

MORNING EDITION from NPR News, July 7, 2010

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 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. 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.

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, director of one of Paris's 800 *ecole maternelle*. **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. 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 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 OECD. 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: 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. The U.S. is not spending enough, she says, but it is at least targeting lower income children with its Head Start program.

Copyright © 2010 National Public Radio®. For personal, noncommercial use only.