

## Educational Structures and Social Closure: Private Schooling, Curriculum Differentiation and Social Segregation in French Secondary Education

Quentin Maire, *University of Melbourne*

Andres Molina, *Victoria University and Universidad de Chile*

### Abstract

The relationship between private schooling and social and academic segregation varies around the world. French private schools enroll a minority of secondary students, yet social inequalities are marked in French education. This article argues that the social role of private schooling must be understood in the context of the entire panoply of resources and institutional means of managing socio-academic competition. Specifically, we explore the relationship between curriculum provision and private schooling in producing school segregation in France. Drawing on census data for all secondary education students in major cities, we compare levels of school segregation in middle school, where the curriculum is broadly comprehensive, and in high school, where it is divided. The findings show that private schooling and curriculum both contribute to social segregation.

### Résumé

La relation entre l'enseignement privé et la ségrégation sociale et scolaire varie dans le monde. En France, les écoles privées accueillent une faible proportion des élèves du secondaire, mais les inégalités sociales sont tout de même prononcées dans le système français. Dans cet article, nous soutenons que le rôle social de l'enseignement privé doit être compris dans le contexte de l'éventail complet des ressources et des moyens institutionnels employés pour gérer la concurrence socio-académique. Plus

Quentin Maire & Andres Molina. (2025). Educational Structures and Social Closure: Private Schooling, Curriculum Differentiation and Social Segregation in French Secondary Education. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 21(2). doi:10.22230/ijepl.2025v21n2a1465

IJEPL is a joint publication of the Faculty of Education at **Simon Fraser University**, the **University of Delaware**, and **PDK International**. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution in educational and other non-commercial settings 90 days after initial publication. Copyright for articles published in IJEPL is retained by the authors. More information is available on the IJEPL website: <http://www.ijepl.org>



précisément, nous explorons le rapport entre programme scolaire et enseignement privé dans la perpétuation de la ségrégation scolaire en France. En nous appuyant sur les données de recensement de tous les élèves du secondaire des grandes villes, nous comparons les niveaux de ségrégation inter-établissements au collège, où le programme scolaire tend à être le même pour tous et toutes, et au lycée, où il ne l'est pas. Les résultats montrent que l'enseignement privé et le programme scolaire contribuent tous deux à maintenir la ségrégation sociale.

**Keywords / Mots clés :** segregation, inequality, private schools, school choice, curriculum / ségrégation, inégalités, écoles privées, choix d'école, programme scolaire

## Introduction

In the last three decades, private schooling has received sustained attention from sociologists examining educational inequality. This has been approached from two main angles. On one hand, policy scholars have argued that private schooling has gained ground over public schooling as part of the broader erosion of the welfare state and the global diffusion of market models of provision (e.g., Jones & Ball, 2023). In this literature, the expansion of private schooling has been a top-down movement generated through the implementation of neoliberal political agendas. On the other hand, scholars focusing on social struggle for educational advantage have foregrounded the increasingly important role of private schooling as a marker of distinction in a context of mass educational participation (e.g., Zancajo & Bonal, 2022). Here, struggles between social groups for individual educational advantage result in the advance of privatization.

A key question explored in the field is the relationship between privatization and school segregation. The extant literature (e.g. Boterman, Musterd, Pacchi, & Ranci, 2019) shows that the role of private schools in producing segregation is variable internationally, calling for context-sensitive studies. This article analyzes this issue in France, where the tide of educational privatization has been weaker than in other countries and where private schools are largely state-dependent. The authors argue that the link between segregation and private schooling can be examined only as part of an analytical framework that considers the broader means of educational distinction. The social and educational uses of private schooling depend on the overall suite of instruments available to different social classes to invest in, navigate, and build advantage through the education system. This argument is developed with a multi-dimensional comparative analysis of school segregation in French cities. Our findings highlight the need to move beyond a generic focus on marketization and neoliberalization to better understand private schooling, school segregation, and educational inequality.

## Literature review

Studies of educational segregation, typically focusing on social class and ethnic and academic segregation, have produced cumulative findings showing that school segregation has increased internationally in recent decades, and that this intensification has been linked to educational policies implemented over the period, especially with

respect to family choice and market models of school enrolment (Bonal & Bellei, 2018). This has incited scholars to take stock of the causes of educational segregation, organizing them into more or less coherent theoretical models.

### **Theories of school segregation**

Theoretical models usually take the form of a list of factors presented as causes of school segregation. Wilson and Bridge (2019) propose a basic model including residential segregation and mechanisms of school allocation, including choice policies. Boterman and colleagues (2019) foreground educational landscapes, sub-divided into institutional dimensions (e.g., school selection processes, program differentiation, and other institutional features) and geographies, including social diversity, residential segregation, and the spatial network of schools. Bonal and Bellei (2018) mention four categories of causes: residential segregation, family strategies, school system structures, and educational policies. Perry, Rowe, and Lubienski (2022) propose a tripartite framework of education policies and structures, psycho-social dynamics, and contextual and societal factors, bringing together a wide array of mechanisms.

These models are valuable instruments to achieve analytical clarity and theoretical integration in our understanding of the causes and modalities of school segregation. At this level of abstraction, however, they remain under-specified because the causal articulation of different factors is case specific. Indeed, theorists of school segregation typically caution against abstract or generic causal arguments, highlighting that the phenomenon is driven by complex networks of causes, which are expressed differently internationally (Perry et al., 2022).

France presents an interesting case for the analysis of the relationship between private schooling and school segregation for two main reasons. On one hand, private schooling has seldom advanced in recent decades (Oberti, 2023; Piquemal, 2024). On the other hand, school segregation has long been marked in the French context, receiving greater attention since the choice-oriented policy reforms of the 2000s (Ben Ayed, 2013). This combination raises the question of the conditions that determine the significance of private schooling as an instrument of school segregation. Comparative analysis, across cities and across schooling levels, offers a useful approach to examine this issue.

### **French schooling structures**

The organization of French education is significant to understand the socio-educational role of private schools. After completing five years of primary school, French students move to middle school, organized as a four-year comprehensive curriculum that culminates in a national end-of-middle school certificate (*brevet*). Based on family preference and teacher judgment, at the end of grade nine, students transition to a high school (a small minority transition to an apprenticeship program). They enroll in either an academic or vocational program leading to the academic or vocational high school diplomas (*baccalauréats*), respectively. After grade 10, academic program students are further oriented into either general (i.e., standard academic) or technological (applied academic) pathways leading to distinctive high school diplomas.

Students' results in the *baccalauréat* then serve as the main criterion for university and non-university selective higher education entry. Although vocational baccalaureate holders can theoretically access universities, in practice, most places go to technological and above all general baccalaureate holders (see Figure 5 in Appendices).

It is through uneven engagement with these structures that social inequalities are produced in the French school system. Throughout the schooling years, academic competition prevails in determining social access to educational spaces and programs, and socially privileged families dominate this academic contest of continuous elimination (Cœuvrard, 1979). Upper- and middle-class students do better academically at the *brevet*, are significantly over-represented in the academic high school program, and are more likely to access university and selective higher education (Barasz, Furic, & Galtier, 2023).

The organization of curriculum also shapes school segregation's role in this academic contest. In middle school, although between-school segregation is significant, within-school segregation based on optional subject choice (typically foreign or classical languages) plays a key role in separating learners within broadly comprehensive institutions (Ly & Riegert, 2016). In high school, school segregation becomes the by-product of social patterns of enrolment in the split program structure. At this level, schools of different types coexist based on the programs they offer. The four main categories are: academic-general high schools (offering only the general stream of the academic baccalaureate), academic high schools (offering the general and technological streams of the academic baccalaureate), vocational high schools (offering the vocational baccalaureate only), and comprehensive high schools (offering both academic and vocational baccalaureates). It is this divided structure that organizes segregation in grades 10–12. Academic-only and vocational-only high schools tend to be more socially and academically homogeneous (in contrasted ways), whereas comprehensive high schools are more socially and academically heterogeneous but display high levels of within-school segregation between programs (Charousset, Monnet, & Souidi, 2023).

### ***Private schooling in France***

The specific status of private schools is relevant to grasp the relationship between private schooling and social segregation in France. Since 1959, most private schools, overwhelmingly Catholic, are governed through a contract with the state, granting them a “para-public” status, with curriculum, teacher training, teacher salaries, and external inspections aligned to the public school system (Héran, 1996). They are required to follow the national curriculum set by the Ministry of Education and around 75 percent of their total costs are publicly funded, including infrastructure expenses, operational cost, and teacher salaries (CACE, 2024). Private schools cannot charge fees, though family contributions for religious education, administrative expenses, or other material investments are common, on average to the tune of €1,000 per year (CACE, 2024). Unlike public schools, however, private schools are not subject to the school zoning policies that regulate the geography of public-school enrolments. This combination of tuition fee prohibition, para-public status, state-mandated curriculum, and state-dominated funding and accreditation makes French private

schools significantly different from private schools in most other countries. We argue this has important implications for their contribution to school segregation.

### ***School choice in France***

School choice was historically a relatively contained educational strategy in France, with enrolment in the local public school prevailing for most families. Policy reform weakening residence-based school assignment was introduced by the liberal Sarkozy government starting in 2007. This policy environment has since supported the diffusion of the logic of school choice through widespread granting of exemptions from enrolment in assigned public schools (Ben Ayed, 2015). It is in this new conjuncture that both private schools and school segregation have come to play a more central role in social struggles for academic distinction. Today, residential strategies, enrolment in private schools and requests for exemptions to enrol in out-of-zone public schools represent the three dominant forms of school choice in France (Boutchenik, Givord, & Monso, 2018; Courtioux & Maury, 2020; Oberti, 2007). For those who choose, schools' reputations and their social composition and academic enrichment curricular offerings, such as international or multilingual programs, are commonly invoked as reasons for choice (van Zanten, 2009, 2010).

### ***School segregation in France***

A rich body of literature on French school segregation has developed in recent decades, with studies principally focusing on middle schools. Existing analyses indicate that the specific status of private schools has made them an important but not a leading cause of school segregation. At the national level in 2023, under a quarter of the total segregation observed between middle schools (23.5%) was due to differences in social composition between public and private schools (Piquemal, 2024). Just over one fifth of the observed segregation (21.5%) was found between private schools, with the majority of segregation occurring between public schools (55%).

In secondary education, private school enrolment shares have not grown in the last three decades, nor has the level of between-school segregation increased. Rather, the main transformation has been the intensifying social differentiation between public and private sectors. Segregation between sectors has grown due to a higher concentration of middle- and upper-class students in private schools over the years, compensated with a decline in segregation between public schools (Piquemal, 2024). This has made private schools increasingly important to the analysis of school segregation.

Over this period, policy developments have sought to remedy school segregation, primarily aiming to address the concentration of social disadvantage in public schools. In 1981, the Priority Education Zones (ZEP) policy was introduced by the socialist Mitterrand government to provide additional funding to the public schools serving the most socially disadvantaged families (Miletto, 2018). Priority Education has since been a cornerstone of needs-based resourcing in primary and middle schools. In response to public concern about school segregation, in 2015 and 2023, regional and local educational authorities were also exhorted by the Ministry of Education to implement measures promoting social mixing. Diverse policies were implemented locally, including school re-zoning, adjustments to school assignment

rules, enrolment of scholarship students in socially advantaged public schools, and the introduction of curriculum enrichment in disadvantaged schools (Piquemal, 2024). These policies testify to the adoption of a primarily local policy approach to addressing school segregation (Ben Ayed, 2016), which has further differentiated the landscape of school segregation between cities.

Beyond country-wide analyses, existing research highlights the importance of cities as a unit of analysis to understand school segregation. Across France's major cities, the role of private schooling in producing segregation in middle school is variable (Oberti, 2023). In Grenoble, Marseille, and Montpellier, the contribution of the public/private divide to total segregation is small (under 25%); it rises to about 30 percent in Nantes, Rouen, and Paris, and exceeds 40 percent in Strasbourg and Douai-Lens. In all major cities except Lille, between-public school segregation still accounts for more of the observed segregation than public/private segregation and between-private school segregation.

At the city level, comparative analysis has shown that school choice (as opposed to residential segregation) accounts for about 40 percent of total segregation in Clermont-Ferrand and Bordeaux and 50 percent in Paris, with private schooling making up the majority of this contribution relative to the choice of non-assigned public school (Boutchenik, Givord, & Monso, 2020). City-specific studies have primarily been conducted in Paris. Oberti and Savina (2019) found comparatively high levels of school segregation for both working-class and upper-class students in Parisian middle schools. van Zanten (2012) revealed three main categories of attitudes toward middle school choice among working-class and immigrant families in Paris' disadvantaged suburbs: acceptance of the local public school, efforts to create protected pathways within local schools, and opt-out strategies to access better schools. These findings highlight the need to study school segregation at a city level and comparatively for different social groups.

In the French context, the scarcity of studies on school segregation in the upper secondary years stands out relative to the breadth of studies on middle-school segregation. Ly and Riegert (2016) have made an important contribution to the comparative analysis of school segregation in French middle and high schools. Using national data, they found greater levels of social segregation in high schools and that total educational segregation is twice as high as school segregation (meaning that segregation within schools is as significant as between-school segregation). Based on these studies, middle-high school comparison, city comparison, and comparison of segregation for different social classes drive the approach taken in this article.

## Methods

This article offers a multi-dimensional comparison of school segregation in French secondary education to examine the significance of system structures, including private schooling and curriculum, to this phenomenon. The authors use a three-dimensional comparison between:

- Major French cities
- Middle schools and high schools
- Lower-class- and upper-class-background students

This approach leverages the analytical advantage of multiple comparisons and the coverage of the census data used in the article to develop the authors' argument about the relationship between private schooling and school segregation.

### **Data**

The dataset we use is the 2022 Base Centrale Scolarité (BCS) school and student files produced by the French Ministry of Education. These census files are the most complete data source on French secondary education. The student file includes over 5.5 million records of students enrolled in grades six to 12 in middle and high schools in the 2022–23 academic year. Base Centrale Scolarité is a key data source used in official statistical reporting (e.g., DEPP, 2022) and the leading source of data for scholarly analyses of school segregation in France.

### **Variables**

As an administrative data source, BCS includes only a limited range of information. This analysis draws on school and student variables, with school-level variables merged into the student file using a school identifier.

### **School variables**

Four key variables are used from the school file:

1. For all schools, a sector variable to distinguish public from private schools. Although the private school category includes both those with and without a contract with the state, the student population in those without a contract is just 2.5 percent of the private school student population in the 14 selected cities. Accordingly, the variable is coded as a public/private dummy.
2. For middle schools, a variable that identifies all schools supported with additional resources by the Ministry of Education's Priority Education program due to their high concentration of social disadvantage. Only public schools are eligible for this program, and high schools are excluded from the policy. In 2022, 731 middle schools were supported as Priority Education Network (REP) schools serving socially disadvantaged families, and another 361 middle schools were further supported as Highest Priority Education Network (REP+) schools serving the most socially disadvantaged students. These two levels are included as separate categories of the Priority Education variable in the analysis.
3. For high schools, a school type variable that distinguishes four types of schools: academic (general-only) high schools, academic (general-technological) high schools, vocational-only high schools, and comprehensive high schools (offering both academic and vocational programs). These four types coexist within each city, and each type includes both public and private schools.
4. For all schools, an international option variable identifying whether the school offers a language enrichment program giving students access to an international label for their middle school certificate (brevet) or high school diploma (baccalauréat). The inclusion of this variable is motivated by the over-representation of socially advantaged families in these schools (Maire, 2022) and their documented use of these electives as a means of academic dis-

inction (Merle, 2011). In 2022, 151 middle schools and 90 high schools offered this international option across France.

### Student variables

The authors use two main variables from the student file. The key variable used to operationalise students' social class is derived from the listed occupation of the head of the student's household (see Maire, 2022 for a discussion of the limitations associated with this operationalization of students' social class). Following the approach most commonly used by researchers (e.g., Ly & Riegert, 2016), the 40 occupational categories can be grouped into four socioeconomic status (SES) background groups as follows:

- High-SES: large business owners, liberal and other professionals (public and private sectors), including engineers and teachers (primary and secondary);
- Upper-middle-SES: middle-level professionals (public and private sectors), including technicians, social workers, and allied health professionals;
- Lower-middle-SES: farmers, craftspeople, tradespersons, shopkeepers, police officers, members of the armed forces, and clerical and administrative workers; and
- Low-SES: labourers and manual workers (including in agriculture), retirees, and those unemployed or not in the labour force.

Because these four categories are based on parental occupation rather than on a continuous distribution, they are not of equal size: the high-SES group accounts for 33.4 percent of students in the analysis, the low-SES group 29.3 percent, the upper-middle-SES group 11.5 percent, and the lower-middle-SES group 25.8 percent (see Table 1 in Appendices). This distribution is consistent with the Ministry of Education's statistical reporting on student social origins (DEPP, 2022). This analysis focuses on the two polar and largest groups, i.e., students from high-SES and low-SES backgrounds.

The second student variable used in the analysis is a grade level variable that allows students to be grouped into either middle school years (grades six to 9) or high school years (grades 10 to 12).

### Sample

The analysis includes all students in non-special schools enrolled in grades six to 12 in the 14 selected cities with valid information for all the measures used in the analysis. The administrative code of the school's municipality was used to identify the school's city. Cities are categorised from the 2020 "urban unit" boundaries constructed by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, where municipality inclusion in a city is determined based on dwelling contiguity and population distribution. For France's major cities, these include urban centres, suburban zones, and urban peripheries (from poorer to more affluent ones). These can be geographically spread out for the largest cities, especially Paris, and can join previously separate urban areas, such as Douai and Lens. Cities are included in the analysis based on their total student population. All cities with a baseline of at least 45,000 students are included, covering the 14 largest cities based on secondary education size (see Table 1 in Appendices).

The 1.9 million students in the selected cities account for over 75 percent of students enrolled in French cities of at least 200,000 people and about 35 percent of all secondary education students in France. Students in Paris account for almost half of the student population in the analysis, whereas the four cities with the smallest student population (Rouen, Avignon, Strasbourg, and Montpellier) add up to less than 10 percent of the sample (see Table 1 in Appendices).

### **Analysis**

The analysis proceeds with description and statistical modelling. Given the categorical nature of our measure of students' social class, the authors use binomial multilevel mixed modelling to estimate the level of social segregation between schools and the extent to which school sector, school type (Priority Education label for middle schools and program offering for high schools), and international program account for the between-school variance in each selected city. The two-level hierarchical structure of the data, where students (level 1) are nested within schools (level 2), makes it possible to conduct a multilevel analysis of variance, partitioning the variation observed between and within schools (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2001). Variations close to 100 in the proportion of student from a given SES group found between schools denote high levels of social segregation for that group, while variations close to zero represent low levels of segregation.

For hierarchically structured continuous data, a multilevel linear regression model can be fitted to calculate the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), which indicates the proportion of the total variance in the outcome variable that can be found between level 2 units (schools). Given that the outcome variables are not continuous, the Latent Threshold Approach is used, the most widely used approach for calculating the ICC with binomial outcome variables in logistic multilevel models (Devine, Uanhero, Otto, & Flake, 2024). This approach assumes that the between-school variation is equal to the variance of a logistic distribution with scale parameter equal to one, or  $\pi^2/3 = 3.29$  (Goldstein, Browne, & Rasbash, 2002; Snijders & Bosker, 2011). Using this constant, the within- and between-school components of the individual variance are converted to the same scale, allowing for computation of the ICC. In other words, random-intercept multilevel logistic regressions are employed assuming that the variation within schools is fixed at 3.29.

In the analysis, the authors focus on random effects and the ICC of being in one of the SES groups. By including school level characteristics in successive models, the authors estimate how much of the between-school variation in the propensity of being in a given SES group is accounted for, conceptualized as the role of school characteristics in the explanation of social segregation. The analysis is conducted for each city separately. In each case, two sets of models are fitted, one for high-SES and one for low-SES background students (compared with all other students). The modelling strategy consists of four consecutive and incremental multilevel logistic regression models. The first model is a null model (without independent variables) to estimate the total variance observed between and within schools, followed by the model including school sector as predictor. The third model adds school type (Priority Education label for middle schools and program offering for high schools)

as predictor, and the fourth model adds international program offering. The equation for the full model is as follows:

$$\gamma_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{1j} + \beta_2 X_{2j} + \beta_3 X_{3j} + u_j + e_{ij}$$

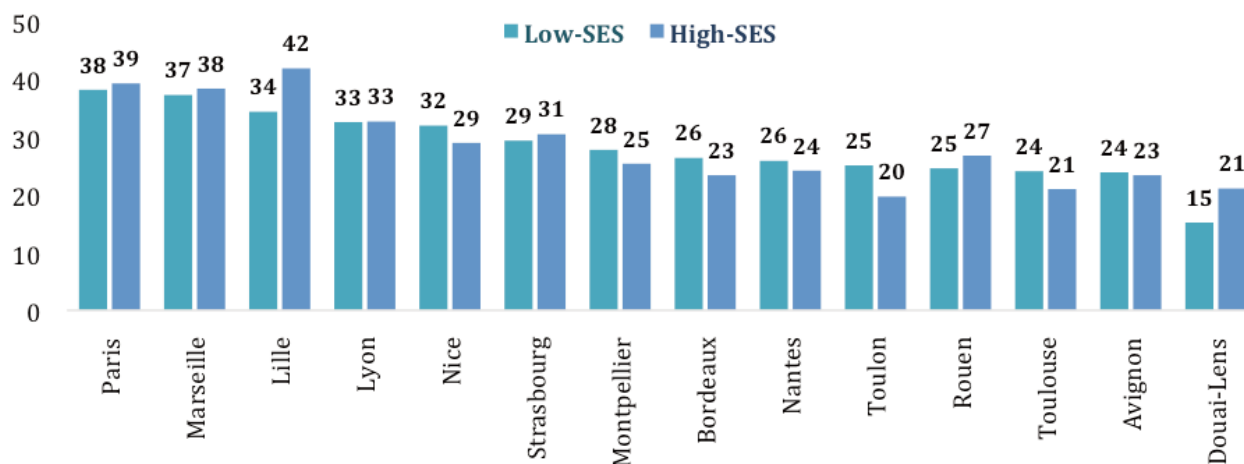
where  $\gamma_{ij}$  is the value of the dependent variable (here SES group membership) for a student  $i$  in school  $j$ ;  $\beta_0$  is the intercept across schools;  $X_1$  is school sector (1 = 'private schools');  $X_2$  is school type (1 = priority schools in middle schools, and three dummy variables for high schools: academic (general-technological), vocational-only, and comprehensive);  $X_3$  identifies schools with an international option;  $u_j$  is the school error term; and  $e_{ij}$  is the student level residual.

## Findings

### School segregation in selected cities

On average across the 14 cities, levels of school segregation are comparable for high-SES and low-SES students, with an ICC of 37 and 36 percent, respectively (Figure 1). Compared with levels of segregation observed in other European countries, this is relatively high (Holmlund & Öckert, 2021). However, large disparities exist between cities. For high-SES students, the level of school segregation is twice as high in Lille as in Toulouse (42% versus 21%). The level of high-SES student segregation in Paris is also double that of Toulon (39% versus 20%). A similar magnitude of inter-city variation is observed for low-SES students: in Paris and Marseille, their level of segregation exceeds 35 percent, whereas it is inferior to 25 percent in Douai-Lens, Toulouse, Rouen, and Avignon. Relative levels of segregation between social classes also vary across cities: in Toulon, Toulouse, Boudreaux, Nice, and Montpellier, segregation is greater for low-SES students, whereas the reverse is true in Lille and Douai-Lens. Despite the relative strong degree of country-wide consistency in the organization of secondary schooling in France, these findings thus highlight the importance of city-level segregative processes.

Figure 1 Intraclass correlation coefficient of high- and low-SES students in secondary education, by city (% , 2022)



### Private schooling and social segregation

Internationally, the rate of private schooling is positively associated with the level of social school segregation (Boterman et al., 2019). One could thus hypothesize that pri-

vate schooling explains part of this inter-city variability in school segregation. The weight of private schools indeed differs significantly across cities: Lille (44%), Nantes (39%), and Lyon (33%) have the highest levels of private enrolment, whereas Douai-Lens (12%) and Nice (17%) have the lowest (see Table 2 in Appendices).

**Figure 2: Socioeconomic profile (mean (X-axis) and standard deviation (Y-axis) of secondary schools (middle and high schools) across 14 major French cities, by school sector (2022)**

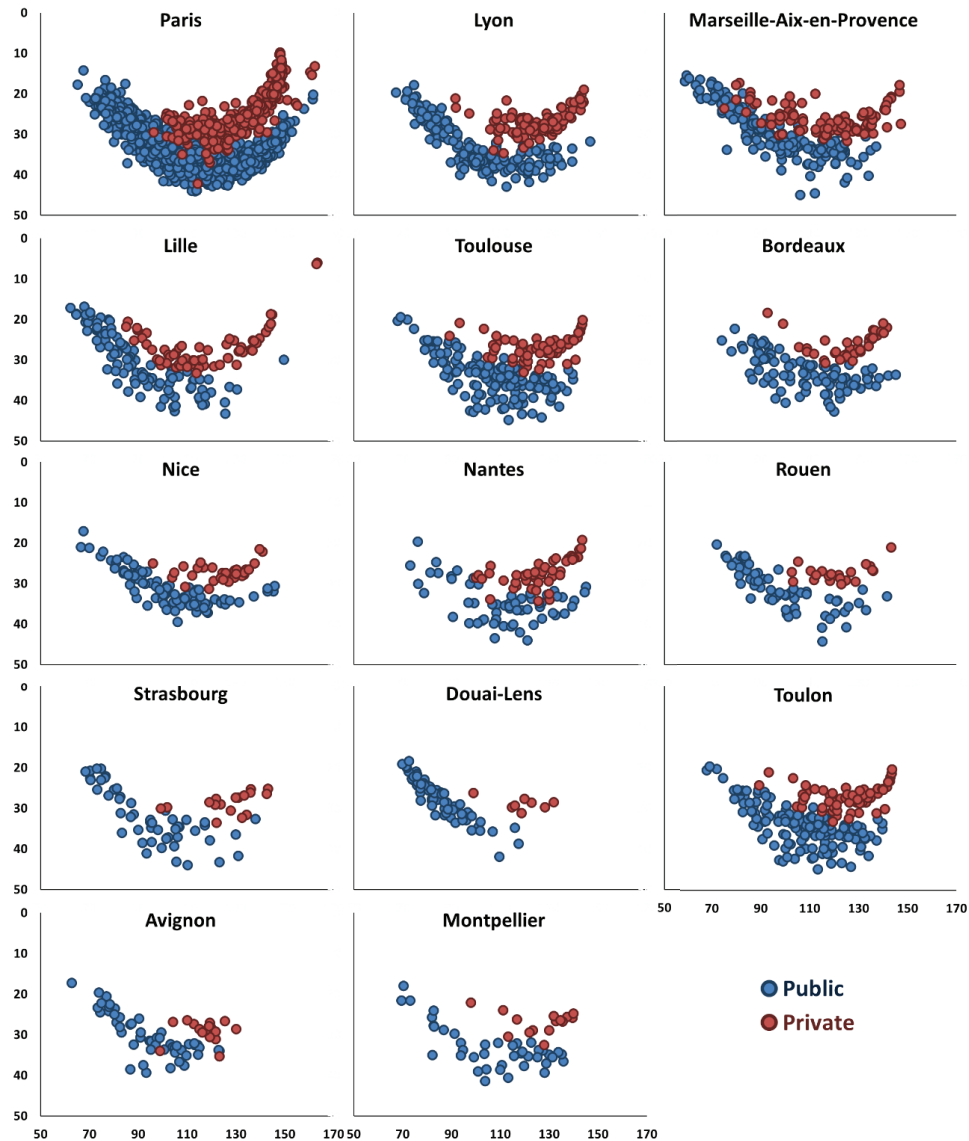


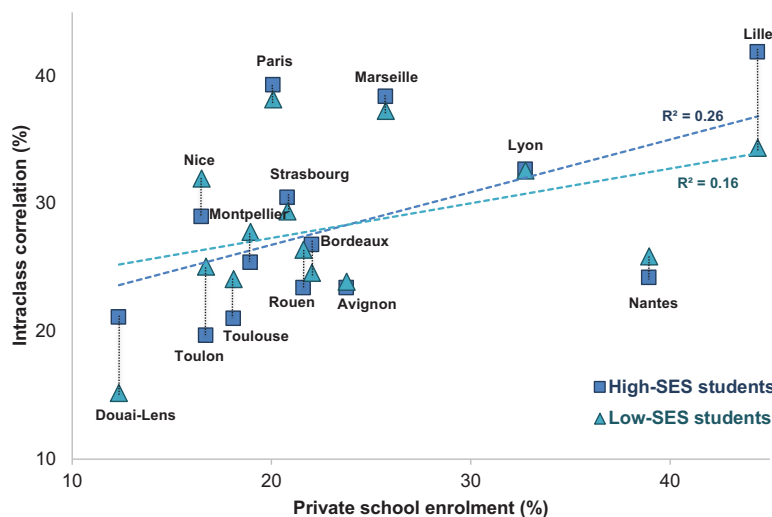
Figure 2 charts the social composition of all public and private middle and high schools in each city. The horizontal axis represents the average SES score of students in the school, and the vertical axis represents the standard deviation of SES scores of students in the school. The vertical axis is inverted so that the more socially homogeneous a school is, the higher it appears on the chart. A school in the upper-left corner in the chart is a socially homogeneous low-SES school and a school in the upper-right corner is a socially homogenous high-SES school. For this part of the analysis, the authors draw on supplementary school-level SES data released by the French Ministry of Education. The Social Position Index (IPS) is used, a synthetic indicator of students' social origins that ascribes a numerical value to each of the 40 parental occupation categories used to record students' social origins. The IPS score

is a factor score constructed from panel data via an analysis of the relationship between 21 independent variables measuring the level of students' social, economic, and cultural resources, on one hand, and their academic success on the other (see Rocher, 2023 for methodological details). As originally constructed, IPS values are standardised to a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 30 (Rocher, 2016).

Figure 2 reveals the important role played by private schools in dividing the school system. In all cities, the average SES level of students in private schools is higher than in the public sector. Private schools are highly under-represented among schools serving predominantly low-SES students: in all cities, the lowest-SES schools are public schools. Conversely, private schools are over-represented among high-SES schools, especially in Lyon, Marseille, Lille, Douai-Lens, and Avignon. Private schools' social compositions also tend to be more homogenous.

As a sector, public schooling tends to be more diverse: it plays a greater role in educating students from poorer families, and public schools are less likely to be places of high concentration of socioeconomic privilege. In all cities, the most diverse schools are public. At any given mean school SES, private schools tend to be considerably less diverse than public schools, suggesting that the same average school social composition is obtained differently in public and private schools. Despite this overall trend, however, public schools serving very large cohorts of high-SES students are found in most cities. In places such as Nice and Bordeaux, the most socially advantaged schools are public, though this is the exception rather than the rule. In addition to the public-private comparison, Figure 2 thus also highlights the internal diversity of the public sector.

**Figure 3: Share of private school enrolment (X-axis) and intraclass correlation coefficient of high- and low-SES students (Y-axis), by city (2022)**



To investigate whether the weight of private schooling explains differences in levels of school segregation across cities, Figure 3 plots the share of private school enrolments (X-axis) and the level of school segregation of low- and high-SES students (Y-axis) in secondary schools for the 14 cities. Overall, the linear trend lines show a modest association between the extent of private school enrolment and social segregation at city level, with a stronger association for high-SES than low-SES students. At the city level, increases in rates of private schooling are thus associated with a small rise in levels of low- and especially high-SES student segregation. At the same time, the chart shows

that very different levels of segregation, for both low- and high-SES students, are found at any level of private school enrolment. Nantes has the second highest rate of private schooling but has comparatively low levels of segregation. Nantes and Lille are comparable in rates of private enrolment but highly contrasted in levels of segregation of high- and low-SES students (the same is true for Paris and Montpellier). This finding highlights that while private schooling is important to explain school segregation, it does not tell the whole story of school segregation in France's cities.

### **Social segregation, private schooling, and program offering**

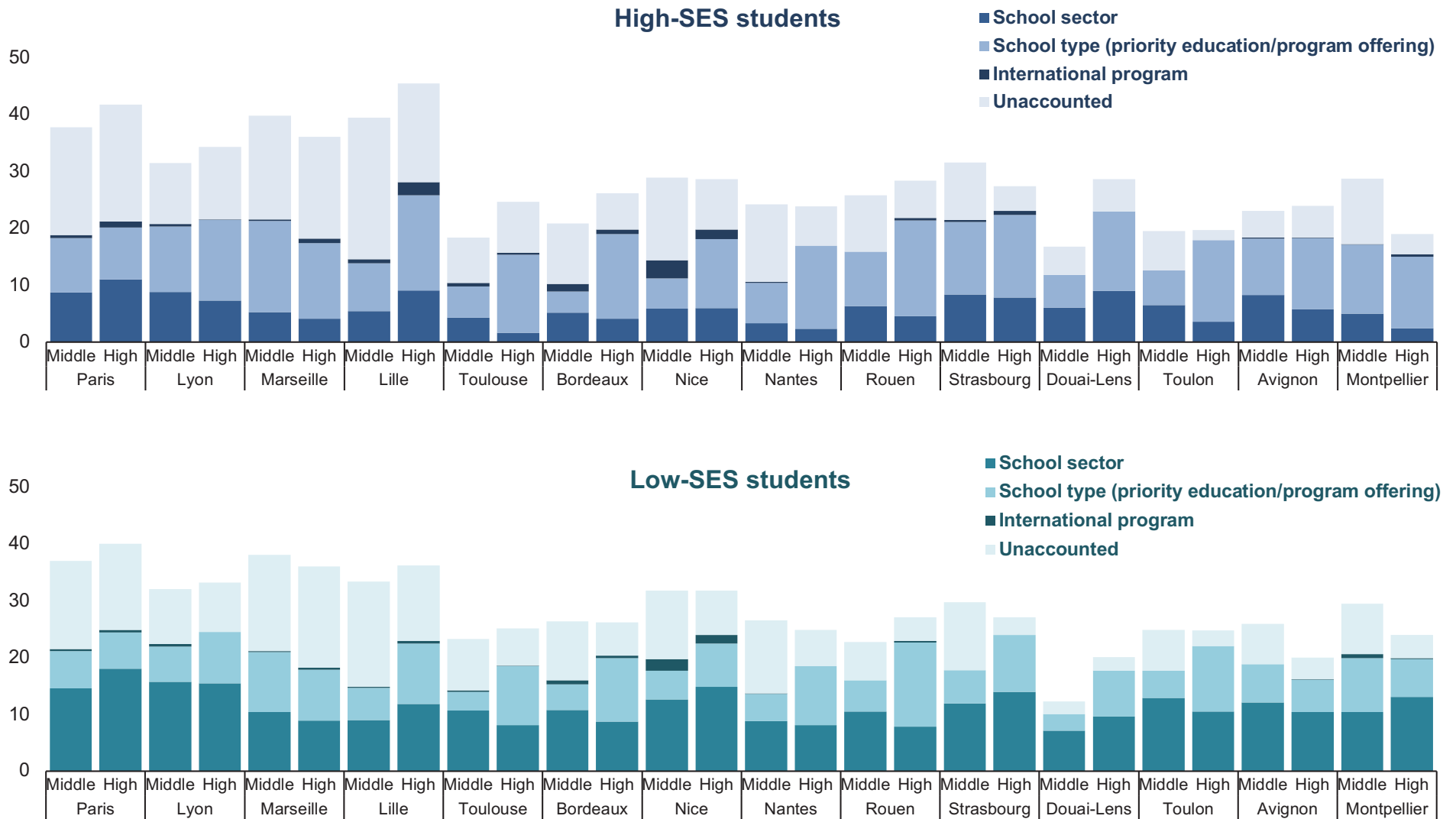
So far, the analysis of segregation has focused on secondary education as a whole. However, the logics of educational selection and inequality are different in the middle and high school years (Barasz et al., 2023; Maire, 2024). Given that program differentiation divides high schools into different school types (academic, vocational, or comprehensive), unlike middle schools, which are comprehensive, this article explores the role of school type in producing school segregation. Figure 4 describes the extent to which private enrolment and program offering account for the level of segregation in each city. The analysis is carried out separately for low- and high-SES background students and for middle and high schools. Alongside school type (high schools) and school sector (all schools), the analysis examines the contribution of schools' Priority Education status (middle schools) and of the international option availability for the *brevet* and *baccalauréat* (all schools). Because the analysis consists of four consecutive incremental regression models, Figure 4 shows the proportion of the variance in student SES found between schools accounted for by school type additional to the proportion of variance accounted for by school sector, and the additional variance explained by international program after accounting for school sector and school type.

Figure 4 first allows for a comparison of overall levels of segregation in middle and high schools. For both high-SES and low-SES students, rising, declining, and stable levels of segregation are observed across cities in the middle-to-high school transition. In itself, curriculum differentiation and the existence of vocational- or academic-only high schools do not lead to a systematic increase in levels of segregation between schools. Inter-city variation once again highlights the significance of logics and practices pertaining to the specific organization of each urban educational space.

The second key pattern is that, for both high- and low-SES students, most of the segregation observed between schools is accounted for by the three key variables included in the model, i.e., school sector, school type, and international program. On average across cities, these variables together account for about 60 percent of the variance in middle school (58% for high-SES students and 64% for low-SES students) and over 70 percent in high school (71% and 76% for high- and low-SES students, respectively). These results also indicate that these three variables tend to account for more of the school segregation of low-SES students than of high-SES students, and more of the segregation in high school than in middle school.

The third key result from Figure 4 is that private schooling and school type (i.e., Priority Education status for middle schools and program offering for high schools) are the two key variables to understand school segregation across all cities. Compared

Figure 4: Intraclass correlation coefficient and share of between-school variance accounted for by school characteristics, by city and school level (% , 2022)



with these two variables, international program offering plays a marginal role. Only in Nice and Lille does international program offering make a substantive difference to observed school segregation, and primarily for high-SES students. International certification thus emerges as a secondary or supplementary rather than primary logic of school choice in most cities (though it may be an important means of within-school segregation).

Fourth, important differences exist between low- and high-SES students. In middle school, private schooling contributes most to the segregation of low-SES students due to their strong over-representation in public schools. By contrast, for high-SES students, schools' Priority Education status contributes most to their segregation—by repelling them. In middle school overall, these two key school variables contribute to more of the segregation of low-SES than high-SES students (62% versus 56%, respectively). In high school, the role of school attributes is once again strongly differentiated for low-SES and high-SES students. For low-SES students, as in the middle years, it is private schooling that accounts for the largest share of observed segregation (41%). For high-SES students, on the other hand, school type matters more to segregation than does school sector, with these students strongly over-represented in academic-only schools and largely avoiding vocational-only schools.

The final key pattern to emerge from Figure 4 is the degree of city variation. On average for low-SES and high-SES students in middle school, sector and Priority Education status account for under 60 percent of the observed segregation in Paris, Marseille, and Lille, but over 70 percent of the observed segregation in Douai-Lens and Avignon. Comparable results are obtained for high schools, with the share of segregation accounted for exceeding 80 percent in Strasbourg, Rouen, Toulon, Avignon, and Montpellier. In these cities, most of the distribution of lower- and upper-class students across schools is accounted for once their public/private status and program offering (academic, vocational, or both) are considered. The school attributes included in the model explain a larger proportion of the observed segregation in cities where overall levels of segregation are lower. These results highlight the differences in the institutional means used by families to concentrate in certain schools across French cities.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Until the mid-1970s, French secondary education as a whole was socially selective and structured into separated institutions serving different social classes through hierarchized curricula and programs (Prost, 2004). Social segregation between institutions was primarily the byproduct of outright exclusion of lower-class students from selective institutions and rigid curricular separation. This configuration generated little social demand for school segregation through family-based strategies of private schooling.

Today, the social profile of French secondary education is profoundly different. From just over three in 10 students attaining the high school certificate (baccalauréat) in the mid-1980s, the rate doubled within a decade to 63 percent in 1995, reaching 80 percent of an age cohort by the early 2020s (Poullaouec & Lemêtre,

2009; Thomas, 2023). This social transformation of French secondary education occurred through structural change. On one hand, in the 1970 (with full implementation in the 1980s), lower secondary education became an integrated curriculum common to all students and delivered in non-terminal comprehensive middle schools. On the other hand, the social demand for broadened access to upper secondary education was accommodated not by making the curriculum of the common baccalaureate more inclusive but through formal program differentiation, with the creation of a separate vocational baccalaureate in 1985. This led to the emergence of a differentiated high school landscape in French cities.

It is in this specific socio-educational configuration that school segregation is now significant as a means of socio-academic closure. Private schools have come to play an important role in producing school segregation in French cities. But the logic shaping the social uses of private schooling is class specific, context (city) dependent and conditioned by the educational structures of secondary schooling. The forces producing school segregation are not the same for lower-class and middle- or upper-class students; they shift as students move from middle to high school, and they depend on the organization of educational provision in each city.

Nevertheless, the finding of important city differences within this overall configuration raises further questions. Whereas differences in school system structures explain much of the dissimilarity in contrasted forms of educational segregation across cities internationally (e.g., Kosunen & Carrasco, 2016), this is less pertinent when comparing French cities. Here, city-specific levels and logics of school segregation will require more attention in contextually rich analyses in future comparative research. Differences in residential segregation (Piquemal, 2024) and in the weight of private schooling, related to regional differences in religious history (CACE, 2024), are part of the story, but a more conceptually robust account is needed. If city differences can be explained as reflecting differences in “local configuration” of residential segregation and educational provision (Oberti, 2007), the nature of these local configurations could be further theorized, including in relation to the general models of school segregation presented earlier. These will also benefit from renewed modelling of the urban as a domain of “accumulation, differentiation and contestation” of various forms of power (Wacquant, 2018, p. 90).

Still, the case of France’s largest cities is theoretically informative for the analysis of school segregation on several fronts. First, private schooling is only part of the segregation story, accounting for a minority of observed segregation in most French cities. Even if residential segregation—another key dimension usually considered in the literature (Frankenberg, 2013)—captured most of the “unaccounted for” share of segregation in Figure 4, private school choice and residential segregation would still leave a significant share of the observed segregation unexplained. Indirectly, this result indicates that French public schools themselves make a significant contribution to segregating students, with program differentiation between schools playing a key part in high school.

Second, the analysis points to the need to theorize the roles of school sector and curriculum *relationally*. Private schools’ role in segregating the school system is class specific and dependent on the other institutionalized instruments of school differ-

entiation. Private schooling is not the main tool of self-segregation of upper-class students because they find in program offering—the avoidance of comprehensive and especially vocational high schools—and other status signals (e.g., schools' Priority Education label in middle school) more accessible instruments to distinguish themselves from other social groups. Here, as school choice has gained momentum, policy efforts to address the concentration of socio-educational disadvantage in public schools can have the unintended consequence of reinforcing segregation, with school labels functioning as institutional stigma and proxies for schools' social composition that middle- and upper-class families seek to avoid (Merle, 2012). Relatedly, private schooling is a key source of segregation of lower-class students because they are rarely accessing these schools. Yet, for them too, program offering is an important dimension of school segregation, as these students are over-represented in vocational and comprehensive high schools.

Third, we argue that school segregation *itself* needs to be considered as part of the broader instruments of socio-academic distinctions available to different social classes rather than taking it as a stand-alone object of analysis. In the French context, structural differences with respect to curriculum are critical to understand social inequality (Dupriez, Dumay, & Vause, 2008). This does not mean that as the landscape of all-comprehensive middle schools gives way to program-differentiated high schools, school segregation automatically increases, because antagonistic forces are at play. In high school, school differentiation does intensify school segregation through socially patterned enrolment in academic-only and vocational-only schools. At the same time, even in comprehensive schools where several programs are available, *within-school segregation* (between programs) can produce socially and academically segregated learning environments. Critically, although our analysis has solely focused on between-school segregation, the availability of accessible and effective means of producing within-school segregation—both social and academic—requires attention to understand the social demand for school segregation, including for private schooling.

Finally, the French context is a healthy reminder of the analytical risk—and interpretive loss—that comes with considering private schools as a self-evident analytical category to explain school segregation, especially in international studies. French private schools play a significant but not all-dominant role in school segregation, in part because they are “private” in a specific way. The historical and comparative approach needed to understand school segregation should focus not only on privatization and marketization, as Waldow, Falkenberg, & Rothe (2017) argue, but also on the social definition of private schooling itself. Private schools' importance for social inequality in the school system depends decisively on the economic, cultural, and political resources of the social groups that use them; on the forms of selection and exclusion that they are able to implement; on the extent to which they are allowed to operate independently from democratic control; and on the kinds of relations, more or less competitive, communal, or detached, that they are allowed to form with public schools. Private schools are unevenly positioned along these analytical axes, and a program of research considering these dimensions systematically would offer novel insight into the relationship between private schooling and school segregation.

## References

- Barasz, J., Furic, P., & Galtier, B. (2023). *Scolarité : le poids des héritages*. <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/publications/poids-heritages-parcours-scolaires> [September 6, 2023].
- Ben Ayed, C. (2013). L'école et les ségrégations urbaines et scolaires, 1986-2013. *Diversité*, 174, 88–98.
- Ben Ayed, C. (2015). La mixité sociale à l'école : un cas limite des tensions entre local et national. *Diversité*, 181, 77–84.
- Ben Ayed, C. (2016). Les acteurs locaux aux prises avec l'injonction paradoxale de la mixité sociale à l'école [Local actors struggling with social desegregation in schools]. *Espaces et sociétés*, 166(3), 15–30. doi:10.3917/esp.166.0015
- Bonal, X., & Bellei, C. (2018). Introduction: The renaissance of school segregation in a context of globalization. In X. Bonal & C. Bellei (Eds.), *Understanding school segregation: Patterns, causes and consequences of spatial inequalities in education* (pp. 1–25). London, UK: Bloomsbury.
- Boterman, W.R., Musterd, S., Pacchi, C., & Ranci, C. (2019). School segregation in contemporary cities: Socio-spatial dynamics, institutional context and urban outcomes. *Urban Studies*, 56(15), 3055–3073. doi:10.1177/0042098019868377
- Boutchenik, B., Givord, P., & Monso, O. (2018). La ségrégation sociale entre collèges : un reflet de la ségrégation résidentielle nettement amplifié par les choix des familles, notamment vers l'enseignement privé. *INSEE Analyses*, 40. <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/3614217> [September 20, 2018].
- Boutchenik, B., Givord, P., & Monso, O. (2020). How do restrictive zoning and parental choices impact social diversity in schools? A methodological contribution to the decomposition of segregation indices applied to France. *LIEPP Working Paper*, 105, 1–23.
- Charoussat, P., Monnet, M., & Souidi, Y. (2023). *Ségrégation sociale en milieu scolaire : appréhender ses causes et déterminer ses effets*. <https://www.ipp.eu/publication/segregation-sociale-en-milieu-scolaire-apprehender-ses-causes-et-determiner-ses-effets/> [November 2, 2023].
- CACE [Commission des Affaires Culturelles et de l'Éducation]. (2024). *Rapport d'information en conclusion des travaux de la mission d'information relative au financement public de l'enseignement privé sous contrat*. [https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/rapports/cion-cedu/116b2423\\_rapport-information](https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/rapports/cion-cedu/116b2423_rapport-information) [April 2, 2024].
- Courtioux, P., & Maury, T.-P. (2020). Private and public schools: A spatial analysis of social segregation in France. *Urban Studies*, 57(4), 865–882. doi:10.1177/0042098019859508
- DEPP [Direction de l'Évaluation, de la Prospective et de la Performance]. (2022). *Repères et références statistiques sur les enseignements, la formation et la recherche 2022*. <https://www.education.gouv.fr/reperes-et-references-statistiques-2022-326939> [September 21, 2022].
- Devine, S., Uanhoro, J.O., Otto, A.R., & Flake, J.K. (2024). Approaches for quantifying the ICC in multilevel logistic models: A didactic demonstration. *Collabra: Psychology*, 10(1). doi:10.1525/collabra.94263
- Dupriez, V., Dumay, X., & Vause, A. (2008). How do school systems manage pupils' heterogeneity? *Comparative Education Review*, 52(2), 245–273. doi:10.1086/528764
- Frankenberg, E. (2013). The role of residential segregation in contemporary school segregation. *Education and Urban Society*, 45(5), 548–570. doi:10.1177/0013124513486288
- Goldstein, H., Browne, W., & Rasbash, J. (2002). Partitioning variation in multilevel models. *Understanding Statistics*, 1(4), 223–231. doi:10.1207/S15328031US0104\_02
- Héran, F. (1996). École publique, école privée : qui peut choisir ? *Economie et statistique*, 293, 17–39. [https://www.persee.fr/doc/estat\\_0336-1454\\_1996\\_num\\_293\\_1\\_6046](https://www.persee.fr/doc/estat_0336-1454_1996_num_293_1_6046)
- Holmlund, H., & Öckert, B. (2021). *Patterns of school segregation in Europe* (EENEE Analytical Report No. 45). <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ba08547f-1ce1-11ec-b4fe-01aa75ed71a1/language-en> [September 23, 2021].
- Jones, B.M.A., & Ball, S.J. (Eds.). (2023). *Neoliberalism and education*. Oxon and New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kosunen, S., & Carrasco, A. (2016, 2016/03/03). Parental preferences in school choice: Comparing reputational hierarchies of schools in Chile and Finland. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 46(2), 172–193. doi:10.1080/03057925.2013.861700

- Ly, S.T., & Riegert, A. (2016). *Mixité sociale et scolaire et ségrégation inter- et intra-établissement dans les collèges et lycées français*. <http://www.cnesco.fr/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SegregationFrance1.pdf> [September, 2016].
- Maire, Q. (2022). International capital and social class: A sociology of international certification in French urban school markets. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 43(8), 1175–1195. doi:10.1080/01425692.2022.2114427
- Maire, Q. (2024). School differentiation in urban spaces: Social diversity, segregation, and inequality. In M. Berends, S. Lamb, & B. Schneider (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of sociology of education* (pp. 541–556). London, UK: Sage.
- Merle, P. (2011). Concurrence et spécialisation des établissements scolaires. Une modélisation de la transformation du recrutement social des secteurs d'enseignement public et privé [School sector competition and specialization]. *Revue française de sociologie*, 52(1), 133–169. doi:10.3917/rfs.521.0133
- Merle, P. (2012). *La ségrégation scolaire*. Paris, FR : La Découverte.
- Miletto, V. (2018). *Les inégalités territoriales et l'école : Exposition des enjeux et revue de littérature*. [http://www.cnesco.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/181026\\_Cnesco\\_Miletto\\_revue\\_litterature\\_educ\\_territoires.pdf](http://www.cnesco.fr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/181026_Cnesco_Miletto_revue_litterature_educ_territoires.pdf) [October, 2018].
- Oberti, M. (2007). Social and school differentiation in urban space: Inequalities and local configurations. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 39(1), 208–227. doi:10.1068/a39159
- Oberti, M. (2023). Enseignement privé et ségrégation scolaire : L'enjeu de la diversité socio-territoriale. *La Vie des Idées*. <https://laviedesidees.fr/Enseignement-prive-et-segregation-scolaire> [April 25, 2023].
- Oberti, M., & Savina, Y. (2019). Urban and school segregation in Paris: The complexity of contextual effects on school achievement: The case of middle schools in the Paris metropolitan area. *Urban Studies*, 56(15), 3117–3142. doi:10.1177/0042098018811733
- Œuvrard, F. (1979). Démocratisation ou élimination différée ? *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 30(1), 87–97. doi:10.3406/arss.1979.3491
- Perry, L.B., Rowe, E., & Lubienski, C. (2022). School segregation: Theoretical insights and future directions. *Comparative Education*, 58(1), 1–15. doi:10.1080/03050068.2021.2021066
- Piquemal, L. (2024). *Évolution de la mixité sociale des collèges* (Note d'Information de la DEPP, Issue). <https://www.education.gouv.fr/evolution-de-la-mixite-sociale-des-colleges-414321> [May, 2024].
- Poullaouec, T., & Lemêtre, C. (2009). Retours sur la Seconde Explosion Scolaire. *Revue française de pédagogie*, 167, 5–11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41202466>
- Prost, A. (2004). *Histoire générale de l'enseignement et de l'éducation en France. Tome IV : l'école et la famille dans une société en mutation (Depuis 1930)* (2nd ed.). Paris, FR : Perrin.
- Raudenbush, S.W., & Bryk, A.S. (2001). *Hierarchical linear models: Applications and data analysis methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Rocher, T. (2016). Construction d'un indice de position sociale des élèves. In C. Simonis-Sueur (Ed.), *Éducation et Formations* (Vol. 90, pp. 5–28). Paris, FR : DEPP, MENJS.
- Rocher, T. (2023). *Indice de Position Sociale (IPS) : Actualisation 2022* (Document de Travail - Série Méthodes, Issue). <https://www.education.gouv.fr/indice-de-position-sociale-ips-actualisation-2022-377726> [March, 2023].
- Snijders, T.A.B., & Bosker, R. (2011). *Multilevel analysis: An introduction to basic and advanced multilevel modeling* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Thomas, F. (2023). *Résultats définitifs de la session 2022 du baccalauréat : des résultats en baisse après deux sessions exceptionnelles* (Note d'Information de la DEPP, Issue). doi:10.48464/ni-23-09
- van Zanten, A. (2009). Other people's choice. Judgments, strategies, and education segregation [le choix des autres]. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 180(5), 24–34. doi:10.3917/arss.180.0024
- van Zanten, A. (2010). Choix de l'école et inégalités scolaires. Le rôle des ressources culturelles et économiques des parents [School choices and inequalities]. *Agora débats/jeunesses*, 56(3), 35–47. doi:10.3917/agora.056.0035

- van Zanten, A. (2012). *L'école de la périphérie. Scolarité et ségrégation en banlieue*. Paris, FR : Presses Universitaires de France.
- Wacquant, L. (2018). Bourdieu comes to town: Pertinence, principles, applications. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 42(1), 90–105. doi:10.1111/1468-2427.12535
- Waldow, F., Falkenberg, K., & Rothe, K. (2017). A comparative panorama of privatisation and school choice in education: Concluding remarks. In T. Koinzer, R. Nikolai, & F. Waldow (Eds.), *Private schools and school choice in compulsory education: Global change and national challenge* (pp. 245–250). Wiesbaden, DE: Springer.
- Wilson, D., & Bridge, G. (2019). School choice and the city: Geographies of allocation and segregation. *Urban Studies*, 56(15), 3198–3215. doi:10.1177/0042098019843481
- Zancajo, A., & Bonal, X. (2022). Education markets and school segregation: A mechanism-based explanation. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52(8), 1241–1258. doi:10.1080/03057925.2020.1858272

**Table 1: Sample of students in 14 major French cities included in the analysis, by schooling level and SES (n and %, 2022)**

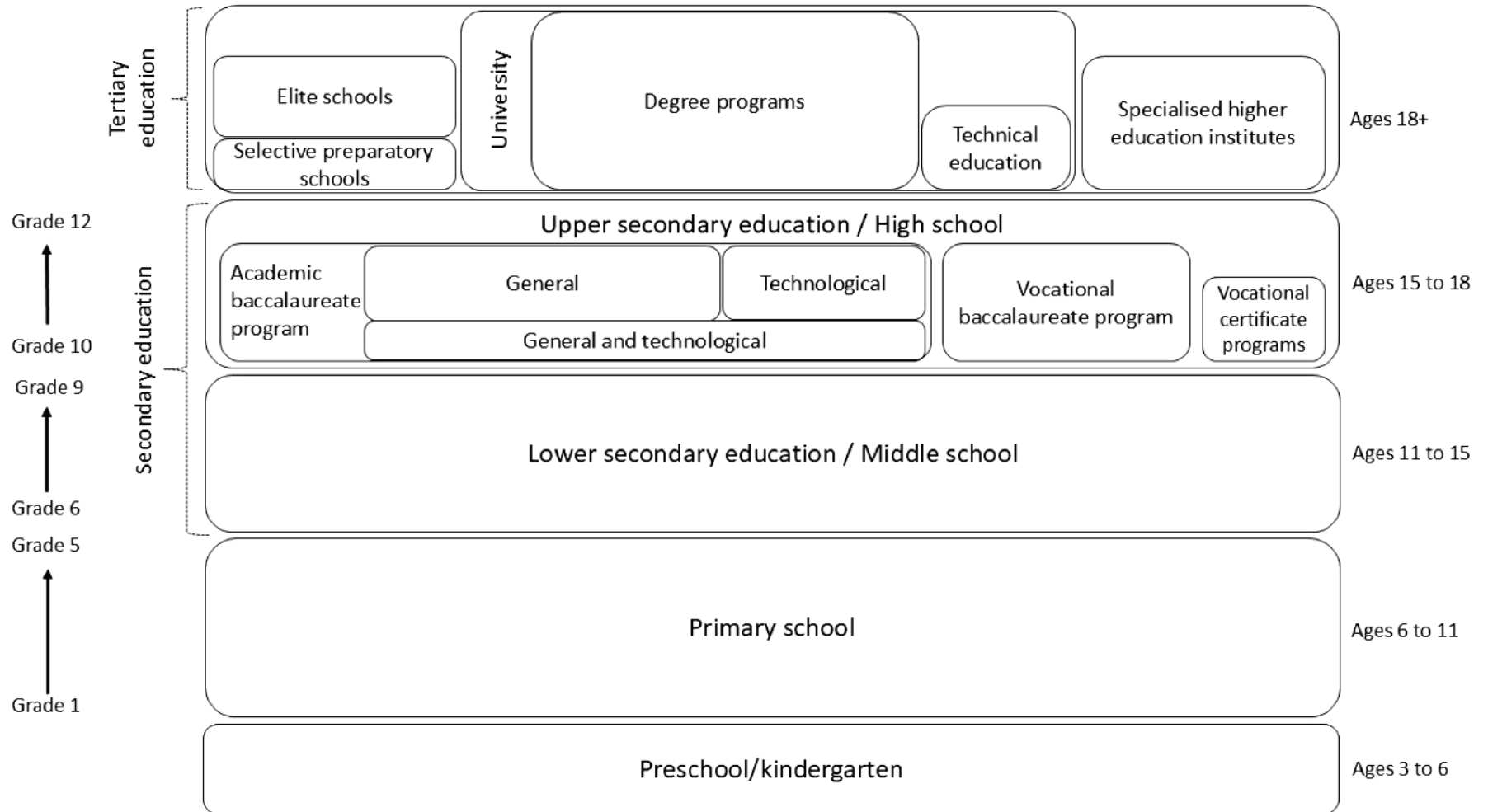
	Sample size (n)			Sample composition (%)			
	Middle years (grades 6-9)	Senior years (grades 10-12)	All students	Low SES	Lower-middle SES	Upper-middle SES	High SES
Paris	535,631	397,454	933,085	28.0	26.1	10.5	35.5
Lyon	85,832	63,143	148,975	28.5	22.7	13.0	35.8
Marseille-Aix-en-Provence	75,004	56,261	131,265	32.4	27.7	12.0	27.9
Lille	51,882	36,538	88,420	37.0	22.2	11.9	29.0
Toulouse	48,568	37,628	86,196	24.5	22.5	13.1	40.0
Bordeaux	45,313	37,180	82,493	23.7	26.0	12.9	37.4
Nice	46,359	32,577	78,936	27.8	32.1	10.6	29.5
Nantes	32,894	28,125	61,019	21.3	21.0	14.8	43.0
Douai-Lens	27,701	18,120	45,821	52.5	20.8	12.7	13.9
Toulon	26,363	19,345	45,708	27.4	36.8	11.7	24.1
Rouen	24,492	20,064	44,556	34.9	23.2	15.3	26.7
Avignon	25,049	18,562	43,611	34.8	31.5	11.3	22.3
Strasbourg	23,789	19,576	43,365	38.4	23.0	11.4	27.2
Montpellier	20,321	18,250	38,571	25.9	27.9	10.9	35.3
<b>All cities (pooled)</b>	<b>1,069,198</b>	<b>802,823</b>	<b>1,872,021</b>	<b>29.3</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>33.4</b>

**Table 2: Share of private school enrolment in 14 major French cities,  
by level of schooling and student SES (% , 2022)**

City	Middle school			High school		
	Low-SES	High-SES	All students	Low-SES	High-SES	All students
Paris	3.9	39.2	20.5	3.7	37.1	19.6
Lyon	9.7	53.0	33.0	10.4	49.2	32.7
Marseille-Aix-en-Provence	8.6	41.3	23.7	13.8	42.3	28.7
Lille	25.9	65.2	44.7	26.2	63.8	43.8
Toulouse	4.6	28.6	18.3	6.4	24.7	18.0
Bordeaux	5.3	33.6	20.8	10.1	30.5	22.7
Nice	3.0	30.0	16.5	4.3	27.3	17.3
Nantes	15.5	49.8	38.3	19.2	47.4	39.9
Rouen	7.0	35.4	20.0	10.7	35.7	24.8
Strasbourg	4.8	44.5	21.1	6.9	34.7	20.2
Douai-Lens	4.0	34.3	12.0	4.5	33.1	13.0
Toulon	4.1	35.3	18.5	4.9	24.6	14.6
Avignon	10.9	42.8	25.9	8.7	31.5	21.0
Montpellier	6.3	32.8	20.9	3.4	26.2	16.3
<b>All cities (pooled)</b>	<b>6.7</b>	<b>40.7</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>7.5</b>	<b>37.8</b>	<b>22.9</b>

## Appendices (continued)

Figure 5: Diagram of overall structure of French education system



Source: Marie & Molina, 2025