

French school pupils to be taught that secularism protects them

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The French education minister has said that the meaning of secularism has been twisted and that teaching must be overhauled to show that Laïcité protects pupils.

In an interview with the [Guardian](#), the French Minister of Education, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, said that the French must "reappropriate the concept of laïcité so we can explain to our young pupils that whatever their faith, they belong to this idea and they're not excluded. Secularism is not something against them; it protects them."

Speaking amid a drive to challenge extremism in French schools by promoting secularism, Vallaud-Belkacem added: "Laïcité is about saying we're in a country where individuals can have whatever beliefs, or lack of beliefs, they choose and the public powers must be neutral towards them. That's why in schools, we ask pupils not to wear distinctive religious symbols, because schools should be indifferent to beliefs and everyone must be treated equally."

She warned that there "had been a growing sense of incomprehension among pupils over what this meant, with some pupils feeling it was an aggressive attack on who they were."

The minister said that "If a big number of young pupils felt secularism was an attack on them, it was because the term had been misused and deformed in the public debate for years by the extreme-right and the right as an attack on Islam."

She added: "The term had often been misused to point out how Muslims were different to others, and that is clearly problematic."

"So we really wanted to work on that concept of secularism and specially train teachers on it."

TES reported that "thousands of French people have signed up to help promote 'the values of the republic' in the country's schools" and that a National Education Citizen Reserve will see French citizens "promote principles of secularism and citizenship" in schools.

Teacher training candidates will also be assessed on their ability to teach the French principles of liberté, égalité and fraternité.

The efforts are part of a drive to "unite the country under secularism", aided in part by a raft of new teaching materials on "the philosophical basis of France".

Speaking in early January, Vallaud-Belkacem said that "rarely will so much have been done in so little time to promote republican values in school. But I am conscious of the extent of what is left for us to accomplish."

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