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The French educational system

- International -

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PRIMARY EDUCATION

The "crèches" and "Ecole Maternelle" (kindergarten) :

Private and public nurseries, called "crèches" are daycare centers that keep babies from 2 months to 3 years old, until they can attend the "Ecole Maternelle".

Kindergarten or pre-schools are called "Ecoles Maternelles" and take pupils from 2 to 6 years old. They prepare them for entry into primary school. The French "école maternelle" is more than just a playschool ; the curriculum includes reading and writing, numeracy and even sometimes a foreign language, as well as artistic, creative and sports activities. There are three levels of classes, "les petits", "les moyens" and "les grands".

The « Ecole primaire » :

The « Ecole primaire » is primary school or grade school with five classes from 6 to 11 years old. The primary school curriculum in France is similar to that in other countries, and includes literacy and numeracy, with classes in French, arithmetic, but also geography and history, the arts, and a foreign language, usually English. Pupils have an average of 28 hours classes per week. The five classes in the "Ecole Primaire" are, in order, CP (Cours préparatoire, preparatory class), CE1, CE2 (CE means cours élémentaire - elementary class), CM1, and CM2 (CM is cours moyen, middle class ; the two middle classes are a preparation for the next level, which is middle school).

SECONDARY EDUCATION

The "Collège" :

The "Collège" is the equivalent of Middle school. There are four levels, for pupils aged 11 - 15. The "collège unique" is the backbone of the French school system. All pupils go to collège, usually at age 11, but sometimes at an older age, if they have been made to repeat a year in primary school which is exceptional. The collège is designed to provide all pupils with a fundamental secondary education. The programme in collège includes French, maths, history, geography, technical education, art, music, sports , civic education, some science, and English. A second foreign language of their choice is introduced the third and fourth years of collège, usually Spanish, German or Italian. The four classes, corresponding to grades 6 to 9, are called Sixième, Cinquième, Quatrième and Troisième. At the end of their Troisième, they take an exam called the "Diplôme National du Brevet" (the equivalent of the GCSE).

In practice, pupils are frequently oriented during their collège years either towards general classes, from which they will be expected to continue their education in a traditional "lycée", or towards more technical classes or vocational education.

The "Lycée" :

The traditional French "lycée" is High School and covers the last three years of secondary education. There are two main types of traditional lycée, the "lycée général" and the "lycée technique or technologique" which are often put together in big towns and cities. The main function of the lycée is to prepare pupils to sit Baccalauréat exam (or Bac), the equivalent of British A levels. Classes in a traditional lycée cover the same range as in collège, with the addition of philosophy (for all) in the final year. The three classes (grades 10 to 12) are known as Seconde, Première and Terminale.

As for the college, parents can choose private schools or public state schools.

In addition to their general secondary studies, pupils in a lycée technique may begin to specialise in a fairly narrow technical fields such as micro technologies or aeronautics.

The "Lycée Professionnel" or "L.P." :

This is vocational high school. "Lycées Pros" or "L.P.", as they are commonly known, provide both academic and vocational education for young people intending to work in manual or clerical jobs. Pupils will either work to prepare :

- a "Baccalauréat Professionnel" degree (3-year-studies), for which they will need to continue taking classes in the main academic subjects - French, maths, sciences, history and geography, arts and a foreign language mainly English, as well as vocational subjects ;
- a B.E.P. (Brevet d'enseignement professionnel), an intermediate diploma that they take after two years during their studies for the Baccalauréat Professionnel ;
- or a C.A.P. (Certificat d'aptitude professionnel) prepared in two years.

One common type of Lycée pro, found in most cities, is the "lycée du bâtiment", as our own school, or building trades vocational school, where pupils specialise in one of the many trades of the building and construction sector. There are also many vocational schools preparing to different careers in commerce, catering and services, agriculture, logistics...

HIGHER EDUCATION

The « BTS »

The « Brevet de Technicien Supérieur » follows high school and vocational school studies. The "Lycées" are also responsible for providing instruction for what is the equivalent of Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), two-year higher education courses, generally technologically or vocationally oriented. BTS classes have selective entry, and students have a heavy load of coursework to get through.

The University :

Universities award three types of degree, in line with the European "Bologna" system. The first degree (3 years) is the Licence, the first postgraduate degree (5 years' study) is the Masters (using the English term), and the final degree, obtained after at least eight years' study, is the Doctorate.

They are others possibilities of higher education for more specific careers offered in IUT (Institut Universitaire et Technologique), and schools specialised in a precise field of activity such as medicine, pharmacy, paramedical studies, study of art and architecture.

Translated by Ilham Moufassih