Presentation of the French education system

**General Principles**

The French constitution states that it is the duty of the state to “provide free, compulsory, secular education at all levels”.

Provision of schooling at level 1 (*premier degré*: nursery and elementary schools), level 2 (*second degré*: lower secondary *collèges* and upper secondary general, technological and vocational *lycées*) is free in state schools. At primary level, local authorities (*les communes*) pay for textbooks in almost all cases. The State also provides free textbooks in *collèges* (lower secondary). Theoretically in *lycées* (upper secondary) textbooks are paid for by parents but in practice the *conseils régionaux* (regional authorities) cover this cost.

State schooling is neutral: teachers and pupils are required to show philosophical and political neutrality.

The French school system has been based on the principle of secularism since the end of the 19th century. Staff have been secular since 30 October 1886. Respect for the beliefs of pupils and their parents means an absence of religious education in the curriculum, the prohibition of proselytising and the secularism of staff.

**The Structure of the School System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Niveau d'enseignement - Type of School</th>
<th>Classe</th>
<th>1st DEGREE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ecole Maternelle (Nursery School)</td>
<td>Petite Section</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Ecole Maternelle (Nursery School)</td>
<td>Moyenne section</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Ecole Maternelle (Nursery School)</td>
<td>Grande section</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ecole Primaire (Primary School)</td>
<td>Cours Préparatoire</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Ecole Primaire (Primary School)</td>
<td>Cours Élémentaire 1ère année (CE1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ecole Primaire (Primary School)</td>
<td>Cours Élémentaire 2ème année (CE2)</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Ecole Primaire (Primary School)</td>
<td>Cours Moyen 1ère année (CM1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Ecole Primaire (Primary School)</td>
<td>Cours Moyen 2nde année (CM2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Collège (Junior High School)</td>
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<td>2nd DEGREE</td>
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<td>3ème</td>
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<td>Lycée (Senior High School)</td>
<td>Seconde</td>
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<td>Lycée (Senior High School)</td>
<td>Première</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Lycée (Senior High School)</td>
<td>Terminale</td>
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**Devolved Powers**

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<th>Junior High School</th>
<th>Senior High School</th>
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<td>Municipality</td>
<td>département</td>
<td>région</td>
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<td>functionning)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching materials</td>
<td>Municipality</td>
<td>State</td>
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<td>Teaching staff (recruitment, training, postings, pay)</td>
<td>State</td>
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<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>State</td>
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<td>Awarding diplomas</td>
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<td>State</td>
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The construction of the International School has been fully funded by the Région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur

**The Mission of the School System**

The state school system contributes to equality of opportunity and must enable each pupil to develop his or her personality, raise his or her standard of initial and continuing education, integrate socially and professionally, exercise his or her citizenship.

School education facilitates the development of the child by allowing him or her to become cultured, preparing him or her for the workplace and exercising his or her responsibilities as a citizen. It is the basis of lifelong education.

According to the 2005 Education Act (*loi d'orientation et de programme pour l'avenir de l'école*) the main mission of schools, aside from the transmission of knowledge, is to communicate the values of the French Republic. Compulsory schooling must guarantee that pupils have the «necessary means to acquire a common core of knowledge and skills the possession of which is crucial for the successful completion of schooling and the development of a personal and professional identity.»

**Teachers**

From 2011, candidates must have a two-year master diploma in order to apply and no longer only a bachelors degree. Objective: raising the standard of qualification of teachers.

The competitive exams:

In order to teach at primary level, candidates take the primary teacher recruitment competition (CRPE) organised by the regional académie (France has 30 académies).

There are several national competitive exams for teaching in the public sector at secondary level:

- The Certificate of Aptitude in Secondary Teaching (*Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré, CAPES*);
- The Certificate of Aptitude in Physical and Sporting Education teaching (*Certificat d'aptitude au professorat d'éducation physique et sportive, CAPEPS*);
- The Certificate of Aptitude in Vocational Teaching (*Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de lycée professionnel, CAPLP*);
- The Agrégation (more selective than the CAPES and awarding different working conditions).
The Acquisition of the Common Core of Knowledge and Skills:

Nursery, elementary and lower secondary education must allow pupils to acquire the Common Core of Knowledge and Skills. This sets out seven key competences in which pupils must be proficient at the end of compulsory schooling. The Core is the flagship measure of the Education Act of 23 April 2005. It is based on the recommendation of the European Parliament and the European Council in terms of «key competences for education and lifelong learning».

A reference document for drawing up the syllabus
The Common Core of Knowledge and Skills is the reference document for drawing up the syllabuses of primary and lower secondary education. The text lays out the set of values, knowledge, languages and practices that need to be mastered in order for each pupil to successfully complete his or her schooling, continue his or her education, build his or her personal and professional future and be a successful member of society.
It sets out the minimum standards to be attained by all at the end of compulsory schooling.

The seven key competences of the common core of knowledge and skills
The Common Core of Knowledge and Skills is organised around seven key competences:
- command of the French language;
- proficiency in a modern foreign language;
- key elements of mathematics, science and technology;
- proficiency in information, technology and communication;
- humanist culture;
- social and civic skills;
- autonomy and initiative.
Each of these key competences is devised as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context and that are essential throughout life.

The three stages of assessment
The first stage of assessment, at the end of CE1 (year 2 at primary school), involves the acquisition of fluent reading and writing as well as the first elements of mathematics.
The second, in CM2 (last year of primary), allows the consolidation of parts of the seven key skills learned through primary education.
A third and final assessment of the command of the seven competences is organised in troisième (year 9) by schools.
Competences are acquired progressively throughout compulsory schooling. Pupils who have difficulty acquiring the common core of knowledge and skills are offered a tailored programme of support.
Primary School - 1st degree

Pupils are taught for twenty four hours a week, spread over eight or nine half days, from Monday to Friday.
The Primary School or first degree corresponds to all the classes of the Nursery School and the elementary school (from PS to CM2).

Nursery School

The specificity of the French school system is that pupils have access to nursery education before the age of six, when compulsory schooling begins. It is often divided into three levels, petite, moyenne and grande, according to the age of the children. A quarter of two year-olds and almost all three to five year-olds attend nursery school. It is where the majority of children are first educated outside the family.
Although it is optional, nine out of ten children attend nursery school and it is now part of regular schooling.
The curriculum of nursery education is divided into five areas:
- appropriating language and discovering writing;
- becoming a pupil;
- corporal movement and expression;
- discovering the world;
- seeing, feeling, imagining, creating.
The acquisition of language and its development, the discovery of the world of writing and that of numbers, learning to «live together» are prioritised. The main purpose of nursery education is to allow pupils to develop their full potential and to have an initial successful experience of school.

Elementary School

The main priority of elementary education during the cycle of basic skills (CP and CE1: years 1 and 2), is learning the French language and mathematics. In addition to these key subjects there are foreign languages, activities for discovering the world, artistic practices (visual arts and musical education), the history of art, physical education and, in some schools, a regional language.
During the further skills stage (CE2, CM1 and CM2), literature, history, geography, experimental science and technology are firmed up. Information and communication technology are tools used to support a range of school activities and proficiency in it leads to the first level of the Information technology and internet brevet qualification (B2i).
Schools take into account the different aptitudes of each pupil. In addition to reasoning and intellectual thought, a taste for experimentation, awareness, motor skills and creative imagination are developed.
Junior High School: le collège

Lower secondary schools take all pupils from elementary school without an entrance exam. It provides schooling for all pupils. Its primary objective is to help all to master the Common Core of Knowledge and Skills.

Teaching
Teaching in the Junior High School is organised by subject: French, mathematics, history-geography (taught together), civic education, life and earth sciences, technology, art, musical education, physical education, physics-chemistry (taught together), two modern languages as well as the teaching of the history of art. The objectives are set through a national curriculum.

Organisation
The four years (sixième - cinquième - quatrième - troisième: years 6 to 9) of compulsory schooling are organised in three stages or cycles.

Sixième (year 6): the adaptation cycle
The objective is to consolidate the achievements of primary school and initiate pupils in the working methods of lower secondary education. Particular attention is paid to integrating pupils and helping them with their work. In sixième, pupils learn a first modern foreign language or two if they are in a bilingual class.

Cinquième and quatrième (years 7 and 8): the central cycle
The objective is to enable pupils to deepen their “knowledge and skills”. This cycle is characterised by its consistency over two years and the gradual enrichment of the syllabus through the introduction of optional subjects. Particular attention is paid to those experiencing academic difficulties over the two years. Pupils are offered the opportunity to discover trades and vocational training (eg. through work experience).
In cinquième physics and chemistry are taught for the first time. Pupils can take one of the classics (Latin) as an option.
In quatrième pupils choose a second modern foreign or regional language.

Troisième (year 9): the orientation cycle
The orientation cycle allows pupils to build on what they have learned in lower secondary and to work towards general, technological and vocational study at the next level.
In this year, pupils continue their learning of modern languages begun in previous year. They can also choose an ancient language (Greek) or a three hour weekly module of vocational familiarisation. Those who choose this option are dispensed from the second modern language.

At the end of this year, pupils sit an exam to obtain the diplôme national du brevet (DNB) which assesses the Knowledge and Skills learned in lower secondary and certifies the command of the Common Core of Knowledge and Skills. It takes coursework into account and includes three written tests in French, mathematics, history-geography-civic education and, since 2011, a paper in art history.
The Senior High School: Lycée

Since the 2010 academic year, the new general and technological seconde class will be introduced in the context of the reform of upper secondary schools. This reform will affect première classes at the beginning of the 2011 academic year and the terminale classes at the beginning of the 2012 academic year. One of the key objectives is to make the career choices of pupils less irreversible and to allow trajectories to be corrected.

To achieve this objective, the specialisation of the different routes takes place gradually with a high proportion of teaching time allocated to core courses for all pupils of seconde and première.

**Secondé (year 10): The initiation cycle**

Secondé represents a first step on the academic route of the general and technological upper secondary school. As an initiation class, it provides general culture for all pupils which allows them to discover new literature, artistic, scientific or technological subjects or work towards further study. Core classes make up 23h30, that is 80% of the pupil’s overall timetable. The second modern language is integrated into these classes and becomes compulsory for all pupils. Familiarisation classes allow familiarisation with new disciplines. Upper secondary school pupils choose two compulsory familiarisation disciplines, one of which is in the field of economics. The second familiarisation subject is to be chosen from a list which includes:

- scientific and technological courses (scientific methods and practices, engineering science, science and laboratories...);
- literary courses (literature and society, languages and cultures of Antiquity, that is Latin or Greek, Modern Language 3);
- artistic courses (artistic creation and activities).

These choices do not determine the access to a particular specialism for the last two years of upper secondary.

**Last two years of upper secondary school**

Pupils specialise gradually: they chose a general or technological route. This cycle leads them to the baccalauréat.

The General route leads holders of the baccalauréat towards long study. It includes 3 specialisations:

- social and economic science (ES);
- literary (L);
- scientific (S).

At the end of the last year, pupils sit the baccalauréat exam, the first higher education diploma. As such, it gives access to the first year of university study. Some parts of the exam are taken at the previous year (for example French).