

## ▪ Description of the French School System...

In France, the educational affairs are handled by the National Board of Education (le Ministère de l'Education Nationale). The French school system provides a school curriculum for all youngsters between 6 and 18 years old. It is compulsory until the age of 16. Schools have to teach the given curriculum decided by the government. It means that for each grade level, students are taught the same things everywhere in France.

The French public school is strictly secular. No religious sign is allowed inside the school.

### 1. **Kindergarten** : 3 years, age 3 to 5.

It is not compulsory, but most kids start school at the age of 3 (85 %).

### 2. **Primary schools** : 5 years, age 6 to 10.

It is divided into 5 levels : CP, CE1, CE2, CM1 and CM2. CP is the first level, and CM2 is the last. The children are taught by one single teacher all year long.

### 3. **Collège** (1st part of Secondary School): 4 years, age 11 to 15.

1<sup>st</sup> year = Sixième

3<sup>rd</sup> year = Quatrième

2<sup>nd</sup> year = Cinquième

4<sup>th</sup> year = Troisième

At the end of the "collège", pupils have to take an examination called "Brevet des collèges". There is a national test on French, Mathematics, and History&Geography. To the result of this exam are added the results of all the tests that were taken all year long.

Then, students will be placed into one of the 2 types of "Lycées" : most go to a General Education Lycée but some are enrolled into a Technical Educational Lycée, which provides a vocational training.

#### 4. **Lycée** (2<sup>nd</sup> part of Secondary School): 3 years, age 15 to 18.

1<sup>st</sup> year = Seconde

2<sup>nd</sup> year = Première

3<sup>rd</sup> year = Terminale

Throughout high school, all students will have to study :

- French literature
- 2 foreign languages
- French and world history + geography
- Mathematics, Physics and Biology
- Philosophy (for Terminal only)
- Sports

##### a. **General Educational Lycée** (= high school)

- Seconde

The first year is common for all the students. The program is standard in all the subjects. At the end of this first year, the students are allowed to choose their specialization according to their school results (marks) and teachers' advice.

- Première

**Three main sections** are offered, and followed until the end of High School:

- S (*Scientific studies*) : specialization in Mathematics, Physics and Biology
- L (*Art studies*) : specialization in Literature, History and Languages
- ES (*Economic and Social studies*): specialization in Economy, Social Sciences, Mathematics, Languages, History and Geography.

This specialization means that you will have more classes linked to the section chosen, however, students keep studying all subjects (for instance, students in the S section will have many hours of scientific classes, but still will have to study a bit of literature, languages etc...).

- Terminale

The students go on with their sections, and the school curriculum get more specialized.

At the end of this final year, the students take the final examination: the **Baccalauréat** (see below).

##### b. **Technical Educational Lycée** (= vocation school)

These schools offer practical and theoretical teaching in specific sectors : Mechanics, Administration, Accounting, Sales, Cooking etc....

## ▪ **What about the Baccalauréat?**

The Baccalauréat (generally known as the Bac) is divided into 2 parts:

- The first part is taken at the end of the Première. It is an oral and written examination on French language knowledge, and other minor subjects according to the section. The subjects passed will not be studied anymore. It is compulsory in General Educational Lycée and Technical Educational Lycée.
- The second part of the Baccalauréat is the most important. It is taken at the end of the Terminale (3<sup>rd</sup> year of the 2<sup>nd</sup> cycle).

If the students pass the Baccalauréat, they are allowed to enter University. If not, they can repeat the year to take it again.

Some AFS students successfully pass the Bac each year! If you are enrolled in “Terminal” and interested in taking this exam, you have to notify your teachers/school director. Registering you for this exam is not a legal obligation for your host school, and they have the right to refuse.

However, if they accept, you'll have to take, in addition to the Terminal Bac exams, the Première Bac exams. The Bac is a very difficult exam, all French students work very hard to prepare it. There are about 10 subjects to be tested on. Tests are oral or written. They can last from 20 minutes (short oral exam) to 4 hours (philosophy dissertation). All the tests are gathered during the last week of June. If you fail, you can take again some exams in July to try again.

## ▪ What about the teaching of foreign languages?

The study of two foreign languages is compulsory. The teaching of a first foreign language starts in “sixième”. Most of the time (80 %), pupils choose English because it is what most of the schools offer.

Some start to learn a foreign language at the primary school.

Two years later (Quatrième), the pupils choose a **second foreign language**. The more common second languages taught are **Spanish** or **German**, but some schools teach Italian, Russian, Chinese, Portuguese, etc.

Latin and Greek are optional subjects.

In high school, students can take a third foreign language in addition to other subjects.

## ▪ What about the French grading system?

The grading system goes from 0 to 20. The students must have at least 10 to pass the examinations.

17 to 20	=	Excellent
14 to 16	=	Very Good
11 to 13	=	Good
8 to 10	=	Fair
5 to 7	=	Poor
0 to 4	=	Very Poor

In addition to the national exams, all of your teachers will test you throughout the year. You'll have written exams, essays to turn in, oral presentations etc...

The school year is divided into 3 periods of 3 months (trimester). Each trimester, the students get about 2 to 4 marks for each subject. At the end of each trimester, a teachers meeting is organized in which teachers comment about the students' behavior, progress, school commitment etc...then a report is sent to the parents.

The French school system is pretty demanding. Students have many subjects to study, many essays to turn in, many books to read, and a lot of homework to do every night at home (at least 2 hours). Moreover, high concentration is requested during classes. Teachers require silence and attention. You can easily get kicked out of the class if you are late, talking, or just not paying attention.

## ▪ **Some other questions...**

- *When does the school year begin and end?*

It begins on the first week of September, and ends after the last week of June. However, because many high schools have to organize national exams in their building, the students who don't have to take those exams often stop having classes in early June.

There are 4 breaks during the school year :

Vacances de la Toussaint (10 days off towards the end of October)

Vacances de Noël (2 weeks in December)

Vacances d'hiver (2 weeks towards the end of February)

Vacances de Printemps/Pâques (2 weeks towards the beginning of April)

- *What is a typical school day?*

There are about 8 hours of class per day, from 8 or 9 am to 5 or 6 pm. Each class lasts around 1 hour.

At the beginning of the year, the students are assigned within a group of about 30. This group (la classe) is given a number or a letter, and they remain together all year long (they have the same teachers, the same schedule etc...).

Each subject is taught by a different teacher in a different classroom. Students have a 5 minute period between each class to move to the correct classroom. They have to take all their stuff with them (books, pens etc...).

There are 3 breaks during the day:

- 2 breaks of 15 minutes in the morning and in the afternoon.
- 1 break of around 1 hour and a half at lunch time.

During the lunch break, pupils usually eat at the cafeteria, and some go back home or eat out. There is a cafeteria in every school, where the food is usually diverse and healthy.

School is on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, plus, depending on the schools, either on Wednesday mornings or Saturdays morning, or both. If the students miss a single class, a report is sent to the parents and they have to justify the absence.

During free periods, the students can leave the school (and come back on time for the next class!!!) or go to the library, or just hang around the school.

Schools are public buildings and no smoking is allowed inside and outside on the school grounds. Students have to go out on the streets to smoke. Smoking is legal (and common!) for French teenagers, but it's not a good reason enough to start smoking!

- *In what grade level will AFS students usually be enrolled?*

They often are enrolled depending on their age :

14/15 years old : troisième

15/16 years old : seconde

16/17 years old : première

17/18 years old : terminale

But it also depends on their general and French level, and whether the classes are full or not.

Enrollment takes place in June, consequently, in case the AFS student is enrolled in "première" or "terminale" the host parents have to select a section (S, L or ES) for their host child. They will do their best to select what suits the AFS student the best. In case the AFS student does not feel comfortable in the chosen grade level and/or section, some high school are willing to change the students after his/her arrival in a more suitable grade level and/or section.

- *Can AFS students choose their classes and timetable?*

No. The only choice the French students have is the specialization (S, L or ES) of the "Première" and "Terminal" levels.

On the first day of school, the student will be given a timetable. All the classes on this timetable are mandatory. They keep the same timetable all year long. The times, classes, teachers and classrooms are different every weekday, but this week timetable repeats itself all year long.

- *Will AFS students need to buy a uniform? Books? Other school supplies?*

There is no uniform in the public French school system. Even most private schools don't have one, but they will be more regarding about your clothing. However many schools now include a dress code in their rules (no hats, no mini skirt etc...)

The students have at least one school book per subject studied (sometimes more). Generally, books are lent by the school, but students will have to pay for them if they lose or damage them.

Students need to have book notes, sheets of papers, pens etc...

- *Are extra-curricular activities available?*

Generally, schools do not offer many extra-curricular activities. They sometimes have sport clubs and organize trainings and games.

However, most cities offer cheap activities that you register for at the beginning of the year. You should ask your host family about the options that your host community offer.