



June 2007

# La France à la loupe

## The Education System in France

The Preamble of the French Constitution of 1946 sets out that “the Nation guarantees equal access for children and adults to education, vocational training and culture”. The French education system provides **compulsory schooling free of charge** for children aged 6 to 16 and a right to education starting at age 3. With its aim to serve the public, the system **adapts to new educational methods, modern technology** and **users’** expectations, and improves **its management** by decentralizing **power**. It is also **extremely diverse**.

**The Outline Act of 23 April 2005 for the future of French schools**, the result of extensive national debate, revised the role of the education system on the basis of similar objectives to those set out in the final declaration of the European Council meeting held in Lisbon on 23 and 24 March 2000 (points 25-40). They entail **ensuring equal opportunities and success for all students** by establishing a common knowledge base (mastery of the French language, mathematics, a foreign language, information and communication technologies, humanist culture) and **integrating more young people into the working world**.

The national education budget amounts to €65.96 billion or **23.31% of the overall national budget** and represents 3.91% of the GNP. In 2005-2006, there were **15 million students** in public and private sector education combined. The French government spends €6,970 per student. **Over 85% of education expenditures are financed by public sources** (the central government: 62.7%, local government: 21.3%, other public administrations and family allowance funds: 2.1%). In 2005, domestic education spending totalled €117.9 billion, which is the equivalent to 6.9% of the GNP, **the highest average out of all OECD countries**.

# Organization of the Education System

---

## PRIMARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Primary level education is taught in nursery schools and primary schools.

- Nursery school

Pre-primary education (nursery school) created in 1881 is for children aged 3 to 6. Although it is not compulsory, **virtually all 3-year-old children attend nursery school**, the majority in the public school system. With a dual educational and pedagogical objective, children learn how to live among others, shape their own personality and develop language skills. Nursery school is the **strong point of the French education system and what sets it apart from other systems**. It also makes primary education more effective. Nursery school teachers have the same training as primary school teachers and can teach in all primary education grades.

***Ecole maternelle*** (nursery school), Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid35/ecole-maternelle.html>

***Qu'apprend-t-on à l'école maternelle: les nouveaux programmes*** (What children are learning in nursery school: the new curricula) / National Centre for Educational Documentation (CNDP) [in French]

<http://www.cndp.fr/ecole/quapprend/pdf/755A0211.pdf>

***Ecole maternelle: de l'enfant à l'élève*** (The French nursery school: from child to pupil)/ E. Thévenon – Label France, no. 54, April 2004 [in French]

[http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/label\\_france/54/fr/03.html](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/label_france/54/fr/03.html)

- Primary school

Primary school is compulsory for all students, French and foreign alike, starting at age six. It is for children from aged six to 11. It aims to teach children some degree of autonomy and the basics about citizenship.

***Ecole élémentaire*** (primary school), Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid166/l-ecole-maternelle.html>

## SECONDARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

Secondary level of education includes lower and higher secondary schools.

- **Lower secondary education (*collège*)**

Children aged 11 to 15 attend *collège*, taking them from form 6 (*sixième*) to form 3 (*troisième*). *Collèges* are considered comprehensive because theoretically children study the same core curriculum. A diploma awarded upon the successful completion of an exam at the end of form 3 marks the conclusion of *collège*.

**Collège.** Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid38/college.html>

- **Higher secondary education (*lycée*)**

Adolescents aged 15 to 18 attend the *lycée*, taking them from form 2 (*seconde*) to their final year (*terminale*). *Lycées* offer a large range of education and training possibilities. There are **two types** of *lycées*. General and technical education *lycées* culminate in a “general series” *baccalauréat*. Vocational *lycées* culminate in a *certificat d’aptitude professionnelle* (CAP- which sanctions training in a specific vocational skill), a *brevet d’études professionnelles* (BEP - which sanctions the completion of adequate training within a range of technical skills in a particular trade, industrial, commercial or social field) or a “vocational” *baccalauréat*. For more information see the “vocational education” section below.

**Lycée.** Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid39/lycee.html>

- **The *baccalauréat***

Created in 1808, the *baccalauréat* is a diploma in the French education system that has two special features. **It marks the successful conclusion of secondary studies and opens access to higher education.**

**Le Baccalauréat**, website of the French Ministry of National Education [in French].

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid143/le-baccalaureat.html>

## **HIGHER EDUCATION**

Higher education entails all studies after the *baccalauréat*.

Two systems exist side by side:

- **An open system in the universities.** Most students study under this system. All *baccalauréat* holders have the right to enter this system without any prior selection procedure. Universities offer an extremely wide range of studies;
- **A selective system with a limited number of places.** Admission is by competitive examination, entrance examination or applications, sometimes accompanied by an interview. This is the system in use in post-secondary establishments such as the *instituts d'études politiques* (political science institutes), engineering and business schools, *instituts universitaires de technologie* (IUTs- university institutes of technology) and the *instituts universitaires professionnalisés* (IUPs - university institutes of vocational education) and "top tier" establishments such as the *grandes écoles*, (prestigious higher education institutions with competitive entrance exams) such as the *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* (ENA – which trains top civil servants) the *écoles normales supérieures* (ENS - which prepare students specializing in fundamental or applied scientific research to teach at university level and preparatory programs for entrance examinations to the *grandes écoles*) and Polytechnique. These institutions mainly train public-sector and private-sector senior and middle leaders and managers.

**Enseignement supérieur et Recherche : formations et diplômes** (Higher education and research: courses and degrees). Report by the French Education Ministry [in French].

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid10/enseignement-superieur-et-recherche.html>

Higher education also provides general and vocational possibilities.

Students enrolled in general tracks pursue bachelor's degrees, research master's degrees and doctorate degrees.

Students enrolled in vocational tracks pursue university technology degrees, vocational bachelor's degrees and vocational master's degrees.

**Enseignement supérieur et Recherche : formations et diplômes** (Higher education and research: training and degrees). Report by the French Education Ministry [in French].

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid86/formations-professionnelles.html>

## INITIAL VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Initial vocational training or the vocational track offers concrete studies in relation with enterprises and their trades so that students can gain knowledge and expertise in an occupational field. After completing form 3, students can study in a vocational *lycée* to obtain a CAP or a BEP in two years. Students enrolled in initial vocational training courses can obtain

a degree quickly to help them integrate into working life.

**Lycée professionnel** (Vocational *lycées*). Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid2573/la-voie-professionnelle.html>

**L'apprentissage** (Apprenticeships). Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/pid37/apprentissage.html>

## EDUCATION FOR SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS

Some students have special educational needs because of their physical disabilities, language and health problems, but also if they have severe learning difficulties. There are structures that respond to these students' needs which work to integrate them into mainstream schools.

**La scolarisation des élèves handicapés** (Education for disabled students), Report by the French Education Ministry [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/thema/special/default.htm>

## Decentralized management

---

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *communes* have been responsible for running primary schools.

Major measures to decentralize powers in the early 1980s marked an important stage in the evolution of the French education system giving a greater role to departments and regions. The Act of 13 August 2004 on local authorities and freedoms increased the powers of local elected authorities when it comes to education.

While the initiatives of local and regional authorities are growing in number, it is still the central government's responsibility to decide on curricula, educational guidelines, recruitment and teachers' salaries.

**To find out more about the responsibilities of the central government, regions and municipalities in education matters visit [in French]:**

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid219/les-domaines-de-competences.html>

## Private education

---

In France private education was recognized in several stages starting in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Private education for primary school was organized by the Act of 30 October 1866, secondary education by the Act of 15 March 1850 (Falloux Act), higher education by the Act of 12 July 1875 and technical education by the Act of 25 July 1919. It's the Debré law of 1959 (added to the Education Code in 2000) that governs private education today: "The government announces and respects the freedom of education and ensures its exercise in legitimate private institutions" (Article 1).

Private education covers different realities: religious schools offer courses based on specific educational principles.

**One primary student out of 7 and 1 lower and higher secondary student out of 5** attend private schools.

### **PRIVATE EDUCATION UNDER CONTRACT**

**In return for public funding**, private schools must adhere to **requirements and public service obligations** that limit the freedom they have.

Private schools are connected to the State through **various types of contracts**. Two-thirds operate under partnership contracts and the remaining third operates under a simple contract that is less binding but provides for fewer subsidies as well. In order for the more popular partnership contract to be granted, private schools must meet the following requirements:

- It must meet a recognized educational need;
- Its facilities must be adequate;
- It must have a faculty-student ratio that corresponds to the public;
- It must hire teachers with the same qualifications and degrees required of public school teachers.

In a **school under partnership contracts**, the **central government pays the salaries of teacher and other staff**. The **local government pays for the running of the school, equivalent to the aid it grants public schools**. However, families bear the cost of facilities and religious activities.

**Les établissements privés** (private schools). References and statistics for 2003 on education, training and research [in French]

[ftp://trf.education.gouv.fr/pub/edutel/dpd/rers03/chap2\\_8.pdf](ftp://trf.education.gouv.fr/pub/edutel/dpd/rers03/chap2_8.pdf)

[ftp://trf.education.gouv.fr/pub/edutel/dpd/rers03/chap2\\_8.pdf](ftp://trf.education.gouv.fr/pub/edutel/dpd/rers03/chap2_8.pdf)

### OFFICIAL TEXTS

↻ **Code of Education:** all legislation on the French education system regarding its general principles and administration; primary, secondary and higher curricula; and staff [in French].

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/ListeCodes>

↻ **Loi sur les rapports entre l'Etat et les établissements d'enseignement privés dite "loi Debré "** (The so-called Débré Act on the relations between the central government and private schools), no. 59-382 of 31 December 1959.

<http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/histoire/loidebre/sommaire.asp#Loi%20n%20n%2059-1557>

↻ **Loi d'orientation et de programme pour l'avenir de l'École** (Outline Act for the future of French schools), no. 2005-380 of 23 April 2005

<http://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/WAspad/UnTexteDeJorf?numjo=MENX0400282L>

### STUDIES, KEY FIGURES AND COMPARISONS WITH OTHER COUNTRIES

↻ **Les chiffres clés du système éducatif** (Key data on the educational system), French Ministry of National Education, November 2006

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid195/les-chiffres-cles.html>

↻ **L'Etat de l'école de la maternelle à l'enseignement supérieur**, French Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, 2006

<http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/07/9/3079.pdf>

In English: The state of education from nursery school to higher education, October 2006

<http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/68/0/3680.pdf>

In Spanish: El estado de la Escuela desde el parvulario hasta la enseñanza superior, octubre 2006

<http://media.education.gouv.fr/file/68/1/3681.pdf>

↻ **Repères et références statistiques sur les enseignements, la formation et la recherche** (References and statistics on education, training and research), French Ministry of National Education, Higher Education and Research, 2005 [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/stateval/rers/rers2005.htm>

↻ **Regards sur le système éducatif français : données générales, le système éducatif, les grandes évolutions, comparaisons internationales** (The French education system at a glance: general data, the education system, major developments, international comparisons) [in French]

<http://www.education.gouv.fr/stateval/regards/index.htm>

➤ **L'enseignement du premier degré (1989-2005): de la loi d'orientation de 1989 à la loi Fillon** (Primary level of education (1989-2005): from the Outline Act of 1989 to the Fillon Act), Report by the *Documentation française*, *Vie Publique* website, July 2005 [in French].

<http://www.vie-publique.fr/politiques-publiques/enseignement-primaire/index/>

➤ **Indicateurs de l'OCDE sur les systèmes éducatifs européens, 2005 : Résumés**  
In French: Executive summary

[http://www.oecd.org/document/34/0,2340,fr\\_2649\\_34515\\_35289762\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html#Chapitres](http://www.oecd.org/document/34/0,2340,fr_2649_34515_35289762_1_1_1,00.html#Chapitres)

In English: Education at a glance : OECD indicators 2005, executive summary

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/20/25/35345692.pdf>

In German: Bildung auf einen Blick: OECD-Indikatoren – Ausgabe 2005

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/49/19/35311921.pdf>

In Spanish: Repaso a la enseñanza: indicadores de la OCDE - Edición 2005

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/58/1/35317197.pdf>

➤ **Regards sur l'éducation en France : notes de présentation, les dépenses d'éducation, la scolarisation, l'enseignement, les études secondaires, les études supérieures/OCDE** (OECD Education in France at a glance: presentation summaries, education expenditure, enrolment, teaching, secondary studies, higher education studies)

*Regards sur l'éducation au Royaume-Uni* : OECD Briefing Note for the United Kingdom, 2005

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/20/54/35344362.pdf>

German education at a glance: *Bildung auf einen Blick*:

<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/40/60/35342888.pdf>

➤ **Key Data on Education in Europe: European education systems viewed from all angles / European Commission, July 2005, 7p.**

<http://www.eurydice.org/ressources/eurydice/pdf/commonpressdos/PR052FR.pdf>

## REGARDING HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH:

➤ Website of the French Ministry with responsibility for Higher Education and Research [in French]

<http://www.recherche.gouv.fr/>

➤ **L'enseignement supérieur en France** (Higher education in France), *France diplomatie* website

[http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/france\\_829/decouvrir-france\\_4177/france-a-z\\_2259/education\\_2621/colonne-droite\\_3254/sur-theme-...\\_3256/enseignement-superieur-france\\_8407.html](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/france_829/decouvrir-france_4177/france-a-z_2259/education_2621/colonne-droite_3254/sur-theme-..._3256/enseignement-superieur-france_8407.html)

[http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/enseignement\\_superieur.pdf](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/enseignement_superieur.pdf)