



## features

### A first for Tampa Bay: The French American School opens in St. Pete

JANAN TALAHER | TUESDAY, AUGUST 21, 2018



FRENCH AMERICAN SCHOOL OF TAMPA BAY

When The French American School of Tampa Bay opens in the fall, even the pencils and paper will be imported from France.

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“We want it to be as authentic as possible. When you walk into the building, you’re in France,” says Willy LeBihan, an educator and entrepreneur who is opening the school in St. Petersburg with his wife and fellow educator, Elizabeth.

Many Tampa Bay area schools teach a foreign language, sometimes starting in grade school. But the French American School of Tampa Bay will be unique. All of the classes, including math, social studies, and science, will be taught in French. From day one, students not only learn to read and write in French but also speak French exclusively in the classroom.

“We’re not teaching French; we teach in French,” says LeBihan, who describes the school as a full “immersion” experience. He also points out that the school is not for French speakers, but for children whose first language is English.

The French American School of Tampa Bay will be the first of its kind in the region and the fourth in the Southeast. It’s a unique and somewhat surprising concept for Tampa Bay. But not for bigger cities around the country, says LeBihan

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There's a similar program in Atlanta and two in the Miami area. Additional schools operate in several dozen locations around the country, including in Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Austin, California, Scottsdale, Washington, D.C., Maine and Philadelphia. French immersion schools can also be found in Canada and around the world.

All of them are accredited by the French Ministry of Education and part of a network affiliated with Mission Laïque Française and the Association of French Schools in North America.

Most of the schools are also accredited by the state or region where they are located.

St. Petersburg might seem like an unusual city in which to launch a multicultural school. But the LeBihan's would disagree.

The couple began looking for a Florida location for their school two years ago, before deciding on St. Pete. The city's changing vibe was a big draw.

"We've been coming here on vacation for over 20 years, and we've seen St. Petersburg changing. We love the waterfront, the arts culture, the soccer team. It feels like the south of France to us," says LeBihan. "We think it's a good match for us and that there will be a demand."

#### Who are the likely candidates for the school?

"St. Pete is becoming a much more international place," says LeBihan. "There are people from all over the world visiting here or relocating here. We've had interest from the international military community-based at MacDill in Tampa. And we've heard from local parents who are just looking for a different type of educational experience for their children."



Although this will be the LeBihan's first school in Florida, it's not their first French immersion school. They already have a 17-year track record of success. In 2002, they opened L'Ecole Française du Maine (The French School of Maine), now located just outside Freeport, home to LL Bean's corporate headquarters.

The Maine school has about 80 children in preschool through grade 12 and offers a full academic program that includes a strong emphasis on art and music. The St. Petersburg school will follow the same curriculum and mission. Both are also classified as nonprofit organizations.

"We'll be using a French school curriculum, the same one used all over the world," says LeBihan.

A former geologist from France, LeBihan met Elizabeth while he was on a



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business trip to Ireland when she was an exchange student there during her junior year in college. That was a few decades ago. The two settled in Maine, Elizabeth's home, and raised their children speaking both English and French. That experience inspired them to think about creating a school where other children could have that opportunity, too. Elizabeth already had a background in education; Willy went back to school in Maine to get his teaching credentials.

### Speaking more than one language

"There are long-term benefits to growing up bilingual," says LeBihan. "The world is not black-and-white; it's grey. When children learn another language they are also learning a new culture. They realize there is not just one way of thinking. They become citizens of the world."

There are other advantages, he says. "When you become fluent in a second language later in life, you are translating it in your mind when someone speaks to you in that language. But children who grow up speaking both will think in both languages."

During a presentation at [St. Petersburg's 1 Million Cups](#), a forum for startups and entrepreneurs, the couple reassured the crowd that parents do not need to be conversant in French if their child is enrolled in the school.

"If your language at home is English, then the students will speak English at home and French at school," says Elizabeth.



Willy and Elizabeth LeBihan

LeBihan also jokes that "No, your children will not grow up speaking English with an accent. But they will speak French with a native accent because they will be mimicking teachers who speak with a native accent."

A groundbreaking-ribbon cutting for the new school took place in May. The campus, at 2100 62nd Avenue North in St. Petersburg, is currently undergoing extensive renovations to the inside of the existing building and to the grounds. Projected completion date is early September, just in time for the new school year.

To learn more, visit [The French American School website](#).



Read more articles by [Janan Talafer](#).

Janan Talafer enjoys writing for a diverse group of clients, including print and online publications, nonprofit organizations and public relations agencies. One of the highlights of her writing career was flying with the 91<sup>st</sup> Air Refueling Squadron out of MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa FL for a feature about this elite military team. A journalism graduate of Bowling Green State University (OH), Janan's early career was in health care marketing and public relations for hospitals in Connecticut and Tampa Bay. She is an avid gardener, loves East Coast swing dance and enjoys touring around St. Petersburg on the back of her husband's scooter.

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