

Paris, June 30th 2020.

The Director

**To the parents of students enrolled in French
schools abroad**

Dear Parents,

You are the parents of pupils enrolled in the French schools present in 123 countries across the world. Wherever you are, your personal and professional lives have been turned upside down since the start of the COVID 19 crisis. I know that this has been, and remains so for many of you, a very complicated period in time, a source of deep worry and concern, particularly so in some more vulnerable countries which have been more severely affected. Some of you have been living with the crisis since January and continue to live with the ongoing consequences. The vast majority of you were subjected to the impact of the virus at a later stage. Some of you have been progressively readjusting since mid-May and we are delighted that slightly over 160 schools are now open out of the 522 that make up the global network. However, most of you are still in a situation of uncertainty with regard to how the health crisis will evolve and its long term consequences.

All of you experienced the torments of being in lockdown. You were worried about the health of your children and your loved ones. You had to deal with the complexities of assisting and supporting your children with school work whilst overseeing your own professional activities. The health crisis may have impacted your economic situation and perhaps you are worried about whether you will be able to continue to provide your children with the education that you have chosen for them. You are all asking yourselves many questions, trying to work out what they have actually learnt, whether they stayed focused and whether examinations will be recognized as having the same value. You are also wondering how things will be at the beginning of the next school year.

We have tried to answer all of these questions with the leadership teams at the lycées, with the management committees in approved and partner lycées, with the teaching staff and with your councillors. The AEFE, which underwent reorganization as a consequence of the lockdown in France, has devoted all its energies since last January to developing a coherent response to the crisis. Local discussions with your representatives were intense in all locations and I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the total commitment of the leadership teams in French lycées, who fully assumed their duties and responsibilities and fulfilled their mission as an interface between you and the teaching staff. Nevertheless, despite our constant interaction with the parent association federations, to whom I am very grateful, managing the crisis and developing a global response with the assistance of the State has perhaps prevented us from providing a sufficiently full explanation of what we are doing and where we are going.

I would therefore like to take the time today to make a provisional assessment of the situation in order to learn from the experience and to look to the future together, with all its uncertainties, in order to develop our response with you, in a dialogue that is based on trust and is characterised by a constant concern for your children's safety and the quality of their education.

To fully understand our action, it should be remembered that the AEFÉ, the French State operator responsible for French education network overseas, has an overall responsibility with regard to all schools, irrespective of their status, and that it exercises this responsibility in very different ways. It assumes full responsibility for the management of the 71 schools under direct management (EGD); it shares these responsibilities with the management committees in the 256 approved school; it lends its support, essentially in terms of training, to partner schools. Consequently, the decisions it has had to take, including for the management of the EGDs, have been taken with the needs of families in all the schools and the long-term future of schools, whatever their status, in mind at all times.

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Our key priority, from the end of January, was to provide comprehensive support to leadership teams and teaching staff to ensure that pedagogical continuity was put in place as quickly as possible as soon as a school was required to close. A few schools had already experienced measures of this kind as a result of political crises or serious events. Some teachers were already familiar with the use of digital tools in their teaching practices, either through training or personal preference. But for the huge majority, the challenge that they faced was extraordinarily complex and teaching staff needed immediate support and assistance.

The AEFÉ teaching department and the more than 550 teacher trainers making up the network were therefore fully mobilised at the end of January to support their colleagues in the field in a manner that was respectful of the teachers' pedagogical autonomy and the over-riding project of each school and took into account the diversity of the network and the situation in each country (intensity of the health crisis, quality of networks, etc.).

The leadership teams and the teachers received a guide that was frequently supplemented with additional information on how to adapt their teaching practices, access new resources and support their most vulnerable pupils. Pedagogical continuity is not the transformation of the classroom into a virtual exercise. Instead it aims to achieve the pedagogical objectives of the year by other means, taking into account the difficulties of concentrating when working with digital tools for extended periods, whilst constantly striving to ensure that pupils stay focused on their work and do not drop out. The teachers' aim was therefore to provide suitable lessons whilst maintaining direct contact with their students to ensure that they had not only understood the instructions and content of the lesson correctly, but also to monitor their psychological well-being.

Nearly 80,000 training and support initiatives were therefore implemented by the Agency's inspectors and teacher trainers for teaching staff in all of the schools across the network. We know that not everything was perfect. There were some occasional difficulties. The response was particularly complex to organize for our youngest pupils. It is therefore necessary to make a calm assessment of this first experience in each establishment. However, teaching staff across the network have demonstrated their extraordinary commitment and their determination to progress in the interests of their students. Many of you have recognized this dedication and I think it is important to let the teachers know this.

We have also actively worked with the Ministry of National Education and Youth to ensure that our students involved in the preparation of a national exam, DNB and baccalaureate, are not disadvantaged in any way. All of those who are in the "northern rhythm" have therefore been able to benefit from continual assessment and the exam boards have started their work. The first baccalaureate results, in the North America zone in particular, clearly indicate that our students' academic level has not been impaired by this situation and that their skills are recognized. As in every other year, the results are excellent and we are absolutely delighted about this. We are now going to work to ensure that candidates in "southern rhythm" schools, who normally sit their exams in November and December, benefit from the best possible conditions in which to obtain their qualification.

In terms of access to higher education, we have worked with partner academies to ensure that exam result publication dates are compatible with the calendars of the major local universities. For the students who have registered on the Parcoursup higher education platform, the process took place as normal. 12,743 future baccalaureate holders applied to higher education establishments via Parcoursup this year and to date 94.4% of them have received offers, a rate that is already up in comparison to last year. By way of comparison, this rate is 92% for the general course in France. The AEFÉ career advice department (SORES) will continue to provide students, families and educational teams with support seven days a week throughout the process up until 7 September.

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The safety of students, staff and families during this period has been our absolute priority. It remains our key objective as we re-open schools.

The decision to close schools was taken by ambassadors, in conjunction with us, in view of the local health situation and the measures that were imposed by each country's government. We were therefore able to ensure that none of our schools could become a source of infection.

The re-opening procedures have followed a very strict protocol, overseen by the ambassadors, the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the AEFÉ. As soon as the prospect of re-opening is drawn up by the local authorities, the school community is invited to work, under the authority of the head teachers, within the framework provided for by the approval (school council, CHSCT), to prepare the conditions for the resumption of work in the school. These conditions are highly complicated everywhere and we did our utmost to ensure that they were subject to the consensus of the school community. Today we can see that in the 160 schools that have re-opened, everything has gone smoothly.

The experience that we have acquired will help prepare for the next academic year everywhere where the re-opening of schools is authorised by local authorities. The school heads are preparing for the start of the next academic year, along with your representatives and teachers, on the basis of various possible scenarios. Unfortunately we cannot say with absolute certainty how the health situation will have evolved in a few weeks' time in any given place, but we are striving to reduce these uncertainties in order to be flexible, reactive and effective when the time comes.

In the same vein, the leadership teams and teachers have received guidelines on how best to prepare pedagogically for the next school year with the support of the Agency's education department. We hope that a maximum number of schools will be able to re-open normally, but we are aware that over the first few weeks in many countries we will doubtless be forced to implement "hybrid" training methods, alternating the children's physical presence at school with remote lessons. This is complicated in terms of organization but we will be able to draw on the experience we have gained over the last few months in order to rise to the challenge of any situation. Unfortunately we also know that in some schools a physical return to classrooms will not be authorised. We will redouble our effort to reduce the negative impact of this situation on our students.

Wherever you are in the world, and irrespective of the teaching methods that we may implement, the start of the next academic year will not be like any other. All of the teachers will work with their students to assess the skills they have acquired over the last few months and develop a personalised support program that will allow them to start the new school year with solid foundations. Guidelines to this effect have been conveyed to teaching staff, in order to plan for a start to the academic year that may be extended over a few extra weeks if required before launching into the new school year as such. It is essential that we take the time we need and adapt teaching as required. This is the challenge facing all areas of work undertaken in all schools.

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Supporting families experiencing difficulties and ensuring the economic sustainability of schools has been our third key area of committed action over the previous months.

Faced with the economic downturn in the financial situation of some families, the State decided to come to their assistance, irrespective of nationality. It has also mobilized significant additional budgetary and cash resources to help all the schools in the network to cope with the economic difficulties associated with slower than usual school fee payment, but also to implement measures for the benefit of all families. Following the announcement on 30 April of the emergency plan by the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, Mr le Drian, the Minister for Audit and Public Action, Mr Darmanin, and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr Lemoyne, the government has decided to include exceptional aid for the network in the Amending Finance Act No 3: namely 50 million euros in additional appropriations to finance grants for French families in difficulty, 50 million euros in additional appropriations to support schools in assisting foreign families in difficulty in particular, and 50 million in cash advances from Agence France Trésor to the AEFÉ to enable it to support all the schools in the network in limiting the impact of the crisis.

The AEFÉ is working alongside diplomatic posts to implement these measures. **For French families experiencing difficulties**, more than 2,500 appeals for the payment of school fees for the third trimester are currently being processed. The consular scholarship commissions were held until 30 May and examined a much larger number of files, taking into account the impact of the COVID crisis in their evaluation. The AEFÉ started examining all of these applications at the beginning of the month with the aim of responding to all requests over the course of the summer to guarantee registrations.

In terms of **assistance to foreign families in difficulty**, all of the schools in the network are invited to set up commissions to study requests for aid guaranteeing a transparent and fair approach. The first cases are beginning to be sent to the AEFÉ, which undertakes to provide schools with responses as soon as possible.

In addition, schools may receive cash support in emergency cases or to take competitiveness measures within the framework authorized by the contingency plan.

This huge financial effort, at a time when our country is experiencing extreme crisis like its neighbours, should be highlighted. It marks the nation's desire to support the French educational network, in the spirit of solidarity with those French and foreign families who find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. **No other international education network enjoys such a degree of public support in this spirit of solidarity, regardless of nationality.**

I know that some of you would have liked to have seen more overall reduction measures, claiming that the pedagogical continuity measures that were introduced did not equate to the value of school fees. To go down this road is to put the long-term security of schools, all of which will have to deal with the consequences of the crisis for months to come, in jeopardy. All of the schools are already experiencing a reduction in their investments and development projects intended to strengthen their economic stability. They must also guarantee the income of their staff who worked throughout this period.

With you, with your representatives, they must develop their trajectory for the months and years to come with an understanding of the inherent responsibilities. In a spirit of solidarity with the families who have been most affected. And by finding the flexibility needed vis-à-vis other families who may be experiencing on-off problems and need to rearrange school fee payments. This is what we have been attentive to since the outset in the EGDs.

In the coming months, we will also ensure, in accordance with the orientations of the development plan for French education abroad, that parents' representatives are better involved in the governance of the EGDs. We had planned to make regulatory modification during the last semester, but the COVID 19 crisis prevented work from taking place with your representatives. We will recommence this work as soon as possible at the beginning of the academic year and we are more convinced than ever before that it is together, on the basis of shared analyses, that we will develop strategies for our schools in order to come out of the crisis in a stronger position.

