 4,400 external evaluators involved every year, school evaluation clearly paves the way for the dissemination of evaluation as a concept and a new approach to quality.

## 3. Quality integration

The quality integration of evaluation applies to those experiencing it as self- and external evaluators, the action it implies and applies to, and the concepts it conveys and spreads.

### People

The school system (and schools themselves, at a smaller scale) is the meeting point of a variety of people — staff, students and parents — with all sorts and degrees of expertise. Participative evaluation must therefore produce a discourse that is meaningful for all so as to be legitimate and efficient. That implies

going beyond the juxtaposition of stakeholders' individual, specialised contributions. Because 'evaluation' is a widespread polysemic term, also referring to student performance measurement or individual staff assessment, it takes time to convince people that school evaluation is no control or that it must use explicit criteria, evidence-based processes and robust results, which are not as developed in other forms of evaluation. Another hurdle is the fact that the school system operates in status-based silos, which produces various forms of ignorance and misunderstanding between stakeholders, though evaluation aims at promoting open-mindedness to the benefit of all.

### Actions

Evaluating past action means considering school-level decision-making processes, *i.e.* identifying their scope so as to distinguish between context- and school-generated elements, and positioning action in an evaluation chain, which in turn implies focussing on what comes before (student needs analysis, objective setting) and after action (impact measurement, with feedback) for actions to make sense while optimising their coherence, efficiency and effectiveness. Action is also prompted by evaluation, through relevant, workable and contextualised recommendations, as well as strategic directions and their corresponding action and training plan, with the aim of going beyond multiple small-scale projects and prioritising need-addressing transformative actions. Finally evaluation is action in itself. It produces formalisation because it is a formalised, quality-driven process, analysing what is and what is needed, clarifying stakes, thanks to robust methodology, basically moving away from autopilot operation in order to promote an evidence-based road-map.

### Concepts

The quality integration of evaluation finally applies to the concepts evaluation uses and spreads among those experiencing it on a daily basis. The point is to restore the original meaning of words, action and structures. Restoring the meaning of words is what enables one to distinguish between evaluation, control and labelling, or internal and external context and steering. It questions habits so deep-rooted as to become the norm and is therefore a pre-condition to successful evaluation. Restoring the meaning of action is a way to emphasise the fact that action is not to be considered with reference to an absolute, ranking-oriented scale of value but to a relative scale,

depending on the situation of schools, so that no two school evaluation reports should be the same, nor recommendations be too similar, even though methodology and the policy frame of reference are shared.

With evaluation, schools are questioned as structures and reinforced *and* legitimated as such, thanks to the decisions they make daily, though they may not be aware of the fact, nor do they tend to pay enough attention to what led to those decisions. Evaluation generates integration, not just because it is a comprehensive process, during which all stakeholders become aware of their unique contribution to public education service, but because, thanks to evaluation, schools emerge as full entities.

#### 4. Recommendations

- Clarify the meaning of evaluation as a comprehensive, participative process analysing schools' decision and action.
- Establish evaluation not as an answer to ministerial request, but a committed exploration of school autonomy enabling stakeholders to visualise their specific contribution to public education service.
- Establish schools in their environment as a central component of school system operation, to promote commitment and empowerment.
- Make school evaluation a key feature of national and regional education policies aiming at developing school autonomy.



The French Council for School Evaluation is in charge of evaluating independently the school system, its organisation and results. The CSE produces reports, advices and recommendations aimed at improving the performance of public education service.

The CSE's deliberations and works are public, and are designed to help inform public authorities and enrich the debate on education issues..

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