

Development of Universal Preschool in France

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Abstract

The purpose of this summer's project was to build context for the universal French preschool program, *école maternelle*, and its history and significance to women's mobility. Additionally, it was to analyze the French policy under the lens of the three worlds of welfare capitalism framework by comparing it to the U.S. along with other OECD countries. Through analysis of current literature and preschool data, a positive correlation between *école maternelle* and women's social mobility was established. Moreover, a comparison of France to the U.S. and other OECD countries shows that neither fits cleanly into the traditional three worlds of welfare capitalism. This as a whole paints the picture of *école maternelle* and how it is ingrained in French history and the country's attitude towards welfare. This is the first step to answering the larger research question examining the impact of access to early education in France on mother's mental health. Thus, this subproject aims to inform the future research of the London School of Economics Health Inequalities Lab.

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1 Introduction

1.1 French *École maternelle* Program

École maternelle is the French pre-primary school program for children of ages 2-6. In 1833, the central government took over the majority of established schools for young children and in 1881, fees for preschool were abolished (Berger et al., 2026).

The curriculum for *école maternelle* has changed significantly over time, beginning in the 1990s with the most recent major reform occurring in 2015 (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche, 2015). This reform emphasized learning through play, reflection and problem solving, and memorization. It split learning into 5 domains and detailed expectations and objectives for each. While enrollment rates had already reached 96.7% by age 3 in 2014, *École maternelle* was made mandatory for all 3 year olds in 2019 (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2026). The program is separated into 3 main sections, the *petite* section (ages 3-4), *moyenne* section (ages 4-5), and *grande* section (ages 5-6).

Key characteristics of the preschool program are that tuition is free but there are small costs for wraparound services such as meals and afterschool services. The meals provided are considered high quality and nutritious. There is a daily session of physical activity lasting 30-45 minutes. Schools can be private or public, and public schools can be eligible for extra funding to support students (Berger et al., 2026).

There are 24 hours of instruction per week. The curriculum is nationally designed and regulated, and funded by the French ministry of education. Teachers are required to earn a 3-year university degree, pass a recruitment exam, and then earn a 2-year master's degree. The teaching requirements are the same as teaching elementary school. Teachers are assessed throughout their career by inspectors from the National Ministry of Education. Teaching aides who are required to earn a 1 year vocational degree also assist teachers with daily activities (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2026).

1.2 U.S. Head Start Program

The United States does not have a universal preschool program, but for this analysis we can examine Head Start for comparison. Head Start is a targeted preschool program for low-income families in the United States. To qualify for Head Start, household income must be at or below the federal poverty line. This is currently those who make \$33,000 or below annually. Families

receiving TANF and/or SNAP benefits are automatically eligible to apply for Head Start. This program is primarily for 3-4 year olds. Over 1 million children are enrolled in Head Start today across all 50 states ([Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, 2024b](#)).

The Head Start program was first launched in 1965 as an 8 week program by President Lyndon B. Johnson after he declared "The War on Poverty". The program was expanded to include bilingual/bicultural programs in some states in 1977. The federal government awards grants to local organizations, which run each program under national performance standards. The program was reauthorized to expand in 1998 and again in 2007 to strengthen duration and quality ([Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, 2025](#)).

Head Start curriculum is focused on approaches to learning, social and emotional development, language and literacy, cognition, and perceptual, motor, and physical development. Programs are required to establish readiness goals with parental guidance to best fit individual children's needs. At least 50% of Head Start teachers nationally are required to have a bachelor's degree in child development or a related field ([Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, 2024b](#)).

Key characteristics of Head Start include free tuition for those eligible, health screenings, and meals and snacks that provide between $\frac{1}{3}$ and $\frac{1}{2}$ of a child's daily nutritional needs ([Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, 2024a](#)). Support for families is also provided, including parenting education and mental health support.

Table 1 compares and contrasts the key characteristics of the two programs.

Key characteristic	<i>École maternelle</i> (France)	Head Start (United States)
Primary Age Served	3-6 years old	3-4 years old
Teaching Requirements	3-year university degree (bachelor's equivalent) and 2-year master's degree	50% required to have 4 year bachelor's degree
Curriculum	Learning through play, reflection and problem solving, and memorization- 5 domains (language, physical activity, art, structuring thought, exploring the world)	Learning, social and emotional development, language and literacy, cognition, perceptual, motor, physical development
Additional Resources Available	Meals and afterschool services (with wraparound fees)	Health screenings, meals and snacks, mental health support and parent education for families

Table 1: Institutional Comparison of *École maternelle* and Head Start

2 *École maternelle* and Women's Labor Force Participation

There has been some literature on possible beneficial effects of public preschool in the U.S. on student outcomes long-term, both academic and behavioral (Gray-Lobe et al., 2023). Beyond positive outcomes for students, recent studies suggest universal preschool may affect maternal work and income (Baker et al., 2026). Increased SES correlated with higher employment and income for women has been associated with improvements in physical and mental health (Islam and Jaffee (2024), World Health Organization (2026)). Interest in exploring the relationship between universal preschool and maternal mental health stems from these key links. In what follows, I will be showing that in France, the timeline of the development of *école maternelle* displayed through enrollment rates and number schools opened clearly aligns with women's labor force participation and employment trends. This correlational evidence provides a basis to explore the relationship between *école maternelle* and women's social mobility in France. Establishing this relationship is significant for the broader research project about the effect of universal preschool on maternal mental health outcomes.

2.1 Development of *École maternelle* Over Time

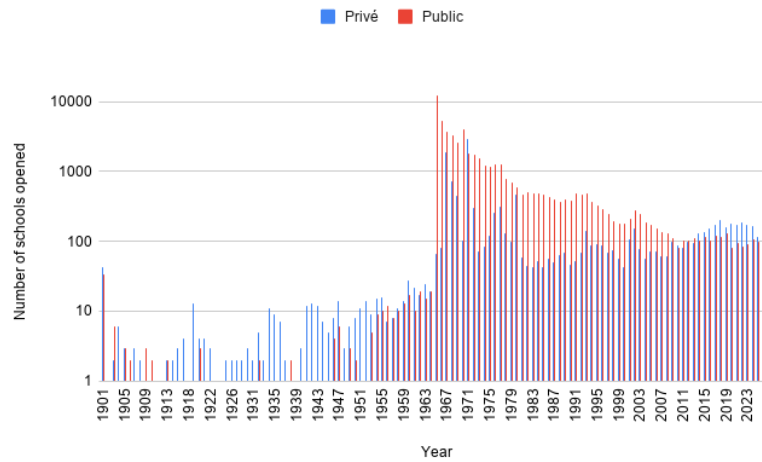


Figure 1: Number of Public and Private École Maternelle Opened Each Year

Notes: Data sourced from [Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale \(2026\)](#).

Figure 1 displays the number of public and private preschools opened each year in France from 1901 to 2026. It was made using a dataset of schools from the French Ministry of National Education. The blue bars represent private schools and the red bars represent public schools. The number of new schools significantly spiked in the late 1960s and plateaued in the late 1980s and beyond. The greatest number of new schools opened occurred in 1965.

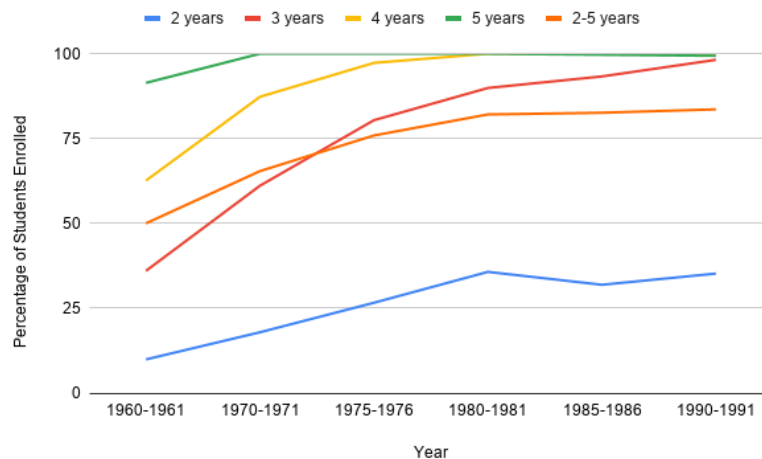


Figure 2: Evolution of Percentage of Students Enrolled in School by Age

Notes: Graphed table data sourced from [Papon and Martin \(2008\)](#).

Figure 2 displays the percentage of students aged 2-5 enrolled in preschool in France from 1960-1961 to 1990-1991. Ages 3-5 have a positive enrollment trend and plateau at or around 100% enrollment while enrollment for 2 year olds decreases in the 1980s before rising again.

2.2 Women's Employment

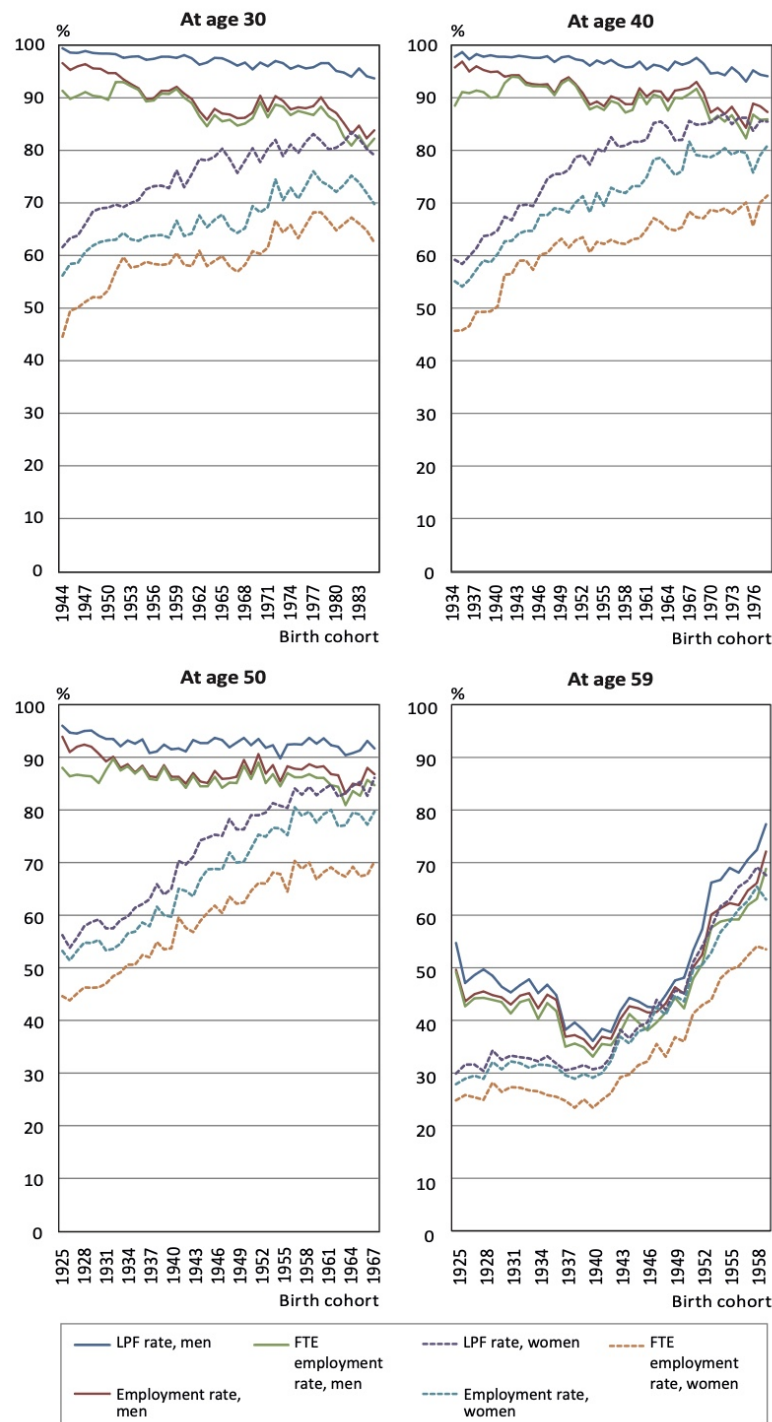


Figure 3: Labor Force Participation and Employment Rates in France

Notes: Graph sourced from [Papon and Martin \(2008\)](#).

Figure 3 shows labor force participation (LFP), full time equivalent (FTE), and employment rates for men and women across different birth cohorts in the 1900s in France at ages 30, 40, 50, and 59. The purple dashed line shows the LFP rate for women and the orange dashed line shows the FTE rate for women. These trend lines are the primary focus of the analysis. The birth cohort of 1934 at age 40 corresponds with the year 1974. Both women's LFP and FTE for age 40 rose significantly from the 1970s to early 1990s and grew slower after that period.

2.3 Intersection of *École maternelle* and Women's Social Mobility

In the late 1960s, the number of new preschools opened significantly increased, shown in Figure 1. In 1970, the number of 3 year olds enrolled in preschool had skyrocketed from 36% to 61% in just a decade. By 1980, there was near universal enrollment for children aged 4 and 5, and over 90% for children aged 3, as seen in Figure 2.

In the 1980s, France faced a recession and a period of high inflation. This led to the rise of both members of household working and earning out of necessity, or dual household incomes. The enrollment trend in preschool closely follows the rise of social mobility for women in France. For example, in 1965, women were given the right to work and open a bank account without needing their husband's permission. This was an important step for financial and economic freedom for women in France. The mid to late 1960s also saw sharp increases in both enrollment and the number of new schools.

One possible explanation is that with both adult members of households working, there was no one to take care of the children during the day, so the demand for school for younger children aged 2-5 increased. Moreover, in 1978, the Single Wage Allowance Act was overturned, included in the timeline in Figure 4. This previously encouraged mothers to stay home as it only supported households where one member earned a wage.

Furthermore, looking at labor force participation (LFP) and employment rates throughout the 1900s in Figure 3, it can be seen that mobility increased strongly. Evidence from the graph shows that growth for labor force participation was highest for birth cohorts in the mid 1930s-1950s, meaning women of age 40 working in the 1970s-1990s. After this period, growth stagnates. However, for the full time equivalent (FTE) rate, the trend slightly differs. The employment rate is lower by at least 20 percentage points at all times, and the rate at which employment increases slows down earlier, in the early 1950s. Differences in labor force participation and employment are majorly explained by labor force participation including both unemployed and employed in-

dividuals and the least qualified group of individuals having more trouble finding full time employment, especially in times of economic downturn.

The trends within the time period show a clear alignment, and could provide evidence for a link between the development of universal preschool and women's mobility and employment. It is important to note that this merely summarizes a correlational relationship, and not taking a stance on causal effects. It is unclear whether the development of *école maternelle* had a mobilizing effect on women in France, or whether the need for women to work during economic changes influenced the demand for universal preschool. However, this correlation provides necessary context for a larger project on the impact of universal preschool on mother's mental health. Recent literature suggests that increased social mobility and financial stability are correlated with improved physical health outcomes and fewer mental health issues. Higher socioeconomic status (SES) is associated with better living conditions, better nutrition, greater access to healthcare, less stress, and greater psychological bandwidth, and more ([Islam and Jaffee \(2024\)](#), [Schilbach et al. \(2016\)](#), [World Health Organization \(2026\)](#), [Zhao et al. \(2025\)](#)).

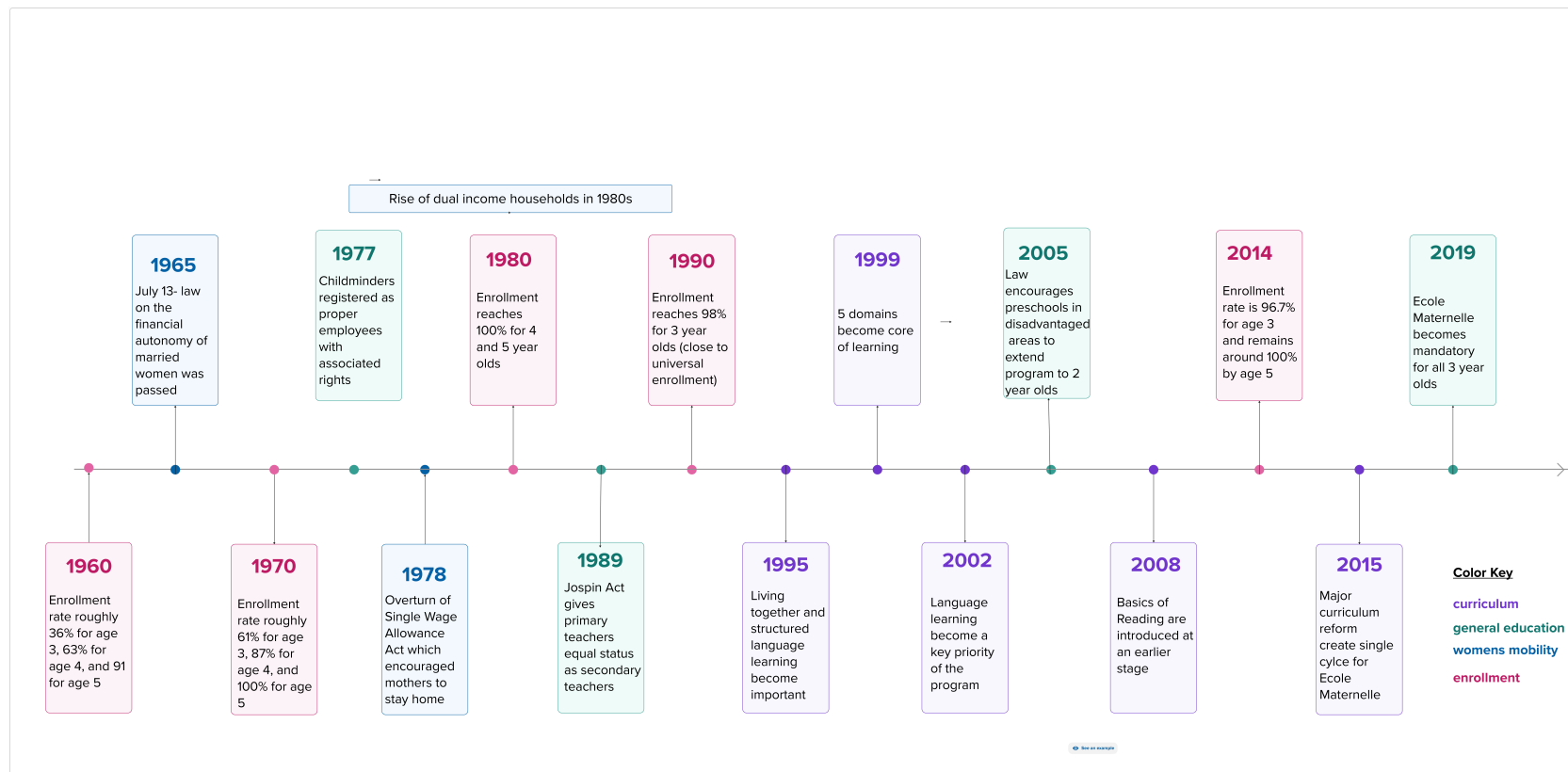


Figure 4: Timeline of Development of *École maternelle* Program in France

Notes: Timeline created using Mural App,

Information Sourced from (BNP Paribas (2025), Fagnani (2012), Robert (2018), Garnier (2011), Centre d'observation de la société (2026), Ministère de l'Éducation nationale (1999), Berger et al. (2026), Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, de l'Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche (2015), European Education and Culture Executive Agency (2026), Direction de l'information légale et administrative (2026))

The timeline in Figure 4 displays key events that shaped the development of *école maternelle* in France from the 1960s to now. The timeline includes changes to general education policy, *école maternelle* program curriculum, laws that have impacted women’s mobility, and enrollment. These four domains have shaped the development of *école maternelle* over the past sixty years. While the 2019 law made it mandatory for all 3 year olds in France to attend preschool, universal enrollment was essentially reached a while before then, demonstrating the quality and usefulness of the program.

2.4 Mapping Distribution of Preschools in France Over Time



Figure 5: Geographic Distribution of Public and Private Preschools in France

Notes: Created with QGIS, Data sourced from [Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale \(2026\)](#).

Figure 5 shows a map of French preschools in the year 1960 (Figure 5a) vs today (Figure 5b). Blue circles represent private schools and pink squares represent public schools. From 1960 to today, we see a dramatic increase in both the number of schools opened and the coverage of schools throughout the country. Moreover, the concentration of schools is greater in the outer areas of France near the border, and private schools specifically are concentrated in the West along the Atlantic coast.

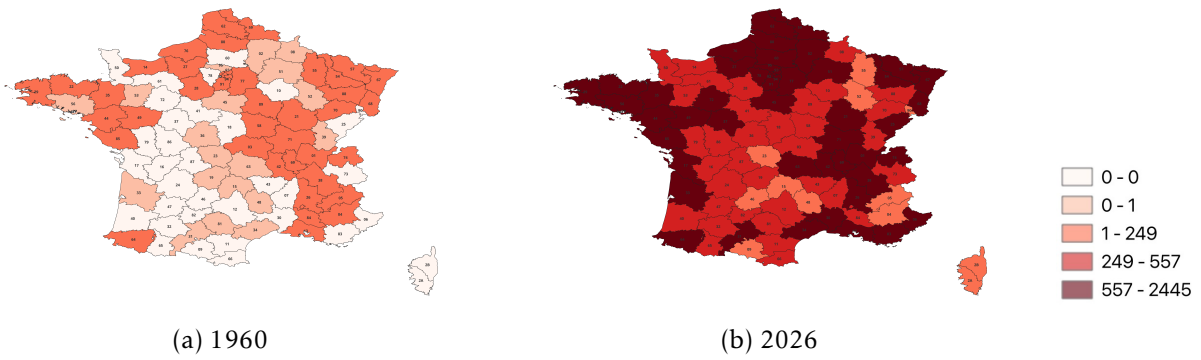


Figure 6: Distribution of Total Preschools by Department in France

Notes: Created with QGIS, Data sourced from [Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale \(2026\)](#).

Figure 6 shows the progression in number of preschools per department in France from 1960 (Figure 6a) to 2026 (Figure 6b). In 1960, many departments have 0 to 1 schools shown by the white and light peach color, and none have over 249 schools. The outer and northern departments in France show a stronger concentration of schools. By 2026, the number of schools per department has increased greatly. About half of the departments have 557 or more schools (dark maroon) and a strong majority have 249 or more (red). Every department has at least one school by 2026.

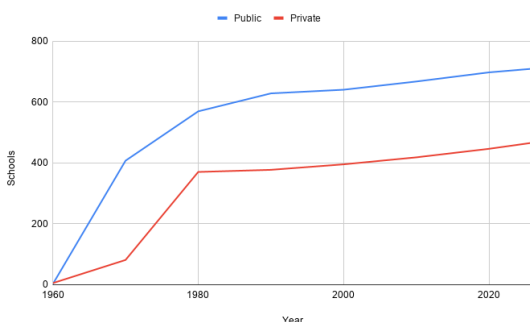


Figure 7: Distribution of Public and Private Preschools by Department in France

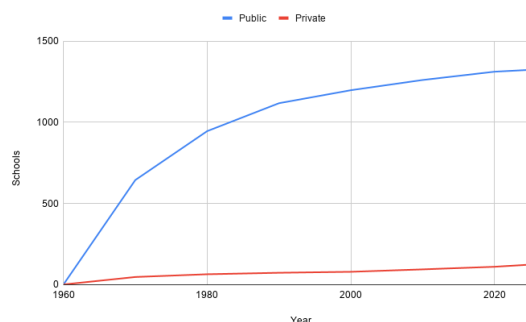
Notes: Created with QGIS, Data sourced from [Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale \(2026\)](#).

Figure 7 displays a map of public and private preschools by department in France in 1960 (Figure 7a) and 1970 (Figure 7b). Blue circles represent private schools and pink squares represent public schools. The total number of preschools per department is shaded according to the legend in figure 6. The maps show a significant increase in the concentration of schools in each department from 1960 to 1970. By 1970, all departments had at least one school and about a fifth of the departments contained over 557 schools. The highly concentrated departments appear closer to

the border of France rather than in the middle of the country.



(a) Department 44 (*Loire-Atlantique*)



(b) Department 77 (*Seine-et-Marne*)

Figure 8: Number of Public and Private Preschools per Department in France Over Time

Notes: Data sourced from [Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale \(2026\)](#).

Figure 8 shows the trend of public and private preschools over time in French departments 44 (Figure 8a) and 77 (Figure 8b). Department 44 (*Loire-Atlantique*) is located on the western coast of France while department 77 (*Seine-et-Marne*) is located on the eastern central part of the country. Both departments show an increase in public and private schools over time. Both have a high number of total schools (more than one thousand) by 2026 and a greater number of public than private schools. However, in *Seine-et-Marne* nearly all of the schools are public, whereas in *Loire-Atlantique* the distribution of schools is more even. This example is consistent with the depiction of a higher concentration of private schools on the west coast than other parts of France in Figure 5.

3 U.S. Perspective on Early Childhood Education

3.1 U.S. Welfare System

Analyzing the U.S. perspective on early childhood education through its role in the welfare system as a whole is key to contrasting it with the development of the French universal program. Childcare in the U.S. is a longstanding and complex issue that exists in the current welfare system. The United States operates on a two tiered welfare system with two types of programs: social insurance (tier one) and social assistance (tier two). Social insurance programs include Social Security, Medicare, Unemployment Insurance, and Worker's Compensation. Benefits are earned by working, but programs are typically universal; there is no income threshold to be eligible to

participate.

Social assistance programs, however, are means-tested; to be eligible, an individual or family must fall below a threshold to qualify for aid. The federal poverty line is commonly used as a threshold for this. Social assistance programs include TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, Public Housing, Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Head Start, and Pell Grants, among others. Social assistance programs in the United States, aside from Medicaid, are much smaller in magnitude than social insurance programs, the largest being social security ([Howard, 2021](#)).

3.2 Attitudes and Spending on Social Programs

Attitudes towards welfare and public opinion play a significant role in shaping federal policy regarding these programs. In the U.S., funding for social insurance programs is much greater than funding for social assistance programs, seen in Figure 9 below: Medicare and Social Security alone take up over 50% of payments for individuals in 2025, while public assistance accounts for less than 5%. This is largely due to stronger bipartisan support for these social insurance programs. On the other hand, social assistance beneficiaries are seen as benefiting from the system while not contributing themselves. Misconceptions, often rooted in racial stereotypes about beneficiaries, led to a stigma surrounding social assistance programs ([Rank et al., 2021](#)).

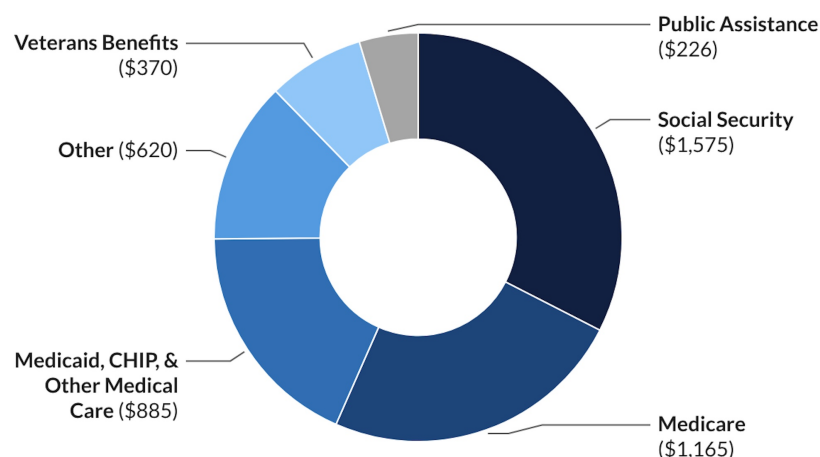


Figure 9: Federal Government Spending on Social Programs

Notes: Chart sourced from [Peter G. Peterson Foundation \(2025\)](#).

Figure 9 displays the U.S. federal funding allocated to each type of welfare program in 2025.

Large parts of government spending went towards Social Security and Medicare (health insurance for elderly), and the second largest portion of the budget went to Medicaid (health insurance for low income individuals) and other healthcare programs. Public assistance, including programs such as SSI and TANF, received the lowest share.

Even within social assistance programs, early education often receives one of the smallest shares of government spending. In 2025, for example, the U.S. spent just \$12.27 billion on Head Start and Early Head Start programs compared to \$101.7 billion on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) ([USAFacts \(2026\)](#), [First Focus on Children \(2026\)](#)). There is a key reason for this. Miller explained that in the U.S., “The resistance to public child care has never been mainly about economics . . . It has been rooted in a moral argument — that the proper place for mothers (at least certain ones) is at home with their children,” ([The New York Times, 2019](#)). Although childcare has been observed to have a strong positive effect on women’s labor force participation, hesitation to invest stems from a deep belief that families (specifically mothers) should take care of their own children.

4 OECD Cross-Country Comparative Analysis

4.1 Esping-Andersen Typology

Comparing the France and U.S. approach to childcare to other OECD countries is important to analyzing where childcare fits in the country’s attitude towards welfare as a whole. One framework that can be used to examine this is the Esping-Andersen typology, which classifies modern countries into three different welfare models: liberal welfare state, conservative welfare state, and social democratic welfare state. Liberal describes countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom where the free market plays an important role and government interference is relatively low; social assistance is means-tested and programs are targeted towards low income individuals. Social assistance is often stigmatized as benefits are often seen as handouts or not earned. The conservative state primarily applies to European countries including Germany, France, and Italy where a traditional family value based system is encouraged. Social assistance for conservative countries acts as a safety net only in the case that the family fails to support itself. The social democratic welfare state works based on the concept of decommodification, where social benefits are not tied to an individual’s ability to work and contribute to the market. Examples of countries that follow the social democratic model are Nordic nations such as Sweden, Denmark,

and Norway. Social assistance is most generous in this model and policies often target universal access to education and healthcare ([Esping-Andersen, 1990](#)).

According to this analysis, France is classified as a conservative regime. However, despite this, France maintains a universal free preschool program, mandatory as of 2019. This has widely encouraged women to return to the workforce after having children. This inherently goes against the traditional family model in which the wife stays home to take care of the children while the husband works. France experienced socialist left (PS) rule with President Mitterrand from 1981 to 1995 and Hollande more recently from 2012 to 2017, sandwiched between centrism ([Présidence de la République française, 2026](#)). Even before the election of President Mitterrand, France was moving away from the traditional family model with the overturn of the Single Wage Allowance Act in 1978 ([Direction de l'information légale et administrative, 2026](#)). In the context of *école maternelle*, France aligns more closely with the attitude of the Nordic countries toward education and childcare rather than using intervention as a last resort.

In this lens, the United States is considered a liberal welfare state. The U.S. spends much less on social assistance than on social insurance programs with the exception of Medicaid and does not have universal healthcare, universal childcare, or federally regulated paid time off. All social assistance programs such as SNAP and TANF are means-tested programs (targeted towards low-income individuals) as opposed to programs which benefit all income brackets. However, in the case of universal preschool, the conservative family focused model which may not be associated with the U.S. as strongly as European nations comes into the forefront of the argument.

4.2 OECD Country Comparison

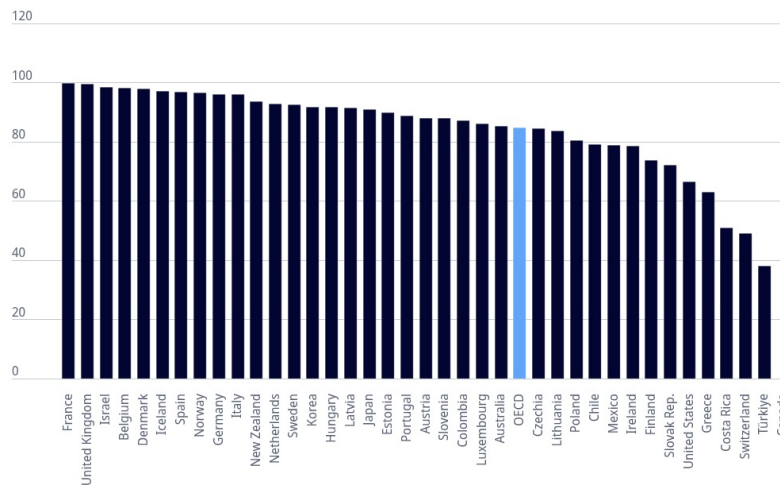


Figure 10: Enrollment rates in 2015 for Early Childhood Education by OECD Country

Notes: Graph sourced from [OECD \(2026\)](#).

Figure 10 displays the percentage of children aged 3-5 enrolled in early childhood education for each OECD country in 2015. Leading countries are France and the UK which had an enrollment rate of nearly 100%, significantly higher than the OECD average of about 85%. The lowest enrollment rate not including Canada was Türkiye with 38% of 3-5 year olds enrolled. A majority of the countries shown had a rate above 80%.

The difference in the focus on early childhood education is apparent in a comparison between OECD countries. As displayed in figure 10 above, France had a 99.86% enrollment rate in 2015, the highest of the OECD countries, while the U.S. fell behind the OECD average with a rate of 66.57% (OECD). In fact, France, the UK, Germany, Italy and the Nordic countries except Finland all had a high enrollment rate of over 95% in 2015. This was before *école maternelle* became mandatory in 2019. Countries' attitudes toward welfare shape their approach to early childhood education. These approaches may not fit exactly in line with the Esping-Andersen typology of the three distinct welfare states, but rather exist as a combination of two.

5 Conclusion

École maternelle has had widespread development in France over the past 66 years shown by the growth in schools per department and dramatic increase in enrollment rates over time. Even before preschool became mandatory in 2019, nearly 100% of children aged 3-5 were enrolled.

In the 1970s through the 1990s, significant early education and childcare reform occurred and women's financial autonomy and social mobility grew in parallel. *École maternelle* simultaneously experienced a lot of growth in enrollment in the 1960s-1990s. This is important as it could provide basic evidence for a link between French universal preschool, women's social mobility, and mother's physical and mental health. One of the goals of future research by the lab is to identify whether there is a causal relationship between universal preschool and maternal mental health outcomes.

The Esping-Andersen Typology is commonly used to classify countries as liberal, conservative, or social democratic welfare states and explain event responses or policy changes. While France is historically classified as conservative and the U.S. is classified as liberal, this does not draw a complete picture for their attitude towards welfare regarding early childhood education. While France is a leader of the OECD countries in terms of universal childcare, the U.S. lags behind the OECD average without any kind of federal program in favor of private or family childcare. From a childcare perspective of the three welfare states, neither the U.S. nor France fits cleanly into its common classification. The U.S. takes on a more conservative approach in favor of the traditional family model while France offers a universal program more similar to that of social democratic countries. The U.S. and France vary extensively in their attitude and approach to childcare, and as a whole fit into a gray area between welfare states rather than into any single one.

6 Acknowledgments

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