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France: Network of digital education advisers

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Type of intervention: governmental (ministerial, at national and regional levels)

Website: <https://eduscol.education.fr/cid150648/ressources-numeriques-educatives.html>

General description

The French Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports mobilised its network of local digital education advisers (*délégués académiques numériques*) to support the transition from face-to-face to distant learning when school closure became a possible scenario then actually happened on 16 March 2020. France is divided into 30 education academies (or administrative districts) directed by rectors, who implement the national education policies at the regional level and interact with regional stakeholders that share legal educational responsibilities with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The digital education advisers advise the rectors of each academy, liaise with local authorities and companies on digital education matters, and lead actions and networks around the uses of digital tools in education. Beyond advising the rectors, they develop projects, actions and training and share and mobilise knowledge for teachers to become more active in the use of digital tools for learning.

The network of digital education advisers ensured the quick transition from face-to-face to online distance schooling with no days of interruption by:

- working with local authorities to lend and deliver computers and learning worksheets to all students

- mobilising existing repositories of curated online resources (notably the Digital Educational Resources Platform [BRNE], Eduthèque and Canotech)
- providing online training to teachers and school principals about the availability and use of digital resources for pedagogical practice
- sharing and promoting of teaching and learning practices adapted to educational continuity and progressive school reopening
- working with other public education partners on the deployment of their education continuity initiatives, notably the National Centre for Distance Education (CNED) and public TV and radio channels.

The originality of this initiative lies in the mobilisation of a network of education advisers with a good knowledge of past initiatives and strong relationships with all the major stakeholders in the field, enabling quick negotiations with partners, rapid communication and an understanding of the peculiarities of the different local contexts across the French territory.

Main problems addressed

The digital education advisers had to address four main problems.

First, they made sure that French teachers in public and government-dependent private schools would be in a position to use their school's learning management system to interact with their students during the school closure. In some cases, this involved expanding existing learning management systems so that they would support or just be used for pedagogical purposes. While learning management systems have been available in French schools for several years, notably in secondary education, their active use by teachers for pedagogical purposes remained rare: their main use was for administrative functionalities.

Second, they ensured that all children and families without digital equipment could continue learning and liaising with their teachers during the school closure through the provision of digital equipment and paper learning worksheets.

Third, they trained and supported teachers (and school principals) in their switch to (online) distance learning. While teachers commonly use technology in their course preparation and sometimes ask students to use digital tools for some tasks, they are not used to teaching with a big digital component and needed help getting started as well as ideas about how they could teach at a distance and adapt their pedagogy.

Fourth, they enhanced the co-ordination and sharing of information and practices across the different academies and contributed to the deployment of other digital solutions provided by the government.

This solution mobilises past digital education efforts and infrastructure and scaled them up at a quick pace across the French territory. It contributed to other national governmental solutions, notably the CNED's "ma classe à la maison" (my class at home), "France nation apprenante" (Learning Nation France), and the broadcast of educational programmes on public TV and radio channels. This supplements other national initiatives (such as [Canotech](#), including a curated library of education resources from pre-primary to upper secondary for students, parents and teachers, as well self-training resources for teachers) as well as local programmes by a variety of stakeholders.

Mobilising and developing resources

The network of digital education advisers was created in 2013, when the French Ministry of Education established its new Directorate for Digital Education. The digital education advisers mainly work at the local level while the directorate works (with them) at the central level. This human infrastructure existed before

the COVID-19 pandemic so that education continuity could be implemented thanks to many pre-existing resources and competences. Qualified human resources specialised in the use of educational resources and tools for pedagogy represent the biggest asset of the network. Each French academy has at least one digital education adviser, with most having less than 15. Over the entire French territory, this represents hundreds of staff with appropriate skills who could be mobilised to prepare and oversee the transition in co-ordination with the ministry's Directorate for Digital Education.

The network could rely on other types of resources that were developed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

- **Digital pedagogical resources.** The Ministry of Education had already curated several repositories of thousands of downloadable pedagogical resources curated by grade and covering 14 disciplines for students from Grades 4-9 (French, maths, science, history and geography, and some foreign languages) (see [BRNE](#)). Teachers can access those resources using their professional identifiers or their school learning management system. Another similar resource was co-designed with public cultural and scientific organisations: [Eduthèque](#) (edu-library). It proposes a selection of the educational resources of the public partners curated against the French national curriculum, learning outcomes and standards.
- **Use cases from digital education projects.** One of the ordinary missions of the digital education advisers is to call for and fund projects around education involving digital components, be it fully on line or most often a part of face-to-face learning. Based on those projects, interesting practices and pedagogies related to digital education are documented in an online repository that is accessible by all ([Edubase](#)). Again, the database is searchable by topic, and by type and level of education.
- **Dissemination of best practices.** Some of the most interesting practices as well as results from research projects were already disseminated nationally and regionally through different information and training channels. This represented a readily available resource for teachers – but also for all digital education advisers.
- **Some previous level of teacher training.** All teachers had a statutory mandatory three-day training related to digital tools in education, so that many teachers in France had some exposure to digital learning tools (regardless of whether they use them or not in their usual practice). However, the deployment of this statutory training was still ongoing.
- **Relationships.** One key asset of the digital education advisers lies in their networks with local actors, from schools through to companies and research partners.

The school closure required the development of new actions to respond to the immediate needs of teachers, students and schools during the crisis.

- **IT equipment.** While French households have relatively good levels of connectivity and IT equipment, some students and families lacked a computer. In 2019, 76% of French households had a computer, 46% had a tablet and 95% a smartphone. According to a survey from the Ministry of Education, 272 000 primary and secondary students (out of 12.4 million, or roughly 2%) live in a household with no computer or tablet, 91 000 with no Internet connection, 130 000 with a blocked access to mobile networks and 37 000 with no smartphone. While this represents small percentages, the numbers remain high. The ministry established two partnerships with the public mail service: one to print, deliver and return paper learning sheets for students with no connectivity; a second to deliver the equipment lent by their schools or acquired by local authorities to the eligible families. The digital education advisers worked with local authorities to identify local IT needs and solutions, relying on the national partnership established by the ministry.
- **Strengthening schools' learning management systems.** While most secondary schools already had a learning management system with both administrative (absences, marks) and pedagogical functionalities, it was not fully universal and the digital advisers accompanied the shift by supporting the negotiation of new contracts with private providers. The digital systems in French schools were

initially designed and used in the spirit of a digital workspace (as their name in French indicates: *espace numérique de travail*) rather than a full learning management system.

- **Training for the immediate needs of teachers and school principals.** Many of the new actions consisted of training teachers and school principals in using the pedagogical functionalities of their learning management systems and, more broadly, in supporting them to use digital resources and to revisit their pedagogy in the switch to distance learning.
- **Curation of additional resources and provision of a virtual classroom tool** (in partnership with the CNED). Finally, in spite of the pre-existence of different banks of digital pedagogical resources, additional curation was carried out in view of their use in a new context. Moreover, the ministry's Directorate for Digital Education worked with the CNED to provide all teachers a virtual classroom tool ("my class at home") and with the public TV and radio services to have educational programmes broadcast (Learning Nation France).

Fostering effective use and learning

As mentioned above, fostering the effective use of resources first took the form of ensuring that all students without a computer or connectivity before the lockdown could have the means to access the learning resources provided by the ministry and their schools after the school closed. This includes support to schools in using and enhancing their learning management system for pedagogical purposes.

The second aspect focused on providing training, disseminating knowledge and organising peer collaboration among teachers and school principals at the local level. The support given to teachers and school principals mainly took three forms:

1. **Daily webinars.** These were designed as training for teachers and school principals on a variety of topics, from how to access the different existing services, to how to use the resources and other tips about how to communicate with students and families.
2. **Sharing of interesting uses of digital resources.** The crisis offered an opportunity to share cases of pre-existing use of digital resources in different pedagogies, but also to share in real time interesting practices of schools and teachers during the crisis. Professional discussions among teachers were encouraged through various means (mainly using social network functionalities or dedicated professional learning platforms provided by the ministry such as [Viaeduc](#)).
3. **Weekly FAQ.** A "frequently asked questions" sheet was developed and posted on the ministry's website by its Directorate for Digital Education based on the questions answered during the week on digital education by different actors nationally and locally, including the digital education advisers.

Implementation challenges

Several implementation challenges had to be overcome, and some are still ongoing.

A first implementation challenge related to budget and logistics. On the infrastructural side, the increased use of the learning management systems and the resources led to computing capacity limitations. On the logistical side, distributing the equipment was another challenge, but there was, and is still, a budgetary implementation challenge. A new partnership with foundations and existing school crowdfunding services is being explored to continue equipping students and families, also in the light of schools reopening. Finally, many primary schools do not have a learning management system, so distance-learning interactions with primary students had to be carried out through other means.

A second implementation challenge lay in the co-ordination of the many different initiatives developed by public actors alone at the national and regional level. This mainly took the form of good communication across actors and the involvement of the ministry's Directorate for Digital Education for many of them.

The third and probably main implementation challenge relates to teaching and learning: Ensuring the active engagement of teachers and learners and preparing the transition to a mix of distance and face-to-face learning after schools reopen. Distance learning raises new challenges for teachers: preparing new lesson plans for their courses; maintaining students' engagement at a distance over a long period of time; developing the learner's autonomy to learn; noticing and acting against different forms of "drop out", from lack of interest to active disengagement. In spite of the resources and the support given to teachers, students and families, this remains an ongoing implementation challenge.

Monitoring success

However, some measures about the use of the developed resources show that those were used:

- **Learning management systems:** School learning management systems attracted on average around 7.1 million visits with an average of 55 million pages viewed every day (about 80% of secondary schools have access to a learning management system). In primary schools, most learning management systems were opened temporarily during the crisis, but several French departments are establishing them.
- **BRNE:** In the first two weeks of the school closures, 120 000 teacher accounts were created, the platform had 15 times more connections, 10 times as many sessions sent to students by teachers than before the closure and over 1.4 million exercises performed by students.
- **My class at home:** 2.5 million accounts have been created since the school closures, especially in primary education (1.13 million) and lower secondary education (0.8 million). On average, there are around 135 000 virtual classes a day (with use even during the weekend), with on average around 2 million unique participants a day.
- **Canotech** (educational resources): Four weeks after its launch, the platform has attracted over 130 000 unique visitors, with 600 000 consulted pages overall and 5 600 sessions every day.

No study has been conducted yet on students' learning and teachers' teaching during the school closure. They may come afterwards. *[Note of the Editor: The Department for Evaluation and Foresight at the French Ministry of Education conducted several [statistical studies](#) during the pandemic, which were published quickly after this note and are summarised in [Schooling during a pandemic](#) by Thorn and Vincent-Lancrin (2021).]*

Adaptability to new contexts

This solution, which has a national scale in France, is easily adaptable in countries or contexts where ministries have had a policy around digital education in the past. In federated countries with several curricula, mutualising knowledge and educational resources across regional and local authorities as well as the knowledge of digital education advisers could easily be replicated.

The digital educational resources in French could also be used in other French-speaking countries, which is already happening in some African countries.

One specificity of the French context is the existence of a national curriculum and the pre-existing mapping of many educational resources on this curriculum. This may not be the case in countries where curricula are decided at the local or regional level. The crisis may, however, show that having a mapping of online digital resources on one's local curriculum may help in such circumstances.

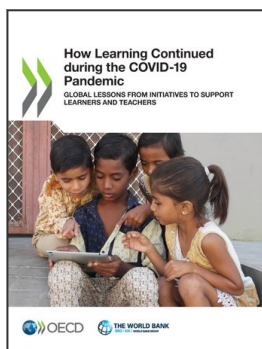
The network of digital education advisers is meant to be sustained after the crisis as are some of the solutions that have been developed. Notably, after the school reopening, a mix of distance and face-to-face teaching and learning will be continued. The pedagogical use of the learning management systems should also be transformative.

Box 18.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Have a strong political will so that all efforts are aligned and move quickly and the budget can be easily redeployed to new actions and priorities.
2. Mobilise existing human resources on digital education and engage them in training and supporting actors at the local level, both on the local level and in negotiating or renegotiating contracts with companies and other actors.
3. Establish partnerships between different stakeholders and rely on existing links and networks at the regional and national level (ministry, EdTech companies, local and regional authorities, etc.), both to mobilise financial and human resources and solve logistical problems.
4. Provide curated platforms of educational resources, possibly mapped on your school curriculum (or by grade and discipline) and make them easily accessible.
5. Use school learning management systems to make digital educational resources available, but also provide more openly accessible resources for teachers, students and parents.
6. Provide teachers with virtual classroom tools (in addition to those possibly available through their learning management systems).
7. Accompany teachers and school principals by providing them with training sessions, curated materials supporting them for their teaching, peer-to-peer learning opportunities through social media and online learning resources, and sharing past and ongoing good and interesting practices.

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