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## *Élite Education*

At fourteen years of age, Benjamin Chabert asked his father if he could go study in a U.S. high school for a year. It was a novel idea for a French teenager, but not that surprising given his background. Benjamin's father, Jacques, a friend of ours, has a degree in English literature and translates travel literature for a living. Jacques approved of the idea and found a high school in California that agreed to admit Benjamin and a family to billet him. There was only one condition: Jacques suspected his son's academic performance would suffer from spending a year abroad, so he made Benjamin promise he would put in extra hours at school when he returned to France.

Benjamin got back safe and sound and with his French education intact. Two things surprised him about life in America. Academically, his American peers were way behind. Benjamin knew more about English grammar than they did. That's not surprising given the drill-type education French children receive and the number of hours they spend at school—up to forty per week. On the other hand, Benjamin said, American teenagers were much more “socially mature” than his French peers. Most of the high school students he met had part-time jobs and earned their own pocket money. They came and went as they pleased between home and school, setting their own schedules and taking responsibility for their lives.