

## College Guild

P.O. Box 696 Brunswick, Maine 04011

# U.S. Education

## ~Issues in Education Today~

### Unit 6 of 6

The U.S. education system has a plethora of issues, and there are heated debates about all of them. These can be as miniscule as school start times and schedules, or as large-scale and dangerous as systemic racism, racial achievement gaps, and safety on school campuses. Now that you've learned about how the system was created and functions, understanding these issues and recognizing the multiple points of view surrounding each issue will give you a stronger understanding of American education. Thinking about problems, even those without easy solutions, can itself be a great learning experience that can help develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

#### Issue 1: School Start Times

Since its inception, school has always started early in the morning and ended in the middle of the afternoon, taking up a good chunk of students' days. As the school system developed, workload and extracurricular activities increased. Nowadays, students typically have packed days even after they get home from school as they move from extracurricular activity to activity while also trying to keep up with an ever-increasing homework load. Because of this busy schedule, students of all ages are beginning to get less and less sleep, with many unable to get the recommended 7–9 hours of sleep each night .

As our education system begins to recognize this issue and acknowledge the importance of sleep, movements have been created that push for later start times (around 9–10 a.m., as opposed to 7 a.m.). These start times would have students beginning their learning at the time of day during which the adolescent brain is most receptive, late morning. Although this shift to later start times seems to have numerous benefits, it pushes the school schedule out later in the day, giving students less time for after-school activities. It can also negatively affect parents' schedules, and, according to some, coddles students.

1. What do you think your ideal start time would have been when you were between the ages of 5–18? What would your ideal start time be for work now? Are they different or the same? Why do you think that is?
2. Imagine you are the superintendent of a school district. Write a speech to give to parents, explaining why you are not going to make start times later in the next school year.

## Issue 2: Science Education

As identified in earlier units, the U.S. education system allows for states and districts to control their own curriculum and subject matter. This means that different states teach different things in all subjects, but this difference is more pronounced and has more meaningful implications in science curricula.

While many people accept certain aspects of science as fact, there are still many others for whom these ideas (particularly issues such as climate change and evolution) conflict with their religious or familial beliefs. Some schools teach climate change and evolution as fact, while others ignore them entirely or have parent groups advocating for the teaching of creationism instead. Many people take issue with this distribution of science education, as it leaves students with different understandings of scientific issues, failing to provide a firm basis for critical thinking and later participation in the workforce. Science educators today must strike a balance between keeping their students informed on up-to-date scientific findings, while making space for them to draw their own conclusions.

3. **Imagine you are a science teacher having a conversation with a school administrator who does not believe in climate change. Explain to them why climate change should be taught as fact in all schools (whatever your beliefs on the subject may be).**
4. **Write a ten-line dialogue between a parent whose children are enrolled in a district that does not teach evolution and the superintendent of that district.**

## Issue 3: Sex Education

In a similar vein, the curriculum surrounding sex education in the U.S. is as hot a topic as science. Just like with science curricula, how sex education is taught is left up to the states and districts, meaning a myriad of different methods are used around the country. **Sex education** generally means teaching students how the human reproductive organs work, respect for the opposite sex, consent, how to use birth control, and general information about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

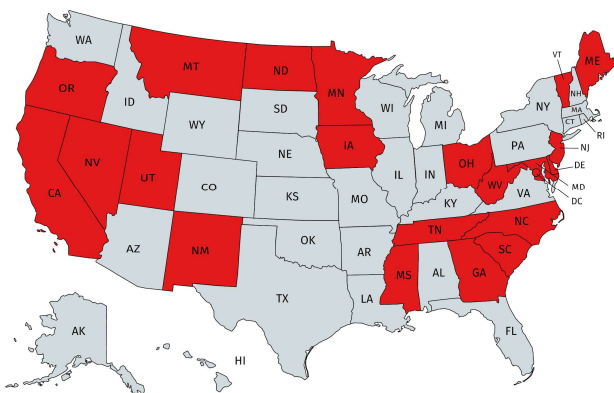
Sex is a deeply personal issue, which is why it is such a difficult subject for schools to navigate. For religious and/or familial reasons, some parents don't want their children to learn about it at all, while others want their children to know all possible information in order to stay safe and avoid pregnancy. Some states, like California, mandate sex education in high school while others, such as Texas, do not. Some states (Alabama, for example), require a sex education curriculum be taught, but don't require that the information be medically accurate. In these cases, teachers may tell students that abstinence is the only effective form of birth control, even though there are plenty of other options today, such as condoms, IUDs, and birth control pills.

Sex education has a profound effect on students, as it dictates their views and actions relating to sex throughout their lives. Many believe that teaching students about sex is similar to giving them permission to engage in promiscuous activities, while others view it as a means of ensuring safety in behaviors that are bound to happen either way. Curricula that focus on abstinence as the only form of birth control have been

shown to lead to more teen pregnancies and higher transmission of STDs rather than less, as students taught abstinence often know very little about birth control.

### Where Is Sex Education Mandatory

■ Sex Education Mandatory



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**5. Explain who you think should make decisions on how to teach sex education in schools: A community vote? The superintendent? The students? The teachers? Someone else?**

### Issue 4: Homework and Stress

Related to the issue of sleep and school start times is the issue of school workload and student stress. In recent years, the amount of homework assigned to middle and high school students has been on a steady incline, slowly burying students under a mountain of homework and building stress year after year. More coursework helps to prepare students for higher education, teaches them how to manage their time, and reinforces the skills learned in school that day. But with more time after school filled up with worksheets, essays, and a variety of extracurricular activities (theater, chorus, school paper, etc.), students experience anxiety about getting everything done, meeting high standards, and getting into selective colleges.

This increase in homework and stress can have adverse effects on students, limiting their free time and personal autonomy and often contributing to declining mental health. Increased stress in students has even been correlated with higher teen suicide rates. Equally important to a student's mental health and development is independent time hanging out with friends.

- 6. Why are friends so important for students' health and development?**
- 7. List three ways you can reduce stress in your daily life.**

While some changes are being made in schools around the country (with some foregoing homework altogether), the overall amount of assigned homework continues (and with it, student stress) is mounting. It can be a difficult issue to remedy, as many don't see it as an issue at all.

8. **How many hours of homework do you think middle school students should be assigned per night? What should their other hours be filled with?**
9. **Imagine you are a high school English teacher who likes to have students read books, write essays, and prepare for class discussions while at home. Plan out one week's worth of homework assignments.**

### **Issue 5: Admissions in Education**

The admissions dilemma is a problem faced by private schools and colleges. When seats in a classroom are limited, schools must make a decision on who gets a spot and who does not. In order to make these decisions, schools must create a process of sifting through applicants and deciding who gets in. Different schools have different standards and methods, depending on how selective they are and what they look for in applicants. Their processes have massive impacts on applicants' lives and serious moral implications about our education system.

Admissions processes and higher education as a whole have historically excluded minority students. To counteract this issue, the U.S. government has passed a series of laws and guidelines that allow colleges to take race and other demographics into account in making admissions decisions, encouraging schools to use these laws to admit students from minority backgrounds at higher rates.

10. **Do you think it's fair for a school to admit a less qualified student because of their minority background? Explain your thinking.**
11. **Write a letter from the point of view of an admissions counselor rejecting an applicant who submitted a very strong application, but just didn't make the cut. You can decide why this application was rejected. Explain to the student why they weren't admitted.**

In determining admissions to schools, admissions committees' methods are called into question. For example, standardized tests such as the ACT or the SAT are one of the biggest tools used by colleges while determining admissions. Private high, middle, and even elementary schools use similar tests as well. Standardized tests were created as a way to measure intelligence and potential, but too often solely measure a student's test-taking ability. Standardized test scores are directly correlated with student income levels, meaning the students with wealthier families score higher and get into better schools. Many believe that this finding also suggests that the tests themselves may be written in a way that favors dominant, majority cultures and is not supportive of the knowledge and skillsets of minority cultures.

Other measures used in determining admissions include grades, extracurriculars, essays, and volunteering, forcing students to do a long list of things outside of school in order to be an attractive applicant. These requirements can also favor wealthy applicants, as many extracurricular activities cost money or require that a student has a parent available to drive them to meetings or practice.

The admissions process is far from fair, causing major issues at all levels of education, including many legal battles that go as far as the Supreme Court and others that send parents to jail for trying to cheat the

system. While recent years have seen subtle movements toward remedying these issues, such as removing standardized tests from application requirements, there is a lot more work to be done.

**12. Imagine you are a college admissions counselor at an elite institution:**

- a. Write an essay prompt for applicants to complete. (For example: “Tell a story about a time you failed and what you learned from it.”) Explain why you think your prompt would help you determine a candidate’s potential.
- b. What traits would you look for in an applicant and why?

**13. Admissions committees must decide how much weight or importance to give each aspect of an applicant’s portfolio. Rank the following choices in order from most important (1) to least (5):**

- High school grades
- Standardized test scores
- Extracurricular activities
- Essay(s)
- Recommendation letter(s)

**Issue 6: Access to Higher Education**

For many, higher education is the key to a successful life in the U.S. Holding a degree can mean access to more specialized, higher-paying jobs. However, college and graduate school are incredibly expensive, not to mention difficult to get into and complete. And graduating with a college degree does *not* guarantee someone a job in any specific field, especially for students who major in Humanities subjects (English, history, literature) that don’t lend themselves to particular trades.

**14. What are three reasons a student may choose not to continue their education in college?**

The way that higher education is currently set up in the U.S. results in a vast majority of college and graduate school students being wealthy and white. Wealthy families are more likely to have numerous family members who have successfully completed college, which means they know and understand the system. Students from wealthier backgrounds and/or neighborhoods tend to receive high-quality college preparation from their high schools. Meanwhile, students from lower-income backgrounds (often minorities) may struggle to apply to or succeed in college due to a lack of funding, support, or prior knowledge of the system. They may have fewer college role models and worse public school preparation, making college a more stressful and difficult experience in many ways.

**15. How might having a role model who can demonstrate the college experience help a high school or middle school student plan their future?**

Due to these issues, higher education is often not as diverse as public primary or secondary school. This problem has far-reaching implications for our country as a whole—little diversity in higher education can lead to little diversity in higher-paying jobs and leadership positions all around the country. This perpetuates

the current system that lands wealthy students in schools with more resources, compounding countless negative effects such as poverty, racism, and segregation.

## **16. How would more diversity in higher education benefit college students?**

### **Issue 7: The Achievement Gap**

One of the easiest ways to see inequality in our nation's schools is the racial achievement gap. While there is an achievement gap between different income levels (with students from higher-income families achieving more than students from lower-income families), white students in a given income group still achieve more than black students from that same income group. These achievements can be seen in test scores, GPAs, and dropout and college enrollment rates. Achievement gaps can even be seen in schools with plenty of diversity, and inside the walls of wealthy schools that seem to offer the same support and aid to students of all backgrounds.

Many factors contribute to these gaps: White students get in trouble much less than minority students; white students are generally advantaged in schools due to prior prejudices unconsciously held by teachers and administrators; and minority students are more likely to receive suspensions, detentions, and expulsions. On top of this, white students are more likely to ask for help and therefore often receive more effective help from teachers. Because of these achievement gaps, white students end up in high-level classes in higher numbers than minority students, further widening the gap in their preparation for higher education. (The information used in this section is from the 2015 book *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Schools* by Amanda Lewis and John Diamond.)

### **17. Why might minority students be more reluctant to ask for help?**

**18. Imagine you are an elementary school student in a school having a poster contest. Create a poster that encourages all students to ask for help and gives some tips on how to ask for help.**

**19. Imagine you are the principal of a public school, and you've been asked to provide your superintendent with three ideas of how to fix the school's achievement gap. What are your three ideas?**

### **Issue 8: Systemic Racism**

While the achievement gap provides evidence of systemic racism present in the U.S education system, it is merely one representation of the systemic racial issues present in schools today. The 1954 *Brown vs. Board* Supreme Court case was seen as a major victory in the fight to desegregate public schools, but it hasn't been as effective as many hoped. While this ruling made segregation in schools illegal, racist structures persisted in schools in different ways—these can include unequal funding allocated to schools with a high proportion of students of color; higher surveillance and policing of schools that enroll high numbers of students of color (leading to what some call the “school-to-prison pipeline”); and racist real estate practices that create segregated neighborhoods, resulting in school districts that are, if not officially segregated, racially divided by default.

Funding is a major driver behind this segregation. Money is what makes the education system tick—it makes some schools better than others, and drives innovation and success in education. Predominantly white schools have tremendously more funding than all other schools due to property taxes and donations from wealthy alumni or wealthy parents.

**20. Should the government intervene in the U.S. education system work to redistribute funding? Explain your answer.**

As we already know, where students live dictates where they go to school. This means that both predominantly black neighborhoods and wealthy white suburbs lack diversity in their schools. The school segregation that persists today can be blamed at least in part on these districting rules, and many believe that this limited diversity negatively impacts education. If schools are meant to prepare students for the real world, where they will be expected to interact with people from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, one could argue that schools that don't expose them to diversity fail them.

**21. Name two other ways that a student's education may be hurt by a lack of diversity.**

The "school-to-prison pipeline" concept explains the phenomenon of high rates of minority students moving directly from school to prison, with little time or other opportunities in between. Evidence of this pipeline is most pronounced at poorly funded, majority-minority schools with higher dropout rates and fewer student support systems in place. These schools often have more surveillance and security on campus, and research has shown that students of color are subjected to disciplinary actions more often than their white counterparts. These findings suggest that students of color are exposed to formal social controls and policing at an earlier age, and are thus more vulnerable to the school-to-prison pipeline.

**22. How would you feel if you were labeled as a troublemaker by your school? Would it motivate you to prove them wrong, or make you feel depressed and uninspired?**

Clearly, the US education system is failing many students, many of whom are minority students. Systemic racism is an issue that has always been present in this country, and it is an issue that looms large over the education system.

Many of the issues in the U.S. education system are microcosms of larger issues plaguing the nation—and fixing some of the issues mentioned throughout this course could help to solve larger problems present in the U.S. As the population served by the U.S. education system is not old enough to vote, it falls on the older generation to remedy these problems and provide a better education to the young students of today.

**23. Pick one issue that has been addressed in this course and write an essay about how this issue has affected your experience with the U.S. education system.**

**Since this is your final Unit, we would appreciate any feedback or suggestions you have about this Course!**

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