
[Tackling urban barriers to quality and inclusive education: Lessons from France](#)

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Social barriers to education

Rural education, urban education

Cities will always be ‘rife with problems’, even when they are ‘filled with promise’ (Sivaramakrishnan, 1996). As highlighted by UN-Habitat (2016, p. 5), ‘urbanization has relied on a model that is unsustainable in many respects’, particularly regarding crucial environmental, social and economic issues. Cities must address the challenge of a growing urban population in a number of sectors, including education. Migration and youth booms, increasing socio-economic disparities, the proliferation of slums, and the education crisis that has arisen from the COVID-19 pandemic all affect cities’ ability to provide access to quality and equitable education.

Cities have a social responsibility to provide their citizens with equitable and quality education and lifelong learning opportunities. In today’s increasingly decentralized education systems, cities, through their local elected authorities, play a growing role in the implementation of national and local education policies, working in partnership with ministries of education and the local education community to achieve the [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 4](#) in their territory.

IIEP-UNESCO’s research programme [Cities & Education 2030](#) aims to learn from how cities plan to achieve SDG4. Field research conducted in a number of French cities highlights their deep commitment to address urban barriers to education and to design opportunities for the youngest. *"Putting the right to education above all other policies is the priority objective"*, highlights [Philippe Rio](#), Mayor of [Grigny](#), a city in the suburbs of Paris.

In France, the responsibilities of cities, for formal education lies with school buildings and equipment, and to some extent school feeding. They are responsible for providing a safe learning environment for all children within their territory. Cities liaise with school staff, parents associations and civil society organizations to facilitate access to school buildings for children with disabilities. In [Ivry-sur-Seine](#), the prevention and child protection officer is the city’s focal point for disadvantaged families and families with children requiring special care. She facilitates the coordination of the different actors involved in prevention, child protection and inclusion issues, by ensuring the link with the families, as

well as the follow-up of the children's personalized pathways.

Inclusion is a top priority of cities' education strategies. Specific programs are developed with the ministry of education and local associations to welcome migrant families and contribute to a smooth integration of their children in local schools. Cities also collaborate with schools in the implementation of Educational Success Programmes, developed by the national Ministry of education. They target pupils with learning difficulties and accompany them and their families for better learning outcomes. In [Saint-Quentin](#), combating the high levels of illiteracy in the territory and its surrounding region is a crucial objective for the city. Every evening, about 70 first-grade pupils benefit from one and a half hours reading and writing through play activities. Attention is also given to school dropouts. In Grigny, the city coordinates with secondary schools to identify at-risk students and collaborates with local companies to support their transition to employment.

Developing relationships of trust with parents is central for cities to ensure inclusive and equitable access to education in their territory. They pay specific attention to increasing the self-confidence of parents who dropped out of school at an early age, and who face socio-economic difficulties. Cities aim at strengthening the child-parental link; they create opportunities for dialogue with parents through informal gatherings and festivities. 'It has enabled us to reintroduce the role of parents who are not able, or who don't have the time, to support their children. *"We don't replace them, but we accompany them"*(Coordinator of Educational Success programmes, Saint-Quentin). Co-designing the city's education strategy is essential: *"We really wanted to put the parents at the heart of the process"*, says the City's Educational project manager in [Orvault](#).

Beyond the crucial role they play regarding school buildings and equipment, cities collaborate with school teaching staff and complement formal education through the development of sound extracurricular activities. They provide educational opportunities that transcend the classroom wall, providing education services that combine formal, non-formal and informal education opportunities. The mission of the city is to support *"comprehensive child development"* and is not limited to the time spent in the classroom, stresses the former mayor of Orvault. In order to guarantee equal opportunities and success for all students, the city of Ivry-sur-Seine strives to leave no learning space aside. 'We want extracurricular activities and school subjects to complement each other says an elected education representative.

Collaboration with sectors like health, culture, sports and urban planning is crucial. The lack of accessible healthcare for families, and the on-going work to equip parents with a sense of confidence, purpose and responsibility vis-à-vis their children's health and education, are at the heart of initiatives that Grigny is co-designing with local partners. According to Ivry-sur-Seine's Director of culture, the link between cultural issues and educational policies is part of the city's DNA: *"Our political commitments make the territory of Ivry-sur-Seine an extremely lively territory in terms of culture, and one that is developing a very strong demand for culture and education"*. In Saint-Quentin, the Sports Education Health and Social Integration (SESI) programme is designed to reach out to young people of the city in order to promote their social integration. Through sports activities organized in the grounds of buildings in priority neighbourhoods, the programme aims to help combat school dropout and direct young people to local integration structures.

Urban barriers to education are numerous and constitute a key challenge for the sustainable development of cities and for the future of their youngest citizens. However, sound education plans and strategies, co-designed by cities with the education ecosystem of actors, and integrated within urban development, are powerful tools to provide quality education for all children and youth in their territory. Our research on 'Cities & Education 2030' highlights the key lessons that can be learnt.

References

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