

# FRENCH AMERICAN SCHOOL OF TAMPA BAY



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Willy and Elizabeth LeBihan are bringing the French American School of Tampa Bay to St. Petersburg after running the school in Maine for 17 years.

BY MARCIA BIGGS

This fall, area children will be offered the unique experience of school learning through a multicultural education at the French American School of Tampa Bay (FASTB). This unique immersion school will be spearheaded by Willy and Elizabeth LeBihan, who bring 17 years of experience running L'Ecole Française du Maine: The French School of Maine.

The French American School of Tampa Bay will offer children from pre-school through grade 12 the opportunity to benefit from both French and American education systems. As a native of France, Willy brings knowledge of the French education system while Maine-born Elizabeth integrates the American perspective. Both have graduate degrees and extensive professional experience as teachers and administrators.

FASTB teaching emphasizes the importance of art, music, language and outdoor play as part of a successful learning environment. While a traditional curriculum of math, science,

and history are taught, a strong cultural arts program will help in the process of learning a second language, says Elizabeth.

"In the US school system, art and music were the first programs to get cut from curriculums," she says. "As teachers, we see that as an integral part of an education, not 'extras.' Children are not getting enough creative time or physical activity. At our school they will get it all – music, art, science, math, creative play and physical activities – these are all skills we try to develop."

The LeBihans are no strangers to St. Petersburg. With family living in the area, Elizabeth has been visiting since she was a child and the couple has spent many family vacations here with their three children. They now reside in St. Petersburg and are excited to be here to start their new school.

After two years of preparation and searching for just the right location, the LeBihans selected a former day care center on



62nd Avenue near the Gateway area. The school will be 5,500 square feet with 7 convertible classrooms. This summer, the structure is being completely renovated and a new playground installed in the adjacent green space.

The school will be affiliated with the Mission Laïque Française, renowned for successfully managing French schools abroad (more than 55,000 students in 41 countries), the French Ministry of Education and its prestigious international network of 400 schools, and the Association of French Schools in North America which comprises nearly 60 primary, elementary and secondary schools in the United States and Canada, all of which are accredited by the French Ministry of National Education. FASTB is going through the process of accreditation by the Florida Department of Education.

What if your child does not speak French? The LeBihans figure nearly one-third of their students in the Maine school are American with no prior French skills, while one-third is French and one-third with an international background. "We think our market is really the American families who want their child to interact, learn another language and culture," says Elizabeth.

The French language is not taught through textbook learning at FASTB, but through conversation during school activities. Early childhood is the easiest time for a person to become bilingual, she adds. "It's much easier to learn a second language when young, particularly for pre-school and younger grades, they can just soak it up."

"In America, we teach languages in middle school or high school and that is the worst time to learn since we have already developed our English language skills," she says. "The earlier the better. We do not teach the language, we live the language. We do not teach French, we teach in French. And this actually helps to improve English language skills. After 17 years of teaching in Maine, we are now finding that our students in college are excelling in English, scoring very high in writing and language skills."

#### Why St. Pete for the new school?

"The way St. Pete is growing and developing is really exciting," says Elizabeth. "The French government felt a real need for a school in this area, the nearest ones are in Atlanta and Boca Raton/Miami. There's a growing French community in Tampa Bay and many businesses find it easier to recruit international talent if their children can attend a bilingual school. If only here for a couple years, they can assimilate better back into their schools in Europe." ●

*The French American School of Tampa Bay opens in the fall of 2018. The school is located at 2100 62nd Ave. N. in St. Pete. For more information go to [fastb.org](http://fastb.org), follow the school on Facebook at [facebook.com/TheFrenchAmericanSchoolofTampaBay](https://facebook.com/TheFrenchAmericanSchoolofTampaBay) or call 727-800-2159 to arrange a campus visit.*



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