SCHOOL EDUCATION IN THE USA

## Education In The USA

## Purpose And Scope

Americans believe that every citizen has both the right and the obligation to become educated.

In order to develop an educated population, all states have compulsory school attendance laws. These laws vary somewhat from one state to another, but generally they require that formal schooling begin by age 6 and continue until at least age l6. However, most Americans attend school at least until high school graduation, when they are l7 or l8 years old. About 75% of all American adults and about 85% of younger American adults are high school graduates.

The size of the nation's basic educational enterprise is astonishing. From kindergarten through high school, about 46 million students are enrolled in school. To educate this vast number of students, Americans employ about 2.7 million teachers, by far the largest professional group in the country.

## Public and private schools

About 88% of American children receive their elementary and high school education in the nation's public schools. These schools have the following important characteristics in common:

a) They are supported by taxes and, therefore, do not charge tuition.

b) In general, they are neighbourhood schools, open to all students who live within the district.

c) They are co-educational, which means that boys and girls attend the same schools and have nearly all of their classes together. By providing girls with equal educational opportunity, American public schools have helped to create today's self-sufficient American woman.

d) Public schools are required to follow some state guidelines regarding, for example, curriculum and teacher qualifications. But, in most matters, schools are locally controlled. Each school district is run by an elected Board of Education and the school administrators that Board hires. This system creates strong ties between the district's schools and its community.

e) Public schools are non-sectarian (secular), which means that they are free from the influence of any religion. As a result, children of many different religions feel comfortable attending the public schools, and the public school system has been able to help a diverse population build a common culture.

Private schools can be divided into two categories: parochial (supported by a particular religious group) and secular (non-religious). Private schools charge tuition and are not under direct public control, although many states set educational standards for them. In order to attend a private school, a student must apply and be accepted. Parochial schools make up the largest group of private schools, and most of these are operated by the Roman Catholic Church. Private secular schools are mainly high schools and colleges.

## Course content and teaching methods

In educating students for adult work and adult life, American schools try, above all, to be practical. American education has been greatly influenced by the writings of a famous 20th-century philosopher named John Dewey. Dewey believed that the only worthwhile knowledge was knowledge that could be used. He convinced educators that it was pointless to make students memorize useless facts that they would quickly forget. Rather, schools should teach thinking processes and skills that affect how people live and work.

Dewey also influenced teaching techniques.education must be meaningful, and children learn best by doing - these are the basic ideas of progressive education. Thus, science is taught largely through student experimentation; the study of music involves making music; democratic principles are put into practice in the student council; group projects encourage creativity, individual initiative, leadership, and teamwork.

What do American schools see as their educational responsibility to students? The scope is very broad indeed. Today's schools teach skills and information once left for the parents to teach at home. For example, it is common for the public school curriculum to include a campaign against cigarette smoking and drug abuse, a course in driver's education, cooking and sewing classes, consumer education, and sex education. Most American grammar schools have also added computer skills to their curriculum. As human knowledge has expanded and life has become increasingly complex, the schools have had to go far beyond the original three Rs ("reading, writing, and arithmetic") that they were created to teach.

American high schools have a dual commitment: (a) to offer a general college preparatory program for those who are interested in higher education; and (b) to provide opportunities for vocational training for students who plan to enter the work force immediately after high school graduation. For the college-bound, high schools offer advanced classes in math, sciences, social sciences, English, and foreign languages. They also have Advanced Placement (AP) courses, which enable good students to earn college credit while still in high school. But in the same building other students take vocational courses such as shorthand and mechanical drawing, and some participate in work/study programs which enable them to get high school credit for on-the-job training in various occupations.

Today, more than ever before, American schools are committed to helping foreign-born students adjust to life in an American class-room. The Bilingual Education Act of l968 provided federal funds for bilingual instruction, which allows students to study academic subjects totally or partially in their native language while they are learning English. Bilingual education is offered in about 70 languages including Chinese, Spanish, Vietnamese, and several American Indian languages. Of course, this type of instruction is available only where a number of students speak the same foreign language. In addition, immigrant students have benefited from the l974 Supreme Court ruling requiring public schools to provide special programs for students who speak little or no English. Today, English as a second language of instruction is common in American elementary and high schools.

## Early childhood education

By the age of five, about 87% of American children are attending school, most of them in pre-academic classes called kindergarten.

However, many American youngsters are introduced to their first school setting even before the age of five, through nursery school or day care attendance. In fact, about 29% of three-year-olds and 49% of four-year-olds are enrolled in one or the other.

Nursery schools accept children from three to five years of age for half-day sessions ranging from twice a week to five days a week. The typical nursery school is equipped with toys, building blocks, books, puzzles, art supplies, and an outdoor play-ground. These pre-school programs usually charge tuition, although some are subsidized, and some offer scholarships. Day care programs have similar facilities that offer all-day care for the children of working parents.

## Elementary school and high school

In most areas, free public education begins with kindergarten classes for five-year-olds. These are usually half-day classes two or three hours long, although some communities run all-day kindergarten programs. The primary purpose of kindergarten is socialization, but the young students also gain information and skills. For example, they learn to identify colors, count to ten, print their names, work with art supplies, listen to stories, and enjoy books. After kindergarten, American children begin their academic studies. Their schooling is divided into 12 academic levels called grades. One school year (from late August or early September to mid-June) is required to complete each grade. Academic work - learning to read, write, and do arithmetic - begins when children enter lst grade, at about age 6.

The first academic institution that a student attends is called elementary school or grammar school. In some school systems, elementary school includes kindergarten through 8th grade, and the next four years (taught in a different school building) are called high school. In other school systems, there is a third division called junior high school (or middle school) which usually includes grades 6 through 8, but in some communities includes grades 4 or 5 through 8 and in others includes grades 7 through 9.

The typical school day is about seven hours long and ends about 3 P.M. Classes are in session Monday through Friday. Traditional vacation periods include a two-week winter vacation (including the Christmas and New Year's holidays),a one - week spring vacation (often coinciding with Easter), and a two-month summer vacation. In addition, there are several one-day holidays giving students a day off to celebrate.

Children going to public elementary schools usually attend a school in their neighbourhood. In big cities, many children live close enough to walk to and from school and come home for lunch. However, most elementary schools provide a place where students can eat if it is inconvenient for them to go home at lunchtime. American high schools are larger than elementary schools and serve a larger community. As a result, most high school students take public transportation or a school bus to and from school and eat lunch in the school cafeteria.

Grammar schools teach language arts (reading, writing, spelling, and penmanship), social studies (stressing history and geography), mathematics (up to and sometimes including algebra), science, physical education, and health. In addition, elementary school programs often include music, art, and home economics.

High school subjects are more specialized. English classes emphasize writing, grammar, and literature. Social studies is split into separate courses such as American history, European history, and psychology. Year-long courses in algebra and geometry are followed by more advanced math work in trigonometry and pre-calculus. There are also specialized science courses in biology, chemistry, and physics. Many high school students study a foreign language, usually Spanish, French, or German. Courses in music, art, home economics, and consumer education are also available, along with various vocational courses. As in elementary school, health and physical education classes are generally required.

During the elementary school years, students are grouped into classes, and each group stays together for the entire school day and the entire school year. Generally, the class has the same teacher for most subjects, although art, music, and physical education are usually taught by teachers who specialize in these areas. Also, in the upper elementary grades, students in some school systems have different teachers (but the same classmates) for their major academic subjects.

In high school, students move from one classroom to another and study each subject with a different teacher and a different group of classmates. Many high schools have what is commonly called a tracking system, which groups students according to academic ability and motivation. Thus, more capable and hard-working students take more difficult courses. Depending on the subject, classes may be offered at two, three, or even four different ability levels.

High school students have a very busy day. Many take five or six academic subjects as well as physical education. During other periods, students may be doing homework in a study hall, researching in the school library, or participating in activities such as the school orchestra, student government, school newspaper, or math club. Many extracurricular activities also meet after the school day ends. Students involved in time-consuming activities such as athletics, dramatics, or music may be at school from very early in the morning until dinnertime. However, these school activities are well worth the time because they help students find friends with similar interests, develop their talents, gain greater self-confidence, and sometimes even discover their career goals.

## Problems and solutions

When an immigrant family moves to the USA, one of the first questions that parents ask is, "Will my children get a good education here?" The answer depends on two major factors: where the children attend school and how hard they are willing to work.

In some schools where the community is stable, the funding good, and the school environment orderly, a hardworking student can get an excellent education. But in other schools - especially those in poor neighborhoods in the nation's large cities - it is very difficult to become educated. The flight of middle-class families to the suburbs left big city public schools with mostly lower-income students. Many are deprived children from impoverished homes with only one parent. Many come to school ill-prepared and poorly motivated to learn. A large number need help in learning English. Many change residences and schools often, and a changing classroom population is difficult to teach. In some poor neighborhoods, the students do not attend school regularly because they are frightened by violent gangs. In some class-rooms, teachers have difficulty keeping the students' attention because disrespectful, uncooperative students disturb the class. Because the quality of education varies so much from one school district to another, parents who are planning to move to a new neighborhood often inquire about the schools - and even visit them - before deciding which community to move to.

Researchers are always studying the schools and evaluating the kind of education being provided. Experts ask: "Are today's students learning as much as their older siblings or their parents did? Are they learning as much as students in other countries?" In the l980s, many studies revealed weaknesses in the American educational system. For example, of the l58 members of the United Nations, the USA ranked 49th in its level of literacy. It has been claimed that as many as 25 million American adults cannot read the front page of a newspaper. Another study focused on students' knowledge of history and literature. The results were published in a book entitled, What Do Our l7-Year-Olds Know?

And the answer is, "not much". For example 75% of American high school seniors did not know when Abraham Lincoln was President, and 89% could not identify Dickens, Dostoyevsky, and Ibsen as famous authors. In a l988 study comparing students' knowledge of geography, American young adults came in last of nine countries. In fact, l8% of the American students couldn't even find the USA on a world map! Still other studies indicate that today's students are weak in mathematical problem-solving and writing skills.

What's wrong with American education? To find the answer and to fix the problem, one must look at all of the elements: the students themselves, their parents, their teachers, the school curriculum, the textbooks, and the community. Many students simply do not study enough. (Two-thirds of high school seniors do an hour or less of homework per night). American teenagers are often distracted by part-time jobs, sports and other school activities, TV, and socializing. Some do not keep up with their schoolwork because of emotional problems, use of illegal drugs, or simply lack of motivation. Clearly, if Americans are to become better educated, students must spend more time studying, and parents must insist that they do so.

Criticism of American education stimulated a reform movement. As a result, 45 of the 50 states raised high-school graduation requirements. One government study recommended a longer school year. (Now, the average American student attends school about 180 days a year, compared to 210 for a Japanese student). Efforts have also been underway to increase parental involvement in schools and to improve teaching. College programs that educate teachers are trying to encourage more academically talented students to choose teaching as a career. Schools of education are also improving their curriculum so that American teachers of the future will be better prepared. School administrators are working on curriculum revisions. Publishers are being urged to create text-books that are more challenging, interesting, and objective. Finally, concerned citizens are urging communities and the federal government to provide more tax dollars for education.

What can one say about basic education in the USA today? It has many strengths, but there's plenty of room for improvement. Since the school reform movement began, test scores have risen somewhat, and Americans are optimistic that reform and improvement will continue. Americans deeply believe in education as the best vehicle for individual and social advancement. Improving the basic school system is one of the nation's top priorities. But meanwhile, it is a consolation to remember that, for most young Americans, formal education does not end with high school graduation.