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NOTE D'INFORMATION

n° 22.02 – Mars 2022

Class size in primary education: the decline continues due to the impact of reducing the last grade of pre-primary classes

► At the start of the 2021 school year, the size of primary school classes continues to decrease in public schools, whether in pre-primary or primary classes. This trend has been particularly marked since 2017, 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 grades. Nor have they been achieved at the expense of rural or urban schools outside priority education, whose class sizes are also decreasing.

In addition, the cap of 24 pupils per class in the last grade of pre-primary, first and second grade throughout the territory, which began in 2020, is also helping to reduce class sizes.

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► At the start of the 2021 school year, pre-primary classes in public schools have an average of 22.4 pupils, and primary classes (grades 1 to 5) have an average of 21.3 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 decreasing until 2020, and stabilized at the start of 2021 school year.

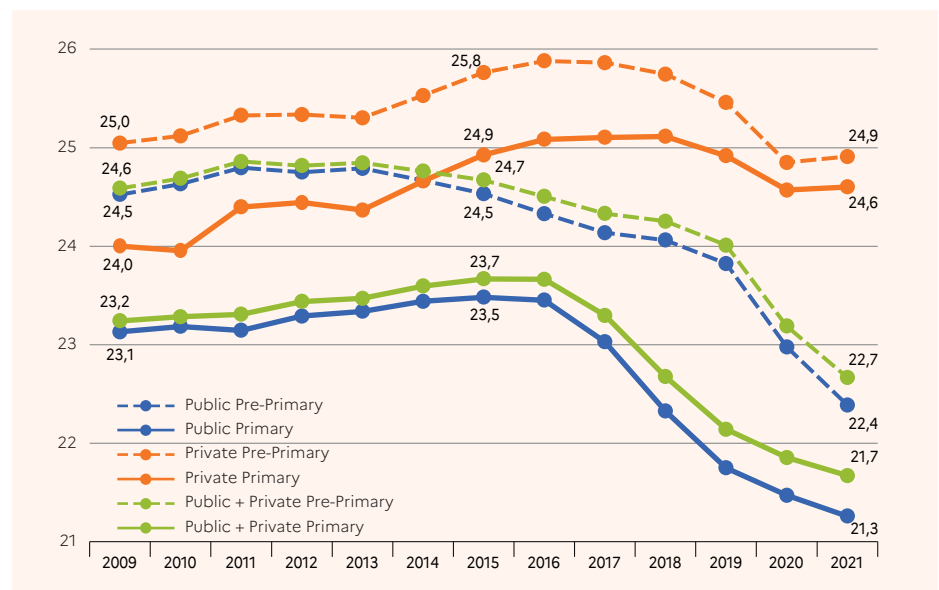
Five years of continuous decline in public schools

In public schools, the decline in class size has been gradual from 2013 to 2019 in pre-primary, before accelerating during the last two years. In primary classes, this decrease has been very rapid since 2017. The start of the 2021 school year is marked by the continuation of a sharp decline in pre-elementary.

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. In 2020 and 2021, it's the turn of the last grade of pre-primary classes in priority education to start having their size

1 Change in class size by sector and level (2009-2021)



Field: Metropolitan France + the French overseas departments, public and government-dependent private schools. Excluding ULIS pupils.

Source: DEPP, Diapre database (back-translated from the BCP for the years 2009 to 2012).

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.02. DEPP

reduced. This extension will run until the start of the 2023 school year.

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

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 2021 "For more information" - Methodology). In 2015, the average size of first grade classes

in REP+ was 21.7 pupils. In 2021, 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 15.1 pupils on average in REP+ at the start of the 2021 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 grade. In 3rd grade, in particular, classes were reduced by nearly two pupils in REP between 2015 and 2021. 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 class size reduction in priority education is that of their possible impact on other territories, and in particular rural areas. At the start of the 2021 school year, 20,500 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 23.6 in rural areas outside priority education in 2015. It is 22.0 in 2021 (figure 3a). The trend 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 22.6 to 21.7 in rural areas, or a reduction of 0.9 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: -0.9 between 2015 and 2021.

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 2021, rural schools lost 77,000 pre-primary pupils and 58,000 primary pupils, i.e., a drop in enrolment of 11.8% and 5.3% respectively (figure 4).

Over the same period, the number of classes also decreased, but to a lesser extent (-5.5% and -1.6%). 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 2021 than in 2015 (-3.5%, pre-primary and primary combined), and the number of classes is up slightly (+1.7%), which also explains the reduction in their size.

2 Évolution du nombre d'élèves par classe selon le niveau

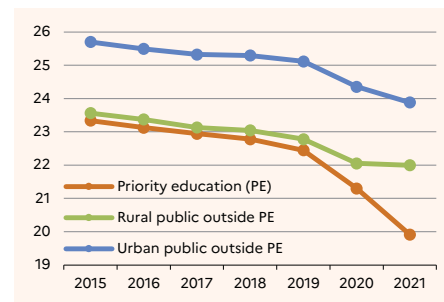
	REP+				REP				Public schools outside priority education			
	2015	2017	2019	2021	2015	2017	2019	2021	2015	2017	2019	2021
Pre-primary 1st year	23,3	23,0	22,9	22,2	23,4	23,1	22,8	22,2	24,8	24,5	24,3	23,4
Pre-primary 2nd year	23,6	23,4	23,2	22,3	23,7	23,5	23,1	22,2	25,1	24,7	24,5	23,5
Pre-primary 3rd year	23,6	23,4	22,1	15,1	23,7	23,4	22,7	18,6	25,0	24,6	24,2	22,9
Grade 1	21,7	13,1	12,6	12,5	21,8	20,7	12,7	12,5	22,5	22,3	22,0	21,4
Grade 2	22,6	21,4	12,8	12,6	22,7	22,3	13,2	12,8	23,3	23,3	23,0	22,4
Grade 3	22,9	22,4	21,5	21,2	23,1	22,8	21,5	20,9	24,0	23,8	23,7	23,1
Grade 4	23,0	22,6	21,8	21,6	23,3	23,0	22,0	21,4	24,3	24,1	24,0	23,5
Grade 5	23,1	22,5	22,0	21,8	23,4	23,0	22,1	21,7	24,4	24,3	24,2	23,7
Total	22,9	20,7	18,6	17,5	23,0	22,6	18,8	18,0	24,1	23,9	23,7	22,9

Field: Metropolitan France + the French overseas departments, public schools. Excluding ULIS pupils.
Source: DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2021.

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.02. DEPP

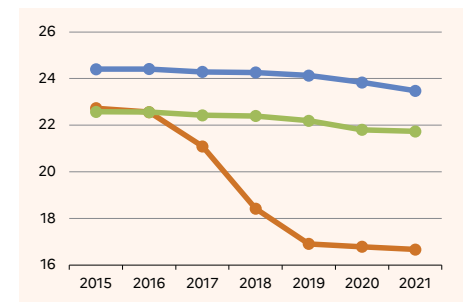
3 Changes in class size in public schools

3a Pre-primary classes



Field: Metropolitan France + the French overseas departments, public schools, pre-primary classes. Excluding ULIS pupils.
Source: DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2021.
Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.02. DEPP

3b Primary classes



Field: Metropolitan France + the French overseas departments, public schools, primary classes. Excluding ULIS pupils.
Source: DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2021.
Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.02. DEPP

4 Evolution of the number of pupils and classes

		Number of pupils			Number of classes		
		2015	2021	Change in %	2015	2021	Change in %
Pre-primary	Priority education (PE)	467 551	439 296	-6,0%	20 032	22 058	10,1%
	Rural public outside PE	653 280	576 339	-11,8%	27 726	26 200	-5,5%
	Urban public outside PE	1 122 030	1 034 050	-7,8%	43 658	43 294	-0,8%
Primary	Priority education (PE)	691 238	691 040	0,0%	30 410	41 467	36,4%
	Rural public outside PE	1 109 618	1 051 343	-5,3%	49 152	48 375	-1,6%
	Urban public outside PE	1 788 813	1 775 089	-0,8%	73 305	75 606	3,1%

Field: Metropolitan France + the French overseas departments, public schools. Excluding ULIS pupils.
Source: DEPP, Diapre databases 2015 to 2021.

Réf. : Note d'Information, n° 22.02. DEPP

A process still underway

To complete the policy of class size reduction in priority education, another measure is being deployed: the cap of 24 pupils per class in the last grade of pre-primary, first and second grade throughout the country. The implementation of these measures should be spread out until the start of 2023 school year. Currently, in all public and government-dependent private schools, 29% of classes with last year pre-primary pupils, 14% of classes with first grade pupils and 22% of classes with second grade pupils have more than 24 pupils, compared to 57%, 29% and 40%, respectively, in 2015.

Following the policy of class size reduction in priority education, these proportions are

down sharply compared to 2015 in public schools "For more information" - figure 5a, 5b and 5c). In total, for these three grades, 78% of classes have 24 pupils or less at the start of the 2021 school year: 82% in public schools and 49% in government-dependent private schools. If we consider only single-grade classes, the results are very similar, with percentages of 79%, 83% and 48%, respectively. ■

FIND OUT MORE

You can access this Note d'Information 22.26, the figures and additional data on education.gouv.fr/statistics