CHAPTER 7

Education

"Anybody can get into college in the USA," Malaysians often said when I was living in their country. They were referring to the fact that at least some American postsecondary educational institutions have rather low admissions standards. Applicants who had no possibility of entering a Malaysian university could often get into one in the States. Malaysians who remarked on the accessibility of American colleges and universities were comparing the American system unfavorably with that of the British, who once ruled Malaysia and provided the model for Malaysia's educational system. Under the traditional British approach, difficult school-leaving examinations were used to limit the number of people given places in postsecondary institutions and to ensure that the people who got those places were well qualified.

On the other hand, these Malaysians would also observe, "You [Americans] put men on the moon. So there must be something right about your system."

Many people interested in education get trapped into trying to answer the question, "Which is the better educational system, the American, the British, or some other?" That question cannot be answered. A more appropriate question is this: "What are the advantages and disadvantages of the

American educational system?" We will return to that question after considering a number of issues related to it.

This chapter does not focus on the structure of the U.S. educational system. Many other publications do that. One is Alan Margolis' 1994 article, "Key Concepts of U.S. Education." A more comprehensive explanation is in the online (and unofficial) encyclopedia called *Wikipedia*, at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_United_States.

To understand any discussion of American education, one must be familiar with the basic concepts and terms in the glossary on the next page.

This chapter offers an overview of the ideals that guide the American educational system. It then discusses some social forces that influence American educational institutions, and some contemporary issues those institutions face. All this will help international visitors understand what they hear about American schools and will lead into some comments about the system's advantages and disadvantages.

GUIDING IDEALS

Access to Education

The American educational system is based on the idea that as many people as possible should have access to as much education as possible. All fifty U.S. states have "compulsory attendance" laws requiring young people to attend school or to be homeschooled. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, twenty-six states require students to continue attending school at least until the age of sixteen. Other states set the age at seventeen or eighteen, or else they require completion of a specified grade.

Most states, under the influence of a controversial 2001 federal law known as No Child Left Behind, have developed examinations intended to prevent students from graduating from secondary school without attaining prescribed test scores.

The U.S. system has no standardized examinations whose results systematically prevent secondary-school graduates from going on to higher levels of study, as is the case in the traditional British and many other

Glossary of Terms Related to the American Educational System

Note: *While most glossaries are organized alphabetically, this one is organized according to the sequence students in the American educational system follow.*

School: For Americans, the term *school* can refer to any institution offering education at any level, from preschool through post-doctoral programs.

Public versus private school: A public school, at any level, is supported by the pertinent local or state government. At the K–12 levels (see entry), nearly all support for public schools comes from the government. Public colleges and universities receive a smaller portion of their total income from government sources. Private schools, at any level, derive most of their income from students' tuition. A **proprietary school**, whatever curriculum it offers, is a profit-making business.

Preschool: A private organization offering childcare and perhaps some educational activity for children below the age of five.

K–12: Kindergarten through grade 12, which is considered the basic education for all U.S. Americans. Children enter kindergarten at age five and, unless things go amiss, complete 12 more years of school and receive a high school diploma at or around the age of 18.

Elementary school or primary school: Typically, grades 1–6.

Middle or junior high school: Sometimes grades 6, 7, and 8; sometimes grades 7 and 8; sometimes grades 7, 8, and 9.

High school or secondary school: Grades 9–12 or 10–12.

Postsecondary: Any formal education beyond the 12th grade.

Community college or two-year college: A postsecondary institution offering associate degrees.

College: (1) any postsecondary educational institution; (2) a four-year, postsecondary institution that offers a bachelor's degree; (3) a component of a university, such as a "college of law" or a "college of liberal arts."

University: A postsecondary institution offering bachelors, masters, and, usually, doctoral degrees.

Post-graduate study: Any formal education beyond the bachelor's level.

Professional school: An institution offering a degree needed to practice a profession, such as medicine, law, dentistry, or architecture.

Technical, **trade**, or **vocational school:** Post-secondary, non-academic institution offering training for trades or crafts.

systems. (There are some well-known standardized tests, such as the SAT, ACT, TOEFL, GRE, and GMAT, but results on these tests are just one among several factors considered in college and university admissions decisions.)

Through secondary school and sometimes in postsecondary institutions as well, the American system tries to accommodate students even if their academic aspirations and aptitudes are not high, even if they have a physical and in some cases mental limitation, and even if their native language is not English.

The idea that as many people as possible should have as much education as possible is, of course, an outcome of Americans' assumptions (discussed in chapter 1) about equality among people. These assumptions do not mean, however, that everyone has an equal opportunity to enter Harvard, Stanford, or other highly competitive postsecondary institutions. Admission to such institutions is generally restricted to those with the most impressive academic—and co-curricular—records. Others can usually matriculate in some postsecondary institution, as the Malaysians observed, but one perceived to be of lower quality.

As of 2008, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 93 percent of all Americans aged 25 or older had completed at least nine years of schooling. More than 84 percent of those aged 25 or older had completed four years of high school or gone beyond that, and 27 percent had completed a bachelor's degree or more. According to data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the number of tertiary (that is, postsecondary) students per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996 was 5,840. Only Greece, South Korea, and New Zealand had more.

Naturally, an educational system that retains as many people as the American system does is likely to enroll a broader range of students than a system that seeks to educate only the few who seem especially suited for academic work. In the American system, academic rigor tends to come later than in most other systems. In many instances American students do not face truly demanding educational requirements until they seek a graduate (that is, post-baccalaureate) degree. In contrast, many other systems place heavy demands on students as early as their primary years—though college may be far less demanding, as is the case in Japan.

Universal Literacy

A second ideal underlying the U.S. educational system is that of producing a society that is 100 percent literate. All American states, as has been mentioned, have compulsory attendance laws, which, if students stayed in school as required and teaching methods were effective, would mean that everyone who passed through the system could read and write. The goal of 100 percent literacy has yet to be achieved, and may never be achieved, but it remains the stated goal.

Equal Opportunity

A third ideal, again in keeping with American assumptions about equality, is that of providing comparable educational programs to everyone, regardless of gender, race, income level, social class, or physical or mental disability. Equal opportunity is another ideal that has yet to be achieved, although assorted factors have transformed the character of student bodies at American schools over the years. At the K–12 level, for example, special programs have resulted in the enrollment of more and more students with physical or cognitive limitations. Before World War II, U.S. tertiary institutions enrolled mainly European American, upper- or middle-class, English-speaking males in their late teens or early twenties. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, more females than males were enrolled at the tertiary level, and looking in on classrooms at colleges and universities, one will see countless people who are different from the "traditional" college student—people of many ethnic and racial backgrounds, people in wheelchairs or using aids for vision or hearing impairments, and "returning students" who are middle-aged or older.

Local Control

Fourth, the American educational system is based on the ideal of local control. The United States has no national ministry of education. (There is a U.S. Department of Education, but it has no direct authority over individual schools.) State departments of education have considerable influence over the curriculum of primary and secondary schools, whether they are public (that is, supported by taxes) or private (supported by tuition and other non-

governmental sources). Local bodies, however, bear the main responsibility for guiding educational institutions. Public primary and secondary schools are under the general direction of bodies that are usually called boards of education or school boards. Those boards hire and fire superintendents and sometimes principals, oversee the curriculum of the schools in their jurisdiction, select textbooks, and review teacher performance. Each school district has a separate board of education, usually elected by the public. A school district may be no larger than one city or county; each state has many, many school districts.

The level of decentralization is higher at the postsecondary level. Most colleges and universities, whether public or private, have their own board of regents or some such body that hires and fires the president (or chancellor, or whatever the chief executive officer is called) and provides general guidance for the institution. Sometimes all the public colleges and universities in a given state will be guided by a single board. The more specific policies that govern colleges and universities are determined not by these boards but by faculty and administrators at each separate institution. Faculty groups set curriculum and graduation requirements. Individual professors decide what they will include in their courses and how they will evaluate their students.

At all levels of education, standards are set and (arguably) maintained by regional accrediting associations that the schools subscribe to, not by the government.

Few if any countries have educational systems as thoroughly decentralized as that in the United States. Many foreign visitors have difficulty comprehending the fact that so much control over educational matters rests at the local level and that there is no national body empowered to override local decisions.

Parental Involvement

Fifth, many primary and secondary schools idealize parental involvement in children's education. Schools encourage parents to become acquainted with the facilities and with their children's teachers, to talk to their children about what happens in school, and to confer and work together with the teachers if a child encounters any academic or social difficulty.

Schools often have "back-to-school nights" near the beginning of the school year to allow parents to visit the school, meet the teachers, and learn about the curriculum. Throughout the year schools send information to parents to inform them about school activities. Periodic parent-teacher conferences are intended to encourage parents to talk with their children's teachers.

Parents are normally expected to help their children with homework, keep track of their children's assignments and important school-related deadlines, and attend the athletic competitions, music performances, and theatrical productions in which they participate. They may even be asked to chaperone their children's field trips or volunteer in some other way. This call for parental involvement may seem odd to parents from countries where education is considered the teachers' business, not a process in which parents have such an active role.

More and more often, parents are maintaining their involvement with their children's education even when the "children" have graduated from secondary school and enrolled in a post-secondary institution. Called "helicopter parents" because they hover nearby and can swoop down at any moment to intervene in their children's lives, these parents do such things as question professors about grades they've given, or ask a residence hall official to find their children more suitable roommates. These days, conferences of academic and academic-support personnel are likely to include sessions on how to deal with helicopter parents.

Analysis and Synthesis

A sixth ideal has to do with the assumptions Americans make about the basic nature of knowledge and learning. The assumption is that only a certain part of all that is potentially knowable is already known. Scholars and students—mainly advanced scholars and graduate students—work at the "frontiers of knowledge" to discover new information or to conceive new ways of understanding or interpreting what is already known. Learning at all levels is thus considered not just a process of memorizing a fixed body of knowledge that already exists in books and in teachers' minds. Learning is viewed as an enterprise of active exploration, experimentation, analysis, and synthesis—processes that students engage in along with their teachers

and professors. The ideal educational situation is, therefore, one in which students are actively involved in the process, learning the skills of analysis and synthesis and applying those skills to discovering new knowledge or taking a new view of established knowledge.

The widespread popularity of e-learning reflects a system in which students are expected to have enough self-discipline and motivation to pursue their studies with only limited reliance on teachers.

Students who come to the United States from educational systems that rely on memorization and reverent acceptance of teachers' words often face academic difficulty until they learn the intellectual attitudes and skills that go along with analyzing and synthesizing the material they study. Another way to say this is that Americans tend to view education as a *productive* activity, while people educated in many other systems conceive of the educational process as a *receptive* activity. (Thanks to L. Robert Kohls for this idea.)

This view of the educational process is an outgrowth of the value Americans place on individualism and equality, namely, the propensity to "question authority." Students at all levels are encouraged to think for themselves, which can entail questioning or even challenging a teacher. For U.S. Americans, questioning a teacher or other authority figure is normally viewed as a good thing, showing that the student is developing "a mind of her own." For people from many other societies, however, this behavior may be viewed negatively and seen as disrespectful of teachers, older people, people in authority, or tradition.

Well-Rounded People

Finally, the American educational system seeks to turn out "well-rounded people." Such people might have specialized knowledge in one area, but they are also expected to have a general acquaintance with many disciplines. Having passed through a system that requires them to study some mathematics, some English, some humanities, some science, and some social science (and perhaps a foreign language), students presumably have an array of interests and can understand information from many fields of study. Thus, again, specialization in the American system comes later than it does in many other educational systems. Students are required to take

courses that they might not be particularly interested in and that appear to have little relationship to their career aspirations.

Being well-rounded also means participating in nonacademic "co-curricular" activities in and out of school. Secondary students are continuously reminded that they will be more attractive to college and graduate admissions officers and to prospective employers if they take part in school clubs, sports, or community activities. Many secondary and tertiary institutions have developed "service learning" programs, in which students receive academic credit for community-service work such as volunteering in a library, homeless shelter, or home-construction program. In some schools, participation in service learning is required for graduating.

SOCIAL FORCES AFFECTING AMERICAN EDUCATION

A few aspects of the social context surrounding the American educational system are worth mentioning. These include the social status of people in the education field, financial support, politics, and anti-intellectualism.

Social Status of Educators and Students

Many American teachers (that term usually applies to people who teach in kindergarten through grade twelve, the final grade in secondary school) would say that they do not enjoy a particularly high status in society. They are not especially well paid, and their working conditions are usually less comfortable than those of workers in many other occupations. Survey results published by the *New York Times* in 2005 showed that secondary-school teachers ranked 34th among other occupations, while elementary and middle-school teachers ranked 45th and kindergarten and preschool teachers 100th. (The top-ranked occupation was "physicians and surgeons.")

Similarly, U.S. college and university professors are not generally held in the high regard enjoyed by those in many other countries. The *New York Times* survey ranked the status of postsecondary teachers at 25. Even within that category there is a status ranking. At the top is the chairperson of the surgery department, very much an applied, rather than a theoretical,

discipline. Professors are sometimes viewed as people who teach because they are not capable of doing anything else. The stereotype of the professor living in an "ivory tower," detached from the real world of things that matter, reflects this view.

In some societies students also enjoy considerable respect, since being a student is relatively unusual and requires special effort. Not so in the United States. Nearly everyone under the age of eighteen is a student, as are many who are older. Under these circumstances students, even graduate students, with the possible exception of students in doctoral programs, are rarely accorded special respect.

Finally, there is the matter of teacher education. In most colleges and universities, people who teach prospective teachers are at or near the bottom of the status hierarchy, looked down upon by most others within academia.

Financial Support

Another factor affecting education—here we are referring to public education—is the amount of money devoted to its support. Public education competes with other public enterprises that need money. Some states consistently devote a higher percentage of their budgets to education than others do, but (despite much talk by politicians about its value) none consistently give education highest priority. Public education at all levels suffered significant reductions in governmental support as a result of the late-2000s depression. In my home state of Colorado, for example, funding for higher education was reduced by 60 percent in 2009–2010.

Most educators believe their institutions are always underfunded. For many years pro-education groups have complained that states spending more money on prisons than on schools.

Politics

A third social factor influencing education is politics. In some states and communities, contemporary political conflicts are directly reflected in the administration of primary and secondary institutions. School boards may debate the value of "sex education," "drug education," or "multicultural education." State legislators who view government negatively argue that

state support for education should be in the form of vouchers given to parents so they can choose which school, public or private, they want their children to attend. This view conflicts with that of legislators who support public education.

State governors may appoint their political supporters to positions on the board of regents that governs the state's major public university, and the political beliefs of those supporters may influence university policies. The degree to which political conflicts are manifested in educational institutions in America, however, is probably minimal. National political conflicts, as opposed to local ones, rarely have a direct influence on the staffing, governance, or policies of American educational institutions at any level. Except during times of national crisis (for example, the war in Viet Nam), American students are generally nonpolitical, though small, vocal groups of students periodically engage in attention-getting activities to support their views on major social and political questions such as world trade, human rights, gay rights, and environmental preservation.

Anti-Intellectualism

A final social force affecting the American educational system is anti-intellectualism. As chapter 3 sought to make clear, most Americans are suspicious of theorizing and "intellectualizing." They want to see practical results from the time and money they spend. Secondary school and university graduates are expected to be well educated, but not to the extent that they cannot do anything "useful." Many Americans are unimpressed by most learning that is undertaken purely for the sake of learning, and they place a high value on professional fields of study such as engineering, medicine, computer science, and business, which they see as leading to high-paying and available jobs.

In contrast, Americans place a relatively low value on fields such as literature, philosophy, history, and art, which many consider a "waste of time." Compared with people from many other countries, Americans have little general reverence for students who excel or pursue advanced studies in one exclusive field (particularly, it seems, if that field is mathematics: a person who seems excessively interested in mathematics—or computers—is labeled a "geek" or a "nerd"). Nor do they necessarily show any particular

respect for well-educated political candidates, a fact that mystifies many international visitors.

ISSUES FACING AMERICAN SCHOOLS

Like other social institutions, educational institutions are the subject of continuing controversy about one issue or another. Some of these issues concern just primary or secondary schools; some concern just postsecondary institutions. Some touch institutions at all levels.

Schools at all levels face the issue of *accountability*. How does one determine whether a particular teacher is doing a good job? A particular school? These questions cannot be answered in the quantifiable terms Americans prefer (see chapter 3), so they continue to vex educational administrators, politicians, and the American public.

At the primary and secondary level, there is often heated debate about the content and quality of textbooks. Are they biased? Have they been made too simple? Have controversial issues been avoided so that potential textbook buyers are less likely to be offended by a book's contents? Have "facts" been distorted to make them more palatable to potential consumers?

Some other recurrent controversial issues are these:

- Should primary and secondary schools allow students to pray to a Supreme Being during the school day? (See the discussion about the separation of church and state in chapter 8.)
- Should particular books (usually famous novels) that contain profane or sexually explicit language, "adult themes," or violence be assigned in classes or be available in secondary school libraries?
- Can religious symbols be used in school activities related to national holidays, especially Christmas and Easter, which have religious origins?
- What should students be taught about the origin of humankind; specifically, should they be taught the theory that humankind evolved from "lower animals" or the theory that humankind was created by a Supreme Being (the theory called *creationism*)?
- What should students be taught about American history; specifically, how should people of color, women, and homosexuals be portrayed in

the story of the country's past? This conflict comes under the rubric of *multicultural education*.

- What measures can appropriately be taken to ensure that schools in poorer school districts offer facilities and opportunities reasonably similar to those offered in wealthier areas?
- What measures, if any, should be taken to accommodate students who are not native speakers of English and who may not be able to use English well or at all?
- What is the proper balance between general (or "liberal") education and education or specialized training intended to prepare students to work in particular fields?
- Should female secondary school students be allowed to participate on athletic teams (such as football and wrestling) that are traditionally all male?
- What is the proper balance between providing special assistance for students with special needs (for example, students with learning disabilities, physical limitations, or English-language limitations) and "mainstreaming" them (that is, incorporating them into regular classrooms and school activities)?
- How can colleges and universities prevent faculty members from having "conflicts of interest" between their research and the terms of financial support they may receive from corporations or other organizations with vested interests in the outcome of the research?

The issue of religious garb—veils, etc.—that has excited so much attention in some European countries has yet to receive much attention in the United States.

American elementary and secondary schools are often called upon to add one topic or another to their curriculum in order to remedy perceived social problems. Thus, schools may be asked to address matters such as values and ethics, conflict resolution, racial integration, environmental preservation, world peace, sex education, and health and fitness. In most other countries such issues would more likely be placed in the domain of the family, religious organizations, political parties, or some other social institution.

Because the American educational system is so decentralized, it is possible for these issues to come up again and again in place after place. Differ-

ent solutions evolve in different localities. There is no uniform, authoritative answer to them, as there might be in a country with a more centralized educational system.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

From what has been said here, many of the American educational system's advantages and disadvantages become clear.

The system provides formal education for a relatively large portion of the population, but the quality of that education is not as high as it might be in a more selective system. (Most experts agree that people who earn Ph.D. degrees in the United States are as well prepared to work in their disciplines as are people who earn Ph.D.s in other systems. Below the Ph.D. level, though, many other systems offer more depth in students' chosen disciplines.)

The system's decentralization serves to insulate educational institutions from national political entanglements and to give citizens some voice in what happens in their local schools. Schools can modify their curricula to accommodate needs and conditions that pertain to their own areas. On the other hand, this decentralization makes it relatively easy for an outspoken and committed minority in a given community to embroil local schools in controversy and also makes it possible for particular schools to maintain low standards if they wish or feel compelled to do so.

The well-rounded people that the American system hopes to produce stand a better chance of becoming "good citizens" (as Americans use that term) because they have a general familiarity with many topics and can keep themselves informed about matters of public policy. Well-rounded people, however, may not be so well equipped to begin working in specific occupations because they might not have learned as much in school about specific fields as have students whose systems encourage earlier and more intensive specialization.

The American educational system, like any other, is integrally related to the values and assumptions of the surrounding society. American ideas about equality, individualism, and freedom underlie the U.S. educational system. Whatever its advantages and disadvantages, the system will retain

its current general characteristics as long as the values and assumptions that predominate in the surrounding society prevail.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

Many readers of this book will be enrolled in an English-language, undergraduate or graduate program at a U.S. college or university. These readers will have the opportunity to experience the American educational system firsthand, and can explore all of the educational resources available at their institution.

Other readers will be parents of children enrolled in American elementary or secondary schools. Such parents can readily get to know their children's teachers and some of their children's classmates' parents. One of the best ways to do this is to get involved in the school's parent-teacher association or to volunteer to help with a school-related activity.

All foreigners—whether they are students, parents, businesspeople, or visitors—can talk with individual Americans about their educational experiences. Although there are always exceptions, most Americans will be happy to discuss their own experiences and to give their opinions on topics such as the quality of the local public school system as well as on current social and political issues related to education.

Talking to teachers can also be illuminating. Ask teachers or professors you meet about their duties, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of their jobs, and their views of changes that are taking place in their student bodies and at their schools.

Many people from abroad find it interesting to visit a primary or secondary school to see the facilities and observe student-teacher interactions. Many colleges and universities have programs through which their foreign students can visit public schools to make presentations about life in their own countries. Participating in such programs gives international students the opportunity to see a vital aspect of American life that would otherwise remain outside their view.