

Education in america
is currently both good
and bad, depending
where one looks



Before we can get into the present state of education in this country, we have to decide which factors contribute to a good educational system and a bad educational system. Do we look at a standardized test score? Do we look at how much money each individual district spends on schools? Do we look at teachers salaries? Do we look at technology and how it has affected the school system? Do we look at the quality of the facilities or the teachers themselves? The list could go on and on.

I feel, in determining the quality of education in America, we have to look at all of these factors. As controversial as standardized tests are, this is one way to look at how students are doing, and one can compare scores from year to year, and perhaps get an idea of how the quality of education has changed. The SAT is one such test. From the mid 1960's to the mid 1990's score on this test (mainly taken by college bound seniors) have dropped.

Scores fell from 478 to 423 on the verbal section and from 502 to 479 on the math section. Other test results in other subjects such as Geography, Math, Reading, and Science have also dropped, in comparison to previous performances in this country as well as other industrialized nations (Zinsmeister 19). So what do we gather from this? Obviously scores are down, but what caused this? Does this mean are educational system is flawed? Not necessarily. Some people even think because the test scores are down, it is a triumph for American education. Former education Secretary William Bennett repeatedly cite the decline in SAT scores as " proof" that students are dumber, teachers don't deliver, business is doomed to failure and our nation is at risk.

What Bennett has failed to reveal, at least in public is the fact that the SAT is an aptitude test, which measures the future (in this case college grades). The SAT does not measure the past, which is what Bennett wants you to believe (Berliner, 27). This country does have valid tests to measure academic progress. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, or NAEP, has been given.

From the 1970's to the 1990's, average NAEP-test scores are steady, or show gains in reading writing and math. The good part about this is the fact that these scores have risen while the quality of a students' life has declined. There are more divorces and consequently many more students have grown up in a single parent environment more so today than ever before. Also, in households that do have two parents, many of the parents both work full time. In the 1960's and 1970's this wasn't always the case. By having both parents working, it is harder for parents to regulate their child's school work, as opposed to a family where there is a stay-at-home parent.

Currently, one in four students lives at or below the poverty line, the highest rate for all industrialized nations (Berliner, 29). The problems for students start before they are even born. Pre-Natal care is at an all-time worst, with more kids being born to drug using mothers every day. Inadequate facilities and inadequate funding are other problems facing our schools today.

Camden New Jersey is the 4th poorest city of 50, 000 or more people in this country. 60% of its residents receive state aid, and its children have the highest rate of poverty in the country. So as one can imagine, no money in the city generally means no money in the schools. At a middle school in this

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city, there are enough books for only 50% of the students. In an 8th grade class room, a student cannot add $5+2$.

In the school there is one computer. At the High School, the school can't afford lunch, so 2000 students must go home for lunch, and most often don't return. The fire alarm was broken 10 years ago, and no one really bothered to fix it. Beyond the school is an illegal dump site, which has been rumored to give off toxic fumes.

Four of the cities elementary schools have been crammed into an old run down factory that does not meet state standards for safety. The science lab in the high school has no equipment. The school district spends about \$3,800 per student. The state average is about \$5,000, and the national average is even higher. The problem is not with taxes, Camden is the highest taxed city in the state, but there are no businesses.

No one wants to come to Camden because 1) the people are poor and no one will spend money. 2) The taxes are high. The lack of economy in this city directly leads to the poor school conditions. If there is no money in the city, there is obviously going to be no money in the schools. The trickle down affect continues with the teachers. Camden has begun to hire teachers who are just completing their third year of college.

This is a good thought but as soon as they complete their degree the school loses these people to the suburbs where they can make up to \$10,000 more. As one can tell, the teacher turnover rate is high, and the teachers that do stick around are the ones who often times can't get out due to their lack of abilities (Kozol, 142-145). So if there is no funding, inadequate
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facilities, bad teachers, and lack of resources there are going to be bad test scores and high drop out rates. At Wilson High School in Camden, the drop out rate is 58%, which does not count the 20% who dropped out before high school, and therefore do not count against this statistic.

Of the 1,400 who start at the school as freshman, only 200 graduate. Of these 200, only 60 take the SAT. 80 people will attempt to further their education. Of these 20 will attend a four year university, and only 40% of that will graduate from their. To put this in perspective, that is eight kids out of 1400 who enter high school that end of graduating from college (Kozol, 145). These problems are not limited to just Camden.

These are the problems facing education all over the country. The fact is the urban areas often face more problems than the suburbs or the rural areas. There is less money in the bigger cities, which lead to inadequate facilities, poor teachers, poor test scores, and poor college graduation rates. These are all correlated together, and until we do something about this the gap between the haves and the have nots will continue to grow. There are several alternatives to public education that are available right now. Homeschooling is one of these.

When a child is homeschooled, they are being taught by their respective parent(s) inside their own home. The number of students in this country who are homeschooled is somewhere between 900,000 to 1.2 million.

Considering 46 million children attend public schools, and 5 million more attend private schools, this number does not seem that high. However, in the early 1980's, only 15,000 students were homeschooled, and the number of

children being homeschooled has increased 25% for the last several years (Reed, 86). There are several reasons why parents choose to homeschool their children.

First of all, some parents may feel the public school system in their area is inadequate. Some may want their children to have a more religious and moral education, and they feel the public school system does not provide their children with this. Others may want their children to learn certain subjects more so than others (Reed 86). As one can see, there are many reasons to do this, and I'm sure there are more than what I have listed here. The one common trend in parents that exists with almost every child that is homeschooled is simple: They care enough about their children's education to do it themselves. These people give up their lives on a daily basis to ensure their child is being educated the way they want them to be.

This includes jobs. It is tougher now to raise a family on one income, than it was years ago, and in our culture, we rarely see stay-at-home-moms. While a lot of these parents are giving up money from a job they may have had, they are also enduring costs. According to one parent who homeschools her four kids in Sheboygan, it costs her about \$2,000 a year in text books alone. Granted some of these can be recycled as the kids age, but some books may be out of print by the time she is ready to use them again. So it is obvious the parents who do homeschool their children in most cases are dedicated.

The idea of homeschooling almost crashed in 1994 when the House of Representatives voted to mandate that all teachers-including parents at home-acquire state certification in the subjects they teach. This sounds like a

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good idea in theory, but a closer look tells one that for all intents and purposes, this law would cause parents to give up the right to educate their children in their own home. Obviously there was quite the backlash to this law, including thousands of letters, faxes and phone calls from homeschoolers, and this led to the House reversing itself 424-1. In addition, they approved an amendment that affirmed the rights and independence of homeschooled children (Reed 86). Another plan to give students a better education in this country is through the newly created voucher program. The voucher program has taken off in Cleveland and Milwaukee, and more cities may soon follow suit.

The Supreme Court ruled in 1994 to allow voucher programs in the city of Cleveland. Voucher programs allow students (mainly inner-city) to attend private schools at the expense of tax-payer money. Most inner-city youth can not afford to attend private schools and under this system, they would be allowed to. These private schools may or not be religious schools, but 96% of students enrolled in the voucher program for the 1999-2000 school year, were at religious schools (Reed 89).

The program started in Milwaukee in 1990. However, this has been opposed by many groups. The American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP, and almost every public school teachers union have been opposed to this. I find it interesting the NAACP is against this, considering the people who are benefiting from this are the very people they represent.

The program in Milwaukee has grown from 1, 500 participants, to 7, 500 in the first two years. At first the program was for just private, non-religious

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schools, but has since expanded to religious schools. Many liberals have petitioned the Supreme Court to re-hear the case, but they voted 8-1 not to hear it again. So for now, the program is here to stay, and consequently, more cities have taken up this very plan.

Donald Lambro a member of the National Education Association likes the idea of this: “ For the first time, dirt poor minority families are being given the same educational choices that the Clintons, Kennedys, and Rockefellers, and even the Jesse Jacksons enjoyed for their kids-the freedom to send their children to the best school possible in their community. (Lambro, 56). The voucher system is still too young to decide if it works. So far results have been mixed, and obviously long term effects on students involved won't be able to be seen for a number of years. The idea of the voucher program is a solid one on the basis of equality.

Every person who is involved in this is benefiting because without this program, they would not be able to go to these private schools. Both homeschooling and vouchers are good ideas, but they are only a band-aid to a gushing wound that public schools face. Educational systems in America can be broken down into two parts. The first part is the world class education offered in suburban, white America.

This includes most Midwestern and western schools not in the inner city. They have funding, new tax-payer funded schools, good teachers, and good resources. The second group is the inner city, non-white sector, and poor southern states. These schools have just the opposite, low funding, inadequate facilities, incompetent teachers, and terrible resources. This is

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not a surprise because local tax dollars fund most of a given city's school system.

Therefore, if the income is low, the taxes are low, and the school funding is low. I feel the biggest problem facing our school systems today is funding. If you have it, you have a good school; if you don't you don't have a good school. In most states, funding for public schools is dispersed equally to all districts depending on how many students a district has.

In other words, each district get X amount of dollars per student. This may seem fair on the surface, but a closer look says otherwise. If a suburban school is building a \$62 million school funded by tax payers, and private grants, as is the case in Neuqua Valley High School in Suburban Chicago, (Jackson 188) do they really need the same amount of money that DuSable an inner city school in Chicago needs, which has a 98% poverty rate among its students (Jackson 189)? The answer is obvious. The solution to this is complicated yet simple. Obviously we are not going to change schools overnight, but we should try and level the playing field. Instead of paying the same " X" figure to each district on a per-pupil basis, why not give more money to the inner-city schools that need it.

Do suburban schools really need a computer for a ratio that comes out to be one computer for every three students, while some inner city schools have three computers in the entire building, and worse yet, the computers are Apple II E's? Let's spread the wealth. Under this proposal, a task force in each state could do a study to find out how much money each school spends per student. From there the state can disperse aid to schools that are near

the bottom of the list. Every school would still get money, it would just vary. Obviously we can't bring every school district to even, but we can close the gap substantially.

This solution has worked in professional sports. For example the Green Bay Packers come from the smallest media market in professional sports. Yet because of revenue sharing, a luxury tax, and a salary cap, the Packers are able to compete at a high level with not only the New York's and Chicago's of the world, but everyone else too. Look at baseball. There is no salary cap, and until this year no substantial revenue sharing. The teams that spend the most on salaries give themselves the best chance to win, and usually do.

That explains why the Yankees have been to the post-season the last years, and the lowly Brewers have not. The more a team spends on salaries the better chance they have to win. Obviously there are exceptions, as there would be should schools go to this method, but for the most part, I believe the effect would be the same on schools. The other problems with tax-payer money are how it is spent. The most glaring example is in Chicago where Chicago spends \$18, 615 on inmates in the city's prison system, while only \$6, 941 is spent per pupil in the school system.

There is something wrong with this (Jackson 188). Why not turn some of that money in the prison system over to the school system? The people in prison have already proven themselves to be deviant to society, so why not give the children of the city money so they don't end up in the prison system. At Cook County Alternative School in Chicago, the students there are all inmates of the prison system. The school is located in the jail, and is run by

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Chicago Public Schools. The students in here score above district averages. When asked why the “ Principal” said, “ Focus.

In here we can focus. They don't have to worry about drive-by shootings. They get three meals a day, and medical care (Jackson, 189). So the message this is sending is “ end up in jail, get a better education. ” Teachers often get the blame when it comes to poor education.

I believe this is wrong. Are there bad teachers? Yes. But there are a lot more good ones than bad ones. Teaching is not a job where one walks into school everyday and collects a check. These people are some of the most dedicated people in the world.

They are constantly taking classes to keep certification, and their job does not start when they walk in the door and end when they walk out. Teachers are planning their classes all of the time. They correct papers, do lesson plans, and attend extra curricular activities that their students are involved in. I believe that bad teachers are not the problem, but unqualified teachers are.

In many inner-city settings, districts turn to college students who have not even graduated yet. They lull students away with money. But if one looks at it closer, these students who are now teachers, are not making nearly as much as they would have a few years and a degree later. Most inner city schools can't get the good teachers because they can't afford them. The inner city is arguably the hardest place to teach, and some districts are throwing college students in there. This is not right.

The solution to this is simple. We need to make sure that in every state, teachers are required to have a teaching degree from a college. This won't solve everything, but it is a start. I could not imagine going into any classroom after my second year of college, let alone an inner city one.

Another solution to the teacher problem is to make them more aware of their surroundings. If a teacher is teaching in the urban areas, make them take a course on Urban Education.

It could not hurt. If a teacher has never lived in a rural area and all of the sudden finds themselves there, make them take a course in Rural Education.

These solutions are not going to save the world, but it could only help.

People who do studies on education often times miss one key point.

Children's personalities are already formed by the time they hit kindergarten (Gardner, 120). This means one thing: It is the parents or whoever is raising the child's responsibility to ensure their child has a fighting chance in the school system.

Often times the students who lack discipline at home often lack discipline in school. For a lot of inner city kids, the most structure they will have in their life is at school. If they have not any rules and regulations at home, chances are they will be turned off by school at an early age. The point here is simple: children who are on the streets and don't have much guidance in the home, are more at risk to drop out or cause disruptive problems at school (Gardner, 130). By the time these children get to school, if they get there at all, it may be too late. Parents need to step up to the plate and raise their children in a way that helps them in their future, not hinder them.

I don't pretend to sit here and call myself an expert on education. I grew up in a middle class town and have seen an inner city school twice in my life. I can tell you I have read many books on education, and have sat through hundreds of hours of classes on education. What I have gathered from that is what you see here. I feel education is not really that bad depending on where one goes. For the most part I feel education is good in most places except the inner city, and some Deep South schools, again based on research.

I believe while money is not a cure-all, it does have a major impact on the success of a school. I also believe some districts have money that they don't know what to do with. If we spread the money out, I feel more schools could become successful. With that being said, this is something that would take time to develop. This could happen eventually, but with the economy where it is, people may not give up money they feel they have earned. Finally, there seems to be a certain amount of negativity in this class when it comes to American Public Education.

Let's look at it from the other side. Generation after generation has gone through the American school system. This is the same system that has turned out Nobel Prize winners, doctors, presidents, as well as others who have made a difference in the way we live today. This country is one of the most thriving in the world. So let's not focus on what is wrong, because there is a lot more that is right about our education system.