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**1 Introduction**

Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of English gives the following definition of education: “A process of teaching, training and learning, especially in schools or colleges, to improve knowledge and developing skills”.

To serve their citizens and help the country prosper all countries in the world without exception provide public education to children and teenagers as one of its main goals is to prepare students for productive citizenship, work and adult life. All this makes the notion of education universal while each country has its own system of education determined by its history, political system, culture, traditions and so on. The collapse of the iron curtain, modern technological developments like the Internet and ability to travel the world enable Russian students and educators to get more or less good idea of educational system of English speaking countries. The expansion of American culture, dominance of American movies on television familiarizes Russian viewers and movie-goers with life of American teenagers and American school. However a survey conducted among the high school students of Lyceum 37 proved that their awareness of American educational system leaves much to be desired.

So we have decided to examine the system of American education from different angles; that of the official sources such as Close up Foundation publications, American students and Russian participants of exchange programs and compare it to the opinions of Russian high school students.

Besides the above mentioned publications and public survey our research is based on the comments on American school system made by the students of the Sun Prairie High School, Sun Prairie, Wisconsin.

**2.1 Historical Background**

Americans have always valued education. They have shown great concern for it since early colonial times. Among the first settlers, in fact, there was an unusually high proportion of educated men. In the Massachusetts Bay colony in early 1600s, as the British historian Rouse pointed out, “there was an average of one university man to every 40 or 50 families – much higher than in Old England”.

In 1647 Massachusetts passed the law which required all towns with more than 50 families to provide a schoolmaster at public expense. It ran like this:

“It is being one chief project of that old deluder Satan to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures… by persuading from the use of tongues…that learning may not be buried in the graves of our fathers in the church and common wealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors: It is therefore ordered that every township in this jurisdiction, after the Lord has increased them to the number of 50 householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within the town to tech all such children as shall resort to him to write and read, whose wages shall be paid either by the parents or masters of such children, or by the inhabitants in general…”1

And it was further ordered that “where any town shall increase to the number of 100 families or householders, they shall set up a grammar school, the master thereof being able to instruct youth so far as they may be fittest for the university…”

Other colonies also made provisions for free public schools. In the course of the 17th century, for instance, free schools were established in a number of places such as New Haven, Hartford, New London and Fairfield. Many academies (schools offering a classical education) opened throughout the next century, including the one established by Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia in 1751.

It is seen from the above mentioned that the Puritans viewed education as an important means of passing on religious teachings. However many Americans hoped that publicly supported schools would wipe out the legacy of the British system,1 Anderson E.A., Anderson N. J. Let Freedom Ring, a United States History. Silver Budget Company, 1977, p. 276

in which the ability to read and write separated the economic classes.

The importance of education in American life was also reflected in the Ordinances of 1785 and 1787 which set guidelines for organizing the new lands to the west. They provided for one square mile of land in each township to be reserved for public schools. By 1859, every state had provided for a system of free public schools open to all and paid by public taxes.

Since its inception in the mid-1800s the nation’s public school system has also helped millions of immigrant children learn the language and skills necessary to succeed in their new country. It goes without saying that a great deal of the economic, political, scientific, and cultural progress America has made in its relatively short history is due to its commitment to the ideal of equal opportunity. In this respect one can’t but mention the landmark case of Brown V Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954) in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated public schools were unconstitutional. Later court decisions ordered schools to desegregate. To comply, many school districts began bussing students to schools outside their neighborhoods to bring together children of different races and ethnic backgrounds.

 The aim of American education to educate as many Americans as possible to the best of their abilities is proved by recent legislation, including school voucher program, which enables students attend a public school outside their neighborhoods, and No Child Left Behind law passed by Congress in 2001. The latter reflects many of President George W. Bush’s education initiatives, and aims to close achievement gaps among students from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as among those with special needs or learning disabilities. The belief that the future of society depends on the quantity and quality of its educated citizens makes it clear why a great many Americans are still willing to give more money to education.

**2.2 A Brief Account of American Education: Differences and Similarities**

Every American is entitled to an education. School attendance is compulsory for all children. Students attend school five to seven hours a day, five days a week for nine months each year, from September to June. Public education from kindergarten through grade 12 is tax-supported; no tuition is required.

About 85 per cent of American children attend public schools. The other 15 percent choose to pay tuition fees to attend private schools. The latter ones are mostly run by religious organizations and generally include religious instruction.

In spite of the above said the United States do not have a national system of education. Education is considered to be a matter for the people of each state. Although there is a Federal Department of Education, its function is merely to gather information, to advice, and to help finance certain educational programs. Education, Americans say, is “a national concern, a state responsibility, and a local function”. As a result, each of the 50 state legislatures is free to determine its own system for its own public schools.

In turn, however, state constitution gives the actual administrative control of the public schools to local communities. There are some 16000 school districts within the 50 states. School boards made up of individual citizens elected from each community oversee the schools in each district. They, not the state, set school policy and actually decide what is to be taught.

The major result of the decent realization is that there is enormous amount of variety and flexibility in elementary and secondary education throughout the nation. In public schools, decisions about school curriculum, teacher certification, and student achievement standards are made by Boards of Education at the state and/or district level. For example, although all states today require that children attend school until a certain age, it varies from 14 to 18 years. Or, as another example, in about 60 per cent of the states, local schools are free to choose any teaching materials or textbooks which they think are appropriate. In the remaining states, only such teaching materials may be used in public schools which have been approved by the state boards of education. Some school systems require that a high school student completes three years of mathematics, before graduation. The national average however is lower.

Funding for schools is another source of difference. Communities and states that are able or willing to pay more for school buildings, materials, and teachers, almost always have better educational systems than those that cannot or do not.

Because of the great variety of schools, and the many differences among them, no one institution can be singled out as typical or representative. Yet there are enough basic similarities in structure among various schools and systems to permit some general comments.

Most schools start at the kindergarten level. There are some school districts that do not have this beginning phase, and others which have an additional “pre-school” one.

Elementary (primary) and secondary (high) schools are organized on one or two bases: eight years of elementary school and four years of secondary school, or six years of elementary, three years of junior high school and three years of senior high school.

Although there is no national curriculum there are almost always required subjects at each level. Primary school children in the United States learn much the same things as do children of the same age in other countries.

Almost every elementary school instructs children in penmanship, science, mathematics, music, art, physical education, language arts (which include reading, writing and grammar), and social studies (which include geography, history, and citizenship).

Most secondary schools require students to take English, mathematics, science, social studies, and physical education. In addition to this “core” curriculum, students choose “elective” courses in their areas of interest.

What makes curriculum offerings more similar is a growing trend to adopt certain types of educational programs and competencies by state legislatures across the country. For instance, since 1985 nineteen states have passed legislation requiring students from schools throughout the state to pass a minimum competency test before they receive their high school diplomas. This, plus the fact that an additional twenty-three states have some form of minimum competency testing, creates strong pressure for curricular uniformity. Course content is also similar because expressed social goals are quite uniform throughout the United States. Additionally, much of what is taught in schools is influenced by the books and materials that are used. Because the large textbook companies sell books and series of books from state to state and from coast to coast, commonalities are further emphasized.

Another reason for similarity is the general uniformity of schooling procedures. For instance the number of hours of instruction and days in the school year is practically the same throughout the United States. Other similarities in schooling procedures include the length of classes, the time between classes, the use of bells, the number of pupils in each class, the awarding of credits (Carnegie units) for the completion of courses, the requirement of a fixed number of Carnegie units for graduation, the bureaucratic structure within the school systems. Also similar are the school rituals, such as book fairs, pep rallies, and graduation ceremonies.

In addition to curricular offerings and schooling procedures, actual teaching methods provide another element of uniformity in schools today. Verbal explanations, presentations and questioning, and assigning seatwork and drill on new material are among the main tools of the teaching trade.

**2.3 Standards**

Those who believe that American schools are more play than work overlook an important fact: a high school diploma is not a ticket that allows someone to automatically enter a university. Standardized examinations play a decisive role at almost every level of education, especially in the admission to colleges and universities. Students, who wish to go to a good university but only took high school courses that were a “snap”, or who spent too much time on extracurricular activities, will have to compete with those who worked hard and took demanding courses.

There are two widely used and nationally-administered standardized tests for high school students who wish to attend a college or university. One is the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), which attempts to measure aptitudes in verbal and mathematical fields necessary for college work. The other is the ACT (American College Testing program), which attempts to measure skills in English, mathematics, and the social and natural sciences. Both tests are given at specific dates and locations throughout the U.S. by non-profit, nongovernmental organizations. The tests are used by universities as standards for comparison, but are not in any way “official”.

**2.4 American School from the Point of View of Russian Teenagers**

Since the objective of our research is to view American system of education from different angles. Firstly we tried to find out what Russian teenagers, in our case senior students of Lyceum 37, know about their peers overseas. We made up a questionnaire containing a number of questions to conduct a survey among the students of the 10th and 11th grades. The results gave us much food for thought.

Out of 86 students who participated in the survey more than a half believe that education in the USA is free, 22 per cent, however, are sure it is paid and 17 per cent do not know anything about it.

As far as the minimum school age is concerned opinions differ. Among those 50 per cent of respondents who think that education in the USA is compulsory 26 per cent believe that American children begin to go to school at the age of 5, 13 per cent suggest 6 and 11 per cent consider children start school at the age of 7. The age at which students graduate from school caused even more controversy. 18 per cent of the respondents think high school students leave school at the age of 18, 15 per cent believe they do it at the age of 17, 8 per cent mention 16 years of age, 2 per cent – 15 years of age. The rest are not aware of the fact at all.

The second chapter of our research deals with the differences and similarities in American education. As for Russian students 35 per cent are not able to answer the question, 39 per cent think the system of education is uniform and only 26 per cent of the respondents know that in spite of many similarities one can hardly speak about a unified national educational system.

Similarly, opinions differ when Russian students are asked about the system of examinations in American schools. Although the majority of the respondents (89%) know that examinations and tests are conducted in the written form, 24 per cent consider that high school graduates are required to take examinations in all subjects on the curriculum. 76 per cent, nevertheless, assume that students of the 12 grade can choose the subjects and the number of examinations.

Even less is known about enrollment in college. 74 per cent of the questioned believe that school graduates are admitted to college or university according to the results of school examinations.

It turned out that Russian students know more about the possibility to choose subjects according to one’s aptitude and level of proficiency. 74 per cent of the students believe that American teenagers can choose classes within a certain subject area.

Due (thanks) to a great number of American movies on Russian television and DVD’s 63 per cent of the respondents know that in most public schools students are not required to wear a uniform, although the rest 37 per cent either do not pay attention to what American teenagers wear at school or do not see American movies at all.

The results of the survey prove that Russian students are well aware of sports and extracurricular activities in American school. 71 per cent believe that Sports is one of the most important subjects on the curriculum and much heed is paid to physical development of students. 98 per cent of the respondents think that American students are provided with excellent opportunities to join clubs and participation in all kinds of organizations, alliances and clubs is very popular among (with) American teenagers.

Very little is known about education for mentally and physically challenged students or students with disabilities. The USA is known throughout the world as the land of equal opportunities, thus children of various abilities (or disabilities) are given equal chances to get their education. So one can find students in wheelchairs, partially blind or deaf sitting in the same classroom as other students. They are approached differently and are taught under individualized syllabus adapted to their skills and abilities. The progress they make is supervised by specialists and coordinators who are in charge of teaching special students. The main idea is that interacting and socializing with other students develop their social skills and as a result they are more likely to get adjusted to life in modern society. However 89 per cent of Russian respondents believe that students with disabilities in America are taught in special schools.

One more controversial issue is that of school discipline. In spite of the fact that in most American schools very strict measures are taken to prevent and fight truancy and school violence the majority of Russian students think that the atmosphere in American high school is more relaxed and little is done to maintain “law and order”. Despite the introduction of “zero-tolerance” policy in most schools and, as a result, a considerable decrease of crimes committed within school precincts. American school is still viewed by most Russian students as a place where teenagers are free to do whatever they want.

Summing up, we can say that Russian students have a certain idea of American secondary education, at least, some of its aspects, which enables them to make rather a categorical conclusion that American system of education can hardly be called more efficient or more productive than the Russia one. This opinion is shared by 83 per cent of the respondents. Out of those 17 per cent who believe American education to be more successful two thirds explain it by higher standards of living and better equipment of schools. Only 25 per cent or one third think that American school provides its graduates with better opportunities to get higher education.

**2.5 What American students think of their educational system**

It goes without saying that to get information “straight from the horse’s mouth” is better than take it from the reference books/ Modern technology and one year stay in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin made it possible to conduct a survey not only among the students of Lyceum 37 but also among the students of Sun Prairie High School.

They were asked only two questions: what they appreciate in American system of education and what they do not approve at all.

Nearly all the questioned believe that the main advantage of the system is its freedom. As Amanda Collier puts it: “The advantages are that you get a choice as to what you are able to take and the freedom to be able to do what you like and/or are good at”. A wide range of extracurricular activities and excellent sports facilities are also mentioned by all the respondents. However some students hold the opinion which contradicts the one. For example, Jaimee Neerland says: “The disadvantages I think are the limitations that some people encounter. Even thought we get to choose what we want to take, there are only so many courses in a day and in my personal case, I had to drop a course that I loved and was good at because there simply wasn’t enough room in the schedule”. Besides sometimes classes get filled up and you can’t take the class you want.

Even such undoubtable advantages of the American system of education as being free of charge and being aimed at providing equal education for all students (or providing all students with equal educational opportunities) turn out to be debatable. My former co-student Clarisse Tobia says that sometimes their educational system can be expensive: “Sometimes you have to pay for materials in a certain class if you want to take the class. Sometimes school will have you pay for each individual class you are taking.”

In spite of great variety of classes to choose there are not enough advanced classes, too much emphasis is placed on sports and not enough on academics. Carl Peterson says: “Too often we are limited as to what classes we can take, because with some schools they cannot afford certain things that other schools can. Some schools do not even offer honors or AP classes”. As a result high school graduation requirements don’t match up with college class entrance requirements “like you might need 3 years of History to graduate but 4 years of History to get into a specific college”.

A couple of my former schoolmates blame their educational system for mediocrity which they believe to be the reverse side of equality. Michal Hartung says: “I feel like this educational system is designed to create a mentally equal population. It suffocates creativity and does not allow for going above and beyond. Because you are forced to take as many as 8 courses at a time you are never able to become great at one subject, just mediocre at all of them. There is simply no need to try to excel in any subject because it is easy to succeed in this system without being truly great”. However the majority think that all schools should offer the same things no matter what. “Every school should be o prep school minus the uniforms”.

There are some more things American high school students are not happy with: too many classes in one day, the time school day starts, and overcrowded classes in big cities.

Nevertheless in general American teenagers seem to be quite content with their educational system and do not want to change it.

Among these few changes they would like to make an introduction or further development of the so-called block scheduling in all schools, more funding for academic things and less for sports, more freedoms with educational careers.

**2.6 Alumni Experience**

Our research or to be more exact our outlook on the American system of education would be incomplete if we didn’t take into account the opinions and conclusions of alumni, the numerous participants of the Russian-American Exchange program Freedom Support Act – Future Leaders Exchange. Thanks to ‘perestroika’ and policy of peaceful co-existence the opportunity to go to the USA and stay there for a year being accommodated in a host family became quite plausible for hundreds of Russian teenagers 15 years ago. Since the geography of the program covers the entire country, from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast and from the Canadian border to the Gulf of Mexico, the alumni’s opinions appear to be pretty objective.

We have questioned 38 alumni who stayed in the USA from 2003 to 2008. In spite of the fact that all of them come from different backgrounds and studied in different schools their points of view proved to be quite similar (nearly the same). Nearly all of them think that one of the biggest advantages of American schools is freedom to choose and ability to make your own schedule.

Another advantage which is mentioned practically by all the alumni is their sport system. Dmitry Dubovic, the alumnus of the year 2007-2008 from Rostov shared his opinion: “I would say that sports is a very important issue in American education and I believe we need to do the same thing here”. Every school has its own teams in different kinds of sports, modern gyms, weight rooms and of course football field. It is great when high school kids are so healthy and fit and determined, and sports also help develop team work which is very important in every area in life.

Another plus (and in this case the opinions of those who study or once studied in American schools and those who have never been there co-inside) is extracurricular activities. Sonia Lomp (2006-2007, Novosibirsk) says: “It is awesome that American schools have such subjects as choir, leadership, drama and stuff that help talented kids and also keep them busy with their hobbies”.

We have already mentioned that the respondents (participants of the survey) have a very vague idea of maintaining discipline in American schools. As for alumni they find it strict enough, sometimes even too strict. There is no way you can skip your classes, or get in a fight at school, or even be late without being punished. Luba Romanova (2005-2006, Novgorod) complains about too much control, corridor passes, sending your grades to parents, calling home if you miss any class. Alina Berdiaeva (2007-2008, Omsk) recollects: “There is no such thing like “may I turn in this paper tomorrow instead of today”. There is no tomorrow. There is discipline. That makes students respect the teachers.” At the same time Ksenia Lenshina (2006-2007, Samara) and other alumni find the school atmosphere more informal, it provides more confidence: the teacher will never yell your grade out, no matter if it is good or bad.

Among other good points are the teacher’s possibilities to use modern technologies, sitting alone at the desk, having study halls to do your homework, an ability to work in groups.

As for such possibilities as the Internet at school or having access to all sources of information they are available to Russian students even in the most distant regions of the country.

As far as the disadvantages of American system of education are concerned nearly all the alumni we have questioned name a low level of knowledge schools give their student, especially in math. For example Evgenia Bogatova (2005-2006, Volgograd) was shocked when she saw juniors and seniors having troubles solving quadratic equations and identities.

Another minus is related more to the mentality or national set of mind rather than to the system of education. Many citizens of the USA admit that America is mostly concerned with America. Young people put it in a more rigorous way. Nastia Peshina (2004-2005, Ekaterinburg) says: “The bad part that Americans are crazy about the USA and pretty much don’t know tons of stuff about the world. I would add Geography at least one required year.” She is echoed by Ekaterina Kononova (2007-2008, Saratov): “A very big part of Americans don’t care about what goes around somewhere farther than their own American nose. So negative but it is true. I seriously like their motto: “There is the US, and there is the rest of the world”. You can see it pretty often in their foreign policy. But again it is a national part of their character. But the educational system could change it…”

Among other disadvantages the alumni mention are low level of teaching foreign languages, 12 grades which some of them think to be too long.

The point which is viewed by some alumni as a plus and by others as a minus is that in every class you meet new students. On the one hand it helps you to meet a lot of new people, but on the other hand it doesn’t give you a chance to feel as part of the group as the result students meet each other at school every day, but sometimes they don’t even know each other’s name. “They don’t become friends because every 45 minutes in school you are going to class with different people and there is nothing that can unite you all together.”

**3 Conclusion**

In conclusion we can say that the main goal of our research, to examine the system of secondary education from the inside and outside, seems to be achieved. We have made a brief outline of American school from the point of view of those who are within the system, the onlookers and exchange programs participants, who are able to compare and contrast.

It goes without saying that there is no system of education which can be called perfect. The National Commission on Excellence in Education which worked in the USA at the end of the previous century asserted: “The education foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity”. The commission’s recommendations for improving student achievement included the following points:

1. Strong academic curricula, with a back-to-basic emphasis on reading, writing, math and science;
2. Stricter standards for students, including a heavier homework load and higher grading standards;
3. Higher salaries to attract and keep talented, well-qualified teachers.

Doesn’t it prove that in spite of all differences education all over the Globe faces similar problems and to solve them joined efforts of all those who make up the system are required.

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