

Portrait of the USA

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Chapter Six A DIVERSE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

Structure, standards, and challenges

American education is a complex topic because a single school can draw upon resources from several different public and private institutions. For example, a student may attend a private high school whose curriculum must meet standards set by the state, some of whose science courses may be financed by federal funds, and whose sports teams may play on local, publicly owned fields.

Despite this complexity, however, it is possible to describe the broad contours of American education.

MANY CHOICES

Almost 90 percent of American students below the college level attend public elementary and secondary schools, which do not charge tuition but rely on local and state taxes for funding. Traditionally, elementary school includes kindergarten through the eighth grade. In some places, however, elementary school ends after the sixth grade, and students attend middle school, or junior high school, from grades seven through nine. Similarly, secondary school, or high school, traditionally comprises grades nine through twelve, but in some places begins at the tenth grade.

Most of the students who do not attend public elementary and secondary schools attend private schools, for which their families pay tuition. Four out of five private schools are run by religious groups. In these schools religious instruction is part of the curriculum, which also includes the traditional academic courses. (Religious instruction is not provided in public schools. The issue of prayer in public schools is discussed in chapter 4.) There is also a small but growing number of parents who educate their children themselves, a practice known as home schooling.

The United States does not have a national school system. Nor, with the exception of the military academies (for example, the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland), are there schools run by the federal government. But the government provides guidance and funding for federal educational programs in which both public and private schools take part, and the U.S. Department of Education oversees these programs.

In American parlance, a college is a four-year institution of higher learning that offers courses in related subjects. A liberal arts college, for example, offers courses in literature, languages, history, philosophy, and the sciences, while a business college offers courses in accounting, investment, and marketing. Many colleges are independent and award bachelor's degrees to those completing a program of instruction that typically takes four years. But colleges can also be components of universities. A large university typically comprises several colleges, graduate programs in various fields, one or more professional schools (for example, a law school or a medical school), and one or more research facilities. (Americans often use the word "college" as shorthand for either a college or a university.)

Every state has its own university, and some states operate large networks of colleges and universities: The State University of New York, for instance, has more than 60 campuses in New York State. Some cities also have their own public universities. In many areas, junior or community colleges provide a bridge between high school and four-year colleges for some students. In junior colleges, students can generally complete their first two years of college courses at low cost and remain close to home.

Unlike public elementary and secondary schools, public colleges and universities usually charge tuition. However, the amount often is much lower than that charged by comparable private institutions, which do not receive the same level of public support. Many students attend college -- whether public or private -- with the benefit of federal loans that must be repaid after graduation.

About 25 percent of colleges and universities are privately operated by religious groups. Most of these are open to students of all faiths. There are also many private institutions with no religious ties. Whether public or private, colleges depend on three sources of income: student tuition, endowments (gifts made by benefactors), and government funding.

There is no clear distinction between the quality of education provided at public and private colleges or institutions. The public universities of California and Virginia, for example, are generally rated on a par with the Ivy League, an association of eight prestigious private schools in the northeastern United States. This does not mean that all institutions are equal, however. A student who has graduated from a highly regarded college may have a distinct advantage as he or she seeks employment. Thus, competition to get into the more renowned schools can be intense.

A college student takes courses in his or her "major" field (the area of study in which he or she chooses to specialize), along with "electives" (courses that are not required but chosen by the student). It has been estimated that American colleges and universities offer more than 1,000 majors.

EDUCATION, A LOCAL MATTER

From Hawaii to Delaware, from Alaska to Louisiana, each of the 50 states has its own laws regulating education. From state to state, some laws are similar while others are not. For example:

- All states require young people to attend school. The age limit varies, however. Most states require attendance up to age 16, some up to 18. Thus, every child in America receives at least 11 years of education. This is true regardless of a child's sex, race, religion, learning problems, physical handicaps, ability to speak English, citizenship, or status as an immigrant. (Although some members of Congress have advocated permitting the states to deny public education to children of illegal immigrants, such a proposal has not become law.)
- Some states play a strong central role in the selection of learning material for their students. For example, state committees may decide which textbooks can be purchased with state funds. In other states, such decisions are left to local school officials.

Although there is no national curriculum in the United States, certain subjects are taught in virtually all elementary and secondary schools throughout the country. Almost every elementary school, for example, teaches mathematics; language arts (including reading, grammar, writing, and literature); penmanship; science; social studies (including history, geography, citizenship, and economics); and physical education. In many schools, children are taught how to use computers, which have also become integral parts of other courses.

In addition to required courses -- for example, a year of American history, two years of literature, etc. -- secondary schools, like colleges, typically offer electives. Popular electives include performing arts, driver's education, cooking, and "shop" (use of tools, carpentry, and repair of machinery).

CHANGING STANDARDS

Until the 1950s required courses were many, electives few. In the 1960s and 1970s, the trend was to give students more choices. By the 1980s, however, parents and educators were taking a second look at this practice. The primary reason for their concern was the possible connection between the growth of electives and the slow but steady decline of American students' average scores on standardized tests of mathematics, reading, and science.

At the same time, college administrators and business executives began to complain that some high school graduates needed remedial courses in the so-called three R's: reading, writing, and arithmetic. About 99 percent of American adults reported in the 1980 census that they could read and write. But critics claimed that about 13 percent of America's 17-year-olds were "functionally illiterate." That is, they were unable to carry out such everyday tasks as understanding printed instructions and filling out a job application.

Experts scrutinized every conceivable cause for the decline in average scores in the early 1980s. One target was television, which was accused of producing mediocre programs. And American children, critics said, watched too much TV, an average of 25 hours a week. School boards were criticized for paying teachers too little, with the result that good ones tended to leave the field of education, and for giving students easier material to work with so that all of them could get a diploma -- a phenomenon known as "dumbing down" the curriculum.

No single cause was identified for what ailed American secondary education. Similarly, there was no one solution. The U.S. Department of Education established a national commission to examine the question. In 1983 the commission made several recommendations: lengthen the school day and year, formulate a new core curriculum for all students (four years of English; three years each of math, science, and social studies; a half-year of computer science), and raise the standards of performance in each subject. As a result, many schools have tightened their requirements, and test scores for American children have been rising.

In 1989 President George Bush and the governors of all 50 states gave the movement to reform American education a new impetus when they set six goals to be achieved by the year 2000:

- That all children will start school ready to learn.
- That 90 percent of all high school students will graduate.
- That all students will achieve competence in core subjects at certain key points in their progress.
- That American students will be first in the world in math and science achievement.
- That every American adult will be literate and have the skills to function as a citizen and a worker.
- That all schools will be free of drugs and violence and offer a disciplined environment that is conducive to learning.

Congress established a program called Goals 2000, by which the states receive federal grants to help them reach the goals. By 1996, progress had been made -- 86 percent of American students completed high school, scores on national math and science tests had gone up one full grade, and half of all four-year-olds attended programs to prepare them for school.

In 2001 President George W. Bush proposed a plan to further improve student performance, and Congress enacted legislation to carry out his goals. Emphasizing the needs of individual students, the legislation requires states to set high standards and require accountability, gives school districts control over spending of federal funds, expands options for parents in choosing the best schools for their children, and supports instruction based on proven methods of learning.

SOCIAL ISSUES IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS

In addition to the challenge to be excellent, American schools have been facing novel problems. They must cope with an influx of immigrant children, many of whom speak little or no English. They must respond to demands that the curriculum reflect the various cultures of all children. Schools must make sure that students develop basic skills for the job market, and they must

consider the needs of nontraditional students, such as teen-age mothers.

Schools are addressing these problems in ways that reflect the diversity of the U.S. educational system. They are hiring or training large numbers of teachers of English as a second language and, in some communities, setting up bilingual schools. They are opening up the traditional European-centered curriculum to embrace material from African, Asian, and other cultures.

Schools are also teaching cognitive skills to the nearly 40 percent of American students who do not go on to higher education. In the words of a recent report by the Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, "A strong back, the willingness to work, and a high school diploma were once all that was necessary to make a start in America. They are no longer. A well-developed mind, a continued willingness to learn and the ability to put knowledge to work are the new keys to the future of our young people, the success of our business, and the economic well-being of the nation."

A SNAPSHOT OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The United States leads the industrial nations in the proportion of its young people who receive higher education. For some careers -- law, medicine, education, engineering -- a college education is a necessary first step. More than 60 percent of Americans now work in jobs that involve the handling of information, and a high school diploma is seldom adequate for such work. Other careers do not strictly require a college degree, but having one often can improve a person's chances of getting a job and can increase the salary he or she is paid.

The widespread availability of a college education in America dates back to 1944, when Congress passed a law popularly known as the GI Bill. (GI -- meaning "government issue" -- was a nickname for an American soldier, and the law provided financial aid to members of the armed forces after World War II was over.) By 1955 more than 2 million veterans of World War II and the Korean War had used the GI Bill to go to college. Many of them came from poor families and would not have had the chance to go to college without the law. The program's success changed the American image of who should attend college.

About the same time, the percentage of women in American colleges began to grow steadily; in 2000 women received 57 percent of all degrees awarded, compared to 24 percent in 1950. With the end of racial segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, African Americans also entered colleges in record numbers. Today, the percentage of African Americans who go on to college nearly equals the general population. In 2000, 56.2 percent of African-American high school graduates were enrolled in college, compared with 63.3 percent of all high school graduates.

LIBERAL OR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION?

Like high schools, American colleges are sometimes criticized for discarding required courses and offering too many electives. In the mid-1980s the Association of American Colleges issued a report that called for teaching a body of common knowledge to all college students. A similar report, "Involvement in Learning," issued by the National Institute of Education, concluded that the college curriculum had become "excessively...work-related." The report also warned that college education may no longer be developing in students "the shared values and knowledge" that traditionally bind Americans together.

These reports coincided with a trend away from the liberal arts. Instead, students were choosing major fields designed to prepare them for specific jobs. In 2000, 49 percent of the bachelor's degrees were conferred in the fields of business and management, communications, computer and information sciences, education, engineering, and health sciences.

This trend raises questions that apply to the educational philosophy of all industrialized countries. In an age of technological breakthroughs and highly specialized disciplines, is there still a need for the generalist with a broad background and well-developed abilities to reason and communicate? And if the answer to that question is yes, should society take steps to encourage its colleges and universities to produce more such generalists? Like their counterparts in other countries, American educators continue to debate these questions.

