

EDUCATION

6

CHAPTER

IN THE UNITED STATES, WHERE YOU LIVE MAY DETERMINE HOW MUCH YOU LEARN IN SCHOOL. BECAUSE OF FUNDING, PERSISTENT SEGREGATION, AND EVEN THE COUNTRY'S VAST SIZE, LOCATION – WHETHER ACROSS TOWN OR ACROSS THE COUNTRY – CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PUBLIC EDUCATION THAT SETS A CHILD UP FOR SUCCESS AND ONE THAT IS A PRELUDE TO FAILURE.

In the United States, where you live may determine how much you learn in school. In the fall of 2016, approximately 50.4 million students began the school year at public elementary and secondary schools in the United States.¹ An additional 5.2 million attended private schools² and over 1.5 million were home-schooled, meaning that their parents or a tutor taught them privately.³

Once in class, their experiences varied hugely depending in part on where they lived and how financially stable their family was. Some were blessed to live in school districts that showered money on them and had access to good teachers, while others disappeared into crowded classrooms or faced a succession of over-stretched teachers who would stay only a year or two at a time. Because of local autonomy and funding, persistent segregation, and even the country's vast size, location – whether across town or across the country – can make all the difference between a public education that sets a child up for success and one that is a prelude to failure.

That uncertainty continues even after high school, as Americans rethink some traditional pathways to upward mobility, including college or even a technical degree, that no longer seem to be guarantors of stability and advancement.

FUNDING

The funding each public school receives varies significantly by state and even by school district. In part, this difference is due to how wealthy a district's residents are and how much taxes it can collect. Local and state governments also have considerable control over how they allocate their budgets, which can have a significant impact on funding. While some districts, like Clark County, Nevada, spend less than \$8,000 per student, others, like Ripley Center, New York, spend over \$30,000 per student.⁴

FACTS AND FIGURES

- » 50.4 million students attend public elementary and secondary schools
- » 40 percent of Americans ages 18-24 are enrolled in college
- » College graduates earn an average of \$1,156 per week, compared with \$692 for those with only a high school degree
- » Close to 90 percent of students at four-year colleges receive financial aid
- » Student debt nationally is \$1.3 trillion



“[In California,] my son was getting F’s and D’s and they didn’t really care to educate him. And here [in Texas] my son is getting A’s and B’s and he’s in college prep classes.”

————— *Vanessa S.*



 Stephanie Monahon, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The resources available greatly affect the quality of education students receive. When the state of Pennsylvania made major funding cuts to schools in 2011, it “had pretty significant impacts on public school all across the state, and I think in Philadelphia you really feel the effects of that,” says Stephanie Monahon, who works in Philadelphia’s city government. One major consequence, she says, is overcrowding in the city’s schools.

Karen Gann of Huntsville, Alabama, made the difficult decision to home-school her children because she says her daughter needed extra attention that she was not likely to get in the local public school’s crowded class-

rooms. When Gann and her husband “went to talk to the school about it ... they kind of brushed us off. So we called the school board and the questions we asked them, we didn’t like the answers that we got.”



 Karen Gann, Huntsville, Alabama

The differences among school districts can lead to vastly different outcomes for students. After Vanessa S. moved from California to El Paso, Texas, with her children, she says her son got more attention in class and she watched him blossom. In California, she says, “My son was getting F’s and D’s and they didn’t really care to educate him. And here my son is getting A’s and B’s and he’s in college prep classes.”

POVERTY

School districts' reliance on local tax revenue predictably leaves schools in poor neighborhoods strapped for resources, but the surrounding poverty itself also wreaks havoc on attempts to educate. "You can't focus on just education and then let people go home from school to really horrible places to live," says Carol Butler, executive director of the Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation in Birmingham, Alabama, an anti-poverty nonprofit group. Children living in poverty often face a multitude of other challenges at home, from hunger to abuse. "Our children bring so many issues to the school building that our teachers don't really have time to teach because they're having to address all these other issues," Butler says, echoing the frequent complaints of teachers who work in poorer districts. Among the initiatives Butler's foundation runs is one that places mental health counselors in local public schools to help students work through some of their challenges at home.

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————— Carol Butler



▲ Carol Butler, Birmingham, Alabama

DESEGREGATION

The divide in the quality of public schools is not just financial but is also tied to the United States' long history of racism and segregation (Chapter 9). In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision struck down state laws that established separate schools for African-American and white

children. African-American schools had been given fewer resources and poorer facilities, and paid teachers less. A further decision by the court, known as *Brown II*, says the process of integration should be done with, "all deliberate speed," sufficiently vague language that many states used it as an excuse to drag their feet.

As public schools began to integrate, many white families moved out of city centers – and took their tax dollars with them – to suburbs that were de facto segregated. Others sent their children to private schools, which were often slower to integrate. In Birmingham, for example, many white families moved south of the city, over Red Mountain, or "over the mountain," as locals say, to white suburbs, which developed strong school systems. The mountain shielded the suburbs from Birmingham's smoke and pollution and divided the suburban whites from the African-Americans in the city. Although de jure segregation ended more than half a century ago, schools in this area, like cities and towns across the country, are still shaped by its legacy. Public schools in Birmingham, with a population that is 73.4 percent African-American,⁵ spend \$9,426 per student, 20 percent less than neighboring Homewood, which is 74.6 percent white and spends \$12,099 per student.⁶



▲ Wayne Heard, Birmingham, Alabama

Even as a child in the 1990s, Wayne Heard, who is African-American, saw white families leave Birmingham for leafy suburbs over the mountain, "Some of it was for better opportunity," he acknowledges, but "some of it was to get away from the increasingly integrated inner-city Birmingham. ... You have white flight, over the mountain."

Heard works with young high school graduates from Birmingham at a technology skills training program. He says that although the city has some good schools:

“[T]he biggest challenge is the ability to progress past high school. ... The expectation over the mountain is that you’re going to go to college. You’re going to probably get some kind of grad degree or doctorate and probably be in some sort of management capacity and salaried job. A lot of times in the inner city it’s, hopefully you graduate high school. So I think it’s more of a mindset barrier as well as ... funding. It’s lack of encouragement for the inner-city school systems.”

Heard says he is “the product of what’s called ‘black flight.’ I grew up in inner-city Birmingham, but for high school my parents got an apartment over the mountain so I could have access to a school over the mountain.” He is now pursuing a law degree at Birmingham Law School.

RURAL CHALLENGES

Rural school districts face many of the same problems as their urban and suburban counterparts, but they can be compounded by geographical isolation, which complicates, for instance, efforts to hire and keep talented teachers or to get reliable broadband internet access.

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————— Wayne Heard

On the Quinault Reservation, a Native American reservation in Washington state, Tribal Council member Clarinda Underwood says teachers do not stay long in the schools. “We have a high turnover in our administration – over and over again due to we are so rural,” she says.



 Clarinda Underwood, Quinault Nation, Washington

The reservation used to provide housing for teachers, but no longer. Instead, many teachers commute hours each day to the rural coastal town of Taholah, where the schools are located. Some teachers come from Aberdeen, an hour south, or even the state’s capital, Olympia, a two-hour drive away, Underwood says. The district has sought to hire Quinault teachers or Quinault members with bachelor’s degrees, providing employment for educated tribal members and stability for students.

“We have a high turnover in our administration – over and over again due to we are so rural.”

————— Clarinda Underwood

In addition to being geographically isolated, rural schools often struggle to combat digital isolation. The U.S. government has invested in expanding internet coverage to rural areas, but some areas have not yet been reached. Many rural schools do not have broadband internet access. Slow internet connections and outdated technology make it harder for students to attend college-level Advanced Placement classes and remedial classes online, which may not be offered in their own schools.⁷ The limited resources of the schools themselves are thus compounded by the lack of access to digital resources.

CHANGING LEGISLATION

Amid concerns about U.S. schools’ international competitiveness, and with certain groups of students persistently falling behind their peers, Congress passed bipartisan educational reforms known as the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002.⁸ The reforms, intended to track performance and hold schools more accountable to state and federal governments, required students to sit for standardized testing on a regular basis. Schools that did not meet targets were penalized and states could intervene. The reforms also instituted teacher evaluation based on student outcomes.

Although these measures were established to ensure that all students receive a quality education, the focus on testing has been a subject of criticism from parents, educators and students alike. No Child Left Behind’s teacher evaluations were particularly controversial, as they put immense pressure on teachers. Many teachers spent significant portions of the school year preparing students for the tests.



“[Teachers] are so worried about the tests instead of teaching our kids. What is the main focus in teaching our kids? It’s either for them to learn or for them to pass a test. I don’t know. I don’t think it’s fair.”

———— Blanca Gallego

“[Teachers] are so worried about the tests instead of teaching our kids,” says Blanca Gallego, a small-business owner in Pecos, Texas. She says she asked her 9-year-old’s fourth-grade teacher, “What is the main focus in teaching our kids? It’s either for them to learn or for them to pass a test. I don’t know. I don’t think it’s fair.” Similarly, Patricia C., a mother of six in El Paso, Texas, has seen a change in the way schools are teaching, “High school [is] more centered around their testing procedures and whether or not they will help the school meet their standards. Because if they don’t score [highly enough], their standards go down and they lose their ratings and they lose their funding.”

No Child Left Behind is being replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act for the 2017-2018 school year.⁹ Although standardized testing will still be required, states can establish their own accountability goals. Teachers are no longer evaluated based on their students’ outcomes.

Many think these reforms do a disservice to students. “I would not go into [teaching] as a profession today,” says Lindsay Reid, a retired teacher in Bellingham, Washington. “The public education system has been

eroded by people making policy for teachers who don’t understand what it’s like to be in a classroom or the art of education, the relationships between students and teacher, the relationships beyond whether you can pass a standardized test.”

Reid says focusing on tests gives the illusion that children are learning while neglecting “what really gets kids learning and excited, learning and critically thinking, and wanting to explore the universe.”

As the Every Student Succeeds Act comes into effect, new national debates are emerging about the public school system. Donald Trump’s secretary of education, businesswoman Betsy DeVos, advocates school voucher systems that would allow students to receive public funding to attend private schools. Democrats have been critical of DeVos, claiming that the policy would cause serious damage to the public-school system.

COLLEGE

After graduating from high school, more students are pursuing higher education: The share of 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college rose from 35.5 percent in 2000

to 40 percent in 2014.¹⁰ Measured in absolute numbers, 17 million students enrolled in degree-granting, post-secondary institutions in 2015, up from 13.2 million in 2000.¹¹

The lion's share of those institutions are colleges. In the United States, the term college typically refers to an institution of higher learning that confers a four-year bachelor's degree. These can be parts of larger universities or independent. Community colleges offer two-year associate's degrees, typically at a lower cost. Students then have the option to transfer to a four-year bachelor's program at another institution.

In 2006, 28 percent of the U.S. population over the age of 25 held a bachelor's degree or higher. Currently 33.4 percent do.¹² College graduates face an unemployment rate of only 2.5 percent, compared with those with only a high school degree (5.3 percent) and those who did not complete high school (7.7 percent).¹³ Those with bachelor's degrees also earn significantly more. In 2016, college graduates earned an average of \$1,156 per week, compared with \$692 for those with only a high school degree.¹⁴

“One of the great problems in the United States today is this notion that you have to go to college and spend four years getting some degree that’s unemployable.”

————— *Marty Connors*

That might sound like good news, but some have started to question the trend.

Marty Connors, former chairman of the Alabama Republican Party, says too many colleges are churning out people ill-equipped for the job market.

“One of the great problems in the United States today is this notion that you have to go to college and spend four years getting some degree that’s unemployable,” he says. Taking aim at those with degrees in “soft” subjects such as philosophy or women’s studies, Connors says, “Nobody wants to hire that, except other schools. ... What do you do with a degree like that other than teach that to someone else?”

Instead, he says, “We need more people who know how to fix things, and build things, and do things, and we need people who are better at knowing how to finance things and, you know, understand corporate law, than we do philosophical, feel-good self-esteem degrees that are completely unemployable.”

For her part, Underwood disagrees that employment is the sole purpose of a college education. “It’s not always that you’re going to get the job that you want, but it sure opens your mind,” she says.

ELITISTS

Some Americans see higher education as liberal, elitist and out of touch. Among conservative-leaning Americans, 58 percent believe that “colleges and universities have a negative effect on the way things are going in the country,” according to a recent Pew survey.¹⁵ In contrast, 72 percent of Democrats or left-leaning Americans believe that they have a positive effect.¹⁶

In recent years many universities have been mocked by conservatives for creating environments that are hyper-politically correct, providing students with so-called ‘trigger warnings’ when reading material or class discussion could be upsetting to them. Conservatives claim that this is out of touch with reality.

Immediately following the 2016 election, for example, some universities sets up so-called safe spaces for students to talk about the outcome.¹⁷ At one prestigious college, Columbia University, in New York, some professors even cancelled midterm exams the day after the election.¹⁸

This protective attitude does not sit well with everyone. Huntsville, Alabama resident Sandra says, “One thing that bothers me [... is that] they’re not children anymore, they’re in college. ... I cannot believe that parents are paying money to Harvard and big schools like that and they allow cry rooms,” she says. Students, she complains, are “not being taught how to lose.”

THE COST

Unlike in many European countries, U.S. students and their families are on the hook for massive college tuition bills, which can approach \$60,000 per year for an undergraduate program and even more for graduate studies at top private colleges.¹⁹ Although public univer-

sities are often cheaper, costs can still reach \$10,000 to \$20,000 a year for state residents and top \$30,000 for out-of-state students.²⁰



 Richard Schulik, Denver, Colorado

“The cost of education in this country is totally out of hand,” says Richard Schulik, a surgeon in Denver, Colorado.

Renee Chambers, an unemployed single mother of two teenage boys in Yakima, Washington, plans to return to higher education for a degree that she estimates will cost “a little over \$40,000.”

“How do I pay to get this new set of skills to fit into the market today? When my education cost me half of what my house does?” Chambers says. “I still have bills. I still have two boys that need to eat.”

Most universities offer some combination of grants and loans to students who could not afford to attend otherwise. Nearly 90 percent of students entering four-year, undergraduate degree programs in the 2014-2015 school year received financial aid.²¹ At some of the nation’s most prestigious universities, scholarships cover the full cost of tuition. At Princeton University, for example, more than 60 percent of students qualify for aid. Undergraduate students whose families earn less than \$65,000 per year are given full scholarships and graduate debt free.²²

Most universities, however, cannot afford to offer such comprehensive aid to their students. Outside organizations, from nonprofits to corporations, also offer scholarships to help students cover exorbitant tuition fees. The Quinault Nation, for example, provides scholarships to 100 Quinault students, including Clarinda Underwood’s son. Combined with other grants, she says, the

money allows him to attend Washington State University.

Life can be precarious for those dependent on financial aid, which is often complicated to navigate and comes with strings attached. Basilia C. received grants to cover her first semester of university in El Paso, Texas. But when her grades slipped, she lost some of her funding, which was contingent upon her academic performance. She now worries if she will be able to continue her studies.

Despite scholarships and financial aid, students can easily end up tens of thousands of dollars in debt, sometimes owing over \$100,000. In early 2017, student loan debt reached \$1.3 trillion nationally.²³

Many Americans wonder if the cost of education is worth it. Monahan, the Philadelphia city official, says when young interns and staff members ask if they should pursue a master’s degree, she hesitates. “There have been a lot of times I’ve said to people, ‘You’re going to spend \$60,000 on a master’s right now. Do the math on that payment. Ask yourself how much of a raise you have to get for that to actually pay off.’ It’s a shame that we are living an environment right now where [we] are not investing in having a better educated, higher-performing work force.”

“The cost of education in this country is totally out of hand.”

————— Richard Schulik

Tuition is not the only cost that students must weigh when considering their choices. Many young people have family responsibilities pushing them straight into the work force. “A lot of [high school graduates] are coming from single-parent homes. ... They’re having to become immediately productive citizens for their households,” says Johnathan Austin, president of the Birmingham City Council. It’s a difficult decision made at the expense of an education that could boost their earning potential in the long run, he says.

ALTERNATIVES

Even some degrees that once seemed bulletproof no longer offer the returns students had come to expect.



“How do I pay to get this new set of skills to fit into the market today? When my education cost me half of what my house does? I still have bills. I still have two boys that need to eat.”

————— *Renee Chambers*

For instance, Atim Smith of El Paso, Texas, who currently does not work, has a degree in information technology but says, “Not once has my degree served me well. It’s a fancy piece of paperwork at this point.”



 Atim Smith, El Paso, Texas

Smith says the jobs are limited in El Paso, where the official unemployment rate was 4.8 percent in May 2017, slightly above the 4.1 percent national average.²⁴ He says colleges do not adequately prepare students for the labor market, so he does not “push the whole college agenda 100 percent.” Instead, he says, “I just

tell my children, ‘Hey – pursue something. Get some type of skill or passion and you’ll do all right.’”

Dale Bright, a union leader in Seattle, Washington, agrees. Bright points out that apprentices with his construction union often start out making 60 percent of a full wage, or almost \$21 per hour, plus \$11 in benefits. By contrast, he says, “I have a friend who’s making \$42,000 with a master’s degree. I looked at him when he told me that and I almost shed a tear for him and said, ‘I’ve got an apprenticeship program.’”

As discussed in Chapter 5, as jobs become more technical and university education becomes more expensive, perhaps some Americans will shift their attention to work force development programs, like apprenticeships and IT skills classes to help prepare the next generation of American workers. However, even if these programs expand and provide better alternatives to college for young high school graduates, elementary and secondary schools will need to adequately prepare students to participate. For those who do choose to study, universities will need to solve their cost problem in order to ensure that their students are able to afford it.

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