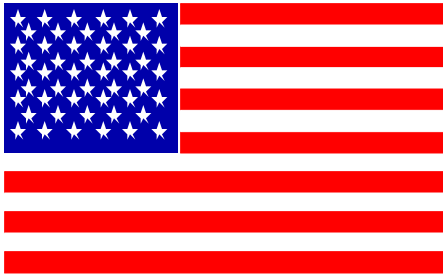


Who Does a Better Job
Educating Their Children?

The United States

vs.

France



Foreign Language Honors Project
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Abstract

Research has been performed to gain insight into similarities and contrasts between formal public education in the United States and France with emphasis being placed upon elementary and secondary education.

The areas investigated in each system were the educational philosophies; the requirements placed on school systems, teachers and students; the funding resources and funding levels used to support public education; and the historical origins of the public education systems. There is a great deal of overlap in each of these areas since educational philosophies cannot exist independently from regulations and funding.

The United States spends approximately 40% more per student than France. In order for schools to earn additional funding, the United States requires strict adherence to standards, linked to performance on standardized tests. In France, each student is expected to become a contributor to the culture and economy of France. The teacher has the ultimate responsibility of ensuring that the student is properly educated. Based upon a report on academic achievement from the United States National Center for Educational Statistics, French students are ahead of US students in most academic areas except science.

Introduction

The education of our children has become the foremost issue in political campaigns, the news, and our minds. In this fast-paced, global society, children are faced with the day-to-day challenges of competition with children in the class next door, as well as competition with children around the world.

In order to keep its children competitive, the United States government has set strict guidelines and laws which must be followed for education. In order to check learning, states often conduct standardized tests, and children are often taught to the test and are expected to perform at increasingly higher levels each year. The students are taught strategies to perform better and more efficiently on these tests, while perhaps omitting some of the basic educational materials that their parents and grandparents grew up learning.

The French educational system is similar to the United States' system in that the French are trying to help their children compete globally also. The French have requirements also for teaching and evaluating their students, however, more emphasis is placed on the students' abilities, development and interests than in how they may perform compared to other children their age on a standardized test. Also, the French put the responsibility of making successful

students solely on the teacher rather than on the administration or the school.

The United States and France consider their children so important that education is in the forefront in both countries. Both countries may approach education in slightly different ways, but the good of the children is of utmost importance.

The history of public education in both the United States and France have similar origins.

The history of public education in the United States began when the foundation was laid in 1779 by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and many of the Founding Fathers had concluded that there was a great need for public education. Nevertheless, Jefferson was the only one to actively pursue this initiative. He proposed that children should be educated at public cost for three years; and those boys who were most intelligent, would be educated beyond that. Jefferson's plan met with many objections because lawmakers and clergy regarded education as the responsibility of the church or that of private schooling. Jefferson's second proposal submitted in 1819, was also rejected.

Finally, in 1825 Jefferson's dream was realized when the University of Virginia opened. It was the the most modern, secular institution of its kind.

Under President Andrew Johnson, the first Federal Department of Education was formed in 1867 during the reconstruction years which followed the Civil War. In order to ensure that education was treated as a serious matter, the Act of 1867 was created. This Act "directed the Department of Education to collect and report the 'condition and progress of education' in annual reports to Congress. In the first report of 1870, the Commissioner proudly reported that

nearly 7 million children were enrolled in elementary schools and 80,000 were enrolled in secondary schools. And 9,000 college degrees had been awarded.”¹ The most current report available from the Digest of Education Statistics, 1999 states that there are 68.1 million people enrolled in American schools and colleges. Of those 68.1 million students, 33.7 million are elementary school students, 19.5 million are secondary, and 14.9 million are college students.

It was not until 1965, that the Elementary-Secondary Education Initiative was established. The responsibility of educating children was assigned to each State. However, since 1965, Congress has created hundreds of programs designed to deal with the inadequacies of the US educational system. Since then, 39 federal agencies and an average of \$120 billion dollars per year have been spent on these programs, and the United States has still fallen short of reaching its goals for educational excellence.

The history of French public education began with the first proposal for public education in France in 1791. With the advent of the French Revolution, Napoleon proclaimed the universal right to education. Prior to that time, the schools in France were mostly run by the Jesuit priests and because the teachings were intertwined with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic church, the schools were

¹ Snyder, Tom. “120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait.” National Center for Education Statistics, 1 (1993).

flourishing. However, there were many changes brought about by the Renaissance and there was growing interest in education and teaching the sciences.

Napoleon championed education because he thought it was essential to building the nation. He felt that the bourgeoisie and upper classes should be educated above all others because they were his most important political supporters. Once educated, they could be educated to support the Napoleonic system of government.

A foundation for primary education was established in 1833. Then, establishment of secular and compulsory education for children between the ages of six and 12 was established during the early part of the 19th century. Regardless of these initiatives, under the resurgence of the monarchy with Louis Philippe in 1814, the Roman Catholic church once again controlled education in France. It was not until a law was passed in 1833 that the foundations for modern primary education, and the obligation to maintain schools and pay teachers was established.

In the late 1800's, after the Franco-Prussian War, the French government revamped the primary education system making it "compulsory, free and secular".² Laws were imposed making it mandatory that school buildings would be maintained, funding be provided, and teachers would be paid salaries in public schools.

² A WWW Page. "Education, History of" <<http://www.britannica.com>> (13 April 2001).

Also, every Department (or state-like region) was issued a mandate to maintain colleges for teachers. Tuition was abolished for training colleges and primary schools, and compulsory attendance was made into law in 1882.

According to the Ministère de l'éducation nationale (National Education Minister), there are 3.6 million students in elementary schools, 8 million secondary school students and 1.5 million college students.

During the evolution of the educational systems, the goals for education were born. These differ in each country in that the US is strongly in favor of assessments, where France is more reliant on the educator for educational success.

In order to achieve the US standard for educational excellence, Federal and State assessments are mandated for measuring successful learning of standardized material. Schools are held accountable for meeting those standards.

One of the goals of the United States educational system is that all students should be educated to the same level of excellence regardless of aptitude.

Education has become the foremost issue in political campaigns, having been a crucial topic during the campaigns of the later part of the 20th century. During the campaign of President George W. Bush, he introduced the "No Child Left Behind" initiative.

The philosophy behind it states the following: districts and schools, even though they are given a standard allotment by the Federal Government, will be supported financially based upon the performance of the students through their scores on standardized tests administered at the state level.

The French educational system was established at the national level and the Government assumes the responsibility to fund and assess the progress of their students. French schools are governed by districts with an Inspector of Education. The Inspector, in conjunction with the school administration, decides what will be taught and how many hours of instruction are needed. However, it is the ultimate responsibility of the teachers to ensure the success of each student. This can be accomplished by factoring into the classroom education the developmental strengths of each student and capitalizing on them.

It is very important to the French that their students compete globally. The French believe that learning begins at an early age. Children begin Nursery School at the age of three, where they are taught how to be effective learners.

One of the most important goals of the French educational system is the preparation of their children to become productive members of French society, by teaching the children cultural and civic responsibility.

Successful achievement of US and French goals for education has led to the establishment of strict standards for instruction. The US and France have very similar requirements.

The US educational system standards have been established through funding of Federal programs designed to mandate what will be taught and how it will be taught to US children.

Students are required to have instruction in reading/language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and physical education.

Federal assessments of the progress of students in the areas of reading/language arts, mathematics, and science are compulsory for all children ages 9, 13 and 17.

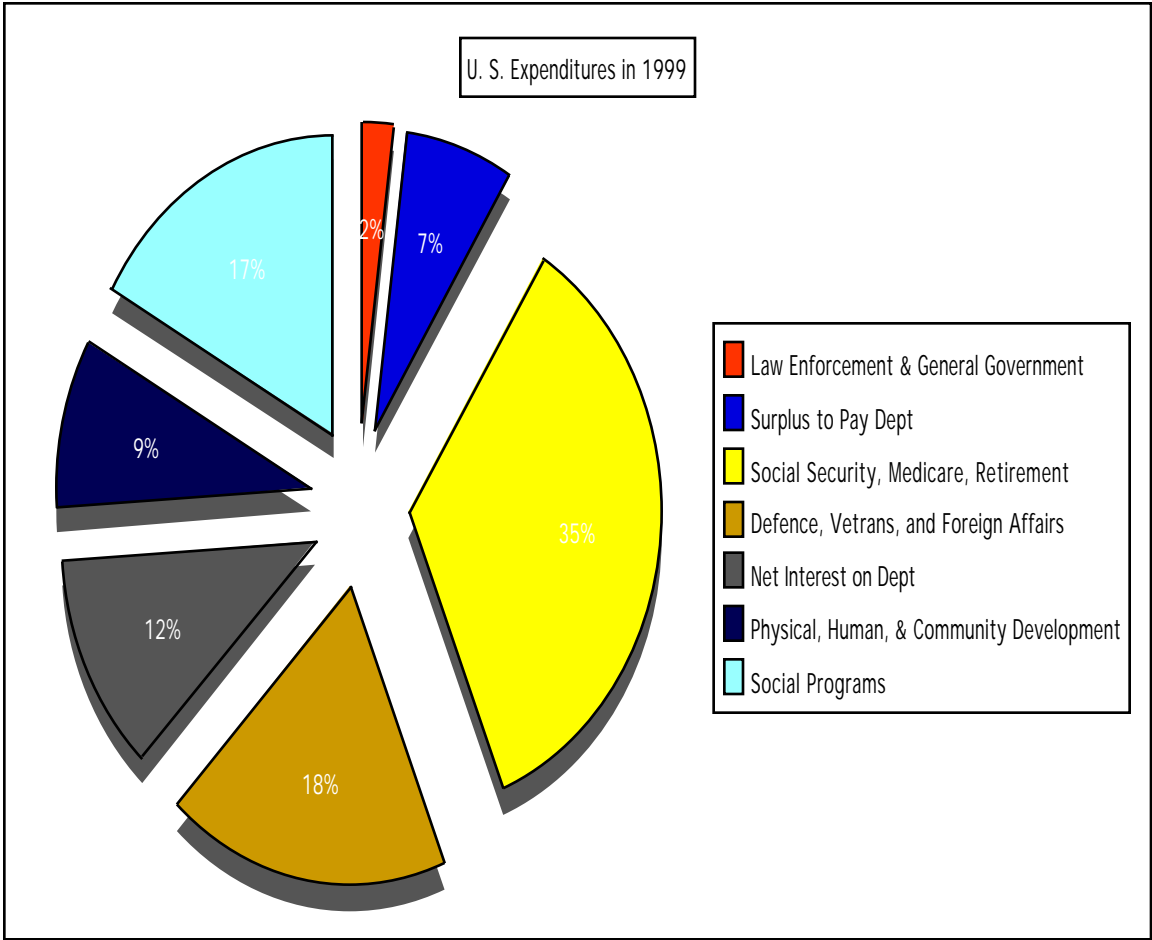
The French have adopted strict guidelines governing what will be taught to their children. French students are required to have instruction in the areas of French language and culture, reading, mathematics, science, civics, art, and physical education.

Assessment of student progress is conducted by individual teachers who have set the pace of learning which suits the needs of the teachers as well as the students.

Whatever the outcome of assessments, the US spends a substantial amount of money on educating its young people, but the French spend a much bigger portion of their national budget on education.

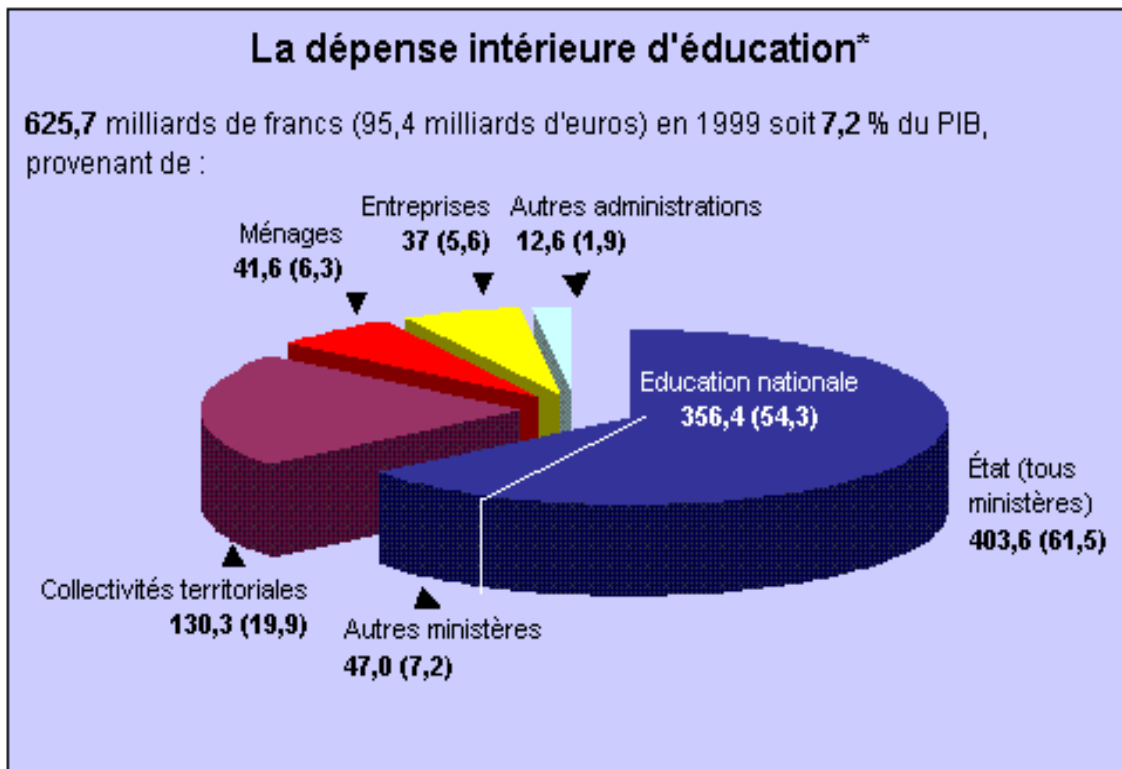
Funding for education in the United States comes only partially

from the federal government. The following pie chart entitled, "U.S. Expenditures in 1999," explains that the Federal budget for education is \$122 billion dollars and that students realize only about 7% of those funds, which averages out to total about \$6,000 per student. In addition, each state contributes, for example, Rhode Island spends \$7,600 per student, which is 21.7% above the national average, 6th highest in the nation. And, each municipality (the amount of which varies from town to town) contributes as well. The estimated figure of \$15,000 is spent each year per student in the United States.



The French also put high priority on educational funding. Education in France is 100% funded by the National Government. The following pie chart entitled, “National Expenditure for Education,” explains that the budget of \$51 billion dollars for education represents 54% of the French National Budget. The total amount spent on each student averages out to be \$5,600 per year.

National Expenditure for Education



Source : MEN-DPD

(*) 625,7 milliards soit 95,4 milliards d'euros : dépense intérieure d'éducation (métropole)
 653,8 milliards soit 99,7 milliards d'euros : dépense d'éducation (métro + DOM + TOM)
 Entre parenthèses : les chiffres en euros

Conclusion

Both the United States and France are grooming their children to compete on a global scale.

The Founding Fathers of the United States saw the great need for public education. Within 100 years of its inception, the first secular institution of learning was opened in the United States, followed by the establishment of the first Federal Department of Education in 1867.

The primary goal of the United States educational system is educational excellence. Standardized tests have been administered for the purpose of evaluating schools as well as teachers since the restructuring of the primary and secondary educational system in 1965. The results of the standardized tests have weighed heavily in the past, and will become even more important in the future.

The United States spends approximately 7% or \$122 billion of the national budget on education, 40% more than France. Also, each state and town contribute funds toward schooling which ultimately equates to approximately \$15,000 per student per year.

Napoleon Bonaparte saw the need for public education for rebuilding his nation. However, the Roman Catholic church had a strong- hold on politics as well as education until 1833 when laws were passed establishing modern primary education in France.

French schools are becoming increasingly more competitive. In order to give French children a competitive edge, the government requires that children begin school at the age of three in Nursery school where they are taught how to learn. The schools are governed by an inspector and the school administration, however, it is the responsibility of the teacher to assure that learning is successful.

The French government is totally financially responsible for funding education. The French spend 54% or \$51 billion dollars per year, which averages out to \$5,600 per student.

There are many similarities as well as differences in the educational systems, but ultimately, both the United States and France both have the best interests of the students in mind.