

Preface

The Education Debate

After a controversial election, there was some degree of initial uncertainty about how newly elected President Trump would approach education, given that education was not a priority of his campaign and that Trump marketed himself as a “radical” conservative willing to break with traditional Republican politics. Despite questions, Trump’s cabinet appointments and budget proposals indicated that his administration will follow a traditional conservative approach on many key issues, including education. In general, conservatives invest in corporations and the wealthy and reduce investment in government-run or funded programs, like welfare, Social Security, and education. Trump’s initial proposals fall into line with this general policy position. For instance, Trump has proposed reducing corporate tax rates by more than half and he proposed repealing an estate tax that charged taxes on estates of more than \$5.49 million.¹ Trump’s initial budget blueprint, though not yet finalized, featured a \$9.2 billion (or 13 percent) reduction in federal funding for public education.² In a further signifier of his educational approach, Trump appointed billionaire heiress Betsy DeVos, an outspoken critic of government spending on social welfare and the public school system, to serve as Secretary of Education.³

Social services are paid for through taxation and taxation is based on income. The wealthy therefore pay higher taxes and many see themselves as taking little out of the system, though this is not typically true. For some, this situation seems fundamentally unfair and many wealthy conservatives believe that the government has little right to claim revenues that they or their ancestors earned. In addition, conservatives are more likely to view government programs as poorly managed, corrupt, or inefficient and conservatives are more likely to believe that private investment and free-market competition are superior to investing in social safety nets. In essence, conservative administrations invest in the wealthy and in corporations, trusting that this investment will increase wealth at the upper levels of society and that this increased wealth will lead to greater productivity and more opportunities for advancement at every level. Whether or not this approach benefits most Americans or will be effective in improving education, is a matter of widespread debate.

Compromising Education with Politics

Beyond the specifics of reform legislation or education financing, the effectiveness of any nation’s education system is also dependent on the attitudes of the population. Finland has what many experts consider to be one of the best education systems in the world and Finnish students consistently score higher on tests than

students in the United States. In comparison to the US education system, Finnish education is more personalized and less focused on quantitative achievement in key subjects. This is possible only because the Finnish population has embraced the idea that a well-rounded education is the best approach, while the United States has increasingly gravitated towards focusing on what is seen as the most “profitable” material, subjects that most directly lead to jobs and earning. Finnish teachers report feeling embraced and supported by their society, while there is a sense that US legislators increasingly want to invest only in the best schools and the best students.⁴ The gulf between the United States and Finland is not as much a matter of spending or of better government management, as it is a matter of cultural philosophy and priorities.

Political ideology, which has become more and more stratified in the United States, is also increasingly affecting the way that individuals approach education. In a 2011 review of the Texas State school system, researchers from the Thomas Fordham Institute gave Texas a “D” grade because the state government revised the state’s social studies curriculum in such a way that teachers were required to downplay the existence of slavery and segregation and to promote the positive effects of Christianity and free enterprise in US history. While it might be argued that this radical reading of history is an appropriate viewpoint to present to students, the state government’s revision mandated that teachers in the state were *only* able to present this highly skewed interpretation. The scholars who study history, social studies, politics, and other facets of human culture can be progressive, conservative, or occupy points between these positions, but the information presented in school curricula must result from a consensus, weighing the research on an issue and presenting, where applicable, various perspectives. When curriculum becomes a tool for inculcating political ideology, the legitimacy of education is compromised and students become the victims of manipulation rather than the recipients of knowledge.⁵

The Culture of Competition

Another factor that compromises educational quality is the distribution of resources, both among schools and among populations in the United States. The United States has an extreme and growing disparity between economic classes that has always existed but has also become more pronounced over time. Sociologists have coined the term “achievement gap,” to describe the difference in educational achievement between students from different groups. On the whole, children from wealthy families, as a result of greater resources contributing to better educational preparedness and the availability of assistance when encountering challenges, fare far better in the educational system than students from low-income families. It is also well demonstrated that there is a persistent achievement gap between white and minority students that is distinct but related to the class achievement gap. A 2016 study from Northwestern University found that the stress of racial prejudice alone reduces educational achievement in marginalized groups.⁶ Subtle factors like the indirect effects of racism are compounded by institutionalized racism operating

at every level of American society that mitigates opportunities for Black and Hispanic students and perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage.⁷

The achievement gap in education contributes to a class, racial, and gender wage gap in the workplace. This wage gap creates a disparity in resources that makes it less likely that children of low-income or minority families will themselves succeed in higher education and thus, the educational divide continues and the wage gap persists and deepens.⁸ Though there have been a variety of proposals to address these complex issues, the fundamental challenge is cultural. The unfortunate drawback to living in a nation that embraces free-market competition, with all its potential for commercial growth and innovation, is that those with advantages not only have access to more opportunities, but also utilize and shape the system to further their own advantages at the expense of potential competitors. In this way, big corporations prevent independent businesses and smaller corporations from becoming competitors. This free-market mind-set is not only a factor in business, but affects many other aspects of American culture.

For instance, a suburban public school may have far higher revenues than an inner city public school *because* many suburbs attract wealthier residents who work in the nearby city, but do not wish to live there for a variety of reasons. Despite the fact that living in suburbs is only attractive *because* of the nearby city and its resources, residents of the suburbs often resist contributing tax revenues to the city. As many inner city schools languish due to insufficient resources and funding, even wealthy residents who remain in the city may choose to send their children to private school rather than investing time, donations, effort, or energy in supporting the local school district. This pattern plays out across the United States, with students who have no other options consigned to underfunded, insufficient schools, while those with the resources congregate in better-funded suburban schools or opt out of the system altogether by choosing private or religious schools. Therefore, despite the fact that suburban residents and wealthy urban residents live where they do because of the city and its resources, the competitive mind-set encourages individuals to invest first in themselves and in those facets of society that provide direct advantages.

Having embraced this competitive mind-set in many aspects of society, there are many who argue that education too would be better if it operated on a more competitive model. In every competition there must, by definition, be winners and losers and so, in a competitive educational environment some schools would be seen as winners, and will therefore be deserving of further investment in both human and monetary resources, while other schools would become losers. Some feel that these underperforming schools, those that cannot compete, should essentially be allowed to lose and that this will ultimately benefit society more than sinking further funding into failing systems. Companies that fail to compete lose investors and may go out of business, but this opens up the system for new competitors. However, if education is a competition and, therefore, some schools will lose, the question is, should some students be allowed to lose as well?

Technology Will Save the Day

Digital technology, the Web and the Internet, and mobile digital devices, have revolutionized many facets of American culture, from music and movies to literature and dating. Some have hoped that technology might offer novel solutions for the problems facing the education system as well. Since the 1990s, educational pioneers have experimented with a variety of types of online and virtual education in hopes of reaching out to alternative students and, in general, making formal education more available, attainable, and egalitarian. As of 2017, the online education revolution has not become the great democratizing force that the most fervent supporters had hoped, but this means only that there is still room for new innovations that might bring about a more productive blend of technological education in the future.

One of the most promising approaches to blending education and technology is the emerging personalized education movement. This approach seeks to utilize technology and real-world participatory activities as a way to make education more engrossing, relevant, and interesting to students. Studies of nations in which education is more personalized, like Finland, demonstrate that such a strategy can have very real advantages for students. Technological advancements like learning computers and gamification are creating the possibility of new ways of challenging and evaluating students and of personalizing curricula to make it possible for a single teacher to effectively teach students at vastly different skill levels. Advancements like these could potentially lead away from what some educators and experts feel has been an overly rigid and unproductive focus on standardized testing and core subjects.

In a complex education system influenced by political dissonance, unequal distribution of resources, and widespread disagreement about how to improve the system, the future of education is largely uncertain. The Trump administration's focus is likely to be on privatization, with a reduction of federal funding for public schools. As 91 percent of American students attend public schools, it is unknown whether this experiment will improve educational options or will simply reduce resources for most students and schools. Americans across ideological lines have always agreed that the welfare of the nation's children must be protected and, for many, this will remain a passionate focus even as enduring challenges remain relevant and new difficulties appear on the horizon.

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The State of American Education



Credit: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg via Getty Images

U.S. President Donald Trump holds up a pen to give away after signing H.J. Res. 57, which overturns a rule on school accountability standards that are part of the Every Student Succeeds Act, during a bill signing ceremony in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, D.C., U.S., on Monday, March 27, 2017. Trump signed four bills, H.J. Res 37, H.J. Res 44, H.J. Res. 57 and H.J. Res. 58, that nullify measures put in place during former President Obama's administration.

Educational States

In 2016, more than 91 percent of American students attended one of the nation's public schools. Any discussion about the state of education must therefore focus, predominantly, on public education. The public school system emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and, though widely maligned for political reasons, has been one of the most important factors in the effort to combat racial, gender, and class inequality. Public schools are funded by state and federal tax revenues and managed by public servants who are entrusted with ensuring that the school system functions without discrimination and to further public interest. This means that the public school system faces the extreme challenge of educating the most diverse student body in the nation, with a wide spectrum of students from different backgrounds and with vast differences in ability.

For those parents and students with the means or who live in certain areas, there are two basic options outside of the standard public school system: private school or charter school. Private schools are funded by donations and private investment, but also receive federal support in the form of tax breaks. Though only about 9 percent of students attend private schools, 25 percent of the nation's schools are private and the value of the private education industry was estimated in 2016 at over \$57 billion. Most (over 80 percent) of the nation's private schools offer a religious-themed education.¹ The third option, charter schools, is a hybrid of the public/private school models. Charters are public, in that students attend for free and the schools receive tax revenues, but are private in that they are run by private individuals, corporations, or organizations. As a result, charter schools, like private schools, are more selective in admission and can be operated on either a nonprofit or for-profit model.

In 2017, the landscape of education is changing. Newly elected President Donald Trump and his choice for Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos are both graduates of elite private schools and are critics of the nation's public school system. The new trend in education, known by the marketing term "school choice," is essentially a privatization movement that seeks to transfer tax funds away from public schools to private schools. The movement is based on the idea that allowing schools to compete for revenues will create a more dynamic, free-market system, that will improve educational quality. The privatization movement has been fueled by the perception of a failing public school system and by studies indicating that US students lag behind students of many other developed nations in key subjects.

The Perceived Crisis in Education

Defending his choice of Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education, President Donald Trump described the US education system as being in a state of "crisis."² However, the state of education is largely a matter of perception and political motive. Trump

and allies see a crisis because this perspective fits well with the Trump administration's overarching thesis that the United States is worse now than it was in the past and that this is the fault of corrupt Democratic bureaucracy, which includes the bureaucracy of the public schools. Experts in the field, including educators, researchers, and legislators with direct experience, do not generally agree that US education, as a whole, is facing a crisis. Rather, experts see US public education as a mitigated success compromised by numerous complex factors, many of which are woven into the fabric of American culture and not only affect education, but also healthcare, the job market, and many other aspects of life for a majority of Americans.

Public opinion polls demonstrate that there is little consensus about the state of education and that opinions have become increasingly partisan. For instance, a 2016 Gallup Poll found that 53 percent of Democrats but only 32 percent of Republicans approved of the nation's K-12 education system. Gallup Polls from 2014, by contrast, found similar levels of support across partisan lines. The partisan gulf reflects the increasing polarization between conservatives and progressives on major issues. The 2016 Gallup Poll also indicated that only about 43 percent of all Americans were satisfied with the state of education, which is the lowest level of faith in public education measured since 2000.

The fact that a majority of Americans feel at least partially dissatisfied with public education seems to indicate that the crisis seen by Trump and supporters is a verifiable fact and yet this perception is largely illusory. Gallup Poll studies show that 76 percent of parents report being satisfied with their own child's education and with the schools that their children attend, despite the fact that less than 40 percent reported being satisfied with public education as a whole.³ In another poll by Education Next, 55 percent of parents rated schools in their community as achieving either an "A" or "B" rating, though only 25 percent gave an A or B rating to public schools in general. In fact, the Education Next poll found that opinions of local schools have improved over the past decade (from 43 percent to 55 percent giving an A or B grade), while the perception of the system as a whole has declined.⁴

If a majority of Americans are satisfied with their own educational experiences, why then do so many Americans believe that there is an education crisis? In part, this can be explained by a psychological phenomenon known as the "mere-exposure" effect, in which individuals are more likely to be supportive when they are familiar with the thing in question.⁵ There has also been a multibillion-dollar campaign to discourage faith in public schools and to promote privatization, the idea that schools could be more effectively, efficiently, and affordably run by private entities than governmental bureaucracy. Finally, because education is one of the most important aspects of any society, the fear that US education is failing creates a sense of perennial paranoia and motivates the belief that education is always in a state of crisis.

However, experts in the field widely agree that there are regions, districts, and individual schools that are very much in a state of crisis. The distribution of funding is tied to local tax revenues and schools in poor districts therefore suffer from a lack of resources. The effects of these disadvantages are also generational and insidious. Parents who are themselves undereducated and underemployed are concentrated

in poor districts where the schools are underserved, producing new generations who are similarly undereducated and more likely to be underemployed.⁶ It is this phenomenon, the educational manifestation of America's severe and deepening class inequality, that creates the nation's legitimate education crisis.

The International Perspective

When evaluating the US education system, one common measure is to compare US students to their counterparts in other nations. For instance, the 2015 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), found that US students achieve average rankings in science, mathematics, and literacy when compared to all nations studied, but rank significantly behind students in many other economically advanced nations. In mathematics, US students ranked 38th out of 71 nations measured, while they ranked 24th in science. Many educators and legislators expressed concern over the results of the 2015 PISA study in part because the vast increase in technological jobs means that math and science are increasingly important for students hoping to participate in the global economy.⁷ A similar study focusing on math and science skills at lower grade levels, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), found similar results, with US students lagging behind peers in many developed nations.⁸

The United States spends more money per student than most other countries in which students score higher in math, science, and literacy, indicating that spending alone does not correlate with increased performance. Program for International Student Assessment studies also indicate that socioeconomic class plays a larger role in the United States than in many other nations, in terms of the effects of class on educational achievement. Analyses of 2012 PISA results showed that about 13 percent of low-income students in Korea, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Singapore, and China were "resilient," which means that students performed better on tests than predicted by their socioeconomic status. By contrast, only 7 percent of US students were shown to be resilient to the effects of economic class.⁹

Reform advocates, politicians, and educational entrepreneurs have seized on PISA results to criticize public education. However, experts in the field caution against such conclusions and note that deep cultural differences are likely one of the most important factors preventing US students from matching or surpassing students in many other nations.¹⁰ Parental involvement and cultural attitudes about the value of education are important in determining how students, teachers, and parents approach, utilize, and participate in the system. For US students to beat out students in other advanced nations, it may therefore require deep changes in cultural philosophy that place increased emphasis, regardless of class and political affiliation, on the value of education and the need for parental and community participation.

International comparisons can also provide a reminder of the benefits US citizenship. Around the world, nearly one-in-five adults, or 19 percent of the adult population, have no formal schooling. This includes more than 40 percent of adults in the Middle East and North Africa where even basic education is not guaranteed. By

contrast, 98 percent of Europeans and 99 percent of adults in North America attain at least some level of formal schooling. The problem is more severe across gender lines, with nearly 23 percent of women globally receiving no formal schooling.¹¹ In comparison to the world population, therefore, US students, even those in the most disadvantaged school districts, enjoy advantages that are far from universal.

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Notes

1. Jennings, "Proportion of U.S. Students in Private Schools Is 10 Percent and Declining."
2. "Trump: Secretary DeVos Right Choice to Address Education 'Crisis'", *VOA News*.
3. Saad, "U.S. Education Ratings Show Record Political Polarization."
4. "Results from the 2016 Education Next Poll," *Education Next*.
5. Kamenetz, "Americans Like Their Schools Just Fine—But Not Yours."
6. Lynch, "Poverty and School Funding: Why Low-Income Students Often Suffer."