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**THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE  
OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

***Trecutul, prezentul și viitorul  
educației publice în Statele Unite ale Americii***

**Abstract:** *Public education is a necessary ingredient for the development of any society today. Whether we talk about economic, social or political development, public education is at the heart of all types of development. Without it, only the well-off can afford to educate their children, leading to increased and continued social, economic, and by consequence political inequality, which in turn affect all of society, including the elites. In order to understand what the situation of public education is today and how we can best improve it, we must look at the past and analyze how public education developed over time. This paper tries to briefly survey the history of public education in the United States. It tries to make the point that in order to implement a successful educational reform in America today, first a comprehensive understanding of public education as a social institution and not merely as a state institution is needed. Moreover, looking at countries that have successfully reformed their educational systems over the past few decades is also necessary.*

**Keywords:** *education, education reform, public education, United States of America, coeducation.*

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In a world with an ever changing economic environment and with a continuous advancement of technology, the question of whether our educational systems are able to cope has been repeatedly asked. Even developed countries such as the United States have been forced to question the way they educated their population, particularly when it comes to K-12

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education. Are today's youth learning the skills they need to succeed in a globalized and technology soaked world? Will the United States be able to stand up to the technology savvy countries of East Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore or, more recently, China? Once the sole producer of most types of modern technology, today the US is forced to bring in immigrants from said countries in order to supplant its workforce in many advanced sectors of the economy. Silicon Valley and other regions of software and technological entrepreneurship are dependent to a large extent on foreign inputs of workforce and brain power. This is a reality caused by the lack of sufficient native qualified workforce. This scarcity of native qualified workforce has been deemed to be caused by the inefficiency of the public education system.

How should then the American K-12 education system be reformed? In order to answer this question one must first look at and understand the evolution of public education in the United States throughout the centuries. Without a good understanding of the past, good reforms for the present would be hard to come by, as no reform is done in a vacuum, but it rather builds upon the past evolution of a system. Moreover, a comparison between the current American and other present public education systems around the world must be made in order to see what works and what does not. This paper tries to do just that: on the one hand it offers a short history of the evolution of the American public education system, while on the other it compares the present American public education system with other public education systems considered to be better.

For most of history, the only kind of education available to children was private tutoring, also known as homeschooling. Families could hire tutors to come to their house and teach their children. Needless to say, due to the financial stress this activity entailed, only rich families could educate their children; the masses, in their overwhelming majority, were by and large illiterate. This was the case in just about all of the world's countries, including today's developed countries. In the English-speaking world and in Continental Europe, by the 15th century, education slowly became a much more comprehensive process, one that took place not only in the family, but also in the church, the community, and through apprenticeship in different crafts. In the United States, starting in the early 17th century, the introduction of public schools in society meant a shift from these traditional places of education, but also added an important socialization aspect. Public schools gave the state the opportunity to disseminate particular norms, customs, or even ideologies to children, the future citizens.<sup>1</sup> Due to the socialization process that occurred in school, some of the institutions that had previously provided the bulk of education for children, such as the church, were not particularly happy about their introduction in society because they lost the opportunity to directly ingrain their values in the

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<sup>1</sup> Cremin 1970.

future adults. Moreover, the craftsmen were unhappy to lose the free labor that apprentices provided and the guarantee that their particular trades and traditions would be passed on to next generation.

In the New World, the Thirteen Colonies saw their first public school open in 1635: the Boston Latin School, which exists till this day.<sup>2</sup> Soon after, all colonies in New England set up schools and made education compulsory, however, public education was not free, which limited opportunities for poor children. In addition, schooling was also limited in most cases to male-only institutions. Thus, schools were places that not only reflected realities from early American society, such as class disparities and gender inequality, but at the same time reinforced them. Furthermore, in the South, public education barely existed; most families that could afford to pay for education either sent their children to the North to study or arranged for private tutors to come to their homes.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that throughout most of the United States, but especially in the South, apprenticeships were still the most common way in which children learned to read and write.<sup>4</sup> Due to this, we can conclude that outside private tutoring or home schooling, on-the-job-training was the most common type of education available to early America.

As time passed, by the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, schools not only became more widespread, but were also more often free of charge and coeducational.<sup>5</sup> The gradual, but constantly improving, inclusion of women in the public education system marked not only changes in society, as women gained more rights, but also reflected the expanding opportunities for women in the economy. As the US economy was step by step moving from a primarily agricultural one to a more diverse sector, more employment options for women also appeared. In addition, even though most women were still only housewives, they were the ones most involved in the education of the children in every family, so they themselves had to be educated in order to be able to teach their children how to read and write. Despite becoming more coeducational, schools throughout the United States remained, however, racially segregated. In many places, especially in the South, children of color were banned from education altogether. This was an extreme case of discrimination, as blacks could not get an education even in the few cases where they could pay for it. Thus inequality based on race lines spiraled out of control. Free blacks were just as affected as the slaves.

The continued expansion of public schooling also brought tension with the religious establishment of the country. Due to the fact that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the majority of the country was Protestant and thus strongly

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<sup>2</sup> Boston Latin School website.

<sup>3</sup> Tyler 1897: 1-6.

<sup>4</sup> Jernegan 1920: 127-142.

<sup>5</sup> Sklar 1993: 511-542.

secular, most states in the US passed laws called "Blaine Amendments" that forbade citizens' tax dollars to fund parochial schools. Moreover, children from Catholic families were expected to enroll in public schools in order to be assimilated to mainstream American culture. In order to subvert this trend, the vast Irish and other Catholic immigrant populations set up parish/parochial schools in cities across the US. These schools were not only meant to protect particular religious identities, but also to enhance and propagate certain cultures and even languages from one generation to the next.<sup>6</sup> The tension between religion and the state over education and its funding during 19th century America shows how the public school system was always a social institution, one that was affected by society and one which at the same time itself affected society as a whole, it was never a purely state institution. An analysis of education today must take this into account and not dismiss the historical evolution of education as a social institution.

The most important change that happened in US public schools in the 20th century was desegregation. After hundreds of years of discrimination in the field of education, children of color were guaranteed the same rights as white children. The *Brown v. Board of Education* case which occurred in 1954 was a landmark US Supreme Court case which triggered a paradigm shift in public education in the United States of America. It concluded that separate public education institutions for black and white students were unconstitutional.<sup>7</sup> This was a major change compared to the previous policy which had allowed for separate institutions and facilities to exist for different races. Although the old policy had allowed for separate, but equal services, including public education, to be delivered to different races in America, in fact, the services provided were not only separate, but also unequal. Money spent on public education in black districts was much less than that spent in white districts. For this reason, the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling can be read as implying both that separate institutions based on race lines are illegal, but also that the institutions should provide the same level of service regardless of the race of the citizens who benefit from them. Again, as happened before in US history, this major shift in education policy did not come out of the blue but instead reflected the changes that occurred throughout the United States in the '50s and '60s when civil rights were a salient issue in just about every aspect of US domestic policy. In other words, education changed as a social institution, not merely as a state institution.

This short history of American education points to the fact that as time progressed and American society developed, public education also evolved to fit the new social expectations. As the school became central to any discussion about education, and as the government became more and

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<sup>6</sup> Walch 2003.

<sup>7</sup> *Brown v Board of Education Case.*

more involved in the provision of education due to it being considered a public good, people started to forget that education happens in many other places besides the institution called "school". In the modern era, education is drawn from a multitude of sources, such as "newspapers, television, youth organizations, libraries, electronic media of many varieties, museums, camps"<sup>8</sup>. Some of these channels are owned and funded by the state, however, many are owned and funded by private institutions. Historian Lawrence Cremin, a Pulitzer Prize winner and former President of the Teachers' College at Columbia University, was the first in the world to introduce an ecological model of education. In 1976, he proposed removing schooling from the center of the American theory of education and instead proposed the perspective of education as a collection of interdependent institutional structures of educative and social interactions.<sup>9</sup> The most important and revolutionary claim that Cremin made was that since education takes place in so many places and as a result of so many other social institutions, much of education occurs outside schools not inside it. An education reform that solely focuses on public schools or even only on schooling in general, is thus likely to be insufficient. Figure 1 shows, on the right, Cremin's model of the ecology of education and, on the left, the way we used to, and some still view education even today. This model provides us with a much better way to understand how schools, in their provision of education, interact with other social institutions, such as the family, businesses, and the community at large. In order to ensure better public education, the state must thus provide incentives for all these actors to engage in the education process of the young generations, rather than just spending more money on public schools. Leading from this, the state should, for example, provide tax credits to businesses to provide on-the-job-training and internships to students, promote the creation of youth-oriented NGOs, and support the family in an appropriate and efficient manner. In recent decades, multiple countries in Latin America, starting with Mexico, have implemented a system of financial rewards which entice families to give more attention to their children's education and school attendance. While initially active only in Mexico, such programs, generally called conditional cash transfers (CCT), have now spread to 25 other countries around the world<sup>10</sup>. While the results of such programs have been mixed and are still being analyzed, the concept of providing incentives for the family to care more about their children's education as opposed to simply spending more on public schools is a welcomed move towards a more comprehensive approach to education. This is what treating public education as a social institution and not merely as a state institution actually means.

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Cremin Website.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Cremin Website.

<sup>10</sup> The New York Times: October 17, 2006.

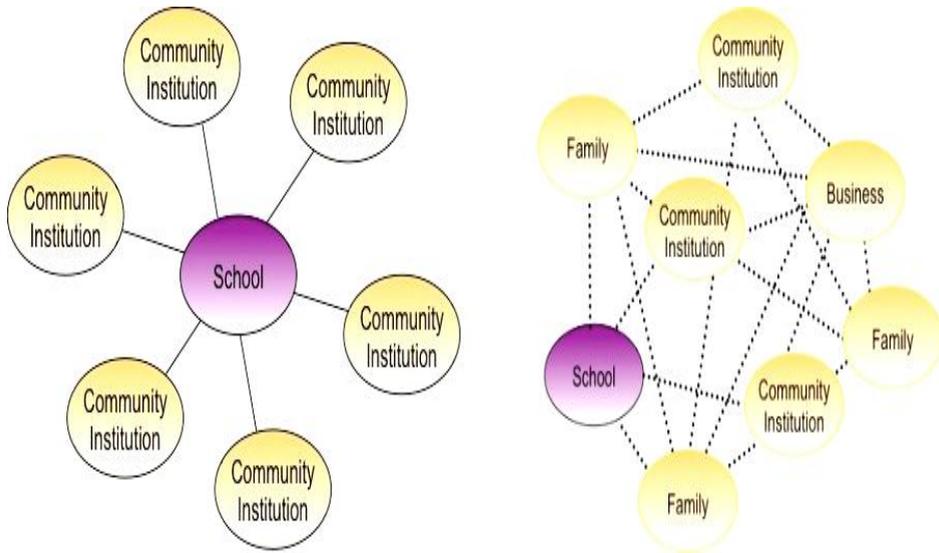
A problem with the modern education landscape in the United States is that the families that rely least on public schools—those who can afford to send their children to private schools—are also the ones much more able to provide other means of education for their children as well, such as private tuition, private classes for standardized exams, youth club membership, internships in companies, and so on. So if a child from a poor family is sent to a public school, that child is likely lacking access to many other sources of education. In other words, while in theory the public school should be the starting point and the main source of education for most children, it is in fact a last resort for many children that otherwise have no option. It is either the public school or no education for them. This has major implications for education reform in the United States. It implies that private schools may focus more on formal education and leave other aspects of education to the family because those families can provide the other aspects to their children on their own, while public schools should have a more comprehensive provision of education, not only focusing on what happens inside the classroom.

In fact what we have seen is that private schools are also the ones that provide better counseling, more opportunities for volunteering, and more contacts with industry and business, while public schools, being strapped for cash, are considered "successful" if they have a minimal retention and graduation rate. The lesson may be that there are diminishing marginal returns to spending money on improving or expanding education in the classroom and that, even taking into account how strapped for cash public schools are, they should be spending less on formal education and more on these other aspects of education. So instead of taking a child from the street or from a family dealing with drug or alcohol abuse and trying to teach him/her at the same standard you would a child from a less challenging background, it may be more productive to lower the academic expectations but instead focus more on counseling on how the child can better manage issues at home and provide him/her with on-the-job training through internships done in partnership with businesses.

Vocational training is nowadays a very important aspect of public education, one that is pretty much ignored in the United States, while other countries, such as Germany focus massively on it. Instead of pretending that the normal, expected educational route for every student is kindergarten - primary school - middle school - high school - college, and that employees will differentiate themselves by how far along they have gone into this sequence of predetermined steps, in Germany, alternative routes exist. For example, after middle school, students can choose whether to go to a regular high school or attend alternative vocational schools that focus less on the academic side, but more on developing practical skills. These public vocational schools have contracts with local and regional businesses where students can and must have internships before graduation. The businesses receive free labor and the students receive

valuable training. It is a win-win situation for all and a model that had been successfully used before the modern public school was created. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the apprenticeship was a well established and extremely successful social institution in Middle-Ages Europe, in Colonial America and in the early United States. Its importance should not be undermined or forgotten.

In conclusion, a future discussion of public education reform in the United States should take a good look at the history of American public education and should consider different aspects of education besides classroom or formal education, such as on-the-job-training, volunteering, counseling and so on. Debates over potential reforms of the American public education system have so far generally focused solely on a handful of inputs and outputs when determining the quality of education. These are spending per student, the academic curriculum, scores obtained on standardized exams and teacher training. From all these, spending per student may represent the most common and deadly trap into which debates over potential reforms of the education system usually fall. It is very attractive for both politicians in office and for political candidates to promise to increase spending per student and at times deliver on that promise, however, what should instead be done is push for a change of perspective on education. As a consequence, in the past few decades, all education reforms in the United States, some of which, such as charter schools, have to their credit been successful, have all been centered only on the academic side of education and ignored the broader social institutional aspects of education. Due to this, given the reality of the ecology of education, with schooling being an integral part and not the center of education, even in those cases of successful education reform, due to not seeing education as a social institution, the full potential of education has not been achieved.



**Fig. 1** - Cremin's model of the ecology of education and the way we used to view education before

Source: <http://www.learningdreams.org/blog/691> [Accessed February 2, 2016].

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