

## **Boarding schools for France's 'banlieues': an old idea back in the mainstream**

AFP via [The Tocqueville Connection](#) ^ | 10/18/2006

PARIS, Oct 18, 2006 (AFP) - Nearly a year after riots erupted in France's impoverished suburbs, an old-fashioned idea has re-emerged in the fight to integrate at-risk children into the social mainstream: the boarding school.

A far cry from the traditional Catholic institutions for the rich or discipline camps for delinquents, the new breed of public boarding school -- called a "school of success" -- is seen as key in combatting crime and unemployment in the "banlieues" by giving a small band of pupils a chance to get ahead.

Spearheaded by Nicolas Sarkozy, France's tough-talking interior minister and a top contender in next year's presidential election, an experimental project is entering its second year in the northwestern Paris suburb of Asnieres-sur-Seine.

Here the boarding facilities adjacent to the 700-strong Renoir High School comprise a five-story building behind imposing gates, tucked within a residential pocket of low-rise homes.

Twenty-four teenagers from across the Paris "banlieues" have enrolled this year, and despite Sarkozy's controversial reputation in the suburbs, the idea appeals to the school's headmaster Lansana Cisse.

"A big dilemma in French politics is that even if you have a good idea as a politician, it will be shouted down by the opposition," said Cisse. "I happen to think boarding schools are a good idea for many families and it doesn't matter where it came from."

"In the banlieues we have many children who have difficulties at school because they have difficulties at home," said Cisse. "There's no room, there are too many children, they can't concentrate, the television is on, the father is absent. "The children do not have the conditions in which they can work."

The structured environment, adult supervision and strict rules are meant to provide at-risk youth with such conditions and encourage underachievers to turn over a new academic leaf.

"These aren't an elite, the children -- that is not how we choose them," said Cisse. "They are not geniuses -- quite the opposite for some -- but they have potential."

If the school's exterior might suggest a detention center, inside it could be a new dorm at an American university. Spacious bedrooms line the upper floors with two students to a room. Eight female students occupy one floor, while the boys are housed on the others.

On a Tuesday afternoon after class the children gather in the cafeteria, where they relax and socialize under the supervision of monitors. The mood is energetic and boisterous and loud bursts of laughter erupt from a corner where a group of boys are playing table soccer.

"It's taken time to adjust, we'll need another month," said Suzanne Prichard, 30, one of three "counsellors". "First of all we have to get a kind of framework in place, because for now they do not have a work reflex. It will take time, and it is not easy, but there will be progress I am sure."

Some students reported that they had already seen progress, and said they had adjusted to boarding school life.

"I was getting marks of 2 one week then 20 the next. My mom said I had to change," said 13-year-old Gregory Sulty. "The best thing is always being with your friends -- and work is definitely improving."

"My old school was awful, the teachers were always going on strike, and I wasn't doing any work, and my marks were terrible," said Estelle Dieleman, also 13. "I was happy to come to boarding school, even though I am a bit homesick every now and again."

Cisse said that 10 more students are expected to enrol next year, and that the project calls for up to three more such schools in 2010. Still he acknowledged that the city's depressed "banlieues" had a long

way to go before substantial change is seen.

"It's only a drop -- but in the long run I hope we can save a few souls," said Cisse. "Change is going to be very slow, because French society is still not ready to open itself up to full scale integration."