

**The French
Education System
and
the French
Baccalauréat**

Organization of the French Education System

In France, all children between the ages of six and sixteen are legally required to attend school. Statistics show, however, that virtually all French children have begun school by the age of five. About 50% of any given age group complete secondary school and go on to higher education

1 PRIMARY SCHOOL (*école primaire*)

Primary school includes pre-elementary and elementary school

1.1- Pre-Elementary school is called *école maternelle* *

3 to 4 years	Nursery school	Petite Section de maternelle
4 to 5 years	Pre-kindergarten	Moyenne section de maternelle
5 to 6 years	Kindergarten	Grande section de maternelle

* This level is not open yet in Lycée français de Toronto

1.2- Elementary school is called *école élémentaire*

6 to 7 years	First grade	Cours Préparatoire; CP
7 to 8 years	Second grade	Cours élémentaire 1 ^{ère} année ; CE1
8 to 9 years	Third grade	Cours élémentaire 2 ^{ème} année ; CE2
9 to 10 years	Fourth grade	Cours moyen 1 ^{ère} année ; CM1
10 to 11 years	Fifth grade	Cours moyen 2 ^{ème} année ; CM2

2 SECONDARY SCHOOL (*école secondaire*).

Secondary school includes Middle School and High School

2.1- Middle School is called *Collège*

11 to 12 years	Sixth grade	<i>Sixième</i> ; 6 ^{ème}
12 to 13 years	Seventh grade	<i>Cinquième</i> ; 5 ^{ème}
13 to 14 years	Eighth grade	<i>Quatrième</i> ; 4 ^{ème}
14 to 15 years	Ninth grade	<i>Troisième</i> ; 3 ^{ème}

2.2- High School is called *Lycée*

15 to 16 years	Tenth Grade	<i>Seconde</i> ; 2 ^{nde}
16 to 17 years	Eleventh Grade	<i>Première</i> ; 1 ^{ère}
17 to 18 years	Twelfth Grade	<i>Terminale</i>

The importance of Kindergarten :

Although formal education does not officially start until the age of six, the year of Kindergarten, which almost all children attend, is accorded great importance. This year is structured in such a way as to encourage mastery of the motor skills necessary for writing and the literacy skills for learning to read in the CP class which follows. Kindergarten students also begin working with numbers, operations and geometrical concepts.

Grade Promotion:

Even in elementary school, promotion from one grade to the next is not automatic. At the end of specific grades (6^{ème}, 5^{ème}, 4^{ème} and 2^{nde}) entry to the next grade is determined by the *Conseil de classe* (Grade Council - comprised of representatives of the school's administration, teachers, parents, students, and guidance counsellor). A student who is not promoted may repeat a grade as long as s/he demonstrates sufficient academic progress to thoroughly benefit from the experience. Whereas in elementary school this is almost always the case, in secondary school matriculation criteria are more stringent. Consequently, there is no particular social stigma attached to repeating a grade.

Educational objectives and philosophy

When judged by North American standards, the French educational system can be considered highly selective.

First of all, only those students intending to pursue higher education are admitted to high schools and then, only if they are deemed academically capable of doing so. In 1997, for example, only 55.5% of that year's cohort (children who entered school twelve years before, in 1985) succeeded in continuing in school to the class of *Terminale* and took the *Baccalauréat*. Of that group, 76% passed the exam and were eligible to enter university (42% of the original cohort). Secondly, this "winnowing" philosophy persists and even intensifies throughout high school and is best reflected by the grading system in which no significant "grade inflation" has been detected.

Furthermore, the *Baccalauréat* is divided into different streams, called "*series*", which correspond to a student's scholastic aptitudes or future college plans. Within these *series* certain subjects are considered to be more important than others and therefore are weighted more heavily. It is conceivable that students from different streams might receive the same instruction (most notably in French language and literature, philosophy and foreign languages) and receive the same grades, but these grades will have a greater or lesser impact on their academic success due to different coefficients (weight) determined by the stream in which the student is enrolled. For example, every student in *Terminale* takes a class in philosophy. If a student is enrolled in the scientific stream, philosophy has a coefficient of "3". If s/he is enrolled in the literary stream philosophy has a coefficient of "7". Heavily weighted courses (the centrepieces of the various streams) should thus be considered as the equivalent of American "honours" courses.

Finally, in order to correctly evaluate the academic rigor of the *Baccalauréat*, attention must be paid to the number of different courses students take as well as their total number of class-hours of instruction. Throughout high school, all students follow courses in all the major disciplines. There is very little time left for electives or co-curricular activities. Students concentrating in the sciences

continue to take French language and literature as well as philosophy and most continue with foreign languages, while students concentrating in Humanities can also take math and science courses. All classes meet a minimum of two hours per week, most meeting for four, and some meeting for five or more. High school students typically take 8 to 12 yearlong courses. The total number of hours of in-class instruction easily reaches 32 and sometimes 40 hours per week. Needless to say, in order to achieve academic success, each hour spent in class also requires the student to do the requisite preparation and work at home.

College Preparatory Program : The *Baccalauréat*

Baccalauréat Général : French secondary education is considered successfully completed upon passage of the Baccalauréat exam.

The *Baccalauréat* has been in existence since the creation of French national public education. It follows the academic curriculum established by the Ministry of Education and is deployed on a national scale. It not only signals the successful completion of secondary education, but is also the essential credential for entry into any of the French national universities. The other nations of Europe recognize its equivalence by treaty. In Canada, French schools prepare students for the *Baccalauréat Général* with academic concentration in one of three areas :

Literary (L) : Concentration in languages and literature with specialisation in modern and classical languages, mathematics and arts.

Economics and Social Sciences (ES) : Concentration in economics and history/geography with specialisation in economics, mathematics and languages.

Scientific (S) : Concentration in mathematics and science with extra specialisation in mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology and natural sciences, and technology.

The Grading System

The French grading system is numerical and ranges from 0 to 20

In the French scheme of things, a score of 20 signifies perfection and, because “perfection” is commonly held to be humanly unattainable, such a grade is unimaginable. Grades of 19 and 18 are exceedingly rare. In general, grades of 17 and 16 can be considered truly outstanding and 15 is the equivalent of a 90%. This is not to say that an elementary school student, who completes all the problems on his weekly math quiz correctly, or spells all twenty words on his spelling test without mistake, will receive a “15”. On the contrary, his success will be reflected arithmetically by “20”. However, by the time a student enters Middle School, tests (in humanities classes as well as in math and science) will most certainly be given in the essay format where the elegance, form and presentation of a student’s analysis, reasoning, and written expression will be evaluated. Multiple-choice tests are rarely seen.

Note sur 20	Canadian % equivalent
17.5 +	100
17	98
16	94
15	90
14	86
13	82
12	78
11	74
10	70
9	66
8	62
7	58
6	54
5	50
4	46
3	42

The Final Examination

The Baccalauréat is the examination which marks the end of secondary school studies and determines university eligibility.

1. The “premier groupe” of examinations

1.1. The *Baccalauréat* is a national examination. When taking the exam, students, no matter where they are, face the same exam questions at the same time on the same day. Last year, this involved over 600,000 student candidates and a concomitant number of proctors, graders, and inspectors.

1.2. The examination consists of a set of tests (one in each of the subjects that comprise the *Série* that the student has followed) which are not short-answer, true-false or multiple choice format. Rather, there are essay questions which require the student not only to demonstrate his depth of comprehension and analytical abilities, but to also apply his acquired knowledge to new situations.

1.3. The written parts of the examination last at least a week and, depending on the number of classes taken, encompass 17 to 23 hours of testing. In addition, there are two-to-four mandatory oral examinations. A student may also choose to take one or two optional examinations in subjects such as foreign languages, art, or music, in which s/he has demonstrated talents. According to the *Série* of Baccalauréat, each subject test has a different level of difficulty and consequently is accorded a different weight or coefficient. The respective weight of each subject is used to calculate a student's total average grade for the whole exam.

1.4. Student success on the Baccalauréat is also recorded by numerical grades according to the above scale. In order to be able to be eligible for university in France, a student must obtain a combined average of "10" on all the different subject tests that comprise the exam.

1.5. In order to award distinctions (or *mentions*) for excellent performance on the exam, a composite score is calculated. The grades obtained on the subject test are multiplied by their coefficients. These weighted scores are then totaled and finally an arithmetical average is derived.

If a student obtains an overall average grade between 12/20 and 13.9/20, s/he is attributed the recognition "*Mention Assez Bien*" which literally means "rather good". Obtained by approximately the top 10-15% of each year's candidates, this is equivalent to an "Honors" distinction.

If the student obtains a grade between 14/20 and 15.9/20, s/he is attributed the recognition "*Mention Bien*" which means "good." Obtained by approximately the top 5% of each year's candidates, this is equivalent to a "High Honors" distinction.

If the student obtains an average grade of 16/20 or above, s/he is attributed "*Mention Très Bien*" which means "very good." Obtained by the top 1-2% of each year's candidates, this is equivalent to a "Highest Honors" distinction.

2. The "second groupe" of examinations:

If after the first set of examinations, a student obtains an average grade below 8, s/he fails the *Baccalauréat*. If the student's overall average is between 8 and 10, the student is able to choose two subjects to retake in an oral examination. If after this second group of examinations, the student's overall grade is 10 or above, s/he passes the *Baccalauréat*; if not, s/he fails.