

College Guild

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U.S. Education

~Levels of Education~

Unit 2 of 6

The U.S. education system is divided into around 12 grade levels. Moving through them is like playing a video game, as you must pass a previous level to access the next. While the process of progressing through each level may seem simple, the specifics can be confusing. Each level has different requirements, goals, and challenges. Understanding the level breakdown is key to understanding the system as a whole.

Preschool

“Preschool,” also known as nursery school or pre-primary school, refers to voluntary early childhood education undertaken before a child enters the compulsory education system in kindergarten. They came to prominence in the U.S. through President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Head Start program, which was created in 1965 to provide publicly-funded preschool for low-income families. Though preschool can be privately or publicly funded, federal funding has decreased in the years since Head Start was created, making it more difficult for low-income families to send their children to preschool.

- 1. How might preschool benefit a child from a low income household? How might it benefit their family?**

Children attend preschool for one or two years, and typically do so between the ages of three and five. The main goal of preschool is to get children ready for kindergarten and elementary school. Students learn skills that form a basis for the education they’ll receive in the coming years, such as recognizing patterns, learning new words, and interacting with other children. Often these skills are taught through games, rhymes, or crafts which entertain the students while teaching them good behavior and how to follow directions.

- 2. Imagine you are a preschool teacher trying to teach new words to a classroom of students. Come up with the following to help them learn:**
 - One craft
 - One Game
- 3. Should preschool be required across the country? Why or why not?**

Elementary School

Around age five, students begin elementary school, the first level of public education in the U.S. Although many states around the country have public preschool programs, elementary schools provide the first mandatory level of public education throughout the U.S. Beginning with kindergarten, elementary schools prepare students for middle school by teaching important foundational skills, including those in both classroom and personal environments.

While the starting grade of elementary school is not up for debate, the final grade is different across the states, mostly depending on region. For example, in many schools in the Midwest, elementary school ends after fifth grade, while elementary schools in the Northeast go until sixth grade. In a few cases, elementary school may even end after fourth grade, but this is much less common.

4. If you were in charge of schools for your town, in what year would you have elementary school end? Why?

Though elementary school curricula and lesson plans vary greatly from grade to grade, the schedule is consistent for students of all grades. Their day typically begins around 8 a.m., ending around 3 p.m. During these hours, students are typically stay with one teacher and the same group of students, learning all of the basic subjects except for physical education, art, music, and other specialties that are often taken once or twice per week. The day is also broken down further by breaks for lunch and recess, and sometimes even a snack or second recess.

5. Pretend you are designing an all-new elementary school. What hours is it open? How are the students' days structured?

6. Imagine you are an art teacher at an elementary school with all the necessary art materials. Design a project for your students to do and explain why you chose that project.

Each elementary school grade level has its own subject matter that builds on that of the previous grade and prepares students for the next one. A brief breakdown of each grade's learning goals is listed on the following page.

Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learn the alphabet and how to write each letter. ● Learn some simple words to create a foundation for reading. ● Acquire skills such as using scissors, painting, drawing, etc.
1st grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read simple books and sentences. ● Learn simple addition and subtraction. ● Understand more complex directions and begin to work independently.
2nd grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read more complex books and stories. ● Begin to learn science concepts such as observation and experimentation. ● Learn more complex math problems with addition and subtraction.

3rd grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Develop stronger reading and writing skills. ● Begin to learn multiplication and division. ● Work on two-step math problems and word problems.
4th grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read a wider variety of books and learn to write stories. ● Complete math problems involving fractions, conversions, and decimals. ● Begin to learn more advanced history and science topics.
5th grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read closely and discuss what has been read. ● Conduct research and begin to write essays or longer pieces. ● Complete multi-step equations using all four basic operations.

- 7. What subjects weren't mentioned above that you believe should be taught in elementary school? Why do you think these are important?**
- 8. Pretend you are a student going through elementary school. Pick a grade and write a letter to a friend about something you learned or something that happened in that grade.**

Elementary education covers far more than the academic curriculum. Learning interpersonal skills, such as how to resolve conflict and form healthy peer relationships, is a key part of the elementary school education, with value that cannot be underestimated. Throughout their time in elementary school, students begin to interact more and more with their peers and teachers, learning valuable communication skills and forming relationships. Not all of this interaction is positive—bullying and exclusion occur daily in schools—but negative interactions can still make for useful learning experiences on both sides. Inevitably, when interpersonal conflicts crop up, students must learn to deal with them in an effective manner, a skill they will use their entire lives. While the social side of school is seen as secondary to the academic side, it is just as important to a student's education and a vital part of preparing them for life after school.

- 9. A group of third graders are having a disagreement during lunch. Write a 10-line dialogue in which the students...**
 - **Approach the problem poorly and someone becomes upset.**
 - **Solve the problem maturely, leaving everyone happy.**

Middle School

After finishing elementary school, adolescent students (aged approximately 11–13) move on to middle school, or junior high school, where they will spend their days until finishing eighth grade. Middle schools typically cater to grades 6–8, with some variation found throughout the country. The purpose of middle school is to prepare students for high school by building on the skills learned in elementary school with more complex concepts, an increased workload, and even more social skill development. Students develop an understanding of the scientific method, study specific historical eras, solve complex math problems, and gain deeper understanding and control of the English language.

10. Imagine you are a student on your first day of middle school. Write a descriptive paragraph about your first steps inside the building. What do you see, hear, feel, smell, and experience? What do you fear? What are you excited about?

In middle school, students often shift to a period-based schedule, where they move from classroom to classroom throughout the day (often when a bell rings), sitting and learning with different students and different teachers in each classroom. With different teachers in each room, classes become more focused. More homework and tougher grading pushes kids to grow academically, as well as learn valuable skills such as time management, self discipline, and planning.

11. How do you think this change in schedule affects students' learning?

12. What is one technique someone might use to stay organized when they have a lot of things to do? Describe this technique.

With classes broken down into specific subject areas, the typical course load includes one class in each of the following subjects: math, science, social studies, English, and physical education. In addition to these, students often take one or two elective courses in areas such as languages, technology, art, theater, woodworking, cooking, and music.

13. Pretend you are a middle school student designing your daily schedule. You must take the five required subjects, two electives, and one lunch period.

- a. **What elective courses would you choose? Keep in mind that they do not have to be listed above.**
- b. **In what order would you take these courses each day, and why?**

Perhaps the biggest and most well-known part of middle school happens outside of the classroom, and that's puberty. Middle school comes at a time when most kids begin to go through a lot of physical changes. They are often uncomfortable with their bodies, and everyone is progressing at different rates, making social interactions even more complicated. These issues begin to subside as students develop as individuals and gain a sense of personal identity, learning who they are, who their friends are, and what they enjoy doing.

14. Write a short story about a middle schooler who is uncomfortable with all the changes happening in their life.

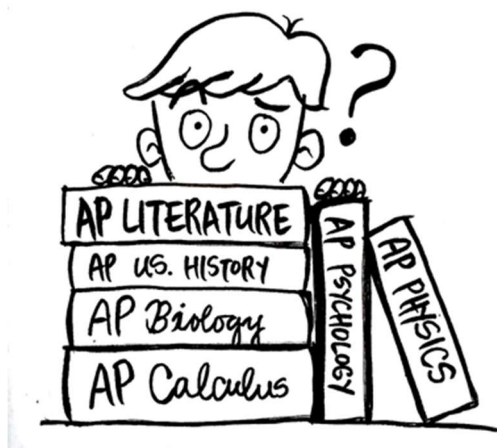
15. Students develop some of their first meaningful friendships in middle school. What qualities do you look for in a best friend? How have these qualities changed as you've grown older?

High School

After navigating the tough and ever-changing waters of middle school, students are often excited and anxious to start high school. Consisting of grades 9–12 in most cases, high school serves as a springboard for students—whether they're heading for college, technical school, or something outside the realm of

education. Depending on a high school's student demographics, it may need to cater to a wide variety of goals, learning abilities, and academic levels in order to serve all students well.

16. What are three different goals that different students might have in one high school?



Typically, high schools offer three levels of courses. There is a general education level, meant for all students, that covers baseline information and assigns a workload manageable for the widest group of students. The next level up is the honors or accelerated level, which has a heavier workload, more difficult subject matter, and higher expectations regarding the quality of students' work. Lastly, many high schools have Advanced Placement (AP) courses that are considered to be college-level classes. Any student who passes a final exam in an AP class receives college credit for that course. The process of placing students into different levels of courses is referred to as tracking.

17. What are two possible benefits of tracking and what are two possible downsides?

While the high school graduation requirements differ from state to state, the general guidelines are relatively similar. Students must take numerous courses in the standard subject areas, a few electives, and some language courses, depending on each school's academic criteria. Students must maintain certain grades in these courses to meet the graduation requirements.

18. What is one high school class that you think should be a graduation requirement? Why?

19. In some states, high schools have a community service requirement that obliges students to complete a certain number of community service and volunteer hours before graduating. Do you think this should be a federal mandate? Why or why not?

High schools also offer a large number of extracurricular opportunities, including clubs organized around various hobbies and interests, school government organizations, and sports teams. These offer students continued opportunities to develop their communication, teamwork, and real-world interpersonal skills.

20. If you were a high school student, which two extracurricular organizations would you join? Explain why you chose those two.

The high school years are an important period in the development of young people, as students begin to gain independence and experience, and grow into adults. By high school, most students have already experienced many of the large-scale changes that occurred in middle school, and are more comfortable socially and in their friendships. That said, it's still a time when new friends are being made and relationships are constantly changing, creating challenges both inside and outside of the classroom.

21. Which life skill learned in high school do you think is the most important? Explain your choice.

22. After learning about all of the levels of public education described in this unit, which level would you most like to teach? Explain your choice.

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes