

EDUCATION

The government and education

Although in general Americans prefer to limit the influence of government, this is not so where education is concerned. All levels of government are involved in education and it is considered to be one of their most important responsibilities.

The federal government provides some money for education through the Department of Education. But state and local governments have direct control and are responsible for the education of students between the ages of 5 and 18, or the years of school called kindergarten, first grade, second grade, etc. to twelfth grade. These years are together referred to as K–12. Individual states have their own Boards of Education, which decide the curriculum and what students must have achieved before they can graduate from high school at the age of 18. States are also concerned with certification standards, general standards of education including the qualifications needed by teachers.

Most of the money for education comes from taxes that people pay to their local government. Local governments appoint school boards, which have control over how individual schools are run. A school board hires a superintendent, the person in charge of all the schools in a school district, principals for each school, and teachers. It also decides how the rest of the money available should be spent. School boards are usually made up of people who live in the area, often parents of children in the schools.

At the primary and secondary levels, most school districts have a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) which gives all parents a chance to take part in making decisions about how the school is run. Parents regularly visit schools to meet their children's teachers and discuss their progress. Many volunteer in their children's schools to teach the children a skill, take them on trips, or work in the school library.

The school system

Although many Americans attend nursery school, day care or pre-school from an early age, formal education is usually considered to begin at the age of 5 when children go to kindergarten, the first step in the K–12 education. Kindergarten and the next five or six years of education, first grade, second grade, etc., are together usually called elementary school (the term primary school is less common in the US than in Britain). Grades seven to twelve are part of secondary school, and may be divided in different ways. In some places grades seven and eight are called junior high school. Other school systems have middle school, which lasts for three years. High school usually covers four years, from the ninth to the twelfth grades.

Post-secondary education, after twelfth grade, is not free though state governments which run most of the educational institutions subsidize the cost for people who live in the state.

The quality of education

By some standards, American education seems very successful. Although young people must attend school until they are 16, over 80% continue until they are 18. About 45% of Americans have some post-secondary or further education, and over 20% graduate from a college or university.

However, 20% of adults, about 40 million people, have very limited skills in reading and writing, and 4%, about 8 million, are illiterate (= cannot read or write). Since control over education is mostly at local level, its quality varies greatly from place to place. There are many reasons for this but the most important is money. In general, the people who live in city centres tend to be very poor. Those with more money prefer to live in the suburbs. People in the suburbs pay higher taxes, and so the schools there have more money to spend. Crime and violence are also serious problems in the inner cities, with some students taking weapons to school. In such a situation it is hard to create a good atmosphere for learning.

Public or private education

Most educational institutions in the US are public (= run by the government) but there are some private schools which students pay a lot of money to attend. Many private schools have a high reputation and parents send their children there so that they will have advantages later in life. Opposition to private schools is not as strong as it is in Britain: individual choice is important in the US, and so the right of people to buy a different education for their children is not questioned. Public or private education is much less of an issue than the difference in quality between inner city and suburban schools. Most parents who have money are likely to spend it not by sending their children to private schools but by moving to a suburb where the public schools are good.

Points of conflict

Americans agree on the importance of education being available to all, but there is disagreement about what should be taught. The greatest area of conflict is the place of religious or moral education. Commonly debated topics include whether teachers should be allowed to say prayers, whether students should learn about sex, and whether it is right to hit students as a punishment. Sometimes the debate ends up in court, and courts usually say that no student should be forced to do something that is against his or her beliefs.

Education for people who come to the US from other countries is also much discussed. In states like California where there are many people whose first language is not English, there is debate over what language should be used in schools. Some people believe that children have the right to an education in their own language; others say that people who come to the US have a responsibility to learn English and cannot expect special treatment. At university level some people object to the high numbers of foreign students, especially in science and related fields. But since relatively few Americans study these subjects the universities are glad to take international students.

In spite of occasional conflict, most Americans agree that a good education gives people the best chance of getting a good job and of improving their social position.

- ***Define the following words, using a dictionary if necessary.***
 - school board
 - superintendent
 - principal
 - PTA
 - further education

- **Write T for true and F for false. Correct the false statements**
 1.Education is a federal responsibility.
 2.The state pays for a K-12 education.
 3.The Boards of Education decide standards of certification and teacher's qualifications.
 4.Boards of education employ principals and teachers .
 5.The PTA runs the school.
 6.Compulsory education starts with first grade.
 7.Students may leave school at the age of sixteen.
 8.The quality of education varies from place to place.
 9.The difference in quality between city and suburban schools is a big issue.
 10.Public schools in the city centers are better than those in the suburban areas.

- **School grades**

You are

to fill in the table with information from the text above.

LEVEL	GRADE	AGE
Elementary	5- 12
.....	7-8
.....

Life in elementary school

The school year runs from early September to the following June. Students attend daily from Monday to Friday. The school day in elementary school usually lasts from about 8.30 a.m. to 3.30 p.m., though kindergarten children usually attend for only half the day. Students spend most of the day with their class. The class is taught most of the time by the same teacher. A few times each week they will have a gym class or do music or art with another teacher. Students rarely have homework until they reach the final grades of elementary school, and even then there is very little.

The school day is divided into various sections and in the morning and the afternoon students have recess, a time when they can go outside and play, for about 15 minutes. Schools usually have a playground attached, a large area outside with equipment for playing different games. In the middle of the day students eat lunch, either a meal prepared by their parents or a hot meal which they buy from the school. The rest of the lunch period is free and spent playing.

The traditional subjects for elementary school students are called the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. In addition, the students study other subjects, such as history and geography, and are given a chance to do creative activities and sports. It is thought to be important to give children the chance to study as many subjects as possible, so that whatever their natural skills are they will have the chance to develop them.

Teachers are rather relaxed about the kind of behaviour they expect from students at elementary school. Children should be fairly quiet during lessons but they are not punished unless their behaviour is out of control and could hurt other students. Punishments include making the student stay behind for a few minutes when others have left for the day, or sending him or her to the principal's office. Teachers in elementary school are usually called by their title and surname, e.g. Mr Johnson. Students at public schools do not usually have a school uniform. Students who attend private and parochial (= religious) schools do wear uniform.

Junior high school and high school

Students at junior high school take different lessons from different teachers who are specialists in their subjects. Students are required to study certain subjects, but they can choose which classes they take. For example, students may be required to study a science for three years, but they can choose whether to take chemistry, physics or biology. There are also many subjects that students can choose to do or to drop, without any limits at all. At high school, students may take technical subjects such as computer programming alongside academic subjects. As in elementary school the aim is to help children develop their natural potential. Additional summer sessions enable students to catch up with work they have missed or to take a course they did not have time for during the year. When students graduate from high school they receive a diploma, a document to say that they have finished their courses.

An important part of junior high school and high school is, for many students, the increasing amount of independence and responsibility they are given. Students in high school have special names: ninth-grade students are called freshmen; tenth-graders are sophomores; students in the eleventh grade are juniors, and those in the twelfth grade are seniors. As students go through these levels, they expect to have more and more freedom.

Part of the independence of secondary education comes from being away from home for longer, and having to travel further to school. Many students go to school in a school bus which picks them up near their homes and takes them back again in the evening.

'Busing' students for long distances became necessary in some cities in order to keep a mix of white and black students in each school. At the age of 16, when most Americans learn to drive, students often go to school in their own car or borrow that of their parents. After school, students can choose from many extra-curricular activities. These include joining clubs based on a particular interest, e.g. chess, computers, acting or cooking, working on the school newspaper or playing in a sports team. A teacher from the school spends time with each group, but as students get older they are expected to organize and run things themselves.

During the school year there are important social activities. In the autumn homecoming, the day when former students return to the school, is celebrated with a big football game and a dance. Other dances are held during the year. The most important of these is the Prom which is held near the end of the school year. Students take special care to find the right clothes for this event, which is usually limited to juniors and seniors. Younger students are very pleased if they have the chance to go as the guest of an older student.

- *Define the following words, using a dictionary if necessary.*

gym class

recess

the three Rs

parochial school

freshman

sophomore

junior

senior

homecoming

Prom

busing

- **Answer the following questions**

1. How do high school students go to school?
2. What do students do in extra-curriculum activities?
3. What forms of punishments are used at school?
4. Do students have to wear uniform?
5. What are some differences between the educational system in the United State and the educational system in Vietnam?

GOING TO COLLEGE

Americans talk about ‘going to college’ even if the institution they attend is a university. To Americans the phrase ‘going to university’ sounds pretentious. Most colleges offer classes only for undergraduate students studying for a bachelor’s degree. Community colleges offer two-year courses leading to an associate’s degree, and afterwards students transfer to a different college or university to continue their studies. Universities are larger than colleges and also offer courses for graduate students who study in graduate school. Many universities also have separate professional schools, e.g. a medical school or a law school.

American high school students who want to study at a college or university have to take a standardized test, e.g. the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or the ACT (American College Test). Students from countries outside the US who are not native speakers of English must also take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Each college or university decides on the minimum score it will accept, though test scores are never the only factor taken into account. Students apply direct to between three and six colleges in their last year of high school. Each college has its own application form and most include a question for which the student must write an essay. The student also has to send a transcript (= an official list of all the subjects studied and the grades received) and letters of reference.

There are many private colleges and universities but most students choose a public institution because the costs are lower. All universities charge tuition, and

students pay extra for room and board. Prices range from a few hundred dollars a year to well over \$25 000 at some private colleges. Students whose families cannot afford to pay the full amount apply for financial aid. Many students receive a financial aid package which may be a combination of grants from the government, a scholarship, a student loan and work-study (= a part-time job at the college).

The most famous universities are those in the Ivy League, including Harvard and Yale, but many others have good reputations. Large universities often put most emphasis on research. Smaller colleges tend to concentrate on teaching undergraduates, and many students prefer these colleges because they offer smaller classes and more personal attention from teachers.

Teaching and learning

The US academic year may be divided into two semesters of about 15 weeks or three quarters of about 10 weeks each. Students take courses in a variety of subjects, regardless of their main subject, because the aim of the liberal arts curriculum is to produce well-rounded people with good critical skills. At the end of their sophomore (= second) year students choose a major (= main subject) and sometimes a minor (= additional subject) which they study for the next two years. Students take four or five courses each semester from the course catalog. Courses may consist mainly of lectures or may include discussion sections or lab sessions.

Students are given grades at the end of each course. The highest grade is A; the lowest is F, which means that the student has failed the course and will not get credit for taking it. To check a student's overall progress, the university calculates a grade point average (GPA). Students who finish their degree with a high GPA may be awarded Latin honours, of which the highest is summa cum laude.

Most people who teach at colleges or universities and have a doctorate are addressed as professor. Full professors are senior to associate professors, assistant professors and instructors. Graduate students working towards a higher degree may teach undergraduate courses at larger universities. These grad students are called TAs (teaching assistants). In return, TAs do not have to pay for their own tuition and get a small amount of money to live on.

(from *Oxford Guide to British and American Culture*)

• Answer the following questions.

1. What need a student do to gain admission to a college or university?
2. What are the differences between a college and a university?
3. Why do many students choose public colleges and universities?
4. What kind of students may teach at a university?

• Define the following words, using a dictionary if necessary.

transcript
Ivy League
GPA
financial aid package

TA
summa cum laude

CLOZE

Choose one appropriate word from the box below to complete each blank space.

<i>Parents</i>	<i>kindergarten</i>	<i>workforce</i>	<i>resident</i>	<i>range</i>
<i>open</i>	<i>choice</i>	<i>tax</i>	<i>tuition university</i>	
<i>five</i>	<i>send</i>	<i>funding</i>	<i>still</i>	<i>higher</i>

Education in the United States

In the United States, education is a state, not federal, responsibility, and the laws and standards vary considerably. In most states, all students must attend mandatory schooling starting with1....., which children normally enter at age2....., and following through 12th grade.3..... may educate their own children at home,4..... their children to a public school, which is funded with5..... money, or a private school, where parents must pay6.....

After high school, students have a7..... of attending either a public/state8....., a private university, entering the9....., or enlisting in the military. Public universities receive10..... from the federal and state government but students11..... pay tuition, which can vary depending on the universities, state, and whether the student is a12..... of the state or not. Tuition at private universities tends to be much13..... than at public universities.

American colleges and universities14..... from highly competitive schools, both private (such as Harvard University, Columbia University, and Princeton University) and public (such as the University of California, Berkeley and the University of Virginia), to hundreds of local community colleges with15..... admission policies.

(from *Wikipedia - The free Encyclopedia*)

Sources

Oxford Guide to British and American Culture, OUP 1999

Wikipedia - The free Encyclopedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States

Suggested reading

A Diverse Educational System, Portrait of the USA, published by the United States Information Agency, 1979
<http://usinfo.state.gov/usa/infousa/facts/factover/homepage.htm>