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FULL VERSION

“Dear Sophie Cluzel, Minister for People with Disabilities, dear Secretary of State for Education of Portugal, dear ambassadors, dear rectors, dear Martine Caraglio, senior official for disability and inclusion (without whom this event would not have been possible) – I am naturally delighted to be here today to open this important conference on inclusive education.

I would like to begin by thanking the president for his warm welcome and for his words about the work that is being done here, through science and technology, to serve people with disabilities. Sophie Cluzel and I decided to hold this event, in this European, international format, in this iconic location, following discussions with UN representatives on inclusion and inclusive education. We came to realise that the issues at stake have first and foremost to do with standards in public policy, and that – as is always the case – the best way to raise standards is to work together and to draw inspiration from practices in Europe and around the world. We have high expectations for today’s event, as we are hoping it will give us an insight into best practices elsewhere. That is why I am particularly grateful to the Secretary of State for Education of Portugal, and the Portuguese ambassador, for being with us today – as we are increasingly looking to Portugal as a country that sets the benchmark on education policy. Portugal has, in general terms, made real progress in recent years, and it is interesting to see what factors lie behind this success. Moreover, Portugal – under your leadership, Secretary of State – has made great leaps forward on inclusive education. I am sure that we can draw inspiration from your model as we seek to improve our own system.

I would like to thank you for coming. I am delighted to see so many people here from across the globe. The problems that schools face are the same here in France as they are everywhere else in the world, no matter what language we speak. Because every school, wherever it is in the world, is in fact part of the same continent – the continent of knowledge, the continent of personal and collective progress. Every school shares the same ideals. There are schools everywhere in the world precisely because we believe that human beings are perfectible, because we believe that every person can learn from others and grow, and because we believe that learning and schooling is part of what it means to be human. And of course, we must all learn from one another and grow irrespective of our differences, our strengths and our weaknesses. That, as all of us here today recognise, is the very purpose of inclusive education – and of education in general. Because when schools are genuinely capable of including pupils with disabilities, that says much more about the school than merely its approach to disability. It speaks to the school's ability to provide individualised learning for all pupils.

We have come together today to talk about our practices and, together, to improve how we integrate pupils with disabilities into our schools.

This is a complex issue. There is no one-size-fits all formula. Nor can we pretend, as some would have it, that, by waving a magic wand, we can make something easy out of something difficult. Everyone who comes into contact with disability through work or everyday life – especially families – knows all too well that it is a complex issue. I do not use the word “complex” here in a pejorative sense, but rather to stress that it is a multifaceted issue that can only be address through teamwork, through equally multifaceted solutions, and through our ability to deliver responses that cater to individual needs.

It is also a question of mindset. If we are to create truly inclusive schools, we must radically change mindsets and reform our education system. In France, that revolution began many years ago. We are fully aware that we need to do more, but I would like to pay tribute to everyone who has made their contribution to progress on this issue in successive governments over the past 20 years or so. I cannot put an exact date on it, nor will I attempt to, but that progress began around 20 years ago. We have made progress, but we have not come far enough. I would say we are mid-way to achieving our goal. We need to do more. Today's event will help us do that.

We have a duty to address our pupils' needs, along with those of their families, as quickly as we can. Today's conference is not about thinking as an end in itself. It is about taking action. Yet change does not happen overnight. We have plenty of questions to consider. For instance, we need to think about how we help families deal with the everyday issues they face, how we give pupils the individual support they need, how we transform the role of support workers, how we adapt school premises and educational materials, and how we coordinate the many stakeholders involved in the process. Sophie Cluzel and I have been addressing these questions, and more, during our time in government. We have already seen progress on many fronts, and further progress is set to come in this and future academic years. We are determined to work proactively in government to address the many problems we face.

This issue is a matter of priority for the government. The President himself has stated that, time and again, and I want to stress it again here. It is a priority for the French government because stepping up the pace of progress is absolutely imperative. During the electoral campaign, our President was asked to state which areas of French public policy he would make a priority were he to be elected. He made a clear commitment to one policy area in particular – disability, the subject that we are gathered here today to discuss. That shows that disability sits right at the top of our public policy agenda. When he was asked what major issue he would tackle first, he said education. That major issue, education, and that top priority, disability, converge neatly around the inclusion of disabled pupils in our schools.

Progress has been achieved over the past decade. In 2006, there were 100,000 disabled pupils in mainstream schools. By 2018, that figure had risen to 350,000. I have no qualms in admitting that this is an issue that has spanned different governments. In fact, it gives me pleasure to say so. That is why I said what I did before, and why I will continue to reiterate that same message. This issue is one that should transcend the political divide. Because, after all is said and done, we are all human beings with an interest in seeing France progress. And quite simply, under the current government, we have decided to do more, to go faster and further, and to throw our entire weight behind that movement. We must resist any temptation to mire the issue in controversy. There will be bumps in the road. There will be complaints. That is perfectly normal. We are here to listen to those complaints and work to address them. But seeking to exploit them to divide our society is not merely a waste of time. It is counter-productive. We want to bring the whole of French society together on this issue.

The number of disabled pupils taught in mainstream settings has more than tripled over the past decade. Moreover, there are now five times as many disabled pupils taught in mainstream secondary schools. Those figures represent real progress. But we recognise that we must do more. We want French schools to be fully inclusive, because we believe that is the best way to raise standards. We have been working to deliver on this aim for the past year. We are investing heavily in recruiting new support workers. In 2019, we will be creating 12,400 new positions for learning disability support workers. The funding is already earmarked in the finance bill that we are bringing to parliament. And, as you know, we hired 11,000 new learning disability support workers for the current academic year. By reducing subsidised contracts and hiring more learning disability support workers, we are delivering on our pledge to put an end to short-term contracts for staff supporting disabled pupils, and accelerate the gradual shift towards a system of more robust contracts, where all support workers are hired on exactly the same terms. We need to continue refining the details of that contract so that everyone employed on that basis has a secure job and ongoing opportunities to gain new skills. The improvements we are making right now are moving very much in that direction. For instance, we are working to give support workers better contracts because, for the first time ever, we now have more qualified learning disability support workers than we do people on subsidised contracts, in a reversal of the situation we had in the past.

Teachers and support workers will receive better training. First, we will build continuing professional development programmes that encompass more stakeholders, including teaching staff, school leaders, healthcare and social work professionals, and non-profit organisations. As we know, this is a vitally important point. That is why all learning disability support workers have 60 hours of training per year built into their contracts – a move that will prove a genuine game-changer.

I have always been convinced that the challenge facing us is not only to train support workers – although that is of course important, as I have just made clear – but also to train teachers and other staff working in our schools. This is an issue that has come up time and again in my discussions with Sophie Cluzel. We must do for inclusive education what Monsieur Jourdain did for prose in Molière's great play, *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*. Inclusive education must be a central component of teacher training programmes – something that will happen with the upcoming reform of teacher training that I will deliver in early 2019. If I may be so bold, I believe that inclusive education should become part of the DNA of our school system. To my mind, rolling out an universal inclusive education model is of paramount importance. Rather than schools seeing disability inclusion as just one of their duties, they should view it as an integral part of their purpose. Those two mindsets are very different.

We have also rolled out new Localised Educational Inclusion Units (ULIS), and will continue to set up more in the years ahead. My plan is to keep the same name for many years, so that the acronym becomes something that everyone can understand. As in other areas, support for pupils with disabilities is an area mired in jargon and acronyms that mean little to anyone other than experts. That is something I find regrettable, and one of the factors that prevents things moving forward in the right direction. Introducing new acronyms gives the impression that we are merely adding to what already exists, rather than reforming from the inside. In any case, we already have ULIS, and I personally like the name. We opened 253 new ULIS at the start of this academic year, including 38 at upper secondary schools, bringing the total number throughout France to 8,814. Sophie Cluzel and I visit these units regularly. Along with the President, we marked the beginning of the 2018 academic year at a ULIS in a lower secondary school in Laval, where we spent several hours talking to pupils and teachers. Once again, as we have seen on many other visits, we encountered hard-working staff and an entire community of educational professionals who are committed to the success of their pupils. The ULIS we visited was a place where pupils are happy, achieving their full potential, and reaping the benefits of public policy reforms. We want to see all pupils enjoy those same benefits.

We are currently trialling new Local Inclusive Support Units, or PIALs, with a view to making those units a permanent fixture. I believe that something really important happened at the start of this academic year, and that it is a taste of further major changes to come. First and foremost, we are adopting a coordinated, territory-wide approach that involves all-inclusive education stakeholders. At the start of the 2018 academic year, we opened a PIAL in every education authority throughout France. The aim of the trial is to shift to a more collective approach to supporting pupils with disabilities, based on coordinated needs assessment, a diverse educational offering, differentiation in the classroom, and school-level strategy. The new units will help us shift towards a more holistic coordination of human, teaching and learning, educational and therapy support, and involve all teachers in identifying and addressing pupils' needs in the classroom and in the wider school environment.

I want to make clear that the reform marks a real paradigm shift. The work we are undertaking is far-reaching, on a scale similar to what is being done in countries that are recognised as leading the way in inclusion for disabled pupils. There are around 80,000 support staff in France. Broadly speaking, that is a positive figure. In terms of quality, however, the situation in France is less satisfying. First, because of the contracts that support workers are hired on – although, as I have said before, we are working on that front. Second, because our organisational processes could be better. We need to improve the way that Departmental Disability Centres prescribe care, and how schools and institutions make decisions. We have introduced PIALs precisely to tackle those issues. Decisions must be made more locally, so that they better address the needs of pupils, and of their school or institution. Our aim, with the PIALs, is for schools to have a much greater say in how resources are used, how they are allocated, and how continuing professional development is organised so that it better reflects the reality on the ground.

All too often, we apply temporary fixes to the issues that confront us. There are too many issues still waiting to be addressed. That is not allogical. What is logical is to have stakeholders who are empowered and well-resourced, and to adopt a collective approach, with the entire school community addressing every pupil's needs, and the state education system behind it providing whatever support is requireds, working in tandem with other stakeholders – both departments and local authorities, as well as healthcare and social work professionals. We are working with those professionals to look at the issues in a more integrated manner, and we hope to see that reflected on the ground.

This transformation can only come about if we change mindsets, as I have already stressed, and if we change the way we organise our services. What we are doing in France is part of a wider, global movement that has brought us all here today – to achieve the highest levels of excellence, on this subject and on others, to progress continually, and to raise the bar in pursuit of fairness and justice, all by offering you the best models from other countries around the world.

The 1994 Salamanca Statement, and the 2006 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (adopted in 2010), are clear roadmaps that guide our action. We are determined to pursue our ambition of delivering fully inclusive schools. International comparisons and research are useful tools for improving education systems in general. The same naturally applies to disability inclusion. That is why we have sent teams of observers to the countries represented here today, and why we feel this event is of such importance. Sophie Cluzel and I were determined to bring together experts so we could compare and contrast our respective experiences, hear first-hand testimony about the resources and instruments that are being deployed at every level – from government department to classroom, and identify what factors are holding back or driving success.

Together, over the two days of this conference, we need to find ways to give all disabled pupils the best possible education. We are keen to see what contributions you make, and we will be studying the conclusions of the conference closely.

During our trip to Denmark, Sophie Cluzel and I were struck by the authorities' proactive policy. I would like to pay tribute to the ambassador for that. Since 1993, schools have been required to adapt teaching to pupils' needs so as to limit the number of children transferred to specialised institutions. Now, 96% of disabled pupils are taught in mainstream settings. Denmark's inclusive model is underpinned by exacting professional standards, with a strong emphasis on teacher training and organisational flexibility – both points that I raised earlier in my address. Local authorities and schools enjoy great freedom in how they teach pupils. We want to achieve the same here in France. The new mindset that we are aiming to promote has to feel natural. Organisational flexibility and pragmatism fit that bill. By giving schools greater freedom of organisation, we will be harnessing pragmatism to better serve pupils.

Denmark is not the only country with a model we can learn from. Portugal, naturally, deserves a special mention, and, as we will soon hear about, Italy has pioneered interesting new approaches. The same applies to New Brunswick, which we visited recently to see how things were done there, and Canada as a whole has achieved remarkable progress. Other than the examples I have just mentioned, I know that every country represented here today will be a worthy source of inspiration.

As I have said in my address this morning, this two-day conference will be a vital opportunity to discuss the issues we all care about – to learn, together, how we can do more to support integrate disability and better serve pupils, their families and our schools. I would like to conclude my address in the same manner as I opened it, by stating that, if we succeed in our drive to build a truly inclusive education system in France – a path what we are half-way along – we will have succeeded in building better schools in general, in building schools in which everyone can have confidence. That, in reality, is the essence of our efforts on this front. Thank you for your attention.”