

# Choosing a Bilingual School for Your Child with a Disability, Diagnosis, or Additional Learning Needs

Prepared by EKIPP: Extraordinary Kids in Paris...and Parents too!

*A note on language: Special educational needs (SEN) is not always a popular term, nor is it accurate in all cases, but for simplicity, it is used here to encompass disability, neurodivergence, or other additional learning or behavioural needs.*

Identifying the best bilingual school in France for your child is hard.

The challenges are even greater when your child has additional needs that require accommodations or modifications to the curriculum or the school environment. Despite inclusion laws that ensure each child's right to an education, interpretations of the law differ from school to school, affecting the types of services provided. This article offers basic guidance to parents trying to find a bilingual school in France that fits their child's unique profile. The issues presented here are also relevant for any parent who values diversity, equity, and inclusion in their child's education.

Schools in France can be grouped into three broad categories: *public*, *sous-contrat* (private but under state supervision), and *private hors-contrat* (private with little state supervision). Adaptations for children fall under government supervision in public and *sous-contrat* schools. Children are assigned to their local public schools based on where they live, and few public schools are fully bilingual, so this article focuses instead on *sous-contrat* and *hors-contrat* private schools.

## Sous-contrat (semi-private) schools

*Sous-contrat* private schools are those under contract with the government. They receive some government funding and follow the national curriculum, with flexibility to add components such as religious or bilingual education. In 2022, 17.6% of students in France attended a *sous-contrat* school. Catholic schools represent 96% of *sous-contrat* schools in France, with the remainder being mostly bilingual, regional language, or schools created specifically for children with disabilities. Most *sous-contrat* schools are governed by a board of parents or other private stakeholders who oversee the *règlement intérieur* detailing the school's approach to instruction, discipline, and pedagogy.

SEN accommodations in *sous-contrat* schools follow the same process as public schools, as they must follow similar government guidance regarding rules and accommodations. However, *sous-contrat* schools have the right to set out admission criteria, often imposing admissions interviews, exams, or other evaluations as part of the admissions process. It is illegal in France to discriminate based on the basis of disability, even in admissions. Still, often, the admissions process (and beyond) makes it difficult for students needing academic support to succeed.

## Hors-contrat (fully private) schools

*Hors-contrat* private schools are not funded by the government and determine the content of their curriculum, provided students are taught common core subjects of the national program. Teachers do not need to obtain government-certified training in education. Montessori schools are a typical example. *Hors-contrat* schools do not need to follow the same school day hours or common holidays as public schools. However, they are subject to yearly inspections and are required to follow same anti-discrimination laws as public or *sous-contrat* private schools. In practice, lack of government oversight of admissions procedures and schooling can lead to a school culture that does not align with these laws. Bringing this to the attention of the relevant government agencies (e.g. the *Defenseur des Droits*) or the judicial system often falls to parents.

## Critical areas to consider when choosing a school

The points below present issues to consider and questions parents can ask when interviewing bilingual schools on behalf of their child with SEN. This article draws on an extensive consultation with the experienced [EKIPP community](#) of parents of children with SEN in France.

### 1- Admissions Process and Inclusion Policy

Both sous-contrat and hors-contrat private schools in France are free to set their own admissions processes, specifically to ensure that they only accept students they feel will "fit in" with the school culture and workload. Sometimes, these practices fall into a grey area of legality, even though many are common practices, such as IQ tests, speech and language assessments, and psychological evaluations.

#### Key Questions

- Does the school have an inclusion policy or committee? How do they foster inclusion in the classroom and the school community if not?
- Does the school currently have any children with SEN?
- Are mandatory interviews, tests, or outside evaluations required?
- What criteria are evaluated in the admissions process, and how much importance is placed on each element?

### 2- Communication and Transparency

The ease with which parents can communicate with teachers and administrators matters for any child's success, and especially for students with exceptional needs.

#### Key Questions

- How do parents communicate with teachers and administrators at this school?
- How will I know if my child struggles academically or socially at school?
- What forms of communication do the classroom teachers regularly use – communication notebooks, apps, emails, phones, or only in-person communication?
- How often are regular meetings scheduled?
- What is the school's policy regarding ad hoc meetings?

### 3- Accessibility and Physical Safety

Many schools in France were built before accessibility laws were enacted, and some have not yet brought their buildings up to code. Other schools may be located in rural, forested, or historic areas or on upper floors of buildings without elevator access.

#### Key questions

- Is the school wheelchair accessible or suitable for students with mobility needs? This includes ramps, electric doors, bathroom stalls, etc.
- Are there physical access issues that might impact my child, e.g., steps, low fences, or unfenced water structures?
- Have inspectors ever flagged safety risks at this school?

#### 4- SEN Staff Training

Not every bilingual school mandates regular training to ensure teachers work well with diverse groups, including children with SEN or children learning a second language. Yet these are not uncommon subgroups at bilingual schools, and staff should have a shared, well-informed understanding of how to work with such children.

##### Key questions

- Are teachers at the school certified in their country of origin or France? Are they mother-tongue speakers of the language in which they are teaching?
- How are staff trained to work with bilingual children?
- How are staff trained to work with children with SEN?
- How often is formal training organized? Are all teachers required to participate?
- Is there a SEN contact person at your school, and how accessible are they to parents?
- What connections does this school have with other schools, networks, or experts who provide SEN or bilingual education training?

#### 5- Applied Learning Support

School regulations and a school's experience with previous students can help illustrate their willingness and expertise in offering learning support. Sous-contrat schools should follow the same policies as public schools, while hors-contrat schools will vary widely in what they offer.

##### Key questions

- Does the school offer learning support for children who require accommodations or are encountering academic difficulties?
- Do they use IEPs or the French equivalent PAP, PPS, or PAI to outline accommodations or supports?
- Does the school have a clearly defined SEN policy and disability access plan?
- How has the school accommodated students in the past?
- If children are taken out of the classroom for learning support, how often does this happen, and for what purposes?
- Does the school practice differentiated learning? How is progress measured?
- How does the school adapt or make arrangements for children throughout the day, e.g., during recreation, lunchtime, and after-school clubs?

#### 6- Integrating Additional Specialists

A child's success can depend on a school's willingness to work with the doctors, therapists, and other carers supporting the child during school hours. This can mean being flexible about a student leaving school for therapy or welcoming professionals into the school environment.

Schools or parents sometimes demand a personal aide – an [accompagnant des élèves en situation de handicap](#) (AESH) – for a student in a mainstream classroom. In public and sous-contrat schools, the government provides these assistants to students following a formal evaluation process. While hiring a private assistant in a sous-contrat school is possible, the process is more complicated. In hors-contrat schools, the school is free to hire someone themselves or allow parents to hire someone privately but cannot legally demand an AESH of parents without a formal disability designation from MDPH. ["The presence of staff responsible for support is neither a prerequisite nor a condition for the student's schooling."](#)

## Key Questions

- Has the school previously worked with AESH, and are they open to having one?
- How do parents and a school decide on hiring an AESH for a student?
- What are the school's expectations of an aide, and how do teachers work with them?
- Who is expected to pay for this aide in private schools – the school, the parents, or both jointly?
- How does the school integrate feedback from the child's medical providers, such as pediatricians, psychologists, or occupational therapists?
- Do teachers participate in meetings with specialists or allow specialists to observe the classroom?

## 7- School Governance and Budget

School governance is a critical feature of how education works in France. Most private schools are governed by a private board that writes the internal rules that govern the school. This board also oversees the school budget. This illustrates the relative importance of, for example, teacher training and retention versus spending on the school's mortgage, rent, and administrative costs.

### Key Questions

- How does school governance work?
- Are the internal rules of the school available in English?
- Where can parents find the full budget? What share of the budget is dedicated to teaching versus administrative/facility costs?
- How much teacher/staff turnover happened in the past three years?

## 8- Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for All

The ideal school will take a holistic approach to diversity to be a school where all children feel welcome and can reach their potential. This framework should include *proactive* elements, such as written strategies to integrate diverse children, planning to communicate regularly and positively with children about people's differences, systematically promoting kindness, and addressing bullying fairly. The framework should also include *responsive* elements, such as standard procedures to follow when the school has difficulty integrating a child or when problems arise.

### Key Questions

- Does the school have a published diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plan? Does it address neurodiversity?
- How does the school proactively promote DEI among children during class, meals, and recreational periods?
- How does the school promote socioemotional skills and conflict resolution?
- What standard procedures does the school follow if behavioural or other challenges related to a student's special needs?

## 9- Gather more information

Finally, ask around: Validate what was learned during the school interview by talking with other parents, and not only the satisfied ones. This means asking where there is room for improvement in the school – a question everyone should be able to answer!