



# In primary education, class size continues to decrease in the school year 2020

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# NOTE D'INFORMATION

n° 21.01 – Janvier 2021

## In primary education, class size continues to decrease in the school year 2020

► At the start of the 2020 school year, the size of primary school classes continues to decrease, whether in public or government-dependent private schools, and whether in pre-primary or primary classes. This trend has been particularly marked since 2017 in public schools, following the implementation of the class size reduction policy in priority education.

These measures, which first concerned the first and second grades, and since September 2020 the last grade of pre-primary sections, have not taken away resources from the other levels. Nor have they been achieved at the expense of rural or urban schools outside priority education, whose class sizes are also decreasing.

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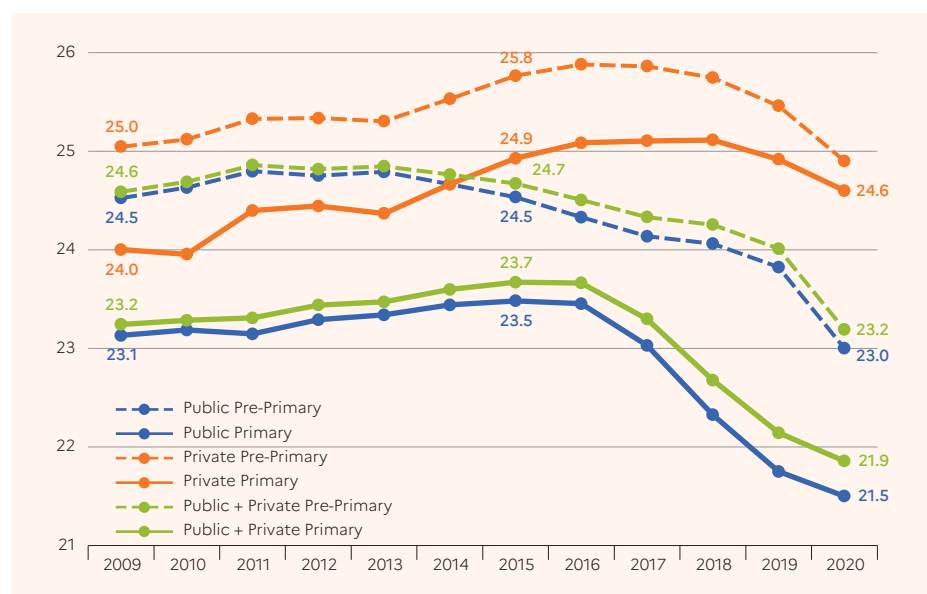
► At the start of the 2020 school year, pre-primary classes in public schools have an average of 23.0 pupils, and primary classes (grades 1 to 5) have an average of 21.5 pupils  
↘ **figure 1.** In government-dependent private schools, these classes are larger, with 24.9 and 24.6 pupils on average. Private sector class size increased sharply between 2013 and 2016, before stabilizing until 2018, and then decreasing.

### Four years of continuous decline in public schools, two in government-dependent private schools

In public schools, the decline in class size has been gradual since 2013 in pre-primary, and much more rapid since 2017 in primary. The start of the 2020 school year is marked by a sharp decline in pre-primary. This decrease in public schools is mainly explained by the successive measures of class size reduction, implemented since 2017. Indeed, in order to combat educational difficulties from the first years of basic learning and to support the most vulnerable pupils, the size of the first grade classes in reinforced priority education networks («REP+») was reduced at the start of the 2017 school year.

This measure was extended to the first grade in REP and the second grade in REP+ from September 2018, and to the second grade in REP in 2019. At the start of the 2020 school year, it will be the turn of the last grade of pre-primary classes in priority education to start having their size reduced: this extension is spread over several years.

1 Change in class size by sector and level (2009-2020)



Field: Metropolitan France + DROM, public and government-dependent private schools. Excluding ULIS pupils.  
Source: MENJS-DEPP, Diapre database (back-translated from the BCP for the years 2009 to 2012).

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 21.01. © DEPP

### After the first and second grades, the size of last year pre-primary sections decreases in priority education without penalizing the other levels...

The effect of these measures can be seen in the change in class sizes in first and second grades between 2015, when the priority education system was last overhauled, and 2020 (see « For more information » - Methodology). In 2015, the average size of first grade classes in REP+ was 21.7 pupils. In 2020, it is 12.5 pupils ↘ **figure 2.** The observation is similar in REP and second grade classes. Last grade of pre-primary

classes, if they are always more crowded than those of first and second grades of primary classes, however already welcome less than 20 pupils on average in REP+ at the start of the 2020 school year, compared to 23.6 in 2015.

One of the questions that accompanied the policy of class size reduction was whether this measure, beneficial to the pupils concerned, would be implemented at the expense of pupils in other grades. On the contrary, it appears that in priority education, class size decreases whatever the level. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, in particular, classes were reduced by nearly two pupils in REP between 2015 and 2020.

The resources made available to school principals therefore seem to have enabled them to make, sometimes, adjustments that benefit the other pupils.

### ... nor the other territories

Another question raised by the implementation of duplications in priority education is that of their possible impact on other territories, and in particular rural areas. At the start of the 2020 school year, 16,000 public schools are located in rural communities. In terms of class size, these schools do not seem to have been disadvantaged by the measures for priority education.

In pre-primary classes, the trend is downward everywhere. The average number of pupils per class was 23.2 in rural areas outside priority education in 2015. It is 21.8 in 2020

↘ **figure 3a**. The trend (-1.4 pupils per class) is the same in urban schools outside priority education.

In primary grades, the difference between schools in priority education and others is more marked. But the trend is also downward outside priority education, with an average size falling from 22.1 to 21.4 in rural areas, or a reduction of 0.7 pupils per class ↘ **figure 3b**.

For public schools outside priority education, located in urban municipalities, the number of pupils per class decreases in the same proportions: -0.6 between 2015 and 2020.

### In rural areas, the decrease of class size is explained by the demographic decline

In rural areas, the slight reduction in the number of pupils per class is explained by the demographic situation. Between 2015 and 2020, rural schools lost 47,000 pre-primary pupils and 31 000 primary pupils, i.e., a drop in enrolment of 10.7% and 4.1% respectively ↘ **figure 4**.

## ↘ 4 Evolution of the number of pupils and classes

		Number of pupils			Number of classes		
		2015	2020	Change in %	2015	2020	Change in %
Pre-primary	Priority education (PE)	467,551	447,497	-4.3	20,032	21,010	4.9
	Rural public outside PE	437,709	390,989	-10.7	18,907	17,947	-5.1
	Urban public outside PE	1,337,601	1,243,552	-7.0	52,478	51,652	-1.6
Primary	Priority education (PE)	691,238	696,480	0.8	30,410	41,495	36.5
	Rural public outside PE	742,004	711,353	-4.1	33,537	33,242	-0.9
	Urban public outside PE	2,156,427	2 152,481	-0.2	88,919	91,083	2.4

**Field:** Metropolitan France + DROM, public schools. Excluding ULIS pupils.  
**Source:** MENJS-DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2020.

## ↘ 2 Evolution of the number of pupils per class, in priority education

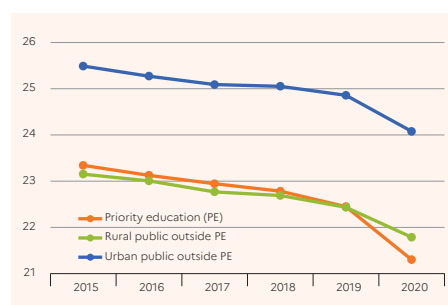
	REP+						REP					
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Pre-primary 1 <sup>st</sup> year	23.3	23.2	23.0	22.9	22.9	22.4	23.4	23.2	23.1	23.0	22.8	22.3
Pre-primary 2 <sup>nd</sup> year	23.6	23.4	23.4	23.2	23.2	22.4	23.7	23.6	23.5	23.3	23.1	22.4
Pre-primary 3 <sup>rd</sup> year	23.6	23.4	23.4	23.2	22.1	19.5	23.7	23.5	23.4	23.2	22.7	20.8
Grade 1	21.7	21.6	13.1	12.7	12.6	12.5	21.8	21.6	20.7	12.8	12.7	12.6
Grade 2	22.6	22.3	21.4	14.2	12.8	12.7	22.7	22.6	22.3	21.0	13.2	12.9
Grade 3	22.9	22.8	22.4	21.7	21.5	21.4	23.1	23.0	22.8	22.2	21.5	21.2
Grade 4	23.0	22.7	22.6	22.0	21.8	21.8	23.3	23.0	23.0	22.4	22.0	21.7
Grade 5	23.1	22.9	22.5	22.3	22.0	22.0	23.4	23.2	23.0	22.7	22.1	21.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>22.7</b>	<b>20.7</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>18.6</b>	<b>18.2</b>	<b>23.0</b>	<b>22.9</b>	<b>22.6</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>18.8</b>	<b>18.4</b>

**Field:** Evolution of the number of pupils per class, in priority education  
**Source:** MENJS-DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2020.

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 21.01. © DEPP

## ↘ 3 Changes in class size in public schools

### 3a Pre-primary classes



**Field:** Metropolitan France + DROM, public schools, pre-primary classes. Excluding ULIS pupils.  
**Source:** MENJS-DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2020.  
 Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 21.01. © DEPP

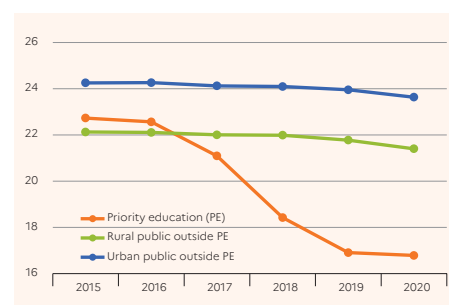
Over the same period, the number of classes also decreased, but to a lesser extent (-5.1% and -0.9%). The faster decline in the number of pupils than in the number of classes has logically made it possible to educate pupils in less crowded classes.

In urban schools outside priority education, there are also fewer pupils in 2020 than in 2015 (-2.8%, pre-primary and primary combined), and the number of classes is up slightly (+0.9%), which also explains the reduction in their size.

### A process still underway

To complete the policy of class size reduction in priority education, another measure was announced: the capping of the

### 3b Primary classes



**Field:** Metropolitan France + DROM, public schools, primary classes. Excluding ULIS pupils.  
**Source:** MENJS-DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2020.  
 Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 21.01. © DEPP

number of pupils per class to 24 pupils in last grade pre-primary, first and second grade throughout the country. The implementation of these measures should be staggered between the start of 2020 and 2022 school years.

Currently, in all public and government-dependent private schools, 36% of classes with last year pre-primary pupils, 17% of classes with first grade pupils and 25% of classes with second grade pupils have more than 24 pupils.

Following the policy of class size reduction in priority education, these proportions are down sharply compared to 2015 in public schools (see « For more information » - ↘ **figures 5a, 5b and 5c**). In total, for these three levels, 75% of classes have 24 pupils or less at the start of the 2020 school year: 78% in public schools and 50% in government-dependent private schools. If we consider only single-level classes, the results are very similar, with percentages of 75%, 79% and 42%, respectively. ■

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

You can access this Note d'Information 21.01, the figures and additional data on [education.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques](https://education.gouv.fr/etudes-et-statistiques)