

Being a Teacher in the United States

Over the past few months, I have been asked by my French colleagues if I could explain certain aspects of being a teacher in the US. For some facets of the American Education system, the answers are simple; for the grand majority, answers are not so straight forward. For example, I can easily answer the question, “How many days a week are children and teachers in school?” The answer is almost always 5 days a week, Monday through Friday (that is, of course, when talking about the public school system). Every answer depends- it depends on the state laws, it depends on the county within the state, it depends on the teacher, it depends on the student, etc. But, I will try to give a broad overview of our school system and to answer a few simple questions. This article comes with the disclaimer that, although I am a certified teacher of children ages 4-12 (grades prek-6), I only have experience with a handful of states and counties on the east coast of the United States.

How Do You Become a Teacher?

To be any type of public school teacher, whether elementary, middle, or high, one must have at least a 4 year bachelor’s degree and the appropriate teaching certification. To acquire these certifications, you must have a certain number of credits in a certain field of study and pass a Praxis exam. Some state requirements are more relaxed, whereas other states may require you to pass several different exams and have a 4 year degree within the curriculum that you teach.



Personally, I am certified to teach grades prek-6 (children in *maternelle* level to *CM2/sixième*). I am certified in the state of Virginia. I needed a 4 year bachelor’s degree (in anything I wanted, so I chose French), plus other credits specific to the Education field. I went ahead and received my Master’s in Education, a second degree, which included these extra credits and will allow me to receive higher pay as a teacher. I also needed to pass 4 exams, which all cost

around \$100+. Thankfully, I passed my exams the first time, paid a state fee for my paper work to be processed, and am now a fully certified teacher in the state of Virginia. Unfortunately, if I were to move to a different state, with different standards, I would have to take other exams, other classes, and pay another fee to have my paper work processed. Many states accept other certifications, but as usual- it depends!

How Are You Given a Job Once a Certified Teacher?

American school teachers are not ever placed in a school once they have gained certification. Once we are certified, we must go out on our own to apply with school districts. We submit our CV and wait for a call. Once called, we are given the chance to interview. Once

interviewed, we wait some more. If we are lucky, if we make a good impression with the directors or school board members, we are offered a position with a school. Rarely are teachers given a choice of what grade level they would like to teach, but as you gain time and experience, it becomes easier to find a position within a particular grade level that you want. As a beginning teacher, you are just very, very happy to have received a job!

What Do You Teach?

Middle and High School teachers usually only teach one discipline. Elementary teachers teach all disciplines, like French elementary school teachers. We teach science, math, English, writing, reading, social studies, history, and spelling. Most school districts have special teachers for art, music, physical education, library, technology, and foreign languages. It depends on the funding whether an elementary school has a teacher for each of these or if they are all taught at all. In my school district, I teach the main disciplines, but I take my students to art one day a week, music one day a week, physical education 2 days a week, and library once a week. Other school districts or schools may split their special classes by week, month, or even grade level. It depends! But, you can count on, as a regular elementary public school teacher, that you will most likely not teach art, music, or physical education.

What Is the Typical Elementary School Teacher Schedule?

Of course this depends, but a general example goes something like this:

Morning		Afternoon	
7:50	Teacher arrives at school to prepare/make copies	12:20	Teacher picks up class from cafeteria
8:20	Students arrive (some eat breakfast in the cafeteria)	12:25	Teacher takes class to recess outside
8:35	School begins, teachers take role, lunch count, begin teaching	12:45	Teacher returns with class for lessons
10:00	Teacher escorts class to one of the special classes (art, music, PE, etc.)	3:15	Teacher prepares class for the end of the day dismissal
10:40	Teacher picks up class from special class (10-10:40 is the planning period for the teacher)	3:30	Teacher escorts students to buses
10:45	Teacher takes class to use bathrooms	3:50	Teacher is allowed to leave school, unless they have other obligations (faculty meeting, group meeting, parent conference, etc.)
10:50	Students and teacher return to class for lessons	Teachers are very rarely permitted to leave school grounds during the day without permission from their principal (even for lunch). Teachers who are absent must call for a substitute and leave plans for the replacement. Teachers are given a set number of sick days and personal days to take a leave of absence.	
11:50	Teacher escorts class to cafeteria (all children eat lunch at the cafeteria, school food, or food brought from home)		