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Overview of the French Education System

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► **To cite this version:**

Maxime Jouvenceau, Olivier Monso. Overview of the French Education System: The State of Education. 2020, pp. 1-4. 10.48464/ni-20-41-eng . halshs-03727202

HAL Id: halshs-03727202

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03727202>

Submitted on 19 Jul 2022

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BRIEFING NOTE

n° 20.41 – November 2020

Overview of the French Education System: The State of Education

► Since 1992, an annual report entitled *L'état de l'École* (the State of Education) has been compiled to present a global analysis of the French education system. Its findings are drawn from longstanding structural indicators, and describe the principal developments and trends observed while also providing notable insight into comparisons at the regional and international level. The data presented is the most recent available, and mostly applies to the 2019-2020 school year. The purpose of this report is to encourage public debate and clarify the decision-making regarding educational issues, and to enhance the management and evaluation of the French education system by providing reliable, objective data, thereby helping to improve the success of all students.

In 2019 the policy of 'priority focus on primary education' was continued, with an increase in the level of spending per student and a reduction in the number of students per class. In doing so, France was able to make up some lost ground compared to other European countries. Primary and Secondary school teachers report feeling less well-prepared than their European counterparts, but those who have recently entered the profession are following a more diversified curriculum. The proportion of young people leaving education early is falling, but the level of qualifications and skills obtained remains strongly linked to social background.

The Ministry of National Education,
Youth and Sports
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e-ISSN 2431-7632

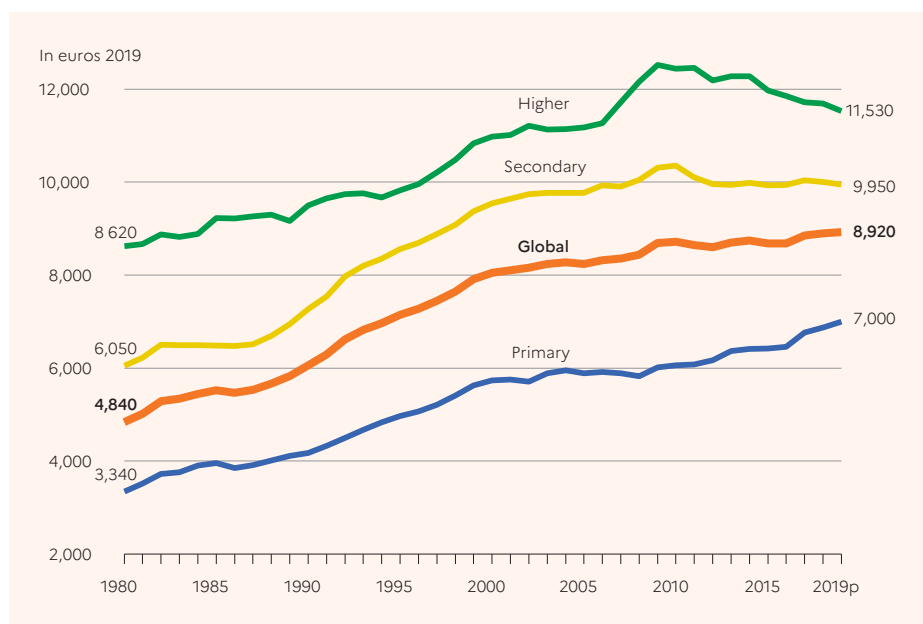
Additional funding allocated to primary education

In 2019, national educational spending (*dépense intérieure d'éducation*, or DIE) was €160.5 billion, accounting for 6.6% of France's GDP. This proportion was slightly higher than the OECD average in 2017. Average spending per student has increased significantly since 1980, rising to €8,920 in 2019 ► **figure 1**. Over the course of the 2010s, spending has risen only in the primary sector, particularly since 2017 due to the policy of priority focus on primary education. In 2017, spending per student was below the OECD average (- 8.5 %), as opposed to secondary (particularly in the second cycle: + 35.4 %) and higher education.

Fewer students per class in primary schools

In primary education, there has been a net drop in the number of students per class since 2017, particularly in First and Second grade classes in 'priority education' schools ► **figure 2**. This decrease has not been achieved to the detriment of students in other grades or those in rural areas, where class sizes have also decreased. The reduction stems from a drop in the number of students, which is set to continue until 2024, in combination with an increase in teaching staff. In 2017-2018, the average number of students per teacher

► 1 Progression of average spending per pupil or student in 2019 prices (in euros)



2019p : provisional data.
Field : Mainland France + DROM.
Source : MENJS-MESRI-DEPP, Education Statistics.

Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

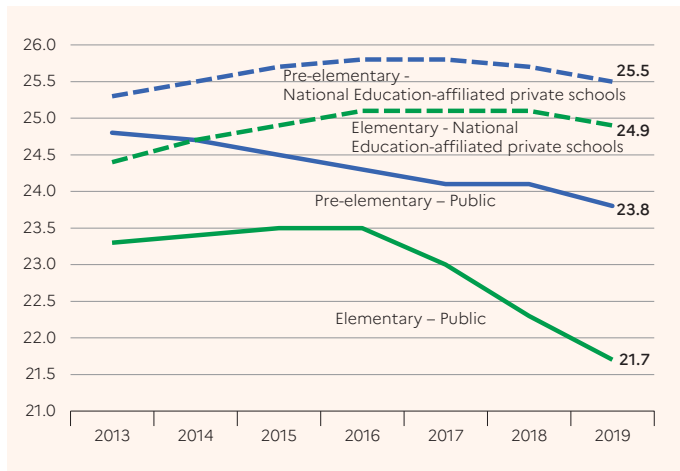
(19 in elementary schools) was higher than the EU average.

More teaching hours allocated to vocational training

The number of students in secondary education is increasing, given that the demographic for children of secondary-

school age continues to grow; however, this trend is set to reverse, and this demographic should begin to decrease in size from 2022 onward. Numbers of students in 'general and technical high schools' (collectively referred to as GT) increased between 1999 and 2016, before declining from 2017 onwards; they are set to increase once again from 2021 due to

► 2 Progression of student numbers per class in primary schools, by level and sector



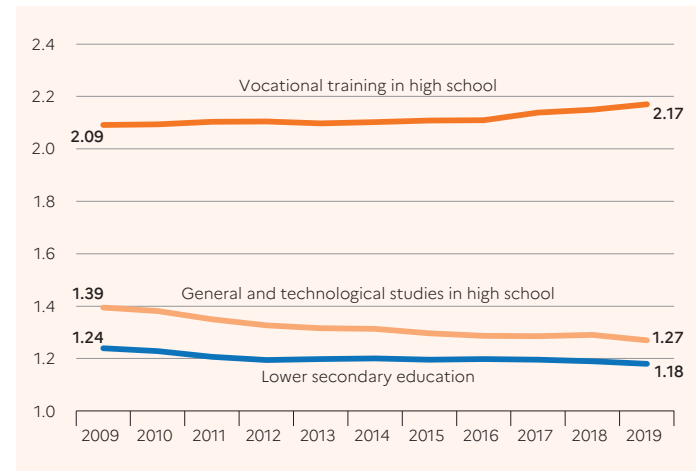
Synopsis: as of September 2019, elementary classes in public schools had an average of 21.7 students.

Field: Mainland France + DROM (children with disabilities).

Source: MENJS-MESRI-DEPP, Diapre database.

Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

► 3 Progression of number of teaching hours allocated per student (H/E) in secondary education



Synopsis: for the 2019-2020 school year, the H/S for secondary teaching was 1.18, i.e. 118 hours of teaching per 100 students.

Note: STS and CPGE are not included. Secondary training includes Segpa teaching.

Field: Mainland France + DROM, public schools and National Education-affiliated private schools

Source: MENJS-MESRI-DEPP, RELAIS DATABASES 2009-2019.

Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

demographic factors. Two thirds of secondary students go on to study at GT schools. This share is now holding steady, following a long period of growth in the GT sector to the detriment of vocational training. Following their first year of GT, nine out of ten high school students opt to continue their studies.

Numbers of students enrolled in CAP ('certificate of vocational qualification') courses or equivalent certifications have declined over the past decade. In particular, the number of apprentices enrolled at this level has decreased. They make up around half of all students enrolled in CAP courses, but are under-represented in the Vocational Baccalaureate, a qualification which is mostly completed in a school setting. Owing to the redevelopment of the vocational route, the average age of young people enrolled in vocational baccalaureate programs has dropped. Two in five young people continue their vocational training following a CAP, and youth people enrolled in school-led CAP programs are more likely to continue than those enrolled in apprenticeship programs. In vocational high schools, the number of hours allocated per student is rising (figure 3) and the number of students per class has been in more or less continuous decline since the mid-1980s. Nevertheless, these dynamics are inverted in secondary school, and especially in GT high schools. There, the number of students per structure is lower, taking into account the significant proportion of group teaching that occurs. In 2017-2018, the number of students per teacher in secondary schools (14.4) was higher than the EU average, but was lower in high schools (11.4).

Overall, students and staff report feeling satisfied with their schools. However, students are more likely to be absent in vocational high schools, and more serious incidents are

reported there. Around one in ten hours of teaching is lost due to student absence, and a further one in ten hours is lost due to the absence of teaching staff and the operational limitations of the academic establishment in question.

Progress being made in digital education, though France remains behind

Three quarters of *Éducation Nationale* (National Education) staff are employed as teachers, just over half of whom work in the secondary educational sector. Overall numbers of teaching staff fell between 2008 and 2012, but rose again between 2012 and 2018. Over the course of this period, more posts were opened up to competitive examination applicants, with an increase in recruitment of non-permanent holders. The majority of teachers employed by the National Education are women. Their net income is below the overall average, due notably to the fact that they are more likely to work part-time and less likely to work in the highest-earning institutions. Teachers in France are younger and earn less than the EU average, particularly during the early and middle stages of their careers.

Compared to their EU colleagues, teachers in the primary and secondary educational sectors feel less prepared to carry out their jobs and less effective in doing so. This is confirmed notably in the fields of pedagogy, classroom management, and the use of IT tools for education (TICE). However, teachers currently entering the profession now benefit from more comprehensive initial training

► figure 4. They feel better prepared, notably, to engage in the use of TICE tools. This topic is also the subject of substantial demand for

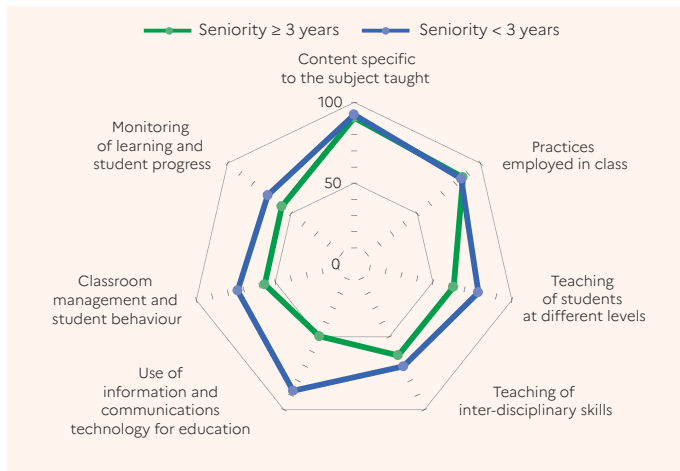
ongoing training, in a context in which schools are equipped with more and more IT tools. Many teachers also express the need for ongoing training with regard to the special educational needs of students. This may be partly explained by the rise in the number of disabled students, who are increasingly educated in standard schools (in some cases with the support of a classroom assistant) rather than in specialist establishments.

Fewer young people leaving education early

The proportion of people leaving education early (i.e. without a diploma or having only achieved a 'Brevet (Certificate)' at age 15) has plummeted since 1970, and is now lower than the EU average ► figure 5. The proportion of baccalaureate holders within each given age group has been on the rise since 2010, hitting 80% in 2019 and even 87% in 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This rise is due notably to the redevelopment of the vocational academic pathway, as well as the continuing rise in exam success rates. Over the course of recent years, the pass rate for the technological baccalaureate has increased sharply to match that of the general baccalaureate, surpassing 95% in 2020.

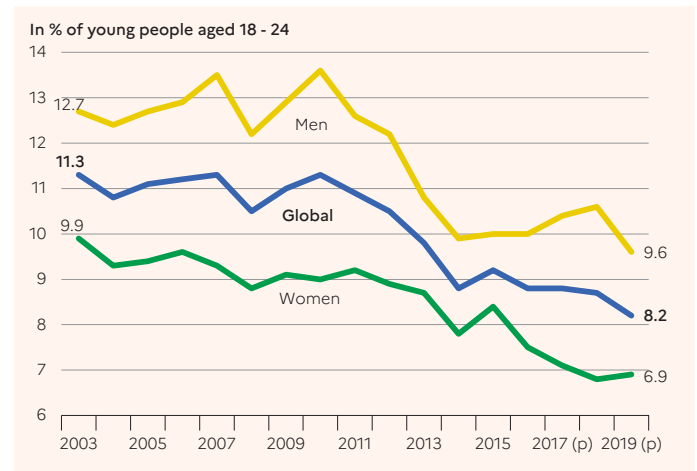
Three quarters of baccalaureate holders, most of whom took the general baccalaureate, go on to pursue higher education. Across all young people leaving the education system in a given year, 46% leave with a higher education degree and 41% with a secondary education diploma. These rates place France above the OECD average. However, a significant percentage of students experience difficulty upon entering the school system. During French language assessments in early First Grade, over eight in ten pupils were

► 4 Teachers in schools having approached content during initial training according to seniority in 2018 (in %)



Synopsis: among teachers with 3 or more years of seniority, 90.5% have studied the curriculum specific to their teaching subject as part of their initial training, compared to 92.4% for teachers with 3 years or fewer of seniority.
Field: Mainland France + DROM (excluding Mayotte and La Réunion), public schools and National Education-affiliated private schools.
Source: MENJS-MESRI-DEPP, OECD, Talis international survey.
 Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

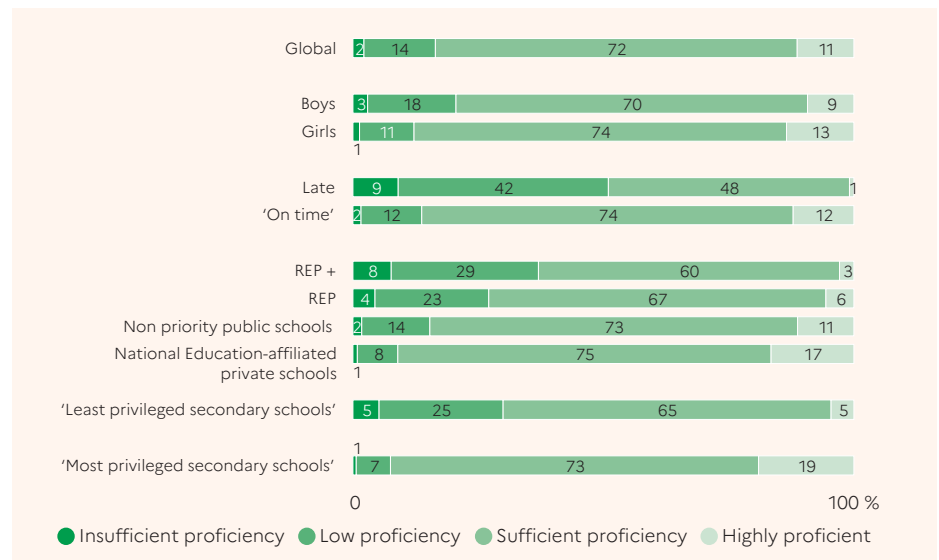
► 5 Proportion of 18-24 year-olds with little or no qualifications not enrolled in training programs (early leavers) in France since 2003



p: provisional data.
Field: Mainland France + DROM (excluding Mayotte).
Source: Insee, employment surveys; calculations and time series breaks MENJS-MESRI-DEPP.
 Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

able to understand an oral text, but only six in ten were able to recognise the various ways of writing a letter. In mathematics, most of the students have a strong grasp of numbers, but only around half can correctly place a digit within a number line. These results were relatively stable between 2018 and 2019, while at the beginning of CE1-second grade (the next academic year), performance levels had risen in both subjects. By the beginning of Sixth Grade (the first year of secondary school), 31% of students had not achieved the desired skill level in mathematics, compared to 16% in French language. These results have remained more or less steady since 2018.

► 6 Grasp of French Language Skills in early sixth grade in 2019 (in %)



Synopsis: 72% of sixth-grade students showed satisfactory grasp of French language skills.
Field: Mainland France + DROM, French Polynesia and Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, public schools and National Education-affiliated private schools.
Source: MENJS-MESRI-DEPP.
 Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

The written comprehension scores achieved by 15-year-old French students during the PISA International Assessments were similar in 2009 and 2018, and are higher than the OECD average. As in 2009, around 20% of 15-year-old students posted low skill levels, which is below the OECD average. The differences in proficiency levels between the highest- and lowest-performing students remain stable in France, and are now comparable to OECD figures.

Significant disparities in written comprehension were also detected through tests taken during France's Defense and Citizenship Day. Three quarters of young people aged around 17 were efficient readers, but more than one in ten showed difficulty in reading, and half of this group might be considered illiterate.

Performance levels and academic orientation by gender

Girls perform better in French language from the time they enter primary school and throughout the educational cycle. In sixth grade, 21% of boys have a weak or insufficient

grasp of French language skills, compared to 12% of girls ► figure 6. However, the disparity in written comprehension between boys and girls at age 15 has been diminishing since 2009. In maths, the difference in performance levels is less stark. While in early first grade girls posted higher performance levels than boys across most assessment criteria, this is no longer the case by the beginning of second grade. Additionally, on average girls show greater proficiency in IT.

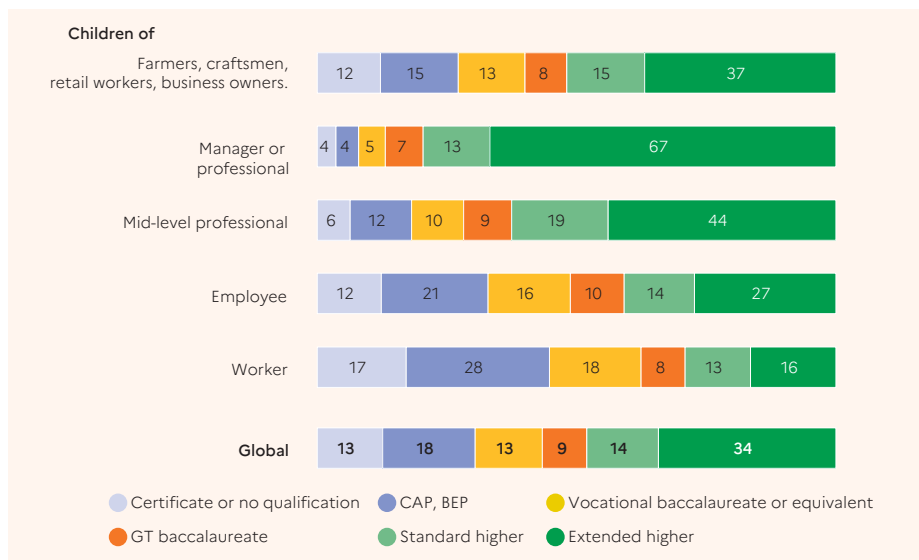
In high school, girls are more likely to take the GT route rather than vocational studies, with apprenticeship an even less likely option. Nevertheless, they remain under-represented in scientific subject areas. They score higher in exams and are less likely to leave the

school system early. After the baccalaureate, they tend to pursue their studies in higher education, notably at universities. Girls more frequently complete their initial studies with a superior grade: 51% for girls vs. 40% for boys. However, this does not translate to an advantage with regard to entering the job market, as their employment rate in the four years following graduation is on a par with that of their male counterparts.

Persistent link between social inequalities and school performance

The établissements en éducation prioritaire ('priority educational establishments') are those in which educational and social difficulties

► 7 Level of qualifications held by 25-34 year-olds by social background in 2019 (in %)



Synopsis: in 2019, 48 % of adults aged 25-34 held higher education degrees. 80% of these were adults from highly privileged backgrounds (with parents who were higher-income earners or had advanced intellectual careers), compared to 29% from working-class backgrounds.

NB: retirees or unemployed individuals are categorized based on their most recent job. The father's profession is considered first, while the mother's profession is used when the father is absent, deceased or has never worked.

Field: Mainland France + DROM (excluding Mayotte)

Source: Insee, employment surveys; data processed by MENJS-MESRI-DEPP, provisional data.

Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

are the most pronounced. They are attended by around a fifth of primary and secondary-age pupils. Over half of these are educated in schools within the educational priority networks (REP), while the rest are in educational priority reinforced networks (REP+) schools which benefit from additional resources. Priority education secondary schools have the highest proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds: three quarters of students in the REP+ category have parents who have working-class parents or are unemployed, compared to just four in ten in public secondary schools outside the educational priority networks. Across the board, secondary schools are marked by wide disparities in social composition, and private secondary schools have a more privileged social composition than public schools - a trend which has been on the rise since the 2000s. Finally, students entering priority education primary and secondary schools have much less solidified skillsets than other students.

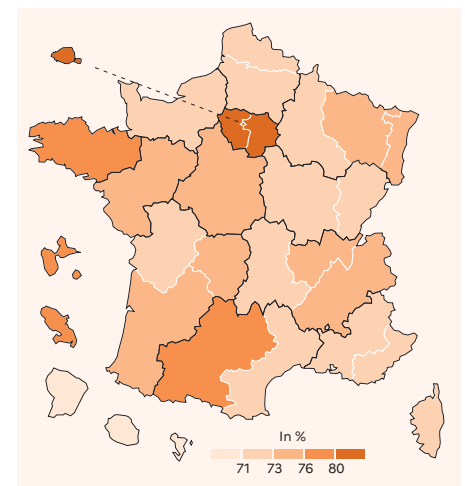
From the time children enter primary school, disparities in social composition (as well as academic levels) between different schools are extremely pronounced, which accounts in large part for the varying performance levels between the non-priority public sector, the priority education sector and the private education sector. Academic performance levels are strongly linked to students' social background; this is the case for example in written comprehension, but also in less well-known areas such as the grasp of IT skills. Academic performance is more strongly linked to social background in France than in any other OECD country. In terms of pass rates for the

'Brevet' exams, disparities in social background are mitigated since the 'Common base of knowledge and skills' is taken into account. Inequality of access to baccalaureate degree completion has been reduced over the past twenty years, but academic choices continue to diverge along social lines. These are the result of the disparity in academic performance levels, as well as socially differentiated choices in academic orientation where results are equivalent. In high school, children from more privileged backgrounds are therefore over-represented in the general route, which is more likely to grant access to higher education. As such, disparities persist in terms of access to qualifications depending on students' social background. These are particularly pronounced at the higher levels of education: 67% of upper-class parents' children will obtain a higher education degree, compared to 16% of working-class parents' children ► figure 7.

Academic proficiency less evident in the North and in Overseas Departments and Regions (DROM)

Regional inequalities in academic performance are largely a reflection of social inequality, as illustrated by the geographic breakdown of priority education. Students with lower performance levels in French and mathematics, or those who leave school early, are over-represented in northern France and in Overseas Departments and Regions. Conversely, they are under-represented in the west of the country. Elsewhere, the Île-de-France region has the highest likelihood that a child entering sixth grade will go on to pass their baccalaureate

► 8 Expectancy of passing the baccalaureate for a sixth-grader – 2019 admittance



Synopsis: In the Montpellier school district, the expectancy of passing the 'bac' for an average sixth-grader is 72.7%, provided they experience the same academic conditions throughout their school years as those who were in the Montpellier school district in 2019.

Field: Mainland France + DROM, public schools and National Education-affiliated private schools

Source: MENJS-MESRI-DEPP, Cyclades, Ocean, Scolarité et Sifa Information Systems; Ministry for Agriculture.

Ref.: Briefing Note, n° 20.41. © DEPP

► figure 8. There are also contrasts in terms of the evolution of student numbers. School districts in the north and east of France have lost students over the past twenty years, to the benefit notably of Île-de-France and school districts in the south.

Entry into the workforce remains closely linked to one's level of qualification and/or apprentice/vocational training status

The success of young people's entrance into the workforce depends on economic circumstances, but also on the level of qualification they have obtained, including in the seven years following initial education. Employment rates are higher for apprentices than for those having engaged in vocational training within a school setting. However, these two options tend to educate different segments of the population, with girls being notably under-represented among the apprenticeship category. Employment rates are also higher for vocational baccalaureate holders compared to general baccalaureate holders, and for graduates of higher education vocational sectors (STS, IUT, vocational degrees) compared to general sectors at the same level of academic qualification. In addition, the socio-professional employment categories occupied are strongly influenced by the level of qualification obtained. ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Consult the Briefing Note 20.41, including full statistics and additional data, at education.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques