

The life of a French high school student.

The first question in the morning is, can I get to school, are the transportation workers on strike today? If you can get to school, the next question is, can I get in, are the students or teachers striking today, are there shopping carts or a pad-lock blocking the entrance? And finally, do I even have class today, did the professor cancel or strike, and there are no substitute teachers.

These are questions that a student would ask themselves on a daily basis when living in France. Living in a country when a strike is the favorite past time of the inhabitants, it begins to affect the daily life of a student. It is possible that the school is blocked with shopping carts or that there is a pad-lock on the doors, placed by the teachers. All in hopes that the government, who is not present to see the incident, will do something different.

As a student in France, their schedule is based on what they would like to do in the future, what their occupation, that they choose around the age of 13, will be. They can prioritize, take more hours of French or philosophy than science, as a choice. Their choices play into what final exam they choose to take to graduate from high school. The next part of the day can vary, maybe they have class or maybe there is a hole in their schedule and they can leave for an hour. This all depends, but they better be back for their other classes that can go until 6pm. Unless the teachers cancels the class, then they are free and can leave school grounds once again.

At lunch, they can take their time and enjoy the three-course meal during the hour and a half they are given. A nice salad to start, a main hot dish, and a dessert or cheese or fresh fruit, and of course a fresh “petit” loaf of bread. No chicken nuggets or frozen pizzas, but chicken, rice, fish or beef in carefully prepared sauce. Not too bad for around 3 euro. For the teachers it is the same menu but there is wine if they so choose to indulge.

Back to class, where the student waits for the teacher to allow them to enter and sometimes, when to sit down. How impressive? Next, they all get out their pencil pouches, take out the needed materials, assorted color pens they are told, glue, scissors, or a ruler, and then wait for further instruction. The teacher will begin the notes on the board, underlining the title, and in unison, all the students pull out their rulers and follow suit, even matching the color scheme of the teacher. Their notebook is a road map from the class, with worksheets glued into the pages and notes next to assignments, missing papers are a rarity.

After taking the notes, that are dictated to them, word for word by the professor, the students write down in their agenda book their assignment for the next week, when they have class again. Never during this time do you hear, ‘I do not have paper’, ‘What color do I need to use?’, ‘I do not have anything to write with’; really you do not hear a peep from the students, just the changing of writing utensils and the use of a ruler. The notes are done, the students are packed up and filing out, the teacher does the same, putting on their coat and locking the door, they leave for the day and are unavailable for questions once the class is over.

The French education system is different when compared to that of the United States, there is no differentiated learning nor do the students stay at school from start to finish nor are there organized sports or clubs like in the United States. But the differences work for France, they produce well educated and behaved students, they strive for autonomy from the students, but that can be questioned when they are told what color to take notes in. And our system in the United States is working for us, but a mixture could be nice. The hour and a half lunch is a long shot, but the use colored pens and the extensive notebooks they keep is beneficial to the students in the class and in their future classes. This is something I hope to bring into my classroom, when I am able to see the students are a daily basis or after school when I will make myself available to them.

All this was first-hand experience. I had the opportunity to participate in an exchange program for teachers, that is conjunction with the French and United States government. I was placed in a high school in the north of France with a high school science teacher. I stepped in front of the students on several teaching occasions and was able to observe a variety of classes. This experience is one of the top in my life and it will change the way I walk into a classroom, no matter the country or the nationality of the students.

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Fall 2010

Rouen, France