

French preschools aim to please toddlers, moms ^[1]

Author: Beardsley, E.

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Excerpts from transcript:

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

This is MORNING EDITION from NPR News. Good morning. I'm Renee Montagne.

MARY LOUISE KELLY, host:

And I'm Mary Louise Kelly.

President Obama wants to make preschool available to every child in the United States. That's already the case in many European countries. In France, children start school at the age of three in what is called *ecole maternelle*. Eleanor Beardsley gives us a glimpse of how the system works from Paris, where her son has just finished his first year.

ELEANOR BEARDSLEY: When Maxim(ph) started French preschool last September, my first thoughts were that three-year-olds are just too young to be in school all day. There was a lot of crying that month, but after Maxim and the other children adjusted to their new routine, I began to see some amazing things.

Like the day he came home and at the age of three and a half, recited his first poem.

MAXINE: (French language spoken)

BEARDSLEY: And I've been pretty impressed since then. With his class, Maxine reads and paints. He has learned to write his name. At Christmas, we parents were serenaded with a yuletide concert.

Group: (Singing in French language)

BEARDSLEY: Maxim is learning a lot, but he is also taken care of in a stimulating and cozy environment. Every day he sits down to a hot lunch and has a nap in a tiny dormitory bed. It's all part of the process of preparing young children to be students and citizens, says Sylvia Bernard(ph), director of one of Paris's 800 *ecole maternelle*.

Ms. SYLVIA BERNARD: (Through translator) The essence of *ecole maternelle* isn't about learning math or how to read. It's about learning who we are and how to interact with other children and adults, and to respect other people.

BEARDSLEY: In France, 100 percent of three, four and five-year-olds attend preschool. So everyone starts first grade on an equal footing. While the French do recognize problems with many aspects of their education system, *ecole maternelle* is held in high regard. It is one of the cherished symbols of the French Republic, embodying both equal treatment for all and the emancipation of women.

Chicago-native Barbara Legron(ph) says she has been able to work full-time with no worries since her daughter Natasha began attending *ecole maternelle*.

Ms. BARBARA LEGRON: I was very skeptical at first, to send her there for basically all day. But eventually as the year went on, I realized that she was learning so much. I mean, she was teaching me rhymes, French nursery rhymes that I should've been teaching her. So she's having a good time, she's learning and she's with other kids, so she's playing. And I can't really compete with that, even though I'm the mom.

BEARDSLEY: Experts say the focus on cognitive and emotional development at the same time is what makes a good preschool. Miho Taguma is an education specialist at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. She says long term studies show that children who attend high quality preschool programs achieve more and have fewer problems later on.

Ms. MIHO TAGUMA (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development): It's not only the parents and the child who benefit from the participation of preschool, but also that society as a whole. We consider public spending in early children is not a cost, but an investment in the future - important for economic development and ensuring well-being of the nation.

BEARDSLEY: Some economists estimate that investing in early education for some groups produces a return of nearly six to one in benefits

and savings later on. Taguma says France and the Nordic nations invest the most in early childhood education, while her native Japan has a poor record. The U.S. is not spending enough either, she says, but it is at least targeting lower income children with its Head Start program.

In America, preschool is a patchwork system. A few states provide full public programs from age four, but many more provide nothing at all. Steve Barnett, a Rutgers University economist specializing in early education says poor families in America have some good options, but the middle class have been largely left on its own.

Mr. STEVE BARNETT (Rutgers University): You have to make do with what you can afford, and most families find themselves in a position where if there're two parents working they need long hours of childcare. And to buy long hours at high quality, is very expensive and often unaffordable.

Ms. ALENE STRETT(ph) (Teacher): (French language spoken)

BEARDSLEY: Back in Paris, Maxim's class is visiting an art museum where the curator draws the children into a discussion over the colors and characters in a giant painting on the wall. Their teacher, Alene Strett, says three-year-olds are not too young to appreciate such an experience.

Ms. STRETT: (Foreign language spoken)

BEARDSLEY: I want them to get into the habit of going to the museum like anywhere else, she says. Learning how to consume culture is very important for children this age.

For NPR News, I'm Eleanor Beardsley in Paris.

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