



By: Gabriela Ramos

Will France change the algorithm that sparked the protests?



Hundreds of thousands of young people have **taken to the streets** in France to protest against the state of the country's education system.

The violence that erupted on October 17 should not eclipse their concerns, which are entirely legitimate: the deplorable conditions at many French schools, including dilapidated buildings, a lack of teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and long school days.

They are also deeply opposed to **Parcoursup**, the country's university-admissions platform, which has become the lightning rod for their grievances. They have denounced it as opaque, stressful, and unfair.

Instead of reducing soaring inequality in the national education system, Parcoursup's student-placement algorithm exacerbates it.

The socioeconomic background that weighs so heavily on academic success in France becomes the input that reinforces these unequal outcomes.

It further fails young people from lower-income backgrounds whose hopes for upward social mobility rest on academic success.

Student outcomes in France are heavily shaped by where students live. When I moved to the country, I was advised to find a good neighborhood in order to be assigned to a good school.

Outcomes also depend on parental support, education levels, and material well-being, which often translate into extracurricular activities and tutoring.

Some countries do much better than others at limiting the impact of socioeconomic background on educational outcomes, but France is not one of them.

Producing a high-quality elite

In the OECD's most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),

France had one of the largest performance gaps in science between the most and least advantaged students: 100 points, equivalent to roughly **five years of learning gains**, compared with an OECD average of 85.

The chances of receiving an offer of admission to one of France's higher-education institutions also depend on the type of baccalaureate achieved, which tends to split along **class lines**.

In 2025, **97.2%** of general baccalaureate graduates, who are often better-off, received an offer during the main admission phase, compared to 82.9% of vocational graduates.

In that phase, 17.1% of vocational graduates received no offer, compared with 2.8% of general graduates.

The country has focused on producing a high-quality elite, with little attention to inclusion or representation

Part of the explanation lies in where France puts its efforts. The country has focused on producing a high-quality elite, with little attention to inclusion or representation.

As a result, **two-thirds of students** at grandes écoles, France's most selective higher-education institutions, come from highly advantaged backgrounds, while the share of disadvantaged students barely moved between 2006 and 2016, from 7% to 8%.

Graduates of the École nationale d'administration, now the Institut national du service public, are practically guaranteed civil-service careers, while most low-income students continue to face a precarious labor market. This is as socially unsustainable as it is morally unacceptable.

Sources of unequal educational opportunity

Parcoursup legitimizes and obscures this biased system by allocating educational opportunities without considering socioeconomic factors.

It highlights applicants' merits, ignoring the support systems that have helped them succeed.

Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron **identified** the sources of unequal educational opportunity in France long ago, but Parcoursup has fueled the sense of unfairness by keeping ranking criteria secret.

After October 17, swiftly reforming Parcoursup would be low-hanging fruit and would send the right signal.

That means anonymizing candidates and removing their school of origin, as **recommended** by a 2026 parliamentary report.

The French government must focus more on students lagging behind or coming from precarious households

Another way to correct some of the system's inherent bias would be to redirect offers declined by scholarship students to other scholarship students, rather than to the next candidate on the list.

This change could increase the number of scholarship students receiving offers by about 10,000.

But addressing the broader inequality in the French education system requires deep structural reform and a different mindset.

Seizing this crisis as an opportunity to bring about genuine change, the French government must focus more on students lagging behind or coming from precarious households.

According to PISA, the countries that better mitigate the impact of socioeconomic background on educational outcomes—such as Finland, Japan, Canada, and South

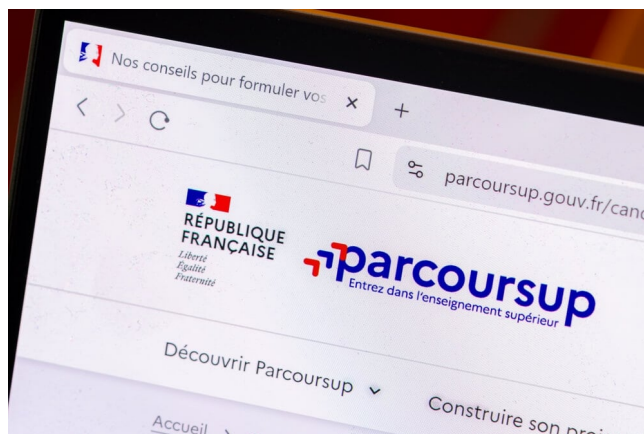
Korea—assign the most qualified and experienced teachers to the most challenging schools. France should follow their example.

Policymakers cannot hide behind Parcoursup's algorithm

It will also be important to provide more resources and support to an overwhelmed and declining teaching workforce, create additional places in higher education, and narrow the gap between grandes écoles and other universities, including in graduates' employment opportunities.

This will not only meet some of the protesting students' demands but also make France more productive and inclusive.

When it comes to decisions that shape young people's lives, transparency and accountability should be non-negotiable.



Policymakers cannot hide behind Parcoursup's complex algorithm. Questions of fairness are a societal discussion, not a technological one

Students locked out of higher education or left with suboptimal choices deserve an explanation and, above all, support.

Policymakers cannot hide behind Parcoursup's complex algorithm. Questions of fairness are a societal discussion, not a technological one.

The situation in France also has important implications for debates about the use of AI for decision-making.

If governments deploy AI in education and other vital services without questioning its underlying assumptions and who actually benefits, and without devising mechanisms for transparency or accountability, the technology will dramatically worsen the already-high levels of inequality between and within countries.

Should that happen, the effects will not remain contained within institutional boundaries.

Like in France, they will spill out of classrooms and into the streets, with dire implications for our politics.

Gabriela Ramos, Co-Chair of the Task Force on Inequalities and Social-Related Financial Disclosures, is a former assistant director-general for social and human sciences at UNESCO.