NEWS LESSON

Why French Students Are Walking Out of Class



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What one change would improve a school you know?
2. Can missing a lesson ever teach someone something useful?
3. What makes adults take young people's opinions seriously?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**infrastructure**	☐	A	to be a clear example of an idea
2	**stopgap**	☐	B	the basic buildings and systems that a place needs
3	**expenditure**	☐	C	angry, sometimes violent meetings between opposing groups
4	**paradox**	☐	D	the money that a government or group spends
5	**confrontations**	☐	E	a short-term solution used until a better one comes
6	**embody**	☐	F	something that limits what you can do
7	**constraint**	☐	G	a situation that seems to contradict itself
8	**underinvestment**	☐	H	a failure to spend enough money over a long period

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Students across France have blocked school gates to protest about run-down buildings and missing teachers. Their demands have grown into a wider argument over school funding.

1 The gates are blocked and the placards are handwritten. Many of the people demanding change are pupils who would normally be in class. Since late September, secondary-school students across France have protested about run-down buildings, staff shortages and what they say is too little money for public education.

2 At Lycée Paul Éluard in Saint-Denis, north of Paris, complaints about inadequate facilities became a focus for wider frustration. Students described disrupted timetables and an environment that fell short of the standards promised by the education system. Their grievances resonated well beyond the school gates. By 13 October, nationwide demonstrations had drawn more than 160,000 participants according to official figures, with organisers estimating substantially larger crowds. Greta Thunberg's visit to Saint-Denis brought international attention, though the campaign had already developed its own momentum.

3 The demonstrations expose a difficult tension in France's understanding of public education. Schools are supposed to embody republican equality, offering children opportunities that do not depend on their parents' income or postcode. Yet pupils argue that shortages and deteriorating infrastructure are not distributed evenly. When one school repeatedly cancels lessons and another is adequately staffed, the promise of equal opportunity becomes increasingly hard to defend. Pupils in Saint-Denis have been quick to point out that this gap is not an abstraction but their daily timetable.

4 The government's response has included a pledge to roll out 3,000 additional replacement teachers. That may alleviate immediate disruption, but campaigners insist that stopgap staffing arrangements cannot make up for sustained underinvestment.

5 Ministers face another political constraint: pressure to contain public expenditure and debt. Better recruitment, maintenance and classroom support require money, while competing priorities make additional spending contentious. The protests have laid bare the effects of years of underinvestment, so the dispute is as much about national choices as it is about local school conditions. Ministers who concede the principle while holding back the money are unlikely to satisfy anyone for long.

6 Policing has become a further source of controversy. Most demonstrations have been peaceful, but confrontations have produced injuries and arrests, and campaigners have accused officers of excessive force. Authorities point to incidents of violence and the need to maintain public order. These competing accounts underline the difficulty of policing a movement involving teenagers, many of whom are encountering organised political activism for the first time. The debate has widened from educational standards to the limits of protest and the state's responsibility towards young citizens. Those are questions that will not be settled by clearing a street.

7 There is an uncomfortable paradox at the heart of the strikes. By refusing to attend lessons, students risk losing more of the teaching they say they are being denied. Supporters respond that accepting the status quo carries its own long-term cost. Whether the movement secures lasting changes remains uncertain. What is already evident is a generation of pupils unwilling to be treated as passive recipients of government policy. In demanding better schools, they are also insisting on a voice in the institutions that shape their lives.

Sources: France 24. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer suggests the campaign had gathered pace before Greta Thunberg arrived. T F NG
2. The writer thinks the promise of extra replacement teachers will fully solve the problem. T F NG
3. Most of the injuries at the demonstrations were suffered by police officers. T F NG
4. Campaigners and authorities disagree about the cause of the violence at some demonstrations. T F NG
5. Ministers who accept the students' case in principle but withhold funds are likely to end the dispute. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

concede **contentious** **deteriorating** **excessive** **momentum** **pledge** **recipients** **resonated**

1. The singer's honest lyrics _____ with fans who had faced similar struggles.
2. After the second win, the campaign gathered such _____ that opponents struggled to keep up.
3. Under pressure from voters, the minister was finally forced to _____ that the policy had failed.
4. Plans to cut the library's funding proved highly _____ among local residents.
5. The _____ condition of the bridge led engineers to close it to lorries.
6. The judge ruled that the officers had used _____ force against the unarmed crowd.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Campaigners described the fines as _____ to the offence. (PROPORTION)
2. The _____ of the new rules has been uneven across the country. (ENFORCE)
3. There is growing _____ among staff with the new timetable. (SATISFY)
4. Economists warned that the current level of spending was _____ . (SUSTAIN)
5. The _____ of the official figures has been questioned. (RELY)

7 Language focus: collocations

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Look for fixed or semi-fixed expressions. If you change one word, the whole phrase may sound wrong.

bargain **deaf** **hold** **laid** **lip** **raise** **shift**

1. The inquiry has _____ bare how little was spent on maintenance.
2. Ministers have been accused of paying _____ service to equality while cutting budgets.
3. Local leaders drove a hard _____ before agreeing to the deal.
4. The minister's remarks fell on _____ ears among angry teachers.
5. Ministers are keen to _____ the blame onto local councils.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would make a student protest worth supporting?
2. Should students help decide how a school spends its money?
3. What could a school do to show it had really listened?

9 Role-play: the school march

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the parent

Your teenage son or daughter wants to miss school on Friday to join a march about school buildings. You understand the problem, but you're worried. Ask at least two questions before you decide.

Student B · the teenager

You want to join a student march on Friday. Explain why it matters, answer your parent's worries and suggest a plan that makes it safe.

Useful phrases

I'd like to join the march on Friday.

I'm worried you'll fall behind.

It's not just about me, it's about everyone.

What if things get out of hand?

Could we agree on a compromise?

I'll catch up on the lesson at the weekend.

Afterwards, tell the class: did the parent agree, and what condition did they set?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 B · 2 E · 3 D · 4 G · 5 C · 6 A · 7 F · 8 H

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 resonated · 2 momentum · 3 concede · 4 contentious · 5 deteriorating · 6 excessive

6 Word forms

1 disproportionate · 2 enforcement · 3 dissatisfaction · 4 unsustainable · 5 reliability

7 Language focus

1 laid · 2 lip · 3 bargain · 4 deaf · 5 shift

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