

French private schools boom after Hollande's education reforms fail

(The Times – Wednesday January 11 2017 - Adam Sage)

Record numbers of pupils are attending private schools in France amid claims that its once cherished state education system has been dumbed down under President Hollande.

An unprecedented 21.52 per cent of all secondary school pupils are in private establishments, up from 20.37 per cent just over a decade ago, according to figures released by the education ministry. The proportion in private primary schools also rose, to 13.7 per cent.

"This is the second year running that a new record has been set and it is a very well-entrenched tendency," said Éric Hans, chairman of the Union of Head Teachers of Private Schools.

The figures are an indictment of President Hollande's legacy. Having come to power on the back of a pledge to restore state education to its former glory, the Socialist leader has witnessed its decline. They are also a challenge to the core French belief that excellence in state education underpins the nation's meritocratic values.

About 90 per cent of France's 8,800 private schools are Catholic, and they were originally intended to offer churchgoing families an alternative to the country's secular state schools.

The majority of them are subsidised by the government, which means that fees are modest by British standards. Saint-François Le Juvé school in the Alps, which has the best exam results in France according to *Le Monde*, costs €806 a year, for instance. Lycée Passy Saint Honoré, the best-ranked private school in Paris, costs up to €1,976 a year.

Unlike its British counterpart, the private education system in France never used to tout itself as a breeding ground for the elite. That was a task for the most illustrious state lycées, such as Louis-le-Grand or Henri-IV in Paris.

However, with the state system in crisis and international surveys showing that French state pupils perform badly in subjects such as mathematics, parents are turning elsewhere. According to a recent study the ten lycées with the best exam results in France were private. In all of them, 100 per cent of pupils obtained the *Baccalauréat*, the equivalent of A levels.

Mr Hans said it was no longer only Catholic parents who sent their children into the private system but those who "distrust" state schools.

Mr Hans said parents believed private schools would offer better discipline and a broader education. Mr Hollande's school reforms dictated by egalitarian beliefs had fuelled hostility towards state education, he said.

Under the reforms, specialist foreign language classes have been quashed and Greek and Latin teaching has been reduced. Critics say the changes have lowered the academic level of schools across the country.

Although 97 per cent of private schools have to follow the national curriculum, they have flexibility. In practice, this means they have found a way of maintaining classics and specialist foreign language classes.

The education ministry survey found that the number of private secondary school pupils had risen by 6,400 this school year, while the number in the public system had dropped by 9,900.