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COM 300 PM Section
Final Draft Paper Set C
Fall 2021

Alterations to Education in our Nation: A Deep Dive into American K-12 Public Education

The United States' K-12 public education system is inherently flawed. Children are the future of this country, yet many adults and even our government, through their actions, have not treated them with the respect that they deserve through their lessons. Couple that with the rapid growth of the internet, where everything is accessible to anyone, and American students are certainly fighting a losing battle with our current system in place. Education is a tool that everyone uses and needs. The more serious we take education as a country, the smarter and more adept our country will be, which can lead to more innovation and jobs available, which can lead to a stronger economy and a better future.

To put it bluntly, we need to change how we approach education in this country. The purpose of this paper is to persuade the American people that our K-12 public education system needs a greater federal aid. I will first discuss in detail the problems that permeate most, if not all public schools today such as low teacher salaries, outdated and superfluous information, mental health among students, and standardized tests like the SATs. Next, I will address the root of these problems, which is our education funding system based on local and state taxes. Finally, I will offer my solution for what needs to be done if we want our students to be satisfied with their education. In

writing this paper, I will illustrate the nightmarish hellscape that many students and teachers deal with daily, and invite a utopia paradise that is possible through correct allocation of funds and resources.

Let us start with a problem that most educators will have to face, their salary. As many can tell you, teachers do not get paid nearly enough for the amount of work they put into preparing for their job with studying, and doing their job with teaching and grading. The National Center for Education Statistics has shown that “The average salary for public school teachers in 2018–19 was \$61,730. In constant (i.e., inflation-adjusted) dollars, the average teacher salary was 1 percent lower in 2018–19 than in 1990–91,” (NCES, 2019). Since 1990, so much has changed within our country: the housing market crash of the late 2000’s and more recently, the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic, have brought massive damage to the economy. Despite the fact that it is undeniable that inflation has occurred for goods and cost of living, teachers are still paid the same as the teachers during the Bush/Quayle administration.

Many teachers have out-of-pocket classroom expenses to help further the education of their pupils. These expenses have been proven to increase student performance and retention. A disturbing article published by the New York Times interviewed 4,200 teachers regarding their salary, experience, out-of-pocket expenses, and their outdated textbooks and school infrastructure in undesirable conditions. For example, one Colorado high-school teacher named Kristina Johnson had the highest ratio of salary, experience, and out-of-pocket expenses. Getting paid a salary of roughly \$44,000 (71 percent of the national average salary) with 20 years of experience and

three degrees, with annual out-of-pocket expenses being \$1,500 to \$2,000, stating she “had to purchase her own curriculum this year,” (Sedgwick, 2018).

As you probably already know, many public schools rely on outdated textbooks which can contain blatant misinformation or omission of fact. CNN has documented some of these cases of outdated textbooks, with one teacher having to use biology textbooks that were published in 2004, making the books as old as the students, (Levenson et. al, 2018). Recently, an image of an Egyptian king who was completely Caucasian has gone viral on the internet. Even though it is not from a textbook per se, it was joked that outdated textbooks have these biases and are white-washing history to seem more ethnocentric. This is dangerous, as subjects like these can change perception of history and our values.

Despite using outdated textbooks, this is not even scratching the surface of the content that the students are learning. It seems that as time passes, more students are fed up with current school curriculums as they prioritize the unnecessary over the future of our nation. I raise a question: is the point of school to prepare you for life, or tests? Current school practices offer a very limited view of what life and careers truly entail. You can find many students saying “when will I ever use this?” and will instead *want* to learn subjects like how to do taxes, or building a credit score, subjects they will eventually need in life. For example, students wanting to pursue the arts will probably never have to use algebra; students who want to pursue computer science may have no experience with coding until they reach college. It was not until I had reached college where I knew I wanted to pursue Linguistics, a subject not offered in my, or most typical secondary schools. I can only imagine how many students feel when pursuing college,

as they are taking a shot in the dark in deciding their major and subsequently their future; many students will switch majors in hopes of finding their passion which can be an expensive and time consuming process. This all stems from the fact that younger students do not have the avenues to express and experiment with their interests during high school. Instead, they are taught superfluous topics that they may not even use in their future (i.e. “the mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell”).

Student mental health is a prevailing topic that does not get nearly enough attention that it rightfully deserves. Depression rates have been growing among high schoolers for years now, and many have tried to pin that on the growing dependence of video games or drugs as an escape from reality, social media, the internet or smartphones, but the depressing reality is just that: a depressing reality. Some of these problems that students face include but are not limited to: home life issues like parental relationships and finance problems, the fear and reality of school shootings, the pandemic, and bullying. However, I think that the biggest problem that faces students is the impossible expectations to maintain good grades, get a job, be active in the community, join clubs, play sports, all while managing time for homework, social life, studying, and sleep. Students have to deal with these stressors just to possibly prepare for another round of a more rigorous college education. This is a nightmare. Even adults do not go through the same level of stress that children and teens do.

One final problem that our education system faces is the importance of standardized tests like the SATs. The SATs have roots in racism, elitism, and classism, and are an extremely outdated and tone deaf way of gauging student knowledge. The founder of the SATs, Carl Brigham, was a eugenist who believed that “The decline of

American intelligence will be more rapid than the decline of the intelligence of European national groups, owing to the presence here of the negro." Professor Wayne Au of the University of Washington Bothell wrote, "...the assumptive objectivity of standardized testing was thus used to 'scientifically' declare the poor, immigrants, women, and nonwhites in the U.S. as mentally inferior, and to justify educational systems that mainly reproduced extant socioeconomic inequalities," (Viera, 2018). The SATs, taken during high school, are integral to getting into a good college, which seems more necessary than ever to getting a decent paying job. Despite colleges supporting diversity and inclusivity, they still use standardized tests with roots in extreme racial and class biases to determine if a student is a suitable candidate for their school.

Studies have shown that yes, throwing more money towards teachers will improve the quality of the education they bring (Ordway, 2020). This is a touchy subject however, as teacher salaries are the most expensive part of running a school (Cavanagh, 2017). Public schools are handled by local and state taxes, but the federal government does contribute 8 percent of funding as well, to provide equal opportunity for students of low-income. Every parent wants their child to succeed and have a good education, but difficulty arises when it comes to paying for that privilege. No one wants their taxes to increase, but everyone wants a better future for our children. The main struggle that causes the problems that I have discussed lies in socioeconomic disproportionality, as more affluent neighborhoods can afford to pay more in their local taxes to properly fund better education. The most disadvantaged people in education are those who already live in poverty. It does not help that standardized tests are rooted in classism, and there is a growing dependence on the internet, which not everyone can

afford. The gap between rich and poor is growing and it all starts with education. The notion of the American Dream is slipping away, as those who are born into a lower class tend to stay within that class until they die. It is simply a vicious cycle.

Is this to say that our K-12 public education system is completely broken with no silver lining? Not necessarily, there's a lot we're doing right. Our public schools are increasingly inclusive, with excellent transportation programs and teachers that are qualified for their position. However, the cons of our current system outweigh the pros. Even though The Constitution and 10th Amendment reserve education rights for the state (though education is not mentioned once in The Constitution), the American people are fighting an uphill battle that may require some help from our federal government. So, I have a proposal to make towards the American people. My proposal is titled: SKOOL, which stands for Student Knowledge Optimization with Office Legislation. My solution has two criteria which could revolutionize education for the future of our nation: an increase in the federal education budget and a modern curriculum.

The federal government needs to contribute more to public education. As we have seen, many schools simply cannot afford to change their whole curriculum and instead have to stick with their current standards, outdated information and all. As it stands, the federal government's money does go to a good place. Federal education funding contributes to special education integration and the No Child Left Behind program. However, I strongly believe that the federal government can help revive every student's learning capabilities through correct allocation of funds and an increased budget. In November 2021, the Biden administration approved the Build Back Better

plan, a \$1.75 trillion bill, of which K-12 education only receives \$82 billion which will be used to fix public school construction, not student wellness¹ (Hendrix 2021). As important as pre-k and higher education are (which will receive more funds), the future of our nation looks grim based on how we treat our struggling K-12 students. While it certainly is a step in the right direction, I feel that the federal government needs to acknowledge that there is a great disparity between areas that can afford to pay the taxes that keep K-12 education prospering, and those who lack the income to improve educational foundations. A federal grant to give students better textbooks and technology could greatly improve student achievement.

The second part of SKOOL involves a revamp of the school curriculum with deemphasized standardized testing. This one will be extremely tricky to navigate, as we have already tried to create a nationwide learning structure with programs like the Common Core State Standards. The CCSS attempted to improve critical thinking in areas like math and language arts, but it only ended up complicating those subjects even further, with backlash among parents, students, and scholars. Seeing as how school districts approve of the subjects to be taught in schools, I believe that this part lies not in federal legislation, but by public opinion. Schools should begin to offer classes that have universal real-world applications instead of subjects for a niche career. Assessments should reflect students' learning and skills, including creativity, leadership, critical thinking, and collaboration. A new education program like this would certainly cost a lot of money and require a lot of effort, definitely more effort than a simple standardized test run through a scantron. It may be hard to evaluate these

¹ Note: Fixing construction of public schools is student wellness, as it is concerned with the safety of students.

qualities in a student, but I wholeheartedly believe that a new approach like this would reignite passion in both teachers and students and bring a whole new appreciation for teaching and learning. In turn, this will remove major stressors caused by education, improving mental health and overall student wellness.

In conclusion, the United States' K-12 public school system has many flaws that are rooted in class inequality, but they can be improved upon through better allocation of funds and resources. I understand that my proposal may seem unconstitutional, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Now more than ever do we need a helping hand from our government to improve the quality of life and education for our K-12 public school students. The future of our nation is at stake, and if we do not act accordingly then our country will be apathetic to the needs of future students, and the cycle continues and the class disparity will continue to grow.

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