

FRENCH SCHOOLS: 10 INTERESTING FACTS



10 Interesting Facts You Need to Know

The French education system is known for its rigorous academics, long school days, and deep-rooted traditions. While it has evolved over time, many aspects of French schooling remain unique compared to other countries. From two-hour lunch breaks to a strong emphasis on mathematics, there's a lot that makes French schools stand out. Whether you're a student, a parent, or simply curious about education in France, these French Schools – 10 Interesting Facts will give you a fascinating glimpse into how learning happens in one of the world's most culturally rich countries.

1. Going to school is required by French law

In France, school attendance is compulsory for children between the ages of **3 and 16**. This begins much younger than in many other countries, but it also means that working parents don't have to pay for child care. This law

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ensures that all children receive a basic education, whether through public schools, private institutions, or homeschooling (which is rare and highly regulated). French parents have all used this threat against their growing kids in case they start voicing that they would love to just stay at home and skip school.

2. Old methods die hard in French schools

Despite the evolution of modern teaching techniques, many traditional practices remain in French schools. Teachers often write grades on the board for the whole class to see, reinforcing the competitive academic environment. Similarly, disciplinary measures like copying lines—writing the same sentence repeatedly as a form of punishment—still exist, although they are less common than in the past. While educational reforms aim to modernize teaching, the French school system remains deeply rooted in its long-standing customs. There are changes taking place but the "Éducation Nationale" is a very rigid and slow moving entity.

3. Math is king in French schools

French education places a strong emphasis on mathematics and science, especially in high school. Students who excel in these subjects are often considered

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the most capable and have the best academic prospects. The Baccalauréat, France's rigorous high school diploma, offers different study tracks, and the most prestigious ones are heavily math-focused. Success in these subjects often determines access to top universities and elite schools (known as grandes écoles).

4. French schools are secular

The principle of laïcité (secularism) is a cornerstone of French public education. Students and teachers are prohibited from wearing religious symbols such as crosses, kippahs, or hijabs. This law, reinforced in 2004, has sparked debates, particularly regarding Muslim headscarves. While the goal is to maintain neutrality and equality, critics argue that the policy disproportionately affects certain religious groups. Private schools, however, are not bound by this law and may allow religious expression.

5. Teacher centered education

French classrooms traditionally operate under a magistral (lecture-based) teaching style, where the teacher is the primary source of knowledge, and students are expected to listen, take notes and memorize material by heart. This contrasts with more interactive or student-centered

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approaches seen in other countries. However, younger generations of teachers are incorporating modern techniques, such as group work and project-based learning, to encourage student engagement and creativity. Still, the strict national curriculum often limits how much flexibility teachers have in their methods.

6. Long school days

A typical French school day runs from around **8:00 AM to 5:00 PM or even 6:00 PM**, much longer than in many other countries. High school students very often have classes until early evening, and daily schedules aren't the same for all students. High school campuses are generally "open", meaning students can leave between classes if they have a long break and they can leave for lunch. Until recent years, most French students had Wednesdays off, but now public schools have a half-day schedule on Wednesday mornings. Despite the long hours, students benefit from numerous breaks throughout the day, including the famous two-hour lunch.

7. Lots of vacation

The French school year is structured around a cycle of six to seven weeks of classes followed by a two-week break.

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These breaks include:

- La Toussaint (All Saints' vacation) – late October
- Christmas break – late December
- Winter break – February/March
- Spring break (Easter holiday) – April/May

In addition, students enjoy a two-month summer vacation from early July to early September. This system is designed to prevent burnout and ensure students remain well-rested throughout the academic year.

8. Two hour lunch break

Food is an important part of French culture, and that extends to school life. French students typically have a two-hour lunch break, allowing them time to eat a full meal either in the school cafeteria (cantine) or at home. School cafeterias offer balanced meals, often including a starter, main course, cheese, and dessert. Unlike in many other countries, students are not allowed to bring lunch from home. Schools prioritize nutritious, high-quality food, and there is often a focus on teaching children the importance of eating well. Many high school students enjoy going out to eat in the city with their friends or bringing a "pique-nique" to eat in the park.

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9. French schools are free

Public education in France is entirely free, from preschool to high school. Families only need to cover minor expenses, such as school supplies, textbooks (which are often subsidized), and extracurricular activities. For low-income families, government assistance is available to help with these costs. This commitment to free education dates back to the 19th-century reforms of Jules Ferry, who established the principles of free, mandatory, and secular schooling. Private schools, particularly Catholic institutions, charge tuition, but they are generally more affordable than private schools in other countries.

10. Languages

Foreign language education begins in 6th grade (around age 11), when students typically start learning English along with a second language, such as Spanish or German. However, in some private or bilingual schools, English instruction starts much earlier, sometimes as early as preschool. France also has bilingual schools that preserve regional languages such as **Occitan, Breton, Basque, and Catalan**. These schools play a crucial role in keeping France's linguistic heritage alive while preparing students for a more globalized world.

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