

Jules Ferry laws establishing free, secular, compulsory education in France: 1880s.

The Jules Ferry Laws are a set of French Laws which established free education (1881), then mandatory and laic education (1882). Jules Ferry, a lawyer holding the office of Minister of Public Instruction in the 1880s, is widely credited for creating the modern Republican School (l'école républicaine). The dual system of state and church schools that were largely staffed by religious officials were replaced by state schools and lay school teachers. The educational reforms enacted by Jules Ferry are often attributed to a broader anti-clerical campaign in France.

French education during the 19th century was marked by two distinct and segregated systems, the first being a secondary school system and the second a primary school system. However, in each of these systems, the Catholic Church provided an alternative to secular schooling that was often the only option for families in economically depressed regions of France.

Although the Republican party is often credited for inventing the concept of free primary school, it was, in fact, a series of progressive improvements since mid-century. For example, in 1698, it was decreed that children ages 7–14 were to attend local Catholic schools with certified instructors, which were also added to areas that previously had none.[1] However, funds for these schools were to be provided by local residents, and it proved very difficult for these schools to afford to remain in practice. Overall, between 1837 (44 years before the Jules Ferry Laws were passed) and 1906, the number of schools had increased by more than 100%. In some areas, like Bretagne Ouest, it reached nearly 200% (197.2%).[2]

The idea of national government support for popular education and teacher training first became apparent as an important social and political issue during the French Revolution of 1789.[3] Prominent politicians, such as Talleyrand and Condorcet, each proposed a national system of education that would provide every citizen with basic primary education. With the intention of strengthening France's politics and armed forces, a growing concentration on higher education was later seen after the Revolution, notably from Napoleon I in his establishment of the Imperial University in 1804-8.[4] Meanwhile, the Catholic Church still remained highly involved within primary education. The Guizot Laws passed in 1833 obliged all communes to open boys' schools.[5] The Falloux Laws of March 15, 1850 abolished teacher training programs for men which had been put in place by the Guizot Law. These laws created a mixed system in which some primary education establishments were public and controlled by the state and others were under the supervision of Catholic congregations.[6] Although the concept of universal public schooling was important to these revolutionaries, it became clear that financial issues and political debate thwarted the implementation.

Philosophy

Despite the differences on economic, social, and other issues among the Republican radicals with whom Jules Ferry identified, they were united by the desire to obtain a secular republic[7]

due to the growing popularity of anti-clericalism since the Revolution and notably during the Third Republic. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution and its new practices of employment and work days, the radicals also “hoped that schooling would make workers as reasonable and self-satisfied as it was credited with making the bourgeoisie.”[8]

The 1698 attempt would not have held sway with the Republican radicals of Ferry’s generation, who would have seen it as Catholic propaganda and as a defense against the growing popularity of Protestantism. Likewise, Napoleon’s Imperial University remained connected to the Church and paid little heed to primary education that would ensure basic literacy needs among the larger population. In Ferry’s view, schools would educate on political doctrine and the virtues of nationalism, emphasizing independent thought.[9]