

## Education Week

# Looking To France

## American Visitors Scrutinize System Of Early Education

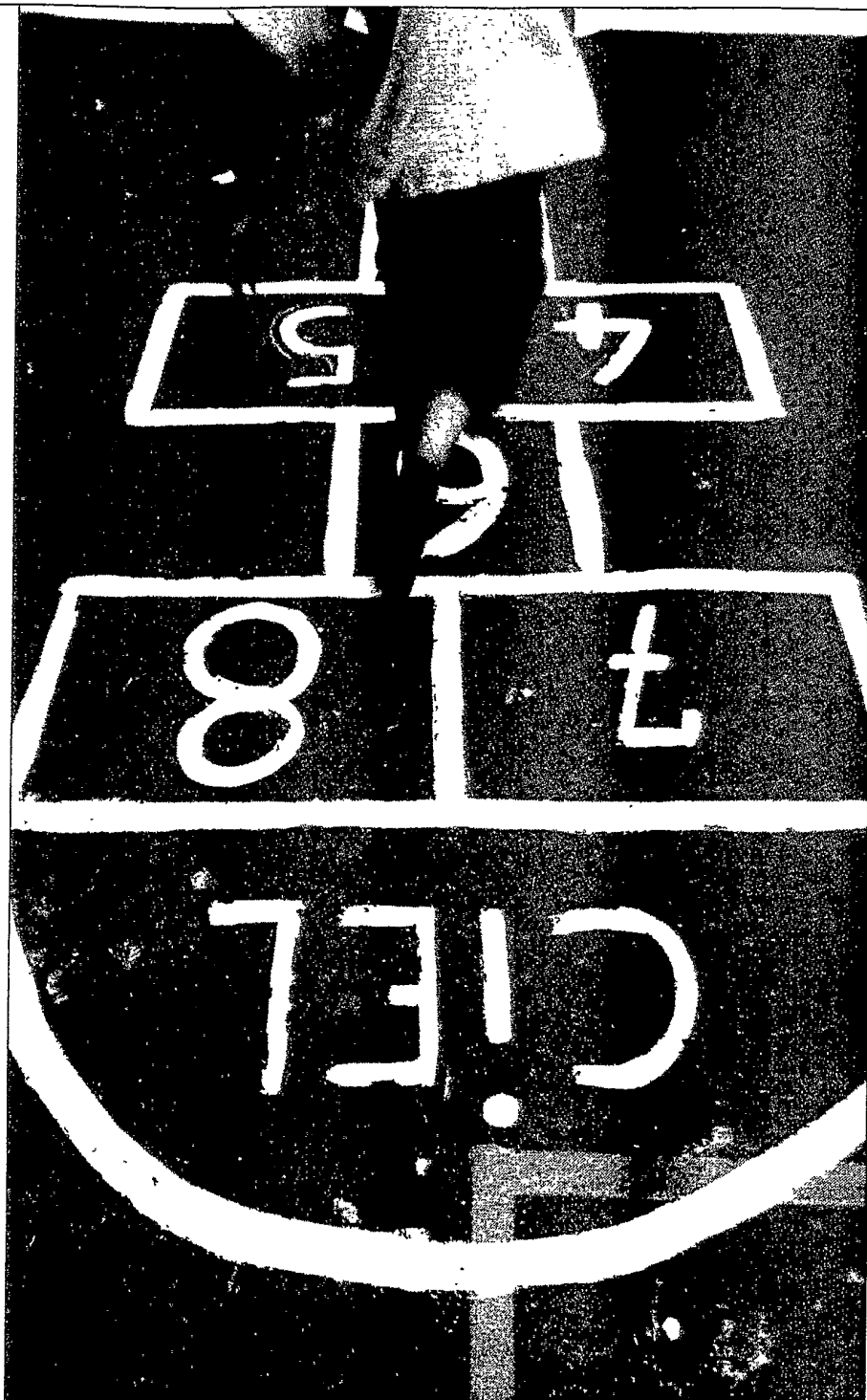
By Linda Jacobson  
*Paris*

As efforts to expand preschool programs in the United States have increased, so has interest in looking abroad to see how other countries are educating their youngest children. And perhaps no system of early-childhood education has captured the attention of U.S. educators and policymakers quite like the French model.

Since 1999, the French-American Foundation in New York City, a non-profit group working to strengthen the relationship between the two countries, has sponsored three study trips to this European nation for Americans interested in *écoles maternelles*, the French preschools for 2- to 6-year-olds that some early-childhood experts call the "crown jewel of the French educational system."

Earlier this year, the Albert Shanker Institute, a nonprofit organization in Washington named for the late president of the American Federation of Teachers, organized a similar tour involving about a dozen researchers and educators. And an American delegation sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund returned last month from a weeklong visit to France, which *Education Week* accompanied.

"Top-level policymakers are becoming interested in early education," said  
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Allison Shelley

**PRESCHOOLS IN FRANCE:** A child skips through a game of hopscotch at Ville de Paris École Maternelle, one of a handful of preschools and child-care facilities that American early-childhood specialists visited here last month. See story, Page 40.

# Experts See Strengths and Weaknesses of French System

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Shanny Peer, the director of education programs at the French-American Foundation, and such growing interest has translated into trips by educators, early-childhood experts, and policymakers to France for a closer look at its programs. Plans are now in the works to organize groups of U.S. senators and governors to visit the country to observe its écoles maternelles.

But even Americans who are impressed by the French model concede that large-scale replication of that system in the United States is unrealistic.

"The French have their own culture, but we have to look at the pieces we can learn from," said Evelyn Moore, the president of the National Black Child Development Institute in Washington, who has visited child-care facilities and preschools in France twice.

## Advocates 'Inspired'

It is clear that for many advocates for better early-childhood education in the United States, the French system offers much of what they would like to see offered back home. (Also see related *On Assignment* story, Page 40.)

"We are all committed to building a high-quality universal system for all our children in the U.S.," Marian Wright Edelman, the president of the Children's Defense Fund, said through an interpreter when she greeted French education officials in Paris last month. "You have inspired us."

In fact, later during the visit, Ms. Edelman told *Education Week* that the services she had observed here "reaffirmed" much of what is included in a new piece of proposed legislation with ambitious goals written by her organization. Introduced in Congress last month by Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., and Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., the proposal calls for government-subsidized health insurance for every child under age 18 whose parents can't afford private insurance, an expansion of food programs, and more funding for child-care, Head Start, and other preschool programs.

To be sure, the proposal certainly shows some similarities to what the French government has done to improve the care and education of its infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children. According to Susan B. Watts, who began an early-education program at the French-American Foundation and now works as a consultant, children are born into poverty in France and the United States at virtually the same rate—25 percent in the States and 24 percent in France. But by age 6, child poverty in France drops to 7 percent, while in the United States it hovers around 17 percent.

The greater improvements in France are explained, in part, by some of the differences in government policy in the two countries. To begin with, children in France



dens surrounding the Eiffel Tower. While a small "chalet" is available for shelter when it rains, the children who visit the center spend most of their time outside, sitting at a small table for activities, climbing on the playground equipment, and tending to an herb garden. In the cold and wet months, they just bundle up and wear boots, said Annick Leroy, the director of the center.

At the age of 3, French children are eligible to enter an école maternelle, which is the first level of the nation's public education system.

The system is highly centralized, with all teachers trained,

hired, and paid by the national government. Curriculum guidelines exist at the national level that are reviewed and updated every four to five years. Inspectors from the Ministry of Education who have additional training and experience monitor teachers. And directors—who have administrative duties but little authority over classroom instruction—run the schools.

## Political Consensus

The actual school facilities, and the staff assistants who work in the schools, are paid for with funds from France's municipalities. The cities also provide before- and after-school care and a wide range of activities on Wednesdays, when all of the écoles maternelles are closed. While parents pay fees for the additional before- and after-school services, education officials say the cost to parents is small.

All of those services for children and their parents, whether nationally or locally financed, make up a system of care and education that French officials and citizens say is fully supported by both liberal and conservative political leaders.

"You cannot find a municipality that says they don't want to open services," said Olga Baudelot, a senior researcher with the National Institute of Pedagogical Research, a division of the Education Ministry. "I've never heard a debate about the use of taxes" for preschool education.

Those thoughts were echoed by Jean-Pierre Villain, an adviser to Minister of Education Jack Lang, who said that while some mayors were originally reluctant to build preschools, none ever turned down parents' requests to open preschool classrooms. Such a denial, Mr. Villain insisted, would have labeled any mayor "a monster. He'd have been kicked out."

Some international studies help illustrate France's widespread commitment to early-childhood



Whole-group lessons, such as the one above at Crétéil École Maternelle, are common. At left, a teacher comforts a boy at an open-air day-care center near the Eiffel Tower.

encouraged to use licensed providers because the government will pay for such providers' social-security taxes.

But the French system is not just geared toward helping working mothers. In France, mothers with at least two children who choose to stay at home with them can receive a government allowance of roughly the equivalent of \$500 a month if they were working full time for at least a year prior to staying at home; the government pays about half that amount to mothers who continue to work part time.

Beyond those benefits, parents receive a "family allowance" that begins with the birth of a second child. A family with two children receives about \$116 a month; the subsidy is approximately \$265 a month for a family with three youngsters, and the payment continues to increase with the birth of each additional child. Families receive the allowances until a child is 20, as long as the child is enrolled in some school or is participating in a work-apprenticeship program. If a youngster is not participating in school or an apprenticeship, the allowances are stopped when he or she is 16.

Mothers who don't work outside the home can also turn to a *halte-garderie*, which is a drop-in center that can be used on a limited basis during the times when a stay-at-home mother has to do such tasks as attend a doctor's appointment or shop for food without a child tagging along. Children have to be at least 18 months old to be dropped off at such centers, and mothers cannot use the centers more than four half-days per week. One such center that the American delegation visited in June is located in a fenced-in area along the Champ de Mars, the scenic gar-

are born into a socialized system of universal health care and financial supports for families. New mothers, for instance, receive 14 weeks of paid maternity leave, which many combine with the several weeks of paid summer vacation French citizens enjoy in order to stay home with their newborns much longer.

In the United States, on the other hand, the government does not require paid maternity leave. What the government does require of employers with 50 or more employees, however, is a guarantee that a woman, or a man, who leaves a job to take maternity or paternity leave of up to 12 weeks will be able to return to the same job with the same pay and benefits.

The French system offers other benefits. For instance, while many French mothers use private physicians, free immunizations and routine checkups are available at public-health clinics throughout the country for pregnant women and young children, regardless of family income.

Beyond that, children in France are screened for any health problems in the écoles maternelles before they enter the preschools and regularly thereafter. Several participants on last month's CDF tour commented that they had never before seen so many toddlers and preschoolers wearing eyeglasses,

and they realized that it was probably because more French children are screened for vision problems earlier than is the case for American youngsters.

When it's time for French mothers to go to work, they can place their babies in a government-subsidized child-care center—called a *crèche*—where they make co-payments based on their incomes. The directors of the crèches are public-health nurses with child-development training. And the adults who work with the children, called "young-child educators," are required to have two years of training.

## Other Help for Parents

As is the case in the United States, some families also use family child-care providers, known here as *assistantes maternelles*. Such providers in France are more closely scrutinized than those in the United States. French doctors examine the homes to make sure there is nothing that could put a child's health at risk, providers must complete 60 hours of training, and their child-care licenses must be reauthorized every five years. And, government monitors can make unannounced visits to the homes for inspections.

In addition, French families that use nannies—or "childminders," as they're called here—are

Photos by Allison Shalley

education. For instance, public spending on preschool represents a higher percentage of France's gross domestic product than in the United States, 0.66 percent compared with 0.36 percent, according to "Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care," a report released last month by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, an economic- and social-policy organization based here.

### Back in the United States

In sharp contrast to France, the United States has what many advocates for a more activist government role in early-childhood programs have come to describe as a "nonsystem" of child care and early-childhood education.

While subsidies are available for low-income families—and those have increased under the 1996 federal overhaul of the welfare system—data released from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services earlier this year found that only 12 percent of the children who were eligible to receive assistance in 1999 actually did.

The reality is that most American families make their own arrangements for child care when parents are working. But because many states don't have strict requirements for child-care providers or strong monitoring systems for day-care centers, parents are left to themselves to judge the quality of the settings where they leave their children. And that differs significantly from the tightly monitored and government-controlled system in France.

As it is, the public in the United States isn't expecting changes. According to a 2000 survey by Public Agenda, a New York City-based nonprofit research organization, American parents aren't necessarily expecting their political leaders or their employers to help them with child-care issues. The survey concluded that "there is little outcry for action, little self-propelled demand for government to step in."

And even though several states—including California, Connecticut, Georgia, and New York—have expanded their preschool programs in recent years, some people who are familiar with the French system argue that Americans would be unlikely to support universal preschool promoted along French lines.

"The underlying policy principles won't fly here," said Karen Hill-Scott, a child-care and development consultant in Los Angeles who has toured child-care and preschool facilities in France. "The goal was to create a French republic."

French officials themselves point out that the purpose of the *écoles maternelles* is less about helping children achieve academically and more about "socializing children to French culture," Ms. Baudelot said.

If a proposal to expand preschool services in the United States were presented as an effort to "instill the values of America, we'd have a debate about whose values we're talking about," said

Sheri Steisel, the senior director of human services at the Washington office of the National Conference of State Legislatures, who visited France last month with the group sponsored by the Children's Defense Fund.

Darcy Olsen, the director of education and child policy at the Cato Institute, a Washington think tank that advances a libertarian philosophy, added that while most Americans are willing to subsidize programs for poor children, she doesn't believe many would want to pay higher taxes for a universal-preschool program. "People don't want to pay for other people's choice to have children," Ms. Olsen said.

### Classroom Differences

In addition to philosophical differences between France and the United States on early-childhood policies, experts see features of an *école maternelle* that run counter to what Americans have come to believe is needed for young children.

the problem, because we don't have training and credentials," said Mr. Price, who visited the French system in 1999.

The concept of independence in the classroom also takes on another meaning in the *écoles maternelles*. In many U.S. preschool classrooms, children are given a fair amount of time to choose the activities they want to work on. On the other hand, in French preschools, teachers give far more direction, and independence is viewed as the child's ability to complete an assigned task without help from a teacher.

Teachers in France also put a great deal of emphasis on eliciting correct answers from their students—an approach that some experts in the United States would consider too rigid for preschool-age children.

"They don't have a problem letting kids know when they have done a less than perfect job," said Linda Bevilacqua, who traveled to France several times to gather ideas to help her develop the preschool curriculum for the

In Colorado, four counties, with money from the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant—the primary source of cash payments to families on welfare—are increasing the wages of child-care providers in programs that meet high levels of quality recommended by national organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

And, in U.S. preschools using the Core Knowledge curriculum, children are learning a technique—called *graphisme*—taken directly from the *écoles maternelles*. Intended to sharpen children's fine motor skills and get them ready to write, *graphisme* is a method of drawing very small, precise, sequential designs on paper. Instead of coloring a picture, children fill up pages with such designs.

Others, not just classroom educators, are also interested in borrowing some ideas from the French. A group of architects from St. Louis, for instance, visited child-care and preschool facilities in France earlier this year

"We're seeing these discussions [about early-childhood education] at very high levels of government. This would not have happened five years ago," Michelle Neuman, who co-wrote the report, said when she presented some of the findings to members of the Children's Defense Fund delegation last month in Paris.

A common trend throughout most of the industrialized countries that make up the OECD—except the United States, she pointed out—is toward maternity and family leave paid for by the government. "It's striking to the extent to which the U.S. is really the outlier in this area," Ms. Neuman said.

Even though the United States—with its emphasis on state and local control, the free market, and private decision-making—doesn't have a national system of child care and early education, the OECD report highlights some features of American early-childhood education as specific strengths. It cites, for example, American enthusiasm for improving the quality of programs, an emphasis on parent involvement, and local and statewide "collaborative efforts," such as Educare in Colorado, Ms. Neuman said.

Another apparent American strength is a heavy emphasis on research—which is not necessarily the case in France. Studies on all aspects of child development, child care, and early-childhood education are being pursued at universities and research organizations throughout the United States.

Undoubtedly, international comparisons help shape the educational agenda in the United States, said Eugenia Kemble, the executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute. The academic-standards movement, for example, has in part been driven by the results of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study that compared achievement of students from 50 different countries, she noted.

Meanwhile, California's state schools superintendent, Delaine Eastin—who toured the *écoles maternelles* two years ago—suggests that just because a true universal-preschool system in the United States might seem far-fetched today doesn't mean it's an impossible goal.

"The GI Bill was a big idea. So was the school lunch program," said Ms. Eastin, who has promoted a universal-preschool plan for California to be phased in over 10 years. "I think there is room for big ideas, but there aren't a lot of big-idea promoters at the national level."

Still, some policymakers stress that while the French preschool system is certainly worth examining, Americans and their political leaders will have to approach such arrangements at their own pace.

"We are a far more complicated and larger country," said Allyson Y. Schwartz, a Democratic state senator from Pennsylvania who visited French preschools in 1999. "We are going to have to create our own American way of doing this."



Most of the preschool children attending *Ville de Paris École Maternelle* come from low-income, immigrant families. Still, they are more likely than poor American children to escape from poverty.

Core Knowledge Foundation in Charlottesville, Va.

For example, in an *école maternelle* in the town of Cretell, a suburb southeast of the city, a teacher in a class mixed with physically disabled children spent several minutes asking the same boy to name a color and an animal that he didn't have on the game card in front of him. "No, that's not right," the teacher repeatedly said in French until the child finally gave the right answer.

### Taking French Ideas

In spite of such differences, there is evidence that knowledge about French preschools is already influencing some of the ideas and practices being used in the United States.

Educare Colorado, Mr. Price said, is based on the premise that a coordinated early-childhood-education system should be built—not just a hodgepodge of individual programs that are not related to one another.

to get ideas about how to design buildings for preschool children.

"[The French] think of space as a learning tool, and natural light as something that helps children's growth and stimulation," said Andrew J. Trivers, an architect who plans to incorporate some of what he saw into the plans for a new early-childhood-learning center for St. Louis children. "These are pieces of important architecture in France."

Of course, the French system of early-childhood education isn't the only one catching the attention of American educators. Experts and advocates from the United States are also eyeing Sweden, Italy, and the United Kingdom.

And the recent "Starting Strong" report from the OECD, which compares the child-care and early-childhood-education policies of 12 countries, has enabled early-childhood specialists and education policymakers in the United States to make more informed and sophisticated comparisons