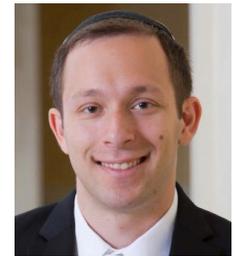


# The State of US Public Education and Why We Should Care

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It is clear that the founding fathers firmly believed that free, secular, equal, accessible public education was both an essential element of and a critical investment in democracy.

Fast forward 240 years, and the United States leads the world in spending on education. With over 50 million students in K–12 education (approximately 16% of the US population) spread across 13,000 districts and 100,000 schools, and over \$625 billion in taxpayer money spent on the system, what happens to public education clearly affects many people. Unfortunately, we do not lead the world in education outcomes.

But to a community that predominantly attends private schools, what is our relationship with these issues? We know about the lobbying efforts to obtain more funds from the government for Jewish day schools, but other than that, why should the public education system be a communal concern of ours?

**“Laws for the liberal education of youth, especially of the lower class of people, are so extremely wise and useful, that, to a humane and generous mind, no expense for this purpose would be thought extravagant.”**

—John Adams, 1776

**“I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness.”**

—Thomas Jefferson, 1786

In the first section, we focus on understanding the basic issues: How much is the US public education underperforming? What are some of its biggest issues and challenges? The second section seeks to go one step further: What are the second-order ramifications of these issues? Which aspects of our national and social experiences are impacted by public education?

After exploring these critical topics, in the final section we highlight a few concrete schools of thought on how to improve public education at scale. There are, of course, many others out there. We encourage you to include them in the discussion as well.

*Elana Riback Rand    Jeff Kiderman*

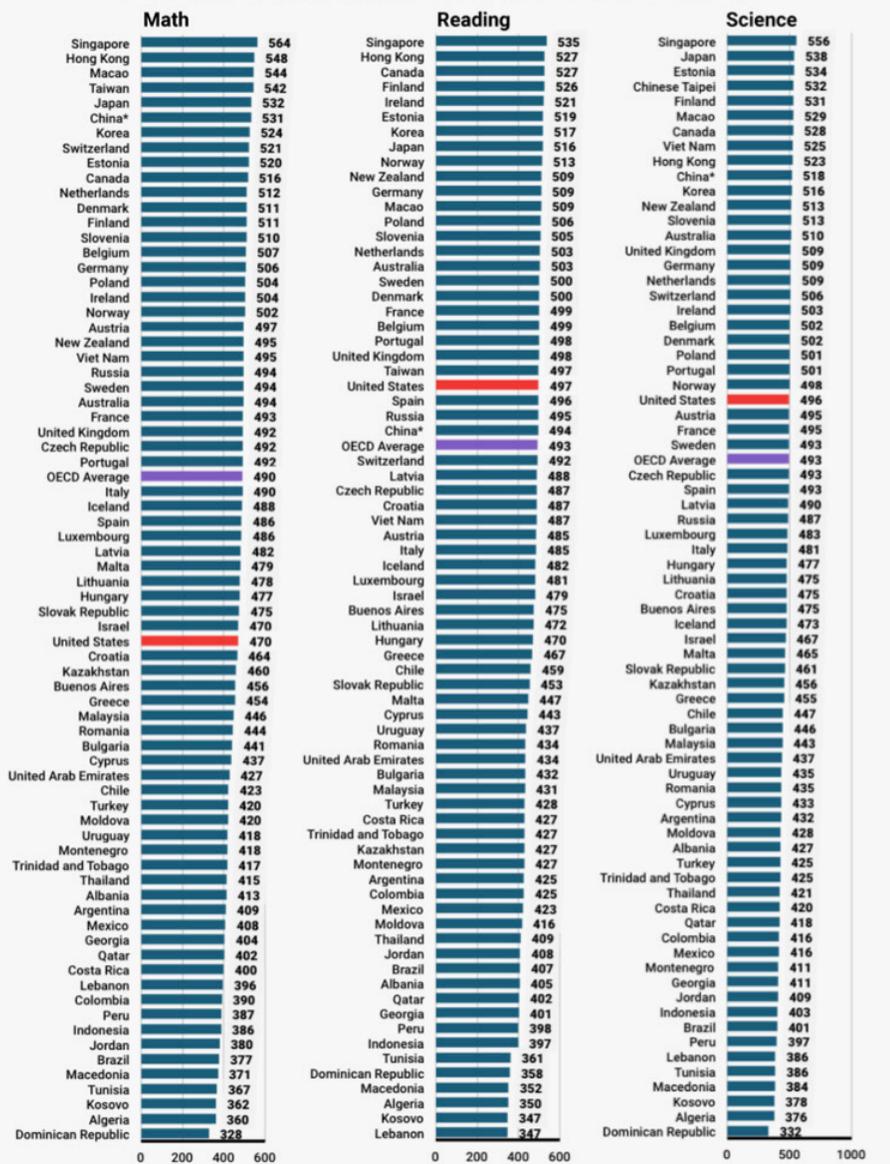
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## The Basics: Where Are We?

“The latest ranking of top countries in math, reading, and science is out—and the US didn’t crack the top 10”, Abby Jackson and Andy Kiersz, *Business Insider*. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) exam is administered every 3 years in 72 countries to compare how 15 year-olds in each country perform in math, reading, and science. Here’s how the US stacked up.

### 2015 PISA AVERAGE SCORES



The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released the results of its 2015 global rankings on student performance in mathematics, reading, and science, on the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA. The PISA is a worldwide exam administered every three years that measures 15-year-olds in 72 countries. About 540,000 students took the exam in 2015. The US saw an 11-point drop in average score for math, while remaining relatively flat in reading and science.

The results again raise questions about the global competitiveness of the US educational system.

On a press call on Tuesday, Jon Schnur, executive chairman of America Achieves, said we need to make dramatic progress in showing educational improvement for students.

When looking at a comparable sample of countries that participated in the PISA exam in both 2012 (the last time the test was administered) and 2015, the US ranking fell to 35th from 28th in math. The US underperformed the OECD average in math. Scores were relatively unchanged in reading and science compared to 2012—down one point in each. The US performed better than the OECD average in both subjects.

Asian countries again topped the rankings across all subjects, and Singapore was the top performing country across all three subjects.

[The 49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Towards the Public Schools](#), Kappan. Do hot topics in education actually reflect concerns of school-age students and their parents? Results of this national poll indicate a disconnect between parents’ educational priorities and current debates around vouchers and standardized testing. (This is an online pdf)

[“Our failing schools. Enough is enough!”](#) Geoffrey Canada, TEDTalks. Geoffrey Canada, president of the Harlem Children’s Zone, delivers an impassioned TED talk about the repeated failures of the public education system. If the “business plan” of education has been failing for decades, claims Canada, the plan needs to be redrafted. (This is a video)

**“In Connecticut, a Wealth Gap Divides Neighboring Schools”, Elizabeth A. Harris and Kristin Hussey, *New York Times*.** *The inconsistent funding provided to wealthy and poor school districts is highlighted and concretized in this pair of articles focused on income and achievement gaps in Connecticut.*

The two Connecticut school districts sit side by side along Long Island Sound. Both spend more than the national average on their students. They prepare their pupils for the same statewide tests. Their teachers, like virtually all the teachers in the state, earn the same high marks on evaluations. That is where the similarities end: In Fairfield, a mostly white suburb where the median income is \$120,000, 94 percent of students graduate from high school on time. In Bridgeport, the state’s most populous and one of its poorest cities, the graduation rate is 63 percent. Fifth graders in Bridgeport, where most people are black or Hispanic, often read at kindergarten level, one of their teachers recently testified during a trial over school funding inequities.

Seemingly intractable contrasts like those last week led Judge Thomas G. Moukawsher to tell the state that it had 180 days in which to rethink almost its entire system of education. Ruling in a case known as Connecticut Coalition for Justice in Education Funding v. Rell, Judge Moukawsher of State Superior Court in Hartford said the state was allowing children in poor districts to languish, while their wealthier neighbors soared.

Across the country, school funding cases have often resulted in more money being funneled into poorer districts to help offset the effects of poverty on their students. That may well be the end result in Connecticut.

But more than anything, Judge Moukawsher seemed offended by the irrationality of the state’s education system: He said its funding of new school buildings was driven not by need, but rather by how much clout individual legislators might have; he criticized the teacher evaluation system and said the high school graduation standards were all but meaningless. He told the General Assembly it first had to determine how much money schools actually need to educate children and then must allocate the funds in a way that met that goal.

Philip Dwyer, the chairman of Fairfield’s Board of Education, said on Friday he felt the judge’s view of Connecticut’s system lacked nuance.

“The problem I have is his writing almost encourages the legislature to boil this down to an urban versus suburban question,” Mr. Dwyer said. “That would avoid the fundamental question of what is a more creative way to fund our constitutional obligation that every child deserves a free and appropriate education. This ‘we’ versus ‘they’ approach his decision sets us on is a path I think is a mistake.”

But Bridgeport’s interim superintendent of schools, Frances Rabinowitz, said much of the ruling sounded right. Ms. Rabinowitz started in Bridgeport as a teacher, then left the city 14 years ago for positions elsewhere, including a job as an associate commissioner for education for the state. When she returned to the district in 2014, she said, it was in even worse shape than when she left. “The stripping of resources was amazing to me,” she said.

### ***Irrational spending***

*Requiring at least a substantially rational plan for education is a problem in this state because many of our most important policies are so befuddled or misdirected as to be irrational. They lack real and visible links to things known to meet children’s needs.*

In the morning, school buses line the circular driveway of Fairfield Ludlowe High School, dispatching a stream of students into the sandy-brick building buffered by an expansive, tree-lined lawn.

At Bridgeport's Warren Harding High School, there is no line of buses. As Judge Moukawsher noted, the city cannot afford them for its high school students.

By the sixth day of his senior year at Warren Harding, Markus Simmons had his morning commute down cold: He wakes at 6 a.m. and walks to a city bus stop where he catches a ride to the Bridgeport bus terminal. There, he boards the No. 13 bus to school. The trip takes him about 40 minutes.

Mr. Simmons, 18, is in Harding's honors program and is eager to go to college, rattling off a list of schools he might apply to: Wesleyan University, the University of Connecticut, Clark Atlanta University, Sacred Heart University in Fairfield.

But three of his friends, he said, had dropped out of high school.

"They just decided they didn't want to come anymore," Mr. Simmons said. "I'm not sure why, to be honest."

### ***Empty promises***

*State graduation and advancement standards are so loose that in struggling cities the neediest are leaving schools with diplomas but without the education we promise them.*

While Harding's graduation rate is a dismal 54 percent, Judge Moukawsher said the number masks a worse reality of students being passed along year after year without acquiring the skills they needed, starting in elementary school.

Some students arrive at Harding High School reading at a third-grade level, said Aresta Johnson, an assistant superintendent who oversees the district's high schools. And in many cases, she said, students simply have not attended school consistently enough to learn how to read fluently.

"We face a huge issue with chronic absenteeism," she said. Cuts to athletic programs, which are a big draw for some students, have only made the situation worse.

"And keep in mind, when our students come to high school in ninth grade we can pretty much get them in the door," Dr. Johnson continued. "Once they turn 16, they become eligible to work full-time jobs, and sometimes serve as the sole supporter for their families."

### ***Passed Along***

*According to a 2012 study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, more than a quarter of children illiterate at the end of third grade never even graduate from high school, and in Connecticut we know just how easy that is to do.*

Bridgeport has about 147,000 residents and an unemployment rate of about 12 percent, according to the judge's decision. At 21,000 students, its school district is roughly twice the size of Fairfield's. Both districts spend more on each of their pupils than the national average, which was about \$10,800 per student, according to the most recent federal statistics.

In the 2014-15 school year, Bridgeport spent about \$14,000 per student while Fairfield spent nearly \$16,000. The difference between those numbers is not enough to explain the yawning disparities in results.

### ***Egregious Gaps***

*Michael Podgursky, an economics professor at the University of Missouri, testified convincingly that there is no direct correlation between merely adding more money to failing districts and getting better results. This is hard to argue with, and the plaintiffs concede that only well-spent extra money could help. But if the egregious gaps between rich and poor school districts in this state don't require more overall state spending, they at least cry out for coherently calibrated state spending.*

Because schools are heavily supported by local property taxes, as the judge pointed out, a property-poor town like Bridgeport has less money for its schools, even while taxing its residents at higher rates. And when funds fall short—for things as basic as paper, as they sometimes do – there is no way to make it up.

That is not true in Fairfield, Mr. Dwyer, the chairman of the board of education, said. While his is not the highest-spending district in the state—several districts spend more than \$25,000 per student—Fairfield parent associations raise money for field trips, white boards or boxes of school supplies.

And then there is what residents spend out of school. “A suburban family can get their kids to museums, they can travel, can get special tutors, they can get enrichment classes,” Mr. Dwyer said. “Poverty is a word, but what really separates the two districts is suburban children have more enrichment activities before they even start public school than the typical urban child, and that makes a difference.”

### **Teacher shortages**

*Shortage problems with only minimal shortage solutions hold true in many districts for math teachers, bilingual instructors, special education teachers, and, in general in poor districts where the working conditions make the jobs less attractive. The state sees itself as powerless here. It set up a system of local control in which school districts must agree on these things with teachers. But if the system was set up by the state then the state is responsible for the system. Any obstacle to a rational system the state has set up, the state can take down. The state is not powerless.*

Harding High School, a once-grand red brick building now long past its heyday, sits on Central Avenue in Bridgeport. Ground has been broken on a new \$106 million school nearby, on a site of a former General Electric plant.

But for now, the school's 1,100 students make do with crumbling walls, peeling paint and classrooms that on Friday were sweltering. By late morning, teachers and students mopped sweat from their faces as they marched through the building.

Finding and keeping qualified teachers, especially those certified to teach math and science, is a challenge presented with the challenges of Bridgeport, many teachers look for jobs in neighboring Fairfield, Greenwich or Stratford, Dr. Johnson, the assistant superintendent, said. That creates a competitive disadvantage that is nearly impossible to overcome.

“They can go 10 minutes away,” she said, “and make \$25,000 to \$30,000 more.”

Indeed, the districts' proximity not only magnifies their differences, it makes matters worse, education experts say.

Erica Frankenberg, an education professor at Penn State who studies school segregation, said: “Over time, districts that are right next to each other become very much identified as on very different trajectories, and that has a range of impacts on the kinds of schooling kids get. There is an idea of what certain districts are, and they just diverge.”

**“The War on Public Schools”, Erika Christakis, *The Atlantic*.** *Providing a counterpoint to other pieces in this section, Erika Christakis contends that the doom-and-gloom rhetoric about public schools' achievement is grossly exaggerated, undermining the successes of public schools and licensing neglect of the institution as a whole.*

PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAVE always occupied prime space in the excitable American imagination. For decades, if not centuries, politicians have made hay of their supposed failures and extortions. In 2004, Rod Paige, then George W. Bush's secretary of education, called the country's leading teachers union a “terrorist organization.” In his first education speech as president, in 2009, Barack Obama lamented the fact that “despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we've let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short, and other nations outpace us.”

President Donald Trump used the occasion of his inaugural address to bemoan the way “beautiful” students had been “deprived of all knowledge” by our nation’s cash-guzzling schools. Educators have since recoiled at the Trump administration’s budget proposal detailing more than \$9 billion in education cuts, including to after-school programs that serve mostly poor children. These cuts came along with increased funding for school-privatization efforts such as vouchers. Our secretary of education, Betsy DeVos, has repeatedly signaled her support for school choice and privatization, as well as her scorn for public schools, describing them as a “dead end” and claiming that unionized teachers “care more about a system, one that was created in the 1800s, than they care about individual students.”

Few people care *more* about individual students than public-school teachers do, but what’s really missing in this dystopian narrative is a hearty helping of reality: 21st-century public schools, with their record numbers of graduates and expanded missions, are nothing close to the cesspools portrayed by political hyperbole. This hyperbole was not invented by Trump or DeVos, but their words and proposals have brought to a boil something that’s been simmering for a while—the denigration of our public schools, and a growing neglect of their role as an incubator of citizens. Americans have in recent decades come to talk about education less as a public good, like a strong military or a noncorrupt judiciary, than as a private consumable. In an address to the Brookings Institution, DeVos described school choice as “a fundamental right.” That sounds appealing. Who wouldn’t want to deploy their tax dollars with greater specificity? Imagine purchasing a gym membership with funds normally allocated to the upkeep of a park.

My point here is not to debate the effect of school choice on individual outcomes: The evidence is mixed, and subject to cherry-picking on all sides. I am more concerned with how the current discussion has ignored public schools’ victories, while also detracting from their civic role. Our public-education system is about much more than personal achievement; it is about preparing people to work together to advance not just themselves but society. Unfortunately, the current debate’s focus on individual rights and choices has distracted many politicians and policy makers from a key stakeholder: our nation as a whole. As a result, a cynicism has taken root that suggests there is no hope for public education. This is demonstrably false. It’s also dangerous.

THE IDEA THAT popular education might best be achieved privately is nothing new, of course. The Puritans, who saw education as necessary to Christian practice, experimented with the idea, and their experience is telling. In 1642, they passed a law—the first of its kind in North America—requiring that all children in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts receive an education. Puritan legislators assumed, naively, that parents would teach children in their homes; however, many of them proved unable or unwilling to rise to the task. Five years later, the legislators issued a corrective in the form of the Old Deluder Satan Law: “It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures,” the law intoned, “it is therefore ordered ... that everie Township [of 100 households or more] in this Jurisdiction” be required to provide a trained teacher and a grammar school, at taxpayer expense.

Almost 400 years later, contempt for our public schools is commonplace. Americans, and especially Republicans, report that they have lost faith in the system, but notably, nearly three-quarters of parents rate their own child’s school highly; it’s other people’s schools they worry about. Meanwhile, Americans tend to exaggerate our system’s former glory. Even in the 1960s, when international science and math tests were first administered, the U.S. was never at the top of the rankings and was often near the bottom.

Not only is the idea that American test scores were once higher a fiction, but in some cases they have actually *improved* over time, especially among African American students. Since the early 1970s, when the Department of Education began collecting long-term data, average reading and math scores for 9- and 13-year-olds have risen significantly.

These gains have come even as the student body of American public schools has expanded to include students with ever greater challenges. For the first time in recent memory, a majority of U.S. public-school students come from low-income households. The student body includes a larger proportion than ever of students who are still

learning to speak English. And it includes many students with disabilities who would have been shut out of public school before passage of the 1975 law now known as the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, which guaranteed all children a “free appropriate public education.”

The fantasy that in some bygone era U.S. test scores were higher has prevented us from acknowledging other possible explanations for America’s technological, scientific, and cultural preeminence. In her 2013 book, *Reign of Error*, Diane Ravitch—an education historian and former federal education official who originally supported but later became a critic of reforms like No Child Left Behind—cites surprising evidence that a nation’s higher position on an international ranking of test scores actually predicted *lower* per capita GDP decades later, compared with countries whose test scores ranked worse. Other findings complicate the picture, but at a minimum we can say that there is no clear connection between test scores and a nation’s economic success. Surely it’s reasonable to ask whether some of America’s success might derive not from factors measured by standardized tests, but from other attributes of our educational system. U.S. public schools, at their best, have encouraged a unique mixing of diverse people, and produced an exceptionally innovative and industrious citizenry.

Our lost faith in public education has led us to other false conclusions, including the conviction that teachers unions protect “bad apples.” Thanks to articles and documentaries such as *Waiting for “Superman,”* most of us have an image seared into our brain of a slew of know-nothing teachers, removed from the classroom after years of sleeping through class, sitting in state-funded “rubber rooms” while continuing to draw hefty salaries. If it weren’t for those damned unions, or so the logic goes, we could drain the dregs and hire real teachers. I am a public-school-certified teacher whose own children attended public schools, and I’ve occasionally entertained these thoughts myself.

But unions are not the bogeyman we’re looking for. According to “The Myth of Unions’ Overprotection of Bad Teachers,” a well-designed study by Eunice S. Han, an economist at the University of Utah, school districts with strong unions actually do a better job of weeding out bad teachers and retaining good ones than do those with weak unions. This makes sense. If you have to pay more for something, you are more likely to care about its quality; when districts pay higher wages, they have more incentive to employ good teachers (and dispense with bad ones). And indeed, many of the states with the best schools have reached that position in the company of strong unions. We can’t say for sure that unions have a positive impact on student outcomes—the evidence is inconclusive. But findings like Han’s certainly undermine reformers’ claims.

In defending our public schools, I do not mean to say they can’t be improved. But if we are serious about advancing them, we need to stop scapegoating unions and take steps to increase and improve the teaching pool. Teacher shortages are leaving many states in dire straits: The national shortfall is projected to exceed 100,000 teachers by next year.

That many top college graduates hesitate to join a profession with low wages is no great surprise. For many years, talented women had few career alternatives to nursing and teaching; this kept teacher quality artificially high. Now that women have more options, if we want to attract strong teachers, we need to pay competitive salaries. As one observer put it, if you cannot find someone to sell you a Lexus for a few dollars, that doesn’t mean there is a car shortage.

Oddly, the idea of addressing our supply-and-demand problem the old-fashioned American way, with a market-based approach, has been largely unappealing to otherwise free-market thinkers. And yet raising salaries would have cascading benefits beyond easing the teacher shortage. Because salaries are associated with teacher quality, raising pay would likely improve student outcomes. Massachusetts and Connecticut have attracted capable people to the field with competitive pay, and neither has an overall teacher shortage.

Apart from raising teacher pay, we should expand the use of other strategies to attract talent, such as forgivable tuition loans, service fellowships, hardship pay for the most-challenging settings (an approach that works well in the military and the foreign service), and housing and child-care subsidies for teachers, many of whom can’t afford

to live in the communities in which they teach. We can also get more serious about de-larding a bureaucracy that critics are right to denounce: American public schools are bloated at the top of the organizational pyramid, with too many administrators and not enough high-quality teachers in the classroom.

HERE SCHOOLS ARE struggling today, collectively speaking, is less in their transmission of mathematical principles or writing skills, and more in their inculcation of what it means to be an American. The Founding Fathers understood the educational prerequisites on which our democracy was based (having themselves designed it), and they had far grander plans than, say, beating the Soviets to the moon, or ensuring a literate workforce.

Thomas Jefferson, among other historical titans, understood that a functioning democracy required an educated citizenry, and crucially, he saw education as a public good to be included in the “articles of public care,” despite his preference for the private sector in most matters. John Adams, another proponent of public schooling, urged, “There should not be a district of one mile square, without a school in it, not founded by a charitable individual, but maintained at the expense of the people themselves.”

In the centuries since, the courts have regularly affirmed the special status of public schools as a cornerstone of the American democratic project. In its vigorous defenses of students’ civil liberties—to protest the Vietnam War, for example, or not to salute the flag—the Supreme Court has repeatedly held public schools to an especially high standard precisely because they play a unique role in fostering citizens.

This role isn’t limited to civics instruction; public schools also provide students with crucial exposure to people of different backgrounds and perspectives. Americans have a closer relationship with the public-school system than with any other shared institution. (Those on the right who disparagingly refer to public schools as “government schools” have obviously never been to a school-board meeting, one of the clearest examples anywhere of direct democracy in action.) Ravitch writes that “one of the greatest glories of the public school was its success in Americanizing immigrants.” At their best, public schools did even more than that, integrating both immigrants and American-born students from a range of backgrounds into one citizenry.

At a moment when our media preferences, political affiliations, and cultural tastes seem wider apart than ever, abandoning this amalgamating function is a bona fide threat to our future. And yet we seem to be headed in just that direction. The story of American public education has generally been one of continuing progress, as girls, children of color, and children with disabilities (among others) have redeemed their constitutional right to push through the schoolhouse gate. But in the past few decades, we have allowed schools to grow more segregated, racially and socioeconomically. (Charter schools, far from a solution to this problem, are even more racially segregated than traditional public schools.)

Simultaneously, we have neglected instruction on democracy. Until the 1960s, U.S. high schools commonly offered three classes to prepare students for their roles as citizens: Government, Civics (which concerned the rights and responsibilities of citizens), and Problems of Democracy (which included discussions of policy issues and current events). Today, schools are more likely to offer a single course. Civics education has fallen out of favor partly as a result of changing political sentiment. Some liberals have come to see instruction in American values—such as freedom of speech and religion, and the idea of a “melting pot”—as reactionary. Some conservatives, meanwhile, have complained of a progressive bias in civics education.

Especially since the passage of No Child Left Behind, the class time devoted to social studies has declined steeply. Most state assessments don’t cover civics material, and in too many cases, if it isn’t tested, it isn’t taught. At the elementary-school level, less than 40 percent of fourth-grade teachers say they regularly emphasize topics related to civics education.

So what happens when we neglect the public purpose of our publicly funded schools? The discussion of vouchers and charter schools, in its focus on individual rights, has failed to take into account American society at large. The costs of abandoning an institution designed to bind, not divide, our citizenry are high.

Already, some experts have noted a conspicuous link between the decline of civics education and young adults' dismal voting rates. Civics knowledge is in an alarming state: Three-quarters of Americans can't identify the three branches of government. Public-opinion polls, meanwhile, show a new tolerance for authoritarianism, and rising levels of antidemocratic and illiberal thinking. These views are found all over the ideological map, from President Trump, who recently urged the nation's police officers to rough up criminal suspects, to, ironically, the protesters who tried to block DeVos from entering a Washington, D.C., public school in February.

We ignore public schools' civic and integrative functions at our peril. To revive them will require good faith across the political spectrum. Those who are suspicious of public displays of national unity may need to rethink their aversion. When we neglect schools' nation-binding role, it grows hard to explain why we need public schools at all. Liberals must also work to better understand the appeal of school choice, especially for families in poor areas where teacher quality and attrition are serious problems. Conservatives and libertarians, for their part, need to muster more generosity toward the institutions that have educated our workforce and fueled our success for centuries. The political theorist Benjamin Barber warned in 2004 that "America as a commercial society of individual consumers may survive the destruction of public schooling. America as a democratic republic cannot." In this era of growing fragmentation, we urgently need a renewed commitment to the idea that public education is a worthy investment, one that pays dividends not only to individual families but to our society as a whole.

## Next Steps: So What?

["Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain"](#) The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); See the OECD's report on the lack of "Universal Basic Skills" among the US labor force (This is an online slideshow)

**"The Skills Gap: America's Young Workers Are Lagging Behind", Mikhail Zinshteyn, *The Atlantic*.**

*See the Atlantic article on the lack of "Universal Basic Skills" among the US labor force.*

Young American workers today are more educated than ever before, but the nation's largest generation is losing its edge against the least and most educated of other countries, according to a provocative new report.

The report's authors warn these findings portend a growing gap between rich and poor American workers and that the lackluster results threaten U.S. competitiveness in an increasingly globalized market.

The report, produced by testing giant ETS, analyzes data collected by the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). The assessment measures the literacy and arithmetic skills of workers ages 16 through 65 in the U.S. and in other wealthy countries. While the results of the PIAAC have been published before, the new ETS study offers new insight in that it compared U.S. millennials—those between the ages of 16 and 34—with their international colleagues in roughly two dozen countries. The analysis found that more than half of U.S. millennials lack proficiency when it comes to applying reading and math skills at the workplace.

"You've seen tons of school-reform efforts in the last 20 years that don't seem to be able to make a dent. Well, maybe we need to reframe the problem in a larger way," Madeline Goodman, a co-author of the ETS report, said in a phone interview. "It's a question of putting the problem of skills in a larger context of inequality and opportunity in America today."

Meanwhile, Tom Loveless, an education scholar with The Brookings Institution, said that while the PIAAC results aren't surprising, the maker of the assessment "is unabashed about its ambitions in this regard ... [it] believes its measuring skills that matter in the 21st century. Put me in the 'I'm skeptical of that claim' group." While keeping those caveats in mind, the ETS report is worth analyzing and paints a dispiriting picture of U.S. competitiveness. Among the findings:

- Even though U.S. workers complete high school and college at rates similar to those in high-performing countries, U.S. PIAAC scores for workers ages 25 through 34 are on par with those in the least educated of participating countries and territories.
- On literacy, America's millennials posted an average score of 274 on 500-point scale while the average among participating countries is 282.
- On numeracy, U.S. millennials are in a statistical dead heat with Spain and Italy for last place, showing an average score of 255 while the average for participating countries is 275 on a 500-point scale.
- One half of U.S. millennials scored below the threshold that indicates proficiency in literacy. By comparison, high-flying nations like Finland and Japan had between 19 percent and 23 percent of their millennials miss the threshold for proficiency in literacy.
- Those same countries had roughly a third of millennials miss the proficiency cut-off score in numeracy, while roughly four in ten millennials in countries like the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Estonia performed below proficiency. Two-thirds of U.S. millennials missed the cut-off mark in numeracy.
- The U.S. had the largest gap in numeracy scores between its millennials in the bottom- and top-10 percent of all performers, and both U.S. groups posted some of the lowest scores compared to other participating countries.
- Perhaps more unsettling, the report indicates that the literacy and numeracy skills of U.S. workers today have largely declined compared to those in the labor force two decades ago.

“As a country, we need to address the question of whether we can afford ... to write off nearly half of our younger-adult population as not having the skills needed to effectively engage as full and active participants in their own future and that of our nation,” write the authors of the ETS report.

Country/region	Neither parent attained upper secondary		At least one parent attained secondary and post-secondary, non-tertiary		At least one parent attained tertiary		Gap between lowest and highest parental education categories
	Percentage	Average score	Percentage	Average score	Percentage	Average score	
OECD average	17*	248*	45*	274*	38*	292*	44*
Australia	26*	254*	31*	271*	44*	292*	38*
Austria	13	247*	60*	281*	28*	298*	50
Canada	8*	246*	34*	267*	58*	282*	36*
Czech Republic	3*	239*	75*	280*	22*	305*	66
Denmark	14*	252*	39	275*	48	293*	42*
England and Northern Ireland (UK)	14	222	49*	267*	37*	289*	67
Estonia	7*	258*	43*	275*	50	294*	36*
Finland	11	278*	51*	291*	38*	307*	30*
Flanders (Belgium)	16*	262*	41	287*	43*	305*	43*
France	21*	247*	47*	267*	32*	292*	45*
Germany	6*	238*	47*	273*	47	295*	57
Ireland	30*	250*	37	263*	33*	277	27*
Italy	49*	246*	39	265*	12*	280	34*
Japan	4*	‡	43	284*	53*	299*	‡
Netherlands	30*	272*	32*	289*	39*	305*	33*
Norway	9*	244*	39	273*	52	290*	46
Poland	6*	244*	72*	266*	22*	293*	48
Republic of Korea	22*	271*	45*	278*	33*	291*	20*
Slovak Republic	12	224*	68*	282*	20*	301*	77*
Spain	53*	246*	26*	263*	20*	278	32*
Sweden	12	261*	33*	281*	54*	293*	32*
United States	11	212	40	250	48	273	61

The ETS report also indicates that parental education levels correlate more strongly with U.S. millennial numeracy proficiency than in other countries, suggesting America's middling scores would be much lower without the high college-completion rates of the previous generation.

Goodman and co-author Anita Sands also ruled out the effect non-native workers have on U.S. millennials' scores, pointing to data that showed American workers born here and abroad performed near the bottom compared to young workers with similar profiles in other participating countries.

PIAAC is produced by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development, the same organization behind Program for International Student Assessment; since 2000, that academic assessment has found U.S. 15 year-olds to be below average in math and science compared with their peers in other countries. And

the International Student Assessment is one of several worldwide tests that have found U.S. students trailing their peers elsewhere. In 1964, the U.S. ranked 11 out of 12 on the first international math assessment—and that was in the middle of a decades-long period of prodigious economic growth.

A January report by the liberal advocacy group Washington Center for Equitable Growth calculated that if the U.S. were to invest in resources to raise the performance of its 15-year-olds on the International Student Assessment—bringing them on par with the average score of test-takers worldwide—the result would jumpstart the economy. The center’s researchers concluded that the investment would yield an increase of \$900 billion in the country’s local, state, and federal tax revenues over the next 35 years. Those gains far outweigh the resources necessary to improve U.S. student scores, the report’s authors wrote.

Goodman cited the kinds of policy decisions that have shaped the U.S. in the last four decades, largely in response to “globalizing changes in the economy and technology ... But all of those global forces have affected European countries, as well, and yet they made different kinds of policy choices and have different results.” Loveless of The Brookings Institution says that, empirically speaking, the PIAAC results don’t match up with existing data about the U.S. economy’s performance. But a bigger qualm Loveless has is the assumptions that the adult-competencies assessment makes about the skills workers will need going forward. “Let’s say I was alive in 1915 and I gave a test that predicted the job skills and future economic productivity of nations,” he said. “I just don’t see how anyone in 1915 could have foreseen the skills that would have been important for the rest of the 20th century, and I doubt that anyone’s doing that now for the 21st century.”

No test maker, Loveless said, “has come up with an assessment that’s a crystal ball like that.” But the report’s authors said their findings are consistent with other data sets that capture where the U.S. stands academically on both a national and global scale, particularly the International Student Assessment and the Nation’s Report Card, the federal exam that measures the academic proficiency of students in certain grade levels. “If our data were showing something that’s not in line with other kinds of large-scale assessments, it might raise questions,” Goodman said. “But that’s not the case.”

**“The Economic Cost of the Education Gap”, Byron G. Auguste, Bryan Hancock, and Martha Laboissiere, McKinsey & Company.** *In a fascinating 2009 report, global management consulting firm McKinsey quantifies the astounding economic cost of the US educational achievement gap—and the corresponding economic potential if that gap were to be closed.*

A persistent gap in academic achievement between children in the United States and their counterparts in other countries deprived the US economy of as much as \$2.3 trillion in economic output in 2008, McKinsey research finds.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, each of the long-standing achievement gaps among US students of differing ethnic origins, income levels, and school systems represents hundreds of billions of dollars in unrealized economic gains. Together, these disturbing gaps underscore the staggering economic and social cost of underutilized human potential. Yet they also create room for hope by suggesting that the widespread application of best practices could secure a better, more equitable education for the country’s children—along with substantial economic gains.

How has educational achievement changed in the United States since 1983, when the publication of the seminal US government report *A Nation at Risk*<sup>2</sup> sounded the alarm about the “rising tide of mediocrity” in American schools? To learn the answer, we interviewed leading educational researchers around the world, assessed the landscape of academic research and educational-achievement data, and built an economic model that allowed us to examine the relationships among educational achievement (represented by standardized test scores), the earnings potential of workers, and GDP.

We made three noteworthy assumptions: test scores are the best available measure of educational achievement; educational achievement and attainment (including milestones such as graduation rates) are key drivers in hiring and are positively correlated with earnings; and labor markets will hire available workers with higher skills and education. While these assumptions admittedly simplify the socioeconomic complexities and uncertainties, they allowed us to draw meaningful conclusions about the economic impact of educational gaps in the United States.

Four substantial achievement gaps emerged from our work. The first is the international one. As recently as the 1960s, the United States led the world in a variety of educational outcomes. Yet the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found that in 2006, America ranked 25th out of 30 industrialized countries in math and 24th in science. Moreover, cross-country comparisons of US students at two different ages—9–10 and 15—suggest that the closer they get to joining the labor force, the further they lag behind their international counterparts in reading, math, and science. The gap's impact is startling: if the United States had closed it by 1998 and reached the level of the top performers, such as Finland and South Korea, the US GDP could have been \$1.3 trillion to \$2.3 trillion higher in 2008. To put the facts another way, the gap imposes a higher recurring annual economic cost on the US economy than the current recession does.

Next we looked at other gaps in US educational achievement. A second one emerges among US students of different ethnic origins. As researchers have long known, black and Hispanic students score, on average, two to three years behind white students of the same age on standardized tests—a gap that persists regardless of how it is measured. These differences too represent sizable missed opportunities. If the gap had been bridged by 1998, the 2008 US GDP could have been up to \$525 billion higher than it was. When we looked at the implications of the achievement gap on US earnings, we found that in aggregate they could have been up to \$160 billion higher in 2008 had it been eliminated. Left unchecked, the magnitude of such disparities will rise in coming years as blacks and Hispanics account for a larger share of the US population.

The two remaining achievement gaps we studied—one between students at different income levels, the other between higher- and lower-performing school systems—also appear to exact a heavy price. We define lower-income students as those eligible for free lunch through a government program. Had the achievement gap between them and other students been bridged by 1998, a decade later US GDP might have been as much as \$670 billion higher than it was. If the gap between low-performing states and the US average had been closed, the 2008 US GDP could have been up to \$700 billion higher. Collectively, the economic impact of the four achievement gaps we studied is significant—comparable, in their effect on the US economy, to recessions since the 1970's. Yet there is cause for optimism amid the gloomy findings. The wide variation in performance among schools serving similar students suggests that the widespread application of best practices observed at the system level could close the gaps. California and Texas, for example, are two large, demographically similar states. But in educational attainment, students in Texas are, on average, one to two years ahead of California students of the same age, even though Texas has a lower per capita income and spends less per pupil than California does.

The same pattern holds true among school districts within states, among schools within districts, and among classrooms within schools. Indeed, the OECD finds that the variation within US schools in 2006 was 2.6 times greater than the variation across them, confirming research by McKinsey and others that consistent, high-quality teaching is a key factor determining student achievement. Moreover, international experience confirms that it is possible to make progress in closing these gaps: not only have two dozen countries made substantial progress in overall achievement, but 17 countries that exceed US performance levels also have a narrower gap among children of divergent socioeconomic backgrounds.

“Racial segregation in the public schools and adult labor market outcomes: the case of black Americans,” Gregory Fairchild, Small Business Economics. This study from Small Business Economics focuses specifically on racial segregation in public schools and the resulting impact on employment and wages. (This is an online pdf)

Thirteenth Annual *Brown* Lecture in Education Research: Public Education and the Social Contract: Restoring the Promise in an Age of Diversity and Division, Marta Tienda, Educational Researcher; (This is an online pdf)

“[How America's public schools keep kids in poverty](#),” Kandice Sumner, TEDTalks. Although some might hope that the public education would serve as a force to mitigate inequality, it seems that in fact public education may itself be perpetuating social inequality. See this study from Educational Researcher and this TED talk by an educator in a low-income community. (This is a video)

[“Different Pedagogy, Different Politics: High School Learning Opportunities and Youth Political Engagement,”](#) Joseph Kahne, David Crowe & Nam-Jin Lee, Political Psychology; (This is an online pdf)

[“High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do,”](#) AEI Program on American Citizenship. One of the roles of public education is to shape a country’s future citizens. See the case study from Political Psychology and the report from the American Enterprise Institute, which both shed some light on US education’s outcomes on this front. (This is an online pdf)

[“Education in the age of fake news and disputed facts,”](#) Lee Rainie, Pew Research Center. Think civics education might be especially important in today’s political climate? The Pew Research Center agrees. (This is an online slideshow)

[“Jews and Politics: Picking a Candidate,”](#) Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner, YU Torah. What is the Torah’s take on civic engagement in a secular society? How should Jews engage with issues of public education, social inequality, or politics in general? Listen to Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner on YUTorah discussing this critical question. (This is an online lecture)

## Deep Dive: What Next?

**“A Running Start”, *The Economist*.** *This article from the Economist explores the academic and social benefits of preschool.*

IN 1965 Lyndon Johnson introduced “Head Start” as part of his “War on Poverty”. Conceived as an intensive summer school for poor three- and four-year-olds, the programme now serves almost 1m children a year, all year round. That still leaves roughly half of American children of that age receiving no formal schooling at all, compared with just 10% or less in much of industrialised Europe and Asia—an imbalance politicians on the left, including Hillary Clinton, are eager to address. Not before time: research on early-childhood education suggests it is a smart investment. By the time pupils begin primary school, there is a huge gap in achievement between rich and poor. In a 2011 paper Sean Reardon of Stanford University examined the difference in test scores in maths and reading between children from families in the 90th percentile of the income distribution and those in the 10th. He found that at age six it was already greater than one standard deviation and had barely diminished by the age of 18, leaving it equivalent to several extra years of secondary schooling. The gap was twice that between black and white students, and growing.

Research by Meredith Phillips of the University of California, Los Angeles, suggests that is because wealthier families are, in effect, home schooling their children. By the age of six, she estimates, children of wealthy parents have spent as much as 1,300 more hours in enriching activities than those of poorer families. Poorer parents are strapped for money and time; roughly 35% of children in America live in single-parent homes.

Proponents argue that good public pre-schooling would therefore be a social and economic boon. It would boost social mobility, they say, while also saving public money in the long run by reducing the need for remedial education, poverty assistance, state-funded health care and the like. The effectiveness of public pre-school education has long been a subject of debate, however. Head Start, for instance, has not prevented the divergence in fortunes between rich children and poor. Studies of preschools for the disadvantaged have often established only a passing improvement in test scores.

The value of pre-school has become clearer in recent years as participants in several long-run studies have grown into adulthood. The Perry Pre-school Project, for instance, divided 123 children in Michigan in the early 1960s into treatment and control groups, and then tracked their performance as they aged. A similar programme initiated in North Carolina in the 1970s tested the impact of pre-schooling on 111 children, again divided into a test and

a control group. Although pupils' early advantage on measures of cognitive ability eventually erodes, participants nonetheless fare much better than peers over the long run. The high-school graduation rate among girls in the Perry Project who had attended pre-school, for instance, was 52 percentage points higher than that of the control group. Preschoolers from both studies were more likely to be employed as adults and to earn higher wages. They were also healthier, less likely to smoke and less likely to be arrested.

By the same token, a paper published in 2014 by Pedro Carneiro, of University College London, and Rita Ginja, of Uppsala University in Sweden, uses local-level shifts in the eligibility criteria for Head Start to tease out the links between participation in the programme and local socioeconomic trends. Head Start was associated with lower rates of obesity and smoking, reduced incidence of depression and less time spent in prison.

Such studies imply that pre-schooling is providing more than a good grounding in finger-painting, or even an early exposure to letters and numbers. Proponents argue that intensive, hands-on programmes help children develop important habits, such as conscientiousness, which do not show up on tests but are clearly useful later in life. The successful cultivation of such skills makes early-childhood education a particularly good investment, because it enables those who receive it to capitalise on subsequent instruction in education or work training, for example. Indeed, one study estimates that spending on pre-schooling for poor children yields a return of 7-10% a year in terms of longer life expectancy, higher earnings, lower crime and reduced public spending.

### **One for all**

*Whether governments should provide pre-schooling for all is a trickier question. An expansion of free nursery places in Britain led to an enormous rise in the share of three-year-olds enrolled, from 37% to 88%. Yet only one in four of those enrolled would not otherwise have gone to pre-school. Although scores on assessment tests for this group rose substantially, they represented a small enough share of total participants that the average scores among all British children barely budged. Evaluations of universal pre-schooling in Quebec, where the government introduced highly subsidised early-childhood education for all in 1997, find that shifting children from private nurseries or lavish care at home into public facilities actually reduced children's scores on measures of social development.*

Those in favour of universality argue that it broadens political support for public pre-schooling. The benefits of early-childhood education take decades to materialise, after all, during which time backing for means-tested programmes might wane whereas support for universal pre-schooling would not. Supporters also reckon that mixing students of different backgrounds improves the experience of poorer children. Yet as with universal primary and secondary schools, richer parents will often opt out of the public system, or segregate themselves from poorer children by moving to expensive neighbourhoods. In strict economic terms, money focused on the disadvantaged is money better spent—provided society remains committed to the investment.

[“The Economic Case for Preschool!”](#) Timothy Bartik, TEDTalks.

[“Use Data to Build Better Schools,”](#) Andreas Schleicher, TEDTalks. In this fascinating TED Talk, Andreas Schleicher of the Programme for International Student Assessment offers data on educational spending, policies, and outcomes from across the globe. If other countries can successfully meld impressive academic outcomes with a focus on educational and social equity, what might be the next steps for America? (This is an online video)

“Visible Learning,” John Hattie. How does each educational intervention stack up against all the others? Professor John Hattie draws on decades of research to answer this question. Watch his two-part lecture [here](#) and [here](#). (This is an online video)

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