

# **EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

## **A BRIEF OVERVIEW**



**U.S. Department of Education**

**September 2003**

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

ROD PAIGE

*Secretary*

JOSEPH A. ESPOSITO

*Associate Under Secretary for International Affairs*

LENORE Y. GARCIA

*Director, International Affairs Staff*

September 2003

This report is in the public domain. Authorization to reproduce it in whole or in part is granted. While permission to reprint this publication is not necessary, the citation should be: U.S. Department of Education, International Affairs Staff, *Education in the United States: A Brief Overview*, Washington, D.C., 2003.

This online document at [www.ed.gov/international/edus](http://www.ed.gov/international/edus) has been slightly revised from the September 2003 printed publication of the same title, which also includes photographs.

### **TO ORDER COPIES OF THE PRINTED REPORT,**

**write** to: ED Pubs, Education Publications Center, U.S. Department of Education, P.O. Box 1398, Jessup, MD 20794-1398;

or **fax** your request to: (301) 470-1244;

or **e-mail** your request to: [edpubs@inet.ed.gov](mailto:edpubs@inet.ed.gov);

or **call** in your request toll-free: 1-877-433-7827 (1-877-4-ED-PUBS). If 877 service is not yet available in your area, call 1-800-872-5327 (1-800-USA-LEARN). Those who use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD) or a teletypewriter (TTY) should call 1-800-437-0833;

or **order online** at: [www.edpubs.org/webstore/Content/search.asp](http://www.edpubs.org/webstore/Content/search.asp).

On request, the printed publication is available in alternate formats, such as Braille, large print, audiotape or computer diskette. For more information, please contact the Department's Alternate Format Center at (202) 260-9895 or (202) 205-8113.

## FOREWORD

---

Education has always been a priority for the United States. Our early settlers were committed to establishing schools and colleges and teaching their children to live productive lives. That tradition has continued.

The United States' education system has developed by borrowing ideas from abroad and adding unique elements. As have so many other countries, we have adapted, improvised and innovated.

Today we educate more than 70 million students at every level and produce some of the finest thinkers in the world. Even so, we are constantly working to improve education. We are proud of our schools, our teachers and administrators and, most of all, our young people.

In 2001, faced with mediocre student progress and an achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers, President Bush rallied the country's leadership to change the way we educate our children with the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

Frequently, visitors from around the globe ask questions about our schools. This is not surprising, of course, as the world continues to shrink and all of us seek to learn more about the cultures of other nations.

For that reason we have written this booklet, which provides an overview of U.S. education. In addition to discussing history, the publication explains such issues as structure, decentralization and funding.

I hope you find this information useful. I also trust that you will feel comfortable sharing your country's experiences with us so that we can learn from you.

In the end, we all want to educate our children so that the world of the 21st century is one of hope, prosperity and peace. We at the U.S. Department of Education look forward to working with you.

Rod Paige  
U.S. Secretary of Education

# CONTENTS

---

FOREWORD.....	3
PREFACE.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND.....	7
PART I: ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF U.S. EDUCATION.....	11
Early Childhood Education.....	13
Elementary and Secondary Education.....	13
Vocational and Technical Education.....	21
Postsecondary Education.....	22
Adult and Continuing Education.....	26
PART II: EDUCATION POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION.....	27
The Role of State Governments.....	27
The Role of Local Governments.....	28
The Role of the Federal Government.....	28
Others Who Influence Education Policy and Practice.....	30
Financing of Education.....	31
CONCLUSION.....	34
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES.....	35
NOTES.....	36
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	38
FIGURES.....	
Figure 1: Structure of Education in the United States.....	11
Figure 2: Highest Level of Education Attained by Persons 25 Years and Older.....	22
Figure 3: Top 10 Bachelor’s Degrees.....	23
Figure 4: Funding for Elementary and Secondary Education.....	32
Figure 5: Funding for Public Postsecondary Education.....	33
Figure 6: Funding for Private Postsecondary Education.....	33
TABLES.....	
Table 1: U.S. Education System at a Glance.....	12
Table 2: Basic Information on U.S. Public School Teachers.....	20

## **PREFACE**

---

The U.S. Department of Education receives many inquiries each year from citizens of other countries who wish to better understand education in the United States. Some of these inquiries are received via correspondence, while others come from the Department's many international visitors.

In an effort to address these questions and to provide contextual information, this publication aims to briefly describe the important features and general characteristics of education in the United States. It is important to note that, due to the highly decentralized nature of U.S. education, policies and practices can vary considerably from state to state and from school district to school district. This publication cites national averages and general patterns of education practice.

To learn about specific policies and practices, readers are encouraged to contact local or state education agencies. Internet addresses have been inserted throughout the document for additional information on specific topics.

## INTRODUCTION

---

The United States has a highly decentralized system of education. The Tenth Amendment (1791) of the U.S. Constitution (1787) states: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” Therefore, the general authority to create and administer public schools is reserved for the states. There is no national school system nor are there national framework laws that prescribe curricula or control most other aspects of education. The federal government, although playing an important role in education, does not establish or license schools or govern educational institutions at any level.<sup>1</sup>

The decentralized nature of U.S. education has its origins in the early history of the United States. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, what was to become the United States began as separate colonies established by settlers from several European countries. In the 13 British colonies that formed the original United States, the colonial governments or, in some colonies, local communities were responsible for education. It was customary for each locality to establish and support its own school(s). Each community educated its children according to its priorities, values and needs. This history helps explain why states and local governments continue to exercise a significant degree of authority over elementary and secondary education policy and administration. Individual postsecondary institutions have also traditionally enjoyed considerable independence since the founding of the country, and they continue to be highly autonomous to the present day.

In the pages that follow, you will find a description of the historic *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*. Part I contains a general description of the organization and structure of U.S. education, while Part II describes the roles played by all three levels of government in education policy, administration and financing, with an emphasis on elementary and secondary education.

## **NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND—THE LAW THAT USHERED IN A NEW ERA**

---

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (No Child Left Behind) is a landmark in education reform designed to improve student achievement and change the culture of U.S. schools.<sup>2</sup> The law was passed by Congress with overwhelming bipartisan support and signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002. Clearly, our children are our future, and, as President Bush has expressed, "Too many of our neediest children are being left behind."

With the passage of No Child Left Behind, Congress reauthorized the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA)—the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. In amending ESEA, the new law represents a sweeping overhaul of federal efforts to support elementary and secondary education in the United States. In exchange for federal aid for education, states must establish systems of accountability that ensure that funds are used to improve the quality of education offered to every child in the state.

### **WHY NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND IS IMPORTANT**

Since the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* was first passed by Congress in 1965, the federal government has spent more than \$242 billion through 2003 to help educate disadvantaged children. Yet, the achievement gap in this country between rich and poor and white and minority students remains wide. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) on reading in 2002, only 31 percent of fourth-graders can read at a proficient level and thereby demonstrate solid academic achievement; and while scores for the highest-performing students have improved over time, those of the lowest-performing students have declined.<sup>3</sup>

The good news is that some schools in cities and towns across the nation are creating high achievement for children with a history of low performance. If some schools can do it, then all schools should be able to do it. That is the purpose of No Child Left Behind. The law is built on four common-sense pillars: accountability for results, an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research, expanded parental options, and expanded local control and flexibility.

### **ACCOUNTABILITY FOR RESULTS**

#### **IDENTIFIES SCHOOLS AND DISTRICTS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT**

As part of the accountability provisions set forth in the law, No Child Left Behind has set the goal of having every child achieving proficiency according to state-defined educational standards by the end of the 2013-2014 school year. To reach that goal, every state has developed benchmarks to measure progress and make sure every child is learning. States are required to separate, or disaggregate student achievement data, holding schools accountable for subgroups, so that no child falls through the cracks. Data is analyzed separately for children of different racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, students from economically disadvantaged homes, and children who are learning English as a second language. This analysis enables

schools to identify groups of students who need additional assistance to meet the state's academic expectations.

Under No Child Left Behind, schools that do not meet the state's definition of "adequate yearly progress" for two straight years (schoolwide or in any major subgroup), are identified as "in need of improvement," and they are given assistance to improve. Assessments called for in No Child Left Behind help schools identify subject areas and teaching methods that need improvement. For example, if reading scores do not reach the state's benchmark, the school knows it needs to improve its reading program.

In the past, these schools might not have received the attention and the help they needed to improve. Through No Child Left Behind, every state has made a commitment that it will no longer ignore when schools are not meeting the needs of every student in their care.

### **PROVIDES HELP TO SCHOOLS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT**

Title I of *ESEA: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged* awards grants to states and local school districts and schools with the highest concentrations of economically disadvantaged students to help them improve the education of disadvantaged students, turn around low-performing schools, improve teacher quality and increase choices for parents. When a Title I school is found to be "in need of improvement," school officials are required to work with parents, school staff, the district and outside experts to develop a plan to turn around the school.

The school's improvement plan must incorporate strategies, relying on scientifically based research, that will strengthen the teaching of core academic subjects, especially in the subject areas that resulted in the schools being deemed in need of improvement. Schools in need of improvement are also expected to develop strategies to promote effective parental involvement in the school and to incorporate a teacher-mentoring program.

### **IMPROVES TEACHING AND LEARNING BY PROVIDING BETTER INFORMATION TO TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS**

Annual assessments to measure children's progress provide teachers with independent information about each child's strengths and weaknesses. With this knowledge, teachers can develop lessons to make sure each student meets or exceeds the standards. In addition, principals can use the data to assess where the school should invest resources, such as in professional development.

### **ENSURES THAT TEACHER QUALITY IS A HIGH PRIORITY**

No Child Left Behind outlines the minimum qualifications needed by teachers and paraprofessionals who work on any facet of classroom instruction. It requires that states develop plans to ensure that all teachers of core academic subjects are highly qualified by the end of the 2005-06 school year. States must include in their plans annual, measurable objectives that each



local school district and school must meet in moving toward the goal. They must also report on their progress in annual report cards distributed to parents and the community.

### **GIVES MORE RESOURCES TO SCHOOLS**

Today, local, state and federal taxpayers spend nearly \$8,000 per pupil on average.<sup>4</sup> States and local school districts are now receiving more federal funding than ever before for all programs under No Child Left Behind: \$23.7 billion for the 2003-04 school year. This represents an increase of 59.8 percent from 2000 to 2003. Nearly half of these funds are for grants under Title I of *ESEA: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged* to ensure that schools in need of improvement have the funds needed to improve instruction for their students.

### **SCIENTIFICALLY BASED RESEARCH**

#### **FOCUSES ON WHAT WORKS**

No Child Left Behind puts a special emphasis on implementing educational programs and practices that have been clearly demonstrated to be effective through rigorous scientific research. Federal funding is targeted to support such programs, and schools are expected to use research and evidence of effectiveness to identify and select instructional resources, instructional practices and professional development strategies. For example, the Reading First program makes \$1 billion in federal funds available each year to help reading teachers in the early grades strengthen old skills and gain new ones in instructional techniques that scientifically based research has shown to be effective.

### **EXPANDED PARENTAL OPTIONS**

#### **PROVIDES MORE INFORMATION FOR PARENTS ABOUT THEIR CHILD'S PROGRESS**

Under No Child Left Behind, each state must measure every public school student's progress in reading and math in each of grades 3 through 8 and at least once during grades 10 through 12. By school year 2007-2008, assessments in science will be added. These assessments must be aligned with state academic content and achievement standards. They will provide parents with objective data about their child's academic strengths and weaknesses.

#### **ALERTS PARENTS TO IMPORTANT INFORMATION ON THE PERFORMANCE OF THEIR CHILD'S SCHOOL**

No Child Left Behind requires states and school districts to give parents easy-to-read, detailed report cards on schools and districts, telling them which ones are succeeding and why, and the progress they are making. Included in the report cards are student achievement data disaggregated by race, ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency, migrant status, disability status and low-income status, as well as important information about the professional qualifications of teachers. With these provisions, No Child Left Behind ensures that parents have important, timely information about the schools their children attend and whether they are performing well or not for all children, regardless of their background.

## **GIVES PARENTS WHOSE CHILDREN ATTEND SCHOOLS IN NEED OF IMPROVEMENT NEW OPTIONS**

In the first year that a Title I school is considered to be in need of improvement, parents receive the option to transfer their child to another higher performing public school, including charter schools, in the same school district. Transportation must also be provided to the new school, subject to certain cost limitations. In the second year that a school is considered to be in need of improvement, the school must continue offering public school choice. Additionally, the school must offer as an option supplemental educational services, such as free tutoring, to low-income students who remain at the school.

## **EXPANDED FLEXIBILITY AND LOCAL CONTROL**

### **ALLOWS MORE FLEXIBILITY**

In exchange for strong accountability, No Child Left Behind gives states and local school districts more flexibility in the use of their federal funding. As a result, principals and administrators spend less time filling out forms and have more time to devote to students' needs. They have more freedom to implement innovations and allocate resources as policymakers at the state and local levels see fit, thereby giving local people a greater opportunity to affect decisions regarding their schools' programs.

### **ENCOURAGES TEACHER DEVELOPMENT**

No Child Left Behind gives states and districts the flexibility to find innovative ways to improve teacher quality, including alternative certification, merit pay for master teachers, and bonuses for people who teach in high-need schools and core subject areas like math and science.

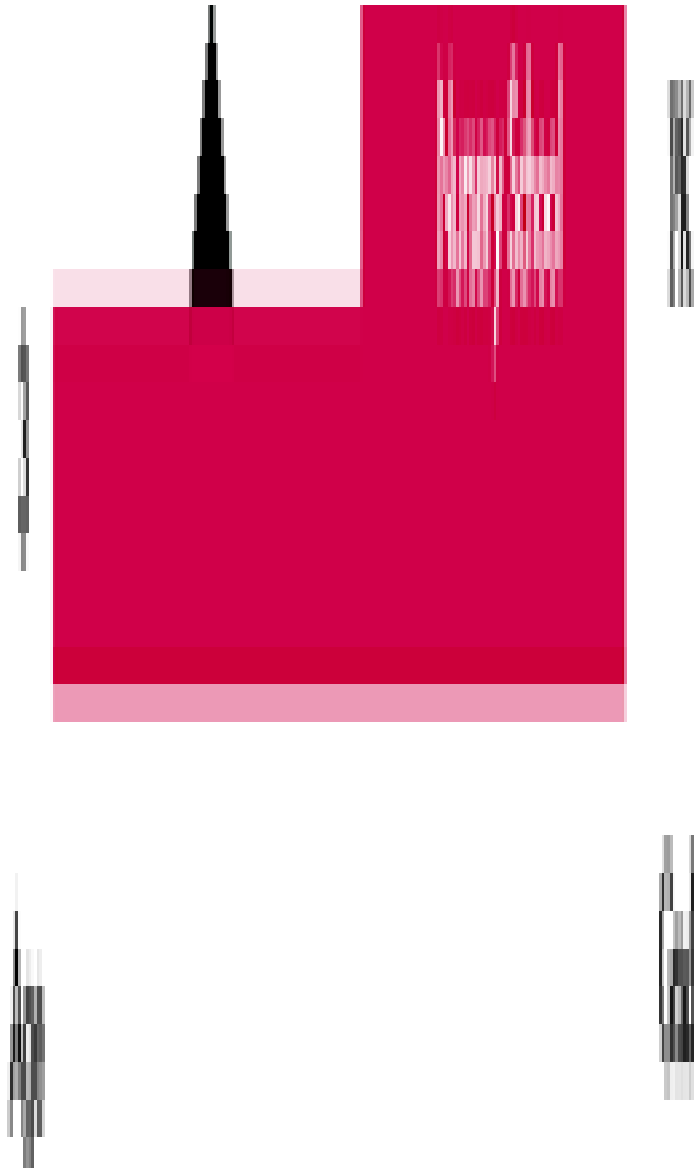
The Improving Teacher Quality State Grants program (from Title II in No Child Left Behind) gives states and districts flexibility to choose the teacher professional development strategies that best meet their needs to help raise student achievement.

## PART I: ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF EDUCATION

---

The structure of education in the United States provides different paths to graduation from high school or a postsecondary institution (see Figure 1 below), and it is common for students to move between different types of schools, or to leave the system and return later in life.

**Figure 1: Structure of Education in the United States**



*Source: 2002 Digest of Education Statistics, Figure 1. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2003). Note: Adult education programs, while not separately delineated above, may provide instruction at the elementary, secondary or higher education levels. Chart reflects typical patterns of progression rather than all possible variations. Numbers in parentheses represent the number of years spent in elementary and secondary schools, depending on the path being followed.*

Description of Figure 1: Figure 1 describes the structure of the U.S. education system, indicating the most typical educational paths taken from preschool through graduate school.

For early childhood education, the stages shown are the following:

- \* Nursery School (ages 3-4) -- 1-2 years duration
- \* Kindergartens (ages 4-5) -- 1-2 years duration

For elementary and secondary education (grades 1 through 12), there are four traditional paths. The path taken by a given individual will depend on the state, school district, or school in which that individual is studying. The stage variations are the following:

Variation 1

- \* Elementary (or Primary) School (ages 6-13) -- 8 years duration
- \* 4-Year High School (ages 14-18) -- 4 years duration

Variation 2

- \* Elementary (or Primary) School (ages 6-9) -- 4 years duration
- \* Middle School (ages 10-13) -- 4 years duration
- \* 4-Year High School (ages 14-18) -- 4 years duration

Variation 3

- \* Elementary (or Primary) School (ages 6-11) -- 5 years duration
- \* Junior High School (12-14) -- 3 years duration
- \* Senior High School (15-18) -- 3 years duration

Variation 4

- \* Elementary (or Primary) School (ages 6-11) -- 6 years duration
- \* Combined Junior/Senior School (ages 12-18) -- 6 years duration

For postsecondary education, the stages are more generally represented in the following order:

- \* Vocational Technical Institutions; and Junior/Community Colleges
- \* Undergraduate Programs (Bachelor's Degree)
- \* Master's Degree Study
- \* Doctor's Degree Study (Ph.D.); and Professional Schools (Medicine, Theology, Law, etc.)
- \* Postdoctoral Study and Research

**Table 1: U.S. Education System at a Glance**

Total elementary and secondary school enrollment	53 million <sup>a</sup>
Percentage of population age 6-17 enrolled in school	98 percent <sup>b</sup>
Number of elementary and secondary school teachers	3.4 million <sup>c</sup>
Number of public elementary and secondary schools	93,000 <sup>d</sup>
Number of private elementary and secondary schools	27,000 <sup>e</sup>
Percentage of elementary and secondary students attending private schools <sup>f</sup>	10 percent <sup>g</sup>
Average expenditure per pupil in public elementary/secondary school	\$7524 <sup>h</sup>
Number of public school districts	approximately 15,000 <sup>i</sup>
Number of higher education students	14.8 million <sup>j</sup>
Number of 2-year colleges	1,700 <sup>k</sup>
Number of 4-year colleges and universities	2,450 <sup>l</sup>
Percentage of adults over age 25 who have completed at least 5 years of elementary school	98 percent <sup>m</sup>
Percentage of adults over age 25 who have completed at least high school	84 percent <sup>n</sup>
Percentage of adults over age 25 who have completed 4 or more years of college	26 percent <sup>o</sup>

Sources: Data from: *2002 Digest of Education Statistics*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003); *2000 Condition of Education*. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2000); and *Findings from the Condition of Education: 2002 Private Schools—A Brief Portrait*. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2002). Figures have been slightly rounded.

- (a) *Digest*, Table 2
- (b) *Condition*, Table 1-1
- (c) *Digest*, Table 4
- (d) *Digest*, Table 5
- (e) *Digest*, Table 5
- (f) See page 18 for a description of private schools.
- (g) *Findings from the Condition*
- (h) *Digest*, Table 166
- (i) *Digest*, Table 87
- (j) *Digest*, Table 2
- (k) *Digest*, Table 5
- (l) *Digest*, Table 5
- (m) *Digest*, Table 8
- (n) *Digest*, Table 8
- (o) *Digest*, Table 8

## **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

Early childhood education (preprimary) in the United States comes in a variety of forms, including nursery school, preschool, day care centers, prekindergarten and kindergarten. It also includes Head Start, a federally funded child development program that serves low-income children. Free Head Start programs are offered for 3- and 4-year-old children from low-income families. Overall, 64 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds are enrolled in early childhood education and 52 percent of these children attend full-day programs.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of 5-year-olds attend free public kindergartens.<sup>6</sup> Most public elementary schools offer free kindergarten education, and the average class size is 20 students.<sup>7</sup> Almost all public school kindergartens report that teachers read stories aloud to the children each day. The majority also arrange for the students to engage each day in running, climbing and other motor skill activities; language development, dramatic play, arts, crafts and music; and free play. About half of the kindergarten teachers engage children daily in using objects to learn about math and science.<sup>8</sup>

For more information about early childhood education in the United States, see the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education at <http://ericece.org>. For more information on Head Start, see [www.headstartinfo.org/index.htm](http://www.headstartinfo.org/index.htm).

## **ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**

### **BASIC INFORMATION**

Elementary (primary) and secondary education spans twelve academic years, or grades. However, the organization of elementary and secondary education varies among school districts and states. Generally students spend from six to eight years in elementary education. Elementary education is followed by four to six years of secondary education. The last four years of secondary school are generally referred to as “high school.” Students normally complete high school by age 17 or 18. High school graduates who decide to continue their education may enter a technical or vocational institution, a two-year community or junior college, or a four-year college or university. Each of these educational levels is further described later.

The average public elementary school enrolls 477 pupils.<sup>9</sup> The grade levels included in elementary school vary by district, based on educational philosophy and school building size. The average public secondary school enrolls 714 students.<sup>10</sup> Secondary education is usually broken into two parts: middle school (or junior high school) and high school. Middle school usually encompasses grades 6-8 or 7-8, depending on the district. High school typically includes grades 9-12.<sup>11</sup>

All states require students to attend school, but the ages of compulsory attendance vary by state. Compulsory schooling ends by law at age 16 in 30 states, at age 17 in nine states, and at age 18 in 11 states plus the District of Columbia. U.S. public schools are tax-supported and free to students and their families.

Students borrow free textbooks from the school for the year, but they must bring their own paper and pencils from home. In most public schools, students are allowed to wear whatever clothing they like within broad guidelines, while a small but growing number of public schools require uniforms. Boys and girls generally attend class together, although a small number of public schools do provide single-sex classes.

**School Calendar and Daily Routine.** In most states, the school year lasts 180 days<sup>12</sup>. School begins in most districts in late August or early September and continues until June, and most school districts have a two-week break at the end of December and a one-week break in March or April. Generally, the school day runs from about 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.; however, daily schedules vary significantly from school to school.

Most elementary school students study in the same classroom all day with one teacher who teaches all subjects. The class may visit the gymnasium and library once or twice a week. Students have a daily lunch break of about 30 minutes. Most schools have one or two playground breaks, although playground time is being reduced or eliminated in a growing number of schools for a variety of reasons. In most elementary schools, daily instructional time is not divided into periods; instead, teachers decide how much time to spend teaching particular subjects based on students' learning needs and their own expertise.

The secondary school day usually consists of five to six instructional periods, with short breaks between periods. Each secondary school student has a unique schedule and set of classes, which is determined by the parents, school counselor and student, based upon local graduation requirements and the student's interests, career goals and academic ability. Middle and secondary school teachers remain in their own classrooms throughout the day and teach specialized subjects rather than the whole curriculum. At the end of each period, every student moves to a different classroom depending on his or her own schedule.

Students generally eat lunch in the school cafeteria. Some students bring their lunch from home, and others purchase their meals at school. About a third of U.S. students—those from low-income families—receive free or reduced-price breakfast and/or lunch each day, paid for by the federal government.<sup>13</sup> For more information on the federal programs that provide school meals, see [www.fns.usda.gov/cnd](http://www.fns.usda.gov/cnd).

**Student Transportation.** For students attending schools located beyond walking distance from their homes, transportation via school bus is generally provided free of charge by the school district. More than half of U.S. public elementary and secondary students use this service to travel to and from school each day.<sup>14</sup> Many parents drive their children to school, while many students age 16 and older drive themselves.

**Extracurricular Activities.** Many schools, especially at the secondary level, sponsor activities such as sports, clubs, performing arts and community service opportunities. In some school districts, prospective graduates are encouraged or required to perform a prescribed number of hours of community service.

In addition to attending school, many high school students work limited hours at part-time jobs (not vocational training) during the academic year. For example, 68 percent of 12th-grade students work during the academic year, with 77 percent of these students working less than 20 hours per week.<sup>15</sup> Food service, grocery clerk and retail sales are the most common types of work for high school students.<sup>16</sup> Persons under the age of 18 are considered minors under U.S. law, and federal and state child labor laws strictly govern the types of work minors can perform, how it is supervised and how long they can work for pay.

## CURRICULUM

States set broad curriculum guidelines for what students should know and be able to do. School districts or schools generally select textbooks, adhering to state guidelines. Within these guidelines, schools, and even individual teachers, are generally expected to determine content details and the pace of instruction so that it is suited to the characteristics of students.

Elementary schools do not generally assign students to specific teachers or classes based on their ability. However, within classes, teachers often set up reading or mathematics groups based on student achievement levels. Students in different achievement groups may receive differentiated assignments so that they can progress at an appropriate pace in mastering the class curriculum.

At the secondary school level, each student's coursework is generally composed of courses required for graduation—with requirements varying by district and state—and elective courses. As a statistical average, public high school students complete the following one-year-long courses between 9th and 12th grades: four years of English; four years of history or social studies; three years of mathematics; three years of science; two years of foreign language; two years of the arts; four years of vocational, technical or business education; one year of computer science; and two to three years of other subjects.<sup>17</sup>

Most students graduate from high school at the age of 17 or 18.<sup>18</sup> Some students graduate from school later because they have been retained in grade. Others drop out and return to school a year or two later, or drop out and decide to complete the General Educational Development (GED) certificate program, which is recognized in all states as the equivalent of a high school diploma.<sup>19</sup>

## ACADEMIC STANDARDS AND STUDENT ASSESSMENT

**Standards.** During the 1990s, most states made significant gains in the use of standards to define educational inputs and desired outcomes. By 2001, almost all states, plus the District of Columbia, had developed and put in place *academic standards* that described what students should know and be able to do in mathematics, language arts, science and social studies. Most states also now have *content standards* that describe the body of knowledge that all students should know, and *performance standards* that describe what level of performance is considered basic, proficient and advanced. (The exact terms used vary by school system.) Despite significant progress in setting academic standards, debate often takes place over whether standards are too high, too low, clear enough or sufficiently relevant.



**Grading.** Students receive classroom grades to describe their academic performance in each subject area. The grading system used is generally on a letter scale, with “A” being the highest and “F” being the lowest and representing failure. Letter grades are often converted into numeric “grade point averages” (“GPAs”)—especially at the secondary school level—to describe a student’s overall performance. In this case, A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1 and F=0, with a 4.0 grade point average indicating a perfect grade record. Grading generally assumes a starting point of 100, or perfect, and subtracts points for mistakes or poor-quality reasoning, rather than assuming a starting point of zero and adding points, as in some other grading systems. Typically, classroom teachers are entirely responsible for determining grades, basing their decisions on the quality of a student’s work, classroom test scores and level of participation.

**Promotion.** A student’s promotion to the next year of schooling is based primarily on his or her classroom grades. If a student’s grades are poor and the teacher believes that he or she is not ready to be promoted to the next grade, the student may be retained. Parents also generally play an important role in making such a decision. Students are most likely to be retained during the early grades of elementary school. Some states require students to pass an examination in order to graduate from secondary school.<sup>20</sup> These examinations vary in content, format and rigor.

**Student Achievement Testing.** States administer tests on a regular basis to assess student performance at designated grade levels. One of the key factors determining the relevance of a state’s testing regimen is its alignment with the state’s academic and performance standards. Achieving this alignment is often challenging due to the time and expense required. Some states use tests purchased from a commercial test developer, while others develop original test instruments that are specifically designed to measure state standards. Another challenge is how to define and ensure test quality. For example, states must determine whether tests will primarily contain open-ended essay questions and mathematical problems, or multiple-choice questions.

The federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* requires states to test all students in reading, mathematics and science in grades 3-8 and in high school. Each state, school district and school is expected to make adequate yearly progress toward meeting state standards in these subject areas and to measure this progress for all students. Special focus is placed on the progress of students who are economically disadvantaged, are from racial or ethnic minority groups, have disabilities or have limited English proficiency.

The results of state-level tests do not generally affect an individual student’s grades or promotion but instead are used to assess the educational quality in a school, a district or the entire state. In many communities, the media report the results of districts’ or schools’ performance on standardized measures.

National-level student assessment takes place through the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP). Every other year, a random sample of U.S. schools is selected to participate in NAEP, which is designed to provide the public with information on the nation’s progress in a number of subjects. NAEP does not provide scores for individual students or schools; instead, it offers results regarding subject-matter achievement, instructional experiences and school environment for populations of students (e.g., fourth-graders) and subgroups of those populations (e.g., female students, Hispanic students).

In 1988, the Congress passed legislation enabling NAEP to also assess student performance at the state level. Many schools also participate in international assessments to measure how well U.S. students perform in comparison to students in other countries.

For more information on NAEP, see <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>. For information on such international assessments, see <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/international>.

## SCHOOL CHOICE

Public school districts generally assign students to particular schools based on place of residence, and those schools generally accept all students assigned to them. Nonetheless, in an effort to provide parents with more options for their children, many public school systems are expanding school choice through options such as magnet schools, charter schools and vouchers.

- *Magnet schools* are public elementary or secondary schools that offer a special curriculum capable of attracting substantial numbers of students of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- *Charter schools* are public schools that are held accountable for student achievement in exchange for being allowed to operate independently of school district regulations.
- *Voucher* programs direct public education funding to parents in order to pay all or part of their child's tuition at a school of their choice. Depending on the program, parents can choose from private schools—either secular or religious—and from public schools.

Public school choice programs provide parents with additional options as to where to enroll their children. Although such programs have not been available everywhere, the proportion of public school children attending a chosen school (rather than the school assigned by their place of residence) has increased in recent years. In 1999, for example, 14 percent of public school students in grades 1-12 attended a school the family had chosen, up from 11 percent in 1993.<sup>21</sup>

With the enactment of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2002, public school choice has taken on a new dimension. Now all children who attend Title I schools identified by their states as needing improvement for two consecutive years or longer must be offered school choice. (Title I schools are those schools that receive federal funds under Title I of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act [ESEA]: Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged*. Title I supports programs to improve the academic achievement of children of low-income families; and currently about 55 percent of U.S. public schools receive funds under Title I.)

For additional information on school choice, see <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/2002/section4/indicator29.asp> and [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/about/choice.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/about/choice.html).

## **PRIVATE SCHOOLS**

While the great majority of U.S. students attend public schools administered by local school districts, private schools account for about 24 percent of all schools, 10 percent of all students and 12 percent of all full-time teachers in the United States.<sup>22</sup> Seventy-nine percent of all private schools have a religious affiliation while the remainder are nonsectarian.<sup>23</sup> Private schools are owned and governed by entities that are independent of any government—typically, religious bodies or independent boards of trustees. Choice is a defining characteristic of private schools as families freely choose private education, and private schools may generally choose which students to accept. Although nonpublic governance and enrollment choice are features that all private schools share, there is wide variation within the private sector on many measures.

Private schools receive funding primarily from nonpublic sources: tuition payments and often other private sources, such as foundations, religious bodies, alumni or other private donors. Average annual tuition cost at private elementary and secondary schools is \$4,689 per pupil,<sup>24</sup> although actual tuition rates for individual schools can be less or significantly more than this average.

In addition, a relatively small proportion (roughly 2 percent) of U.S. students ages 5-17 receive their education through homeschooling. Parents cite several primary motivations for selecting homeschooling for their children. These include, among others, religious beliefs, family reasons and a belief that educational quality and the learning environment would be better at home.<sup>25</sup>

For more information on private schools, see [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/nonpublic/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oii/nonpublic/index.html). For additional information on home schooling, see <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2001033>.

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION**

A number of federal laws govern the provision of educational services to students with disabilities and specifically prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability by public entities or institutions that are recipients of federal financial assistance.

About 96 percent of students with disabilities attend regular schools, while only 4 percent attend separate institutions dedicated to education for students with disabilities.<sup>26</sup> Among those students attending local public schools, most are educated in regular classes with appropriate aids and supports, such as designated periods of time meeting with a qualified special education teacher. The amount of time spent outside the regular classroom varies and depends on the needs of the student. Approximately half of all students with disabilities spend 80 percent or more of their day in regular classrooms.<sup>27</sup>

Special services are often also provided for students that are specially gifted or talented. Gifted and talented students are usually served via special programs in regular school settings. About 6 percent of U.S. students benefit from these services.<sup>28</sup> In some states, special services for gifted and talented students are included under the state's special education law.

For more information about special education, including federal laws prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities, see the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services Web site at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/programs.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/programs.html) and its Office of Civil Rights Web site at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/aboutocr.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/aboutocr.html). Also, see the ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education at <http://ericec.org>.

## **OTHER IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**

**Religion and Schools.** The U.S. Constitution calls for a separation between government and religion; therefore, public schools are not allowed to have a religious affiliation or teach religious doctrine. (They may, however, teach about religions as part of academic studies such as history, social studies or literature.) Parents who desire a religiously oriented education for their children may send them to private religious schools instead of public schools or may homeschool their children, as described above.

**Student Diversity.** Students in U.S. schools represent nearly every ethnic background and nationality in the world. The most diverse school districts are those in major metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, New York, Washington and Chicago, but diverse student populations are increasingly found even in smaller cities, towns and rural areas. As a national average, U.S. students in public schools are 61 percent white, 17 percent black, 16 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander and 1 percent American Indian or Alaskan Native.<sup>29</sup> However, the population characteristics of a given local school or district often vary from the national average.

In the United States, English is clearly the predominant language for government, business, society and instruction. English is taught to all students in U.S. schools, but more than 400 native languages other than English are represented in these same schools.<sup>30</sup> In some schools, especially at the elementary level, students with limited English proficiency receive content instruction in their native language while they learn English. More than 9 percent of public school students (prekindergarten through 12th grade) are considered to have limited English proficiency.<sup>31</sup>

For more information, see the Web site for the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students at [www.ed.gov/offices/OELA](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OELA).

**Parental Involvement.** Parents’ involvement in the schools and in their children’s education is generally encouraged by principals and teachers. Most parents attend general school meetings and parent-teacher conferences each year, and many volunteer at their children’s school by tutoring, presenting special programs of interest, supervising students on field trips or assisting with special events.<sup>32</sup> Parents of children with disabilities must be involved in the development of their child’s specially designed instruction, which is referred to as the child’s Individualized Education Program. There are also organizations—such as parent-teacher associations—that work to support schools and increase the involvement of families in the educational progress of their children.

**Technology.** The use of technology is widespread in U.S. elementary and secondary schools, as well as in colleges and universities. Students use computers to write reports, collaborate with classmates, conduct research on the Internet and engage in many other activities. Ninety-nine percent of public schools are connected to the Internet, while 87 percent of instructional rooms have Internet access.<sup>33</sup> While technology in schools has become increasingly common, several related challenges have presented themselves. These challenges include providing adequate training to teachers on how to effectively integrate technology into the curriculum and ensuring that the benefits of educational technology are available to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. For more information on current activities in applying technology to U.S. classrooms, see the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Educational Technology Web site at [www.ed.gov/Technology](http://www.ed.gov/Technology).

## TEACHERS AND TEACHING

U.S. elementary and secondary school teachers receive their preservice training at four-year colleges and universities. Although the requirements for coursework and practice teaching vary by university and state, most prospective teachers must complete an undergraduate degree and pass one or more examinations in order to be licensed.

The majority of teachers earn master’s degrees and complete additional training during their careers.<sup>34</sup> Some states and school districts have developed “alternative certification programs” to train aspiring teachers who are leaving careers in other fields. In general, public school teachers are required to be licensed by the teacher certification authority of the state in which they teach. The *No Child Left Behind Act* also addresses the issue of teacher quality and establishes certain requirements designed to ensure that all students have high-quality teachers.

**Table 2: Basic Information on U.S. Public School Teachers**

Median age	44 years
Gender	Women 74%, Men 26%
Highest degree held	Bachelor’s 44%, Master’s 55%, Doctorate 1.7%
Median years of teaching experience	15 years
Average hours per week spent on teaching duties	49 hours
Average teaching days per year	180 days
Average annual salary as a classroom teacher	\$35,549

Source: 2002 *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 70. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2003).

Each state administers its own teacher certification exam. Teachers certified in one state are not certified to teach in another state, unless there is a special reciprocity agreement between the states. Since reciprocity is rare, teachers moving to another state are usually required to complete additional coursework and another exam. To obtain employment, prospective teachers apply to and are hired by the public school district in which they wish to teach or the individual private school. Most teachers teach the same grade and subject for several years, and they rarely teach the same students for more than a year. Due to teacher retirements, attrition, increased

student enrollments and other factors, teacher recruitment and teacher quality are currently important issues in the United States.

On average, teachers make up 52 percent of the staff in U.S. school districts.<sup>35</sup> District-level administrators make up 2 percent; principals and assistant principals 2 percent; teacher aides 11 percent; and other staff 33 percent.<sup>36</sup>

## **VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION**

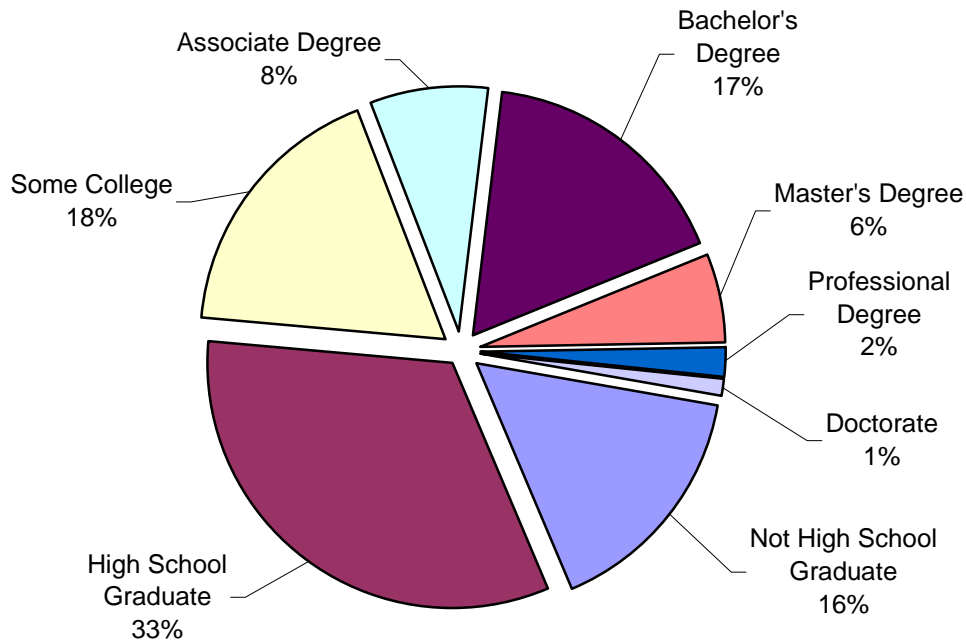
Historically, the purpose of vocational education has been to prepare students for entry-level jobs in occupations requiring less than an undergraduate degree. However, this traditional focus has now shifted toward broader preparation that develops the academic, vocational and technical skills of students in vocational education programs. Vocational and technical education is offered at the secondary, postsecondary and adult education levels.

At the secondary school level, some states have well-developed vocational education programs with apprenticeships or work-based learning opportunities. Most public high school students in vocational education programs work in part-time situations jointly supervised by teachers and employers during their senior year (grade 12) of high school. These work experiences may be provided by the school or obtained independently by the student. Different types of work-based learning experiences can be offered, including internships, apprenticeships and mentoring. U.S. child labor laws, previously mentioned, limit the level and intensity of vocational instruction that can be provided to students under 18 years of age. As a consequence, most vocational and technical education or training—especially for licensed occupations—occurs at the postsecondary level.

At the postsecondary and adult education levels, thousands of institutions and other providers offer degree and non-degree vocational and technical training. These institutions include public community colleges and vocational/technical institutes, as well as private trade and technical schools, employers, unions, professional associations and independent training services. Postsecondary vocational education generally prepares students for occupational fields and terminates in a certificate, diploma or associate degree. Such fields include the craft and industrial trades, certain areas of health care, equipment operation and personal services such as haircutting and grooming. Some vocational-level studies can lead to entry into higher education programs. This is generally true for fields such as nursing and engineering technology, which are often available at both the community college and university levels.

For more information, see *Vocational Education in the United States: Toward the Year 2000* at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2000029>. Also, see the Web site for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/grntprgm.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/grntprgm.html).

**Figure 2: Highest Level of Education Attained by Persons 25 Years and Older**



Source: 2002 Digest of Education Statistics, Figure 5. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2002). Figures have been slightly rounded.

## POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

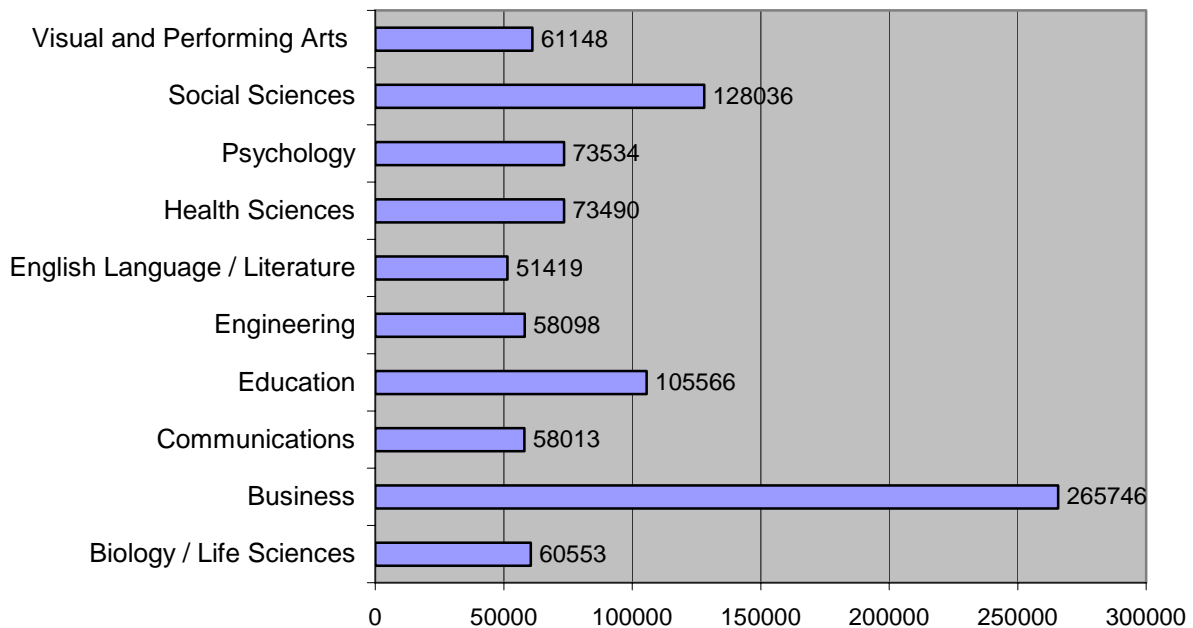
Postsecondary education in the United States is widespread and diverse. Included are degree-granting institutions, such as colleges, universities and community colleges, as well as non-degree-granting institutions that provide specific vocational, technical and career training.<sup>37</sup>

### COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

There are more than 600 public, and almost 1,800 private, four-year colleges and universities in the United States.<sup>38</sup> The academic titles awarded by these institutions include undergraduate degrees such as the bachelor's degree and graduate degrees such as the master's degree and the doctorate. U.S. degree titles are not governed by national laws; therefore, colleges and universities exercise wide discretion in the nomenclature they use for degrees and program requirements for graduation. Accrediting associations, described below, may exert some influence on degree titles, as do the labor market and the professional academic community.

**Undergraduate Degrees.** The basic undergraduate degree in the United States is the *bachelor's degree*. It generally requires four or more years of full-time study. The *associate degree*, which is offered at community colleges, described below, typically requires two years of full-time study.

**Figure 3: Top 10 Bachelor's Degrees**



Source: 2002 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 252. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2003).

**Graduate Degrees.** The basic graduate degree is the *master's degree*, which usually requires one to two years of full-time study beyond the bachelor's degree. The research *doctorate degree* (Ph.D. or equivalent) usually requires a minimum of five to seven years beyond the bachelor's. However, the total time required can vary significantly depending on the institution, student and field of study.

Education and training for professional occupations can take place at the undergraduate or graduate level. For example, the fields of nursing, accounting, engineering and architecture generally require an undergraduate degree, while a graduate-level professional degree is required to become a physician, dentist or attorney.

**Admissions.** Regardless of place of residence, all students are free to apply for admission to higher education institutions located anywhere in the country. However, tuition and fees at public universities are generally higher for out-of-state residents. Although a number of factors are weighed when institutions consider students for admission, decisions generally take into account the following:

- success in secondary school coursework (e.g., grade point average);
- scores on standardized tests, which are designed to determine a student's aptitude for success in postsecondary education (e.g., Scholastic Aptitude Test [SAT]);
- recommendation letters from teachers and others;
- student-written essays; and
- demonstration of leadership potential and participation in extracurricular activities (e.g. student government, school newspapers, sports teams, clubs, artistic activities and volunteering in the community).



For a searchable list of colleges and universities in the United States, see <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/cool>.

## **COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

The community college system originated in the United States in the early 20th century. Community colleges (sometimes called junior colleges) were created to form a transitional link between high school and the university. They generally offer two-year degree programs leading to the associate degree, as well as short certificate and diploma programs in a variety of academic and vocational fields. There are approximately 1,700 two-year colleges in the United States.<sup>39</sup>

Many students enroll in the community colleges to acquire or update specific job skills, attain basic skills and pursue personal interests, while others complete one or two years of study at a community college before transferring to a four-year college or university to complete the remainder of a bachelor's degree program. Most community colleges also offer GED programs and adult literacy programs. Community colleges generally attempt to be responsive to the community in which they operate, offering coursework that addresses the needs of local citizens and employers.

For additional information on community colleges, see [www.gseis.ucla.edu/ERIC/eric.htm](http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/ERIC/eric.htm).

## **FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS**

In addition to public institutions and private nonprofit institutions, the U.S. higher education sector also includes private for-profit institutions often referred to as “proprietary schools.” Proprietary schools represent about 19 percent of all postsecondary degree-granting institutions<sup>40</sup> and enroll about 13 percent of all students who attend postsecondary degree-granting institutions.<sup>41</sup>

Proprietary schools offer practical training in specific fields, such as business administration and computer technology, and degrees in a number of subject areas. The schools offer a range of degrees—from certificates that can be earned in a week to undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Most schools offer programs that are available at night or on weekends so that classes fit into the schedules of working adults, and some schools offer instruction via distance education. While they also offer courses designed to strengthen general competencies, proprietary schools continue to be market-driven institutions that primarily provide students with career-focused programs of study. A growing number of proprietary institutions are accredited by recognized accrediting associations.

## **GOVERNANCE AND FINANCE**

All private and most public institutions at the postsecondary level are chartered or licensed as corporations under U.S. law and are legally independent and self-governing in terms of academic

affairs, administration, fund-raising, resource allocation and public relations. Institutions are generally governed by a board of citizens—often called a “Board of Trustees” or “Board of Regents.” This governing board is the highest authority for institutional policy, although other lesser boards—such as those composed by faculty or students—also generally participate in governance to varying degrees. The Board of Trustees (or Regents) is generally responsible for hiring the institution’s chief executive officer (president).

Whether public or private, institutions depend primarily on four sources of income: student tuition and fees, government funding, institutional investments and holdings, and donations. Research institutions also receive money from grants and contracts with government and the private sector, and teaching institutions may earn money from providing instructional services to employers. Almost all institutions, public or private, charge tuition, with tuition being relatively lower at public institutions than at private institutions.

### **PAYING FOR COLLEGE**

Many college students obtain part-time employment to help pay for their studies, while others also receive grants, scholarships and loans to help meet expenses. More than half of all U.S. students at the postsecondary level—55 percent—receive some form of financial aid to help pay education costs.<sup>42</sup> Scholarships and grants are generally awarded by a variety of nongovernmental organizations, as well as by states. However, the largest single source of such student financial aid is the federal government, which provides more than \$60 billion a year in grants, loans and work-study assistance.

For more information on student financial aid, see [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/fsa/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/fsa/index.html).

### **HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION**

The United States has no centralized authority exercising national control over postsecondary educational institutions. The states assume varying degrees of control over education, but, in general, institutions of higher education are permitted to operate with considerable independence and autonomy. As a consequence, U.S. educational institutions can vary widely in their missions and the quality of their programs.

In order to ensure a basic level of quality, the practice of voluntary accreditation arose in the United States as a means of conducting nongovernmental, peer evaluation of educational institutions and programs. The entities that conduct accreditation are associations of higher education institutions and academic specialists. These associations define procedures for assessing the quality of institutions and programs and formally recognize those institutions meeting their standards while withholding or withdrawing recognition from those that do not. Institutions that have been accredited generally have an advantage over non-accredited institutions with regard to student recruitment, receipt of federal and state funds and their general public image. All recognized accrediting associations are members of the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), and a list of those entities recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education is published annually.

For more information on accreditation, see [www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/admins/finaid/accred/index.html).

## **STUDY ABROAD**

More than 150,000 U.S. college and university students earn academic credit each year through study at postsecondary institutions in other countries. The top five destinations are the United Kingdom, Italy, Spain, France and Mexico, and the most popular fields of study are the social sciences, business and management, and the humanities. Conversely, more than 500,000 foreign students study in the United States each year. The top five countries of origin are India, China, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan, and the most popular fields of study are business and management, engineering, and math and computer sciences.<sup>43</sup>

## **ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION**

Adult education encompasses a wide variety of educational services for adult learners and extends across all educational levels, subjects and purposes. Services are generally oriented to meet the needs of mature adults who have life, work and family experience but who desire additional education in order to improve knowledge and skills for personal or work-related reasons.

*Adult basic education* provides instruction in reading, math, writing and critical thinking skills at or below the level of secondary school completion. Adult basic education applies particularly to school dropouts and to immigrants whose prior educational opportunities were limited. Many of these individuals also require basic instruction to improve English language proficiency.

*Adult continuing education* generally refers to education provided for adults who have already graduated with a secondary school diploma or a higher education degree. Continuing education may be at the undergraduate or graduate levels and usually consists of individual courses, certificate programs or degree programs for students seeking improved work-related skills, new skills to change careers or personal enrichment. In the United States, such programs are provided by postsecondary education institutions, employers, private training institutions and adult education centers.

*Continuing professional education (CPE)* is a special type of adult continuing education provided to professionals working in licensed occupations. These professions generally require practitioners to complete refresher courses on a regular basis in order to have their licenses renewed.

For additional information, see the Web site for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education at [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/index.html).

## PART II: EDUCATION POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION

---

The United States is composed of 50 states, five territories and the District of Columbia. As mentioned earlier in the Introduction, education in the United States is highly decentralized. Each state has authority to make and implement education policy within its jurisdiction so long as such policy does not violate the provisions of the U.S. Constitution or federal law.

The following pages briefly explain the roles of the three levels of government in making and implementing education policy, beginning with the state level and subsequently addressing the local and federal levels. Part II ends with a short description of the roles played by nongovernmental organizations and the courts, as well as a brief section on the financing of education.

### THE ROLE OF STATE GOVERNMENTS

In most states, the topic of education is addressed in the state constitution, with the state legislature having the ultimate authority over education matters. This authority includes enacting education-related legislation and appropriating state funds for education.

**State Legislatures.** Generally, state legislatures delegate a significant amount of policy-making authority to the state board of education. State boards of education are bodies of citizens appointed by the legislature or governor, or popularly elected, depending on the state. The state board is responsible for approving statewide educational policies and determining budget priorities. In some cases the state board is responsible for all levels of education, including vocational and postsecondary education, while in many states the board concentrates on education at the elementary and secondary levels.<sup>44</sup>

**State Departments of Education.** Most states have a state department of education that serves as the executive agency for education. A chief state school officer is generally responsible for overseeing the state department of education and reporting periodically to the state board of education, the legislature and the governor. Depending on the state, this person may be called a superintendent, commissioner, director or secretary of education. Most chief state school officers are appointed by the state board of education or the governor, while some are popularly elected.

In most cases, State Governments are responsible for the following:

- Developing curriculum guidelines and performance standards;
- Providing technical assistance to school districts and schools;
- Licensing private elementary and secondary schools to operate within their jurisdictions;
- Licensing or certifying school teachers and administrators;
- Administering statewide student achievement tests;
- Developing accountability plans and reporting on student performance to the U.S. Department of Education;
- Defining minimum requirements for high school graduation;
- Distributing state and federal funding to school districts; and

- Establishing the minimum number of school days per year.

For information on state education agencies and other state education authorities, see [http://bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org\\_list.cfm](http://bcol02.ed.gov/Programs/EROD/org_list.cfm).

## **THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS**

**Local School Districts.** Although state governments have ultimate authority over education, most states delegate some decision-making powers and the operation of public elementary and secondary schools to local education agencies, or school districts. There are approximately 15,000 school districts in the United States, each overseeing its jurisdiction's public schools.<sup>45</sup>

The amount of control exercised by local school districts varies by state. Most states give districts considerable authority to determine school budgets and to implement curriculum. In fact, many school districts further delegate decision-making and budgetary authority to individual schools, a practice known as site-based (or school-based) management.

**Local School Boards.** Each school district is governed by a local school board, whose policies must generally conform to the regulations of the state school board and the statutes of the state legislature. School board members are generally elected, although, in some districts, they may be appointed by other government officials. The school board selects and hires the district superintendent, who is responsible for implementing policy and managing the day-to-day operations of the school district.

In most cases, School Districts are responsible for the following:

- Determining the budget;
- Allocating money to individual schools and programs;
- Hiring teachers and other staff;
- Preparing and disseminating annual reports on student performance;
- Setting teacher and administrator salaries;
- Implementing the curriculum;
- Planning and administering teacher inservice training;
- Coordinating the transportation of students on school buses;
- Constructing and maintaining school buildings; and
- Purchasing equipment and supplies.

To search for school districts in the United States, see the National Public School District Locator Web site at <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/districtsearch/>.

## **THE ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**

As described above, education is primarily a state and local responsibility. Nevertheless, the federal government plays a limited but important role in affecting education policy and practice at all levels and throughout the nation.

**U.S. Congress.** The Congress is the supreme lawmaking body of the country and has passed numerous laws directly and indirectly affecting education. For example, in late 2001 the Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*. The *NCLB Act*—signed into law by President George W. Bush in January 2002—contains the most significant changes to the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* since it was enacted in 1965. *NCLB* alters the federal government's role in elementary and secondary education by requiring states and schools to measure success in terms of student performance. The act contains the following four basic education reform principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work through rigorous scientific research.

**U. S. Department of Education.** The federal Department of Education is the primary agency of the federal government that implements the laws that the Congress enacts to support education at the federal level. In doing so, the Department establishes policy for, administers and coordinates much of the federal financial assistance for education, in accordance with these laws. In 2002, the Department had about 4,800 employees and a budget of more than \$54 billion. Its stated mission is “to ensure equal access to education and to promote educational excellence throughout the nation.”

The Department carries out its mission in two major ways. First, the Secretary and the Department play a leadership role in the ongoing national dialogue over how to improve education for all students. This involves such activities as raising national and community awareness of the education challenges confronting the nation, disseminating the latest discoveries on what works in teaching and learning and helping communities work out solutions to difficult educational issues. Second, the Department pursues its twin goals of access and excellence through the administration of programs that cover every area of education and range from preschool education through postdoctoral research.

Specifically, the Department’s major activities are the following:

1. Implementing laws related to federal financial assistance for education, administering the distribution of those funds and monitoring their use.

The Department distributes financial assistance to eligible applicants throughout the nation for elementary, secondary and college education; for the education of individuals with disabilities and individuals who are illiterate, disadvantaged or gifted; and for the education of immigrants, American Indians and people with limited English proficiency.

2. Collecting data and overseeing research on America's schools and disseminating this information to educators and the general public.

The Department oversees research on most aspects of education; collects data on trends; and gathers information to help identify approaches, ideas and successful teaching techniques. Employees of the Department, as well as contractors and grant recipients, conduct the research. Research findings and statistics are disseminated to educators, policymakers,

parents and the general public in the form of reports and publications—both printed and online.

3. Identifying the major issues and problems in education and focusing national attention on them.

The Secretary of Education advises the President and leads the Department in implementing the President's education policies—from the preparation of legislative proposals for Congress to decisions about education research priorities. In addition, the Secretary brings national attention to education issues through speeches, publications, the media and personal appearances. The Department further highlights education issues by sponsoring and participating in national conferences and other activities.

4. Enforcing federal laws prohibiting discrimination in programs and activities that receive federal funds and ensuring equal access to education for every individual.

The Department's Office for Civil Rights enforces civil rights laws that are intended to ensure equal educational opportunity for all students regardless of race, color, national origin, limited English proficiency, gender, disability and age. Several of these laws extend to all state education agencies, elementary and secondary school systems, colleges and universities, vocational schools, state and vocational rehabilitation agencies, proprietary schools, libraries and museums that receive U.S. Department of Education funds. The Office for Civil Rights also provides guidance and resources to the public so that students, parents, schools and colleges will better understand civil rights requirements in order to address issues locally.

**Other Federal Agencies.** While the Department of Education is the lead federal agency in matters of education, a number of other federal agencies provide funding and other support for educational activities in areas related to their missions. Among these agencies are the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Interior, Labor and State; the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities; the National Institute of Museum and Library Services; and the National Science Foundation.

For more information on the federal government's role, see [www.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/fed/role.html). For more information on *No Child Left Behind*, see <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml?src=fb>, and to learn more about U.S. Department of Education programs, see <http://web99.ed.gov/GTEP/Program2.nsf>. To access the Web site for Federal Resources for Educational Excellence (FREE), go to [www.ed.gov/free](http://www.ed.gov/free).

## **OTHERS WHO INFLUENCE EDUCATION POLICY AND PRACTICE**

As noted above, legislative bodies, school boards and government agencies all play important roles with regard to education in the United States. However, other sectors and entities can also influence education policy and practice.

**Courts of Law.** The courts—both at the federal and state level—have historically played a crucial role in providing direction and settling public policy debates that are directly and indirectly related to education, including subjects as varied as educational quality, school funding, equal access and religion in the schools. One notable example is the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).<sup>46</sup> In that case, the court unanimously ruled that racial segregation in public schools was inherently unequal, thus reversing the position it had held since 1896. As a result of this ruling, federal courts succeeded over time in eliminating a system of legalized racial segregation in southern schools.

**Nongovernmental Organizations.** Many nongovernmental organizations also play an important role in influencing policy at all three levels of government and educational practice in the schools. Such organizations include charitable foundations, teacher unions, parent-teacher associations and many others interested in education. The missions and functions of these identities vary considerably and can include supporting or carrying out research, providing education-related services, disseminating information or working to influence legislation and public opinion. Representatives of nongovernmental organizations often participate on advisory boards that work with policymakers at all levels of government.

**Business Sector.** The business community is also often involved in supporting education and influencing education policy in a variety of ways. Private businesses often donate resources to nearby schools or encourage employees to volunteer at schools as tutors or in other capacities. Many business representatives also participate in education-related conferences and serve on education-related advisory boards.

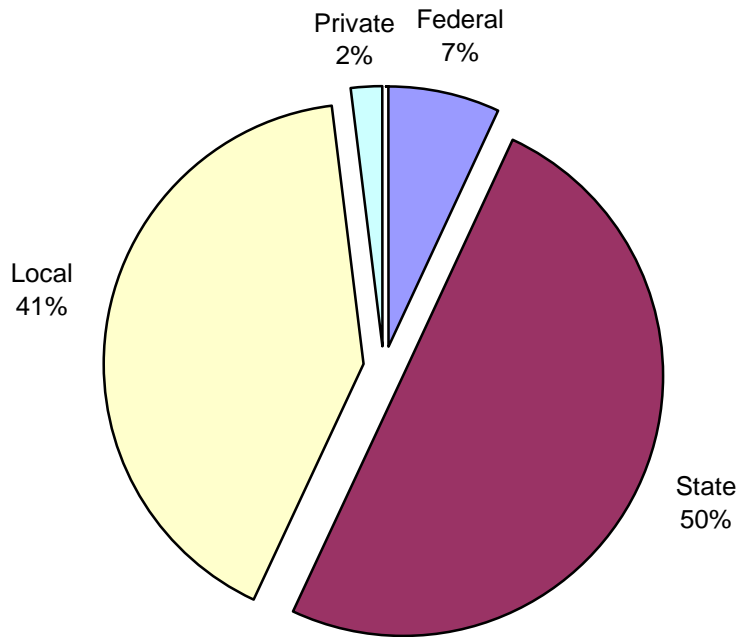
## FINANCING OF EDUCATION

The financing of education in the United States is highly decentralized, and funding sources include the federal, state and local governments, as well as private and nongovernmental contributors. Of the estimated \$750 billion spent nationwide on education at all levels,<sup>47</sup> approximately 61 percent of total education expenditures occur at the elementary and secondary level, while 39 percent are at the postsecondary level.<sup>48</sup> These expenditures altogether represent about 7 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product.<sup>49</sup>

Public elementary and secondary schools receive most of their funding from state and local governments, although additional funds are provided by the federal government and, in some cases, through grants or donations from corporations and foundations and parent- or student-initiated fundraising activities. State governments are generally the largest source of education funding. As a national average, state and local governments contribute about 90 percent of education funding at this level, while the federal government, nongovernmental entities, and private contributors together provide about 10 percent of all funding.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 4: Funding for Elementary and Secondary Education**

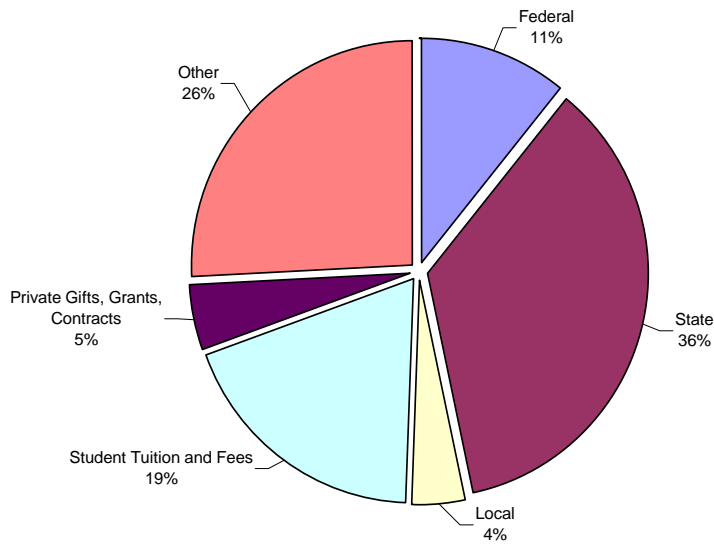


*Source: 2002 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 157. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2003). Figures have been slightly rounded.*

While state and local governments together provide most funding, the proportion of funding coming from each of these two levels of government can vary significantly by state. In general, state governments generate the revenue necessary for educational expenditures from income taxes, corporate taxes and sales taxes, while local school districts rely heavily on property taxes. Due to this reliance on property tax revenue, the amount of funding available for education at the local level can vary considerably depending on a community's property values. To mitigate the funding inequalities that may result, some states have "equalization of funding" laws that require them to ensure that all schools have a specified amount of funds available per student. The federal government likewise provides supplemental funding to schools with limited resources through compensatory education programs such as Title I, described earlier.

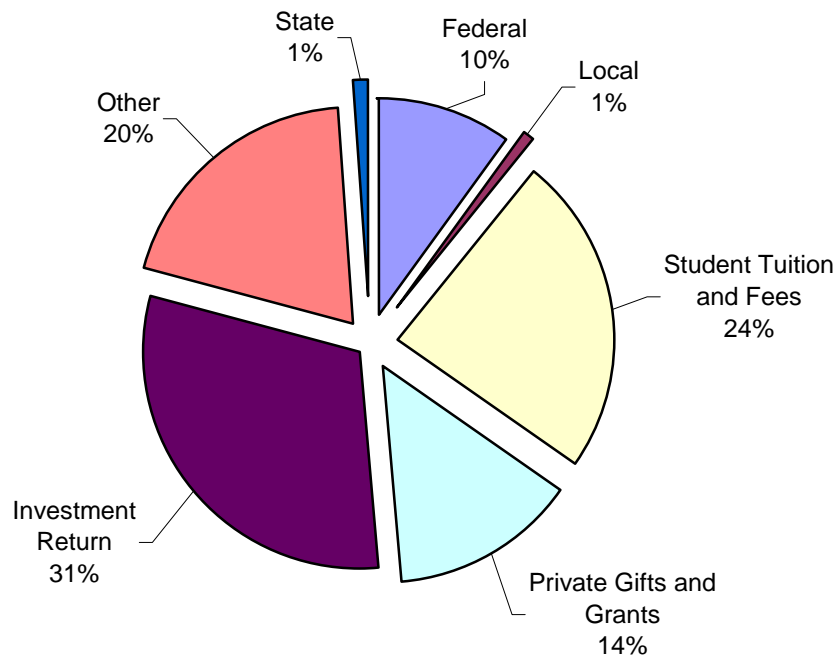
Most postsecondary institutions rely on a variety of sources to generate revenue. These resources typically include student tuition and fees, with private institutions generally charging more than public institutions. Other revenue sources often include government funds, sales and services, private donations, grants and contracts, and endowment income.<sup>51</sup> Sources of funding can differ significantly when comparing public and private institutions, and even among individual institutions of the same category.

**Figure 5: Funding for Public Postsecondary Education**



Source: 2002 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 334. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2003). Figures have been slightly rounded.

**Figure 6: Funding for Private Postsecondary Education**



Source: 2002 Digest of Education Statistics, Table 335. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2003). Figures have been slightly rounded.

For additional information on federal expenditures for education, see <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/digest2001/ch4.asp>.

## CONCLUSION

---

Education in the United States is a tremendously complex and far-reaching endeavor that touches on almost every citizen. Therefore, it should not be surprising that education ranks as one of the most important public issues in the United States.

The landmark publication *A Nation at Risk* (1983) declared that the U.S. education system was in dire need of improvement. Since then, efforts to reform education in the United States have been steadily under way, and standards, evaluation and accountability are now explicit components of U.S. education. Of course, not all parties always agree on their definition and implementation.

Today, nearly every state in the country has developed and published standards for what students should know and be able to do. Most states also have, or are in the process of developing measurements to assess whether students have met the standards. And policymakers and the public are increasingly interested in holding the education sector accountable for the quality of its graduates and program offerings.

Education in the United States is primarily the domain of the states and local school districts. Nevertheless, the federal government can significantly influence educational quality through education-related legislation and programs.

The landmark *No Child Left Behind Act* increases federal funding for elementary and secondary education and allows states greater flexibility in how they spend federal funds for education, while requiring states to set standards for student achievement and holding educational institutions accountable for results.

As a result of the law, by June 2003 every state—as well as Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia—had in place a new accountability plan outlining a strategy for improving student learning and ensuring that all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency.

With significant reforms at the federal level and ongoing innovation at the state and local levels, education in the United States is continually evolving and progressing toward the goal of ensuring that *all* children can achieve their highest potential as individuals and as successful citizens in a free society and global economy.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

---

U.S. Department of Education  
[www.ed.gov/index.jhtml](http://www.ed.gov/index.jhtml)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)  
<http://nces.ed.gov>

*Digest of Education Statistics*  
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/>

*The Condition of Education*  
<http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe>

*Findings from the Condition of Education 2002: Private Schools—A Brief Portrait*  
<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2002013>

What Works Clearinghouse  
<http://w-w-c.org>

Information on Public Schools and School Districts  
<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/quickfacts.html>

U.S. Network for Education Information  
[www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html)

State Education Agencies (State Departments of Education)  
<http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/ccseas.asp>

A number of additional Web sites also appear throughout this document.ate

## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> **The only exceptions are the following: schools which serve the children of military personnel stationed overseas, operated by the Department of Defense; and the five service academies of the Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine.**

<sup>2</sup> **The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB or No Child Left Behind) is the name for the reauthorized (and amended) *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* (ESEA). For the purposes of this document, the law is referred to as **No Child Left Behind**.**

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *The Nation's Report Card: Reading Highlights 2002*. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *2002 Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 166. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 43.

<sup>6</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 43.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *2000 Condition of Education*, p. 67. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> NCES, *2001 Digest*, Table 47.

<sup>9</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 95.

<sup>10</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 95.

<sup>11</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 99.

<sup>12</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 128.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Schools and Staffing Survey, 1999-2000*, Table 1.07. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 51.

<sup>15</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 385.

<sup>16</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 385.

<sup>17</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 139.

<sup>18</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 103.

<sup>19</sup> **GED tests give adults the opportunity to earn a high school equivalency credential and are designed to measure the general academic skills and knowledge normally acquired in a four-year high school program of study. About 15 percent of all high school diplomas issued each year in the United States are awarded based on passing the GED tests. About two-thirds of GED test-takers plan to continue their education and training at the postsecondary level.**

<sup>20</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 154.

<sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *2002 Condition of Education*, Indicator 29. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2002)

<sup>22</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Findings from the Condition of Education 2002: Private Schools—A Brief Portrait*. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2002).

<sup>23</sup> NCES, *Findings*.

<sup>24</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 61.

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Homeschooling in the United States: 1999*. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2001).

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Twenty-third Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2001)*, Table III-1. (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 53.

<sup>28</sup> NCES, *2001 Digest*, Table 58.

<sup>29</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 42.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Survey of the States' Limited English Proficient Students and Available Educational Programs and Services, 2000-2001 Summary Report*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Survey of the States' Limited English Proficient Students*.

<sup>32</sup> NCES, *2001 Digest*, Table 25.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Internet Access in U.S. Public Schools and Classrooms: 1994-2001*, Tables 1 and 2. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2002).

---

<sup>34</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 70.

<sup>35</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 80.

<sup>36</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 80.

<sup>37</sup> **The terms “college” and “university” are used interchangeably, as are sometimes the terms “academy,” “institute,” “school,” and “conservatory.” U.S. law and practice does not protect these terms or distinguish among types of institutions at the postsecondary level. Instead, the level of an institution is indicated by the highest degree it awards and the type is indicated by the variety of subjects offered for study. The most commonly used classification of U.S. higher education institutions is the Carnegie Classification.**

<sup>38</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 5.

<sup>39</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 5.

<sup>40</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 5.

<sup>41</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 172.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Student Financing of Undergraduate Education: 1999-2000*. (Washington, D.C.: NCES, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Institute of International Education, *Open Doors 2002*. (Washington, D.C.: Institute of International Education, 2002).

<sup>44</sup> **States do not generally regulate postsecondary education as closely as they do elementary and secondary education. Although states exercise some control over higher education institutions through specialized boards or commissions, the autonomy of such entities is generally recognized in law and policy. Vocational and technical education, special education and adult education are often associated with both the secondary and postsecondary levels of education and are sometimes administered by specialized state agencies. Professional education and training for licensed occupations is usually overseen by the state’s postsecondary education authorities, its agencies responsible for professional services, and/or specially appointed licensure boards.**

<sup>45</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 88.

<sup>46</sup> Volume 347, p. 483, *United States Reports* (Supreme Court decisions)

<sup>47</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 29.

<sup>48</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 29.

<sup>49</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 29.

<sup>50</sup> NCES, *2002 Digest*, Table 157.

<sup>51</sup> NCES, *2001 Digest*, Table 330.

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

*Education in the United States: A Brief Overview* was conceived under the direction of Lenore Garcia, Director, International Affairs Staff, U.S. Department of Education. The project manager was International Affairs Staff member Rafael M. Nevarez. E. Stephen Hunt and Lois Peak provided input and editorial assistance.

We are indebted to the staffs of the Office of English Language Acquisition, Language Enhancement and Academic Achievement for Limited English Proficient Students; the Institute of Education Sciences; the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; the Office of Vocational and Adult Education; the Office of Postsecondary Education; the Office for Civil Rights; and the Office of the General Counsel for the important roles they played in bringing this publication to print.

We also thank Beverley Blondell and Jackye Zimmerman of the Office of Public Affairs for their assistance in publishing this booklet. In particular, we express our thanks to Kathy Perkinson for editing, and Leslie Williams and Paul Wood for many of the photographs (in the print version).

Finally, we would like to thank our international visitors and colleagues from around the world for their interest in U.S. education. It is our hope that, through dialogue and the sharing of information, we can learn from each other in order to improve education and the quality of life for all students.