

College Guild

P.O. Box 696 Brunswick, Maine 04011

U.S. Education

~Education in the U.S. Today~

Unit 4 of 6

Over the years, the United States education system has changed and evolved with the country. What started as a simple system of tiny schoolhouses has grown into a billion-dollar industry with level upon level of education and millions of schools around the country. In this unit, we will build upon our units that discuss history, levels of education, and higher education to examine the current state of education in the U.S. and discuss who is in charge, where the money comes from, and how this affects students.

Attitudes Towards Education in the U.S.

In recent years, education has become more and more of a hot-button issue in the U.S. and has jumped to the political fore as a key issue in elections. As more and more Americans become educated on the subject of education, they begin to take sides in the raging debate. Many believe that the education system is broken, and politicians at the local, state, and federal level are struggling to remedy countless problems, with solid solutions everyone can agree on very hard to come by.

- 1. What are two controversial issues that you see in the U.S. education system today?**
- 2. Pick one of the issues you just listed. Explain your views on this issue, as well as the opposition's views.**
- 3. How can politics interfere with education or be detrimental to the delivery of education?**

In general, Americans believe that the education system plays a key role in shaping future generations, and therefore the future of the U.S. For years, our education system was thought to be the best in the world, a factor that put us at the top of global power rankings. In recent years, however, this belief has been brought into question. The U.S. education system has begun to fail more and more students, and many believe this is driving the division around the country. While changing the education system alone would likely not be enough to fix the larger issues affecting the country today, it would be a crucial part of any solution.

- 4. What are two ways that the U.S. education system has failed its students over the past several decades?**
- 5. Imagine you are running for president. Write a speech that you would give to a group of teachers about some changes you would make to the education system. Be sure to explain why you would make them.**

Who's in Charge of All This?

With clashes between schools, teachers, states, parents, and politicians, it can be hard to tell who is actually in charge of education in the U.S. In reality, it isn't just one person or one group or people, but a mix of everyone mentioned above.

6. Who do you think should be in charge of making decisions about the U.S. education system? Explain your answer.

Because the Constitution makes no mention of the education system, it is decentralized. In fact, education is a state issue, giving each of the 50 states the ability to set up their educational systems however they please. Typically, states will have a board of education and/or a secretary of education who is in charge of making decisions for the entire state. They can choose graduation requirements and education standards, select which curriculum teachers should teach, regulate standardized tests, and even decide which books students are allowed to read in school. These boards can establish state mandates and rules on how education will be handled in their particular states, which is why education looks a little different in each state.

7. Do you think there should be nationally-established graduation requirements? Explain your answer.

8. Do you think school boards should be able to limit which books students can read? Explain your answer.

This explanation of education's leadership leaves out the federal government. Without any official powers over the states in education, federal changes to education can be hard to enact, especially as states don't like their control to be encroached upon. The federal government's biggest bargaining chip, however, is funding. Surprisingly, federal funding for schools only makes up around 10% of each state's total funding, but that amount can still make a big difference when it comes to helping struggling schools.

9. Pretend you're a student at a struggling school and list three ways your day-to-day life changed after your school received a boost of federal funding.

Another tool at the disposal of the federal government is their ability to pass laws. All of the large-scale changes recently made to the U.S. education system came from laws passed by Congress. These laws regulate schools on a national level by requiring them to meet guidelines in areas such as per-student funding and testing. Often, these laws will give more funding and attention to schools and districts that need help meeting guidelines. Some laws have made it possible for the federal government to give more funding to states that meet or use federal curriculum standards, granting less funding to states that don't comply.

10. Do you think this an overstep by the federal government? Explain your answer.

Where Does the Money Come From?

The costs of education are high because the U.S. has around 50 million students that go to public schools. The education system must pay for teachers, school supplies, building costs, janitors, and more.

11. List three more things that schools must pay for.
12. Why do you think the U.S. education system has gotten more expensive over the years? (Ex: Schools have had to pay more for security following rising numbers of school shootings.)

To cover costs, each state has its own budget of at least a billion dollars. Budgets vary from state to state, as each state has a slightly different total budget and each state's values vary greatly, affecting where they determine money should go. Individual state budgets are divided among school districts in the state.

13. Imagine you are in charge of your state's budget for the next year. Below is a list of areas to which you must devote funding. Draw a pie chart, just like the one above, of how much funding you would devote to each area. After drawing your chart, explain why you chose to allocate funds in this way.
 - a. Education
 - b. Parks
 - c. Police Department
 - d. Fire Department
 - e. Public Works (i.e., gas, electric, water)
 - f. Any other areas you can think of!

The federal government has an education budget of around \$80 billion, an amount that is almost completely divided among the states using guidelines set out in the education laws mentioned above. (A small portion is reserved for education research and innovation.) The competition for federal education funding is always stiff because states want as much as they can get in order to ease the burden on their own state budgets.

14. Imagine you are the secretary of education in a wealthy state with a lot of education funding. Write a letter to the federal secretary of education explaining that your state wants twice as much as they received the previous year. Remember to explain what you would spend the money on, how it would benefit the students, and why you need funding despite being in a wealthy state.

Obviously, this is not all of the funding that goes into schools, although it is a good chunk of it. As you can see in the chart above, local revenue makes up close to half of the funding for K–12 public schools. Local revenue means property taxes paid by those owning property in a certain town. While this money also goes to maintaining roads, parks, fire departments, and other similar projects, a significant portion of it goes to the local school district.

- 15. Imagine you are a teacher in town that does not devote enough money to education. Write a letter to your mayor persuading them to spend more money on education. Remember to use points that make sense from a teacher's perspective.**

This system of funding lends itself to enormous inequality in our education system. The reliance on local revenue as a major source of funding in school districts creates wide gaps between neighborhoods, compounding existing neighborhood disadvantage. This occurs because property taxes are calculated based on the cost of property in a certain town—in wealthier areas, property taxes are higher, so schools in affluent towns get more money and have larger school budgets. Because of these budgets, school districts in wealthy areas tend to have more resources, higher-paid teachers, and more well-maintained facilities. They tend to enroll students from affluent families, granting them further access to wealth. Meanwhile, schools in neighborhoods with lower property values and thus less tax revenue tend to have small school budgets, equating to fewer resources and often lower student achievement. This both creates and perpetuates a cycle of inequality that is very difficult to break within the current system.

- 16. What are three steps you would take to improve inequality in school funding around the country?**

Federal and state funding is intended to break this cycle and interrupt the patterns resulting from local tax revenue streams, but the gaps tend to grow faster than these interventions can keep up with. There are so many schools in need of serious assistance today that the federal and state governments often can't keep up. While some politicians may advocate allocating much more funding to public education, other interests compete for their share of the state budget—if a politician chooses to fund education, they are choosing not to fund someone else. This can hurt their chances at remaining in office long enough to make a change.

- 17. Though it might not be your belief, write an essay arguing that the U.S. education system's model is working well the way it is.**

Public schools

Up until now, this course has focused solely on public education. Essentially, public schools are schools that receive government funding and property taxes to support their schools. With this funding, schools offer a free education to all students who live in their area, which is often a more diverse group than those in private schools. Because they receive funding from the government, public schools must follow strict guidelines and meet requirements set out by their state.

Charter schools

Typically, public schools follow the traditional model of education. This model does not work for every student, and education researchers are constantly searching for new and innovative styles of education that target those with different learning styles or behavioral needs. Charter schools are often created as an answer to these issues. Charter schools are publicly funded schools, available to the public, that are run by

independent boards. These boards have the freedom to try new teaching styles and craft unique student experiences that help their teachers educate a wide variety of students in different ways.

- 18. Imagine you are a student with a very hands-on learning style who struggles in the traditional school environment. You're applying to attend a new charter school that claims to offer a lot of direct, experiential learning. Write an entrance essay explaining why this school would be a good fit for you.**

Magnet schools

Like charter schools, magnet schools are an alternative to traditional public schools. Still receiving government funding and providing free education, magnet schools offer specialized classes in different areas depending on the school. Usually, magnet schools focus on math and sciences, but there are some that focus on areas such as art or cooking. Teachers and administrators at these schools are experienced in these specific subject areas. Students, aside from meeting basic graduation requirements, learn mostly in a single subject area. Magnet schools offer a public education to students who have a passion for a specific area, and only want to focus on that area.

- 19. If you could go to a magnet school for one specific area, which area would you choose and why?**

Private schools

As opposed to public, charter, and magnet schools, private schools receive funding from student tuition, which can be very expensive. Private schools are often smaller and less diverse than public schools, because all students must be able to afford the cost. Some private schools receive small amounts of government funding, but most receive very little and instead earn money through grants and tuition. In order to become accredited institutions, private schools must meet basic education requirements, but beyond that they are free to design their own curriculum, education style, and even uniform requirements. Private schools are often chosen by parents who can afford them because they are assumed to be better than public schools. While greater funding can often mean greater resources, it is not true that all private schools offer a better education than public schools.

- 20. If you were a parent in an area with strong public schools, would you pay extra to send your children to private schools with great reputations? Why or why not?**

Boarding schools

At boarding schools, students live on campus, just like a residential college. Boarding students eat, sleep, and attend class on the school's campus, and are often further away from their home than typical high school students. At some schools, there are a mix of boarding students and students who live at home, but most boarding schools require all students to live on campus. Boarding schools are known for giving students an immersive and all-encompassing education experience. While many have excellent reputations, others are known for being very strict and even sometimes remedial.

21. Pretend you are a 14-year-old freshman at a boarding school. You just spent your first week in high school far away from home. Write a letter to your family or best friend about your experience so far.

Religious schools

Another category of private school is religious school. These schools provide students with a traditional education, but with a religious component. Often the teachers and administrators at these schools are clergymen or other religious figures, providing a strong sense of religious values to the students. Religious schools are also somewhat expensive, but some parents think they are worth it because of their ability to teach religion and life values, as well as give students a quality education.

22. Should schools affiliated with a church receive government funding? Explain your thinking.

Who Goes Where?

Determining who goes to what school is relatively simple: Public school students attend schools in the district in which they live, or the district closest to them. Private school students can attend whatever private school they want, as long as they can pay tuition and are admitted or receive a scholarship to cover tuition. But what happens if there are multiple schools in a district, or different kinds of schools in the area?

These decisions fall to the districts. Some districts simply send students to the school closest to them, while others allow parents to rank their options in the hopes of giving every student their top choice school. For cases such as charter and magnet schools, there is often a lottery or application process to decide who gets the coveted seats at these schools.

23. Which of the above types of schools would you most like to go to? Why?

In some cases, parents will try to game the system in the hopes of sending their children to schools with more resources. Lying about their place of residency or sending their children to live in relatives' houses are a few of the ways that families attempt to get their children into specific schools. Though these efforts sometimes successful, lying about residency is a punishable offense and can end with serious legal consequences.

The system of school placement is a key piece of the so-called "broken system" many view U.S. education as today, as it perpetuates racist and inequitable cycles. In large cities such as New York City, the number of students competing for spots at the best public schools is enormous, and the application process often favors wealthy parents who have the time and resources to meet complex application criteria.

24. Can you think of a solution to this problem? What is it? Write your answer in the style of an opinion essay or letter to the editor.

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