

**Education Policy in the US:  
Current State, Direction and Future**

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### Abstract

Currently the public education system in the US is in a poor state. Students have little interest in their studies and the quality of educators is dropping at an alarming rate. Education is an issue both state and federal government will need to work on together in order to make any significant progress. At the federal level the government has tried to remedy the public education system through programs like No Child Left Behind, and by increasing funding for the growth of charter schools. Though there were slight improvements initially, the programs did not do much for the long-term and arguably have not done much in the short-term either. This day and age common core is failing to provide the general public the knowledge they need in order to succeed in life. Perhaps alternative education methods can aid the coming generations and prevent them from falling into a student loan deathtrap.

Presently the United States education policy goals are not being met. Overtime, the following have been established as the goals of public education:

- to prepare children for citizenship (1)
- to cultivate a skilled workforce (1)
- to teach cultural literacy (1)
- to prepare students for college (1)
- to help students become critical thinkers (1)

One can make the argument that most of these goals are not achieved by the public education system. Higher education definitely assists with these goals but getting students to pursue higher education is an even more difficult task. As a millennial that went through the public education system I can attest to the fact these goals have not been achieved in the public education system. Personally I realized what it meant to be a citizen while at university, not in high school. It was primarily because I joined a fraternity that values citizenship and working to become a productive member of society.

In terms of a skilled workforce, there are many millennials who did not pursue higher education (or did and dropped out) and are either working at the same place they did high school, or just working to get by. Job positions that were meant to be held by high school students are being occupied by young adults, and as industries become more automated they'll realize they don't have the skills to keep up with the change.

In terms of cultural literacy, it varies based on a school districts demographics. Although students are offered courses on world cultures, they are not required to take them. When students opt out of a world cultures course they don't get exposed to culture outside their own and are unintentionally trapped in their own cultural bubble. They can recognize other cultures but are ignorant to many of their customs and form biased opinions based on the norms of their own culture.

In terms of college preparation and critical thinking, the public education system does an alright job if the student applies themselves for the entirety of their public education career (K-12). Though most public school students end up burning out in high school (some even before that), lose the motivation study, and end up ill prepared for college. The majority of students don't even know what they want to do prior to graduation and end up going with the something they "think" they'll like. Most of the time students do this without really understanding the level of commitment, and the reality of their decision. Probably due to the lack the ability to think critically about their own decisions.

The immediate stakeholders on education policy include: "students, parents, teachers, school administrators, professors and education schools, elected and non-elected officials, reformers and businesses which rely on an educated work force" (1). Cooperation between the stakeholders is relatively low, with each group having values and opinions that conflict with the others. The government is relatively decoupled from the stakeholders as there is "often tension between local, state and federal offices over control of various aspects of education content, funding and delivery" (1). Now traditionally, the responsibility of education has been more on parents (PTO's), local, and state governments. When the constitution was written it did not include anything about education. Due to that, the role of the federal government is limited. Also during that time school was more religiously focused and did not really require government funding. That should definitely change, and more emphasis should be put on education funding, since there are hundreds of millions of more Americans since the writing of the constitution. With the major advances in math, science and technology, it's imperative that the future generations receive proper education. Overall the level of cooperation between state and federal government is poor.

As of now the United States Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, supports school choice; a program that enables lower income students to attend schools they otherwise could not afford. She plans to accomplish this via “privatization, religious education, and a hands off approach to accountability for private schools” (2). During her election to Secretary of Education the senate was split 50-50, and the final vote came down to Vice President Pence which is the first time in history the vice president has had to break a cabinet election tie. There is a big split in the senate regarding her policies and only time will tell if she’ll be able to get anything done.

In terms of the budget, President Trump has promised \$20 billion towards Betsy DeVos’s policies during his campaign. In the 2018 budget set by President Trump gave the U.S. Department of Education \$9 billion. The “2018 budget is the first small step in that direction, increasing charter school funding by two-thirds, funding an unspecified new "private school choice program," and adding another \$1 billion for Title I, which helps fund high-poverty schools. That Title I money would be earmarked to "encourage" school choice” (3). It seems as if the majority of the funding will be going towards privatization, religious education based institutions, and charter schools. Whatever is left over goes to “school-choice”. For whatever reason President Trump also supports eliminating after school programs and professional teacher development. Putting more kids on the streets and less qualified educators in classrooms. Subsequently, in higher education, the proposed budget puts Pell grants and federal work-study programs at risk. Pell grants are the largest income-based financial aid program; they serve largely low-income students and do not need to be paid back.

Clearly there is not enough money in the budget to meet everyone’s needs on a federal level. On a state level in Illinois, Governor Bruce Rauner has vetoed a bill that would give \$214 million towards funding teacher pensions. Because it was denied, Chicago Public School (CPS)

students will end their school year 13 days early. A popular activist who was born and brought up from CPS, Chancellor Bennet, has donated \$1 million to CPS as a "call to action". The young Chicago rapper was "calling for politicians and corporations to follow suit, as the conference streamed live on Instagram" (4). He challenged major companies in Chicago and all across the U.S. to take action in their communities. His "call-to-action" was a huge success and inspired businesses in Wicker Park, the Chicago Bulls, NFL players, and many non-government actors to donate towards the cause. The example set by Chance the Rapper has sparked community and has proven to be another means of getting the funding required for education. Billionaire Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos and billionaire President Donald Trump should follow suit. If a rapper from the south-side of Chicago can set an example by donating money to his state, why can't our elected officials do the same for their country?

Besides financial issues the education system faces, an even larger issue is the quality of education. With the rise of privately funded charter schools, the overall quality of education diminishes. Many of the "private schools are required to administer a standardized test of some kind, though not necessarily the state test" (2). This would not be a huge concern because some education is better than no education. However, Betsy DeVos's hands-off approach to accountability for private schools opens the door for money laundering, hiring of underqualified teachers, and counter-productive education. Furthermore, the American Federation for Children (AFC) "issued a report ranking the existing private school choice programs, [...] [which] included only those programs that explicitly allow students to attend religious schools. DeVos, whose family has long supported causes associated with the Christian religious right, has publicly called education reform a way to "advance God's kingdom"" (2). It seems DeVos's prefers the US to track backwards to the religious institutions schools were originally intended to

be. Bringing religion in to public education does not make much sense, especially in this day and age, and should be kept separate as not all students in America are raised as Christians.

With the current policies behind the public education system, and inflation causing students to take on greater debt for higher education, an alternate means of education is looking more attractive than ever before. AltSchool, founded in 2014 by former google engineer Max Ventilla, is disrupting the education industry and hopes to set a new standard for schools by 2030. What AltSchool aims to be is a “blend of a traditional Montessori education with high-tech tools” (5). In an interview done by NPR Amy Kamenetz, NPR’s lead education blogger, she states the “ultimate goal here appears to be to re-define the American classroom and also make a profit” (5). While it’s a bold goal, there seems to be huge adoption and promise in this sort of learning. AltSchool aims to redefine schooling through technology, “every student has a laptop or a tablet, and they spend about 30 percent of their day on their devices, completing what are called playlists” (5). These playlists contain task from mathematics to building cells with your classmates. By utilizing technology, it puts students in charge of their own education, decreasing the burden on the teacher and increasing the interests of the students.

As for being a for-profit organization, AltSchool is working towards building a “software product that combines an instructional platform, student record-keeping, enrollment, administration, a social network for teachers and one for parents” (5). AltSchool are doing this by collecting data from the classroom, in order to better model how kids learn and interact at an early age, with an emphasis on technology. The overall vision is to create a product that can be adopted for use in public and charter schools to reinvent/modernize the education system itself. With the coming age of automation, technology driven curriculums will definitely be gaining attention. To those skeptical about AltSchool’s Kamenetz says “that the legacy of for-profits

[institutions] in education is not a great one if you look at the for-profit colleges. And, ultimately, if it's between my kid's future and some investor somewhere, I'm going to want to send them to a school that really puts my kid first" (5). This comparison of for-profit higher education institutions verses AltSchool's kid-first initiative make AltSchool's for-profit model seem all the more reasonable.

Overall, there are many issues that needs to be addressed for the current state of the U.S. public education system to get any better. Today, we are still using decades old techniques to educate the coming generations. The worst part is that it's in a time where the world is rapidly advancing, it's no wonder that Americans are falling behind. With the current Secretary of Education wanting to privatize and focus on religious based schools without holding them accountable for progress, it truly seems like America is taking a step back in terms of education. Thankfully there are companies like AltSchool that have the future in mind, and are already working towards building an alternate means of education. Currently, the U.S. needs massive education reform at a primary and secondary level and even in the higher education front. The US is headed in the right direction, and with any luck, can get the funding and reform it needs to be able to catch up with the advancements in society.



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