

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN AMERICA: TOCQUEVILLE'S OBSERVATIONS

- 1 As might be expected, educational institutions in the United States reflect the nation's basic values, especially the ideal of equality of opportunity. From elementary school through college, Americans believe that everyone deserves an equal opportunity to get a good education.
- 2 From the beginning, when Americans established their basic system of public schools in 1825, they reaffirmed¹ the principle of equality by making schools open to all classes of Americans and by financing the schools with tax money collected from all citizens. Those who favored public schools believed that these institutions would help reduce social-class distinctions in the United States by educating children of all social classes in the same "common schools," as they were known at the time.
- 3 When Alexis de Tocqueville arrived in the United States in 1831, he found a great deal of enthusiasm about the new and growing public elementary schools. The mayor of New York City gave a special dinner for Tocqueville during which a toast² was offered in honor of "Education—the extension of our public schools—a national blessing."
- 4 Because he was a French aristocrat, Tocqueville at first shared the fears of some wealthy Americans who believed that universal education would be a danger rather than a national blessing. He eventually decided, however, that the tendency of public education to encourage people to seek a higher status in life was in harmony, not in conflict, with the customs of American society. The ideal of equal opportunity for all regardless of family background was much stronger in the United States than in France.
- 5 Tocqueville also noted that American public education had a strong practical content that included the teaching of vocational³ skills and the duties of citizenship. Thus, public education not only gave Americans the desire to better themselves, but it also gave them the practical tools to do so. Moreover, the material abundance of the United States provided material rewards for those who took full advantage of the opportunity for a public education.
- 6 During the next century and a half, public schools in the United States were expanded to include secondary or high schools (grades 9–12) and colleges and universities, with both undergraduate and graduate studies.

The Educational Ladder

- 7 Americans view their public school system as an educational ladder, rising from elementary school to high school and finally college undergraduate and graduate programs. Most children start school at age five by attending kindergarten, or even at age three or four by attending preschool programs. Then usually there are five to six years of elementary school, two to three years of middle school, and four years of high school. (School systems may divide the twelve years a bit differently, usually depending upon school-age population, but all do have twelve years of elementary, middle school, and senior high school.)

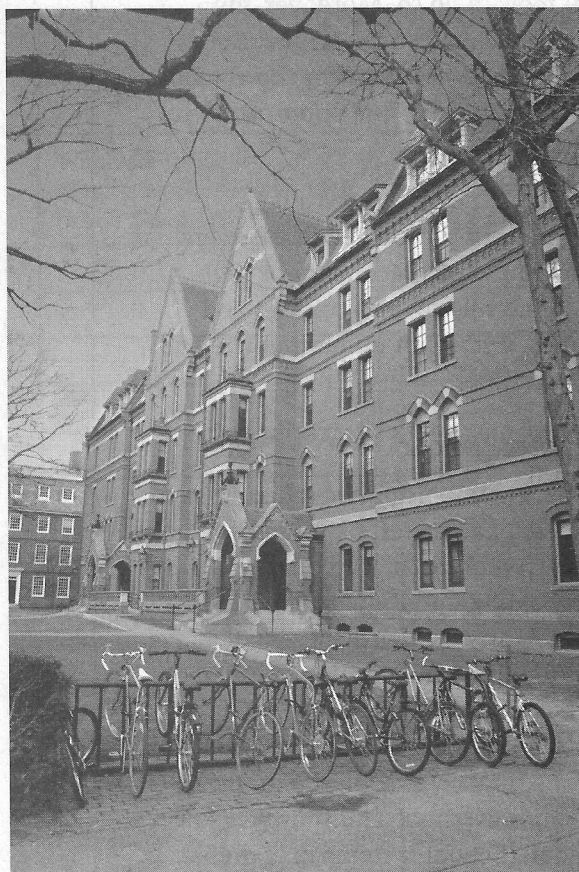
¹reaffirmed: formally stated an intention or belief again, especially as an answer to a question or doubt

²toast: the action of drinking wine or other drink in order to thank someone, wish someone luck, or celebrate something

³vocational: training or advice relating to the skills needed to do a particular job

Most school systems have kindergarten as well.

- 8 After high school, the majority of students go on to college.* Undergraduate studies lead to a bachelor's degree, which is generally what Americans mean when they speak of a "college diploma." Students may also receive an associate degree for two years of study at a community college. Some of these associate degrees are in vocational or technical fields.
- 9 The bachelor's degree can be followed by professional studies, which lead to degrees in such professions as law and



Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts

**The word college is used in several different ways. It is generally used instead of university to refer to the education after high school, as in the expressions "go to college" and "get a college education." It is also used to refer to the school, as in "Where do you go to college?" Often, people use the word college to refer to a small school that does not offer graduate degrees or to a two-year community college. University is used for large schools that offer both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Universities often call the divisions within them colleges, as in the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.*

⁴tuition: the money you pay for being taught at a school or college

medicine, or graduate studies, which lead to master's and doctoral degrees. The American public schools are free and open to all at the elementary and secondary (high school) level, but the public colleges and universities charge tuition⁴ and have competitive entrance requirements.

- 10 The educational ladder concept is an almost perfect reflection of the American ideal of individual success based on equality of opportunity and on "working your way to the top." In the United States, there are no separate public educational systems with a higher level of education for the wealthy and a lower level of education for the masses. Rather, there is one system that is open to all. Individuals may climb as high on the ladder as they can. The abilities of the individuals, rather than their social class, are expected to determine how high each person will go.
- 11 Although the great majority of children attend the free public elementary and high schools, about 10 percent choose to attend private schools. The majority of these are religious schools that are associated with particular churches and receive financial support from them, though parents must also pay tuition. A major purpose of these schools is to give religious instruction, which cannot be done in public schools, but that is not always the reason that parents send their children to these schools. Parents who live in large cities may send their children to Catholic or other religious schools because they believe that these schools are safer and have higher academic standards than the public schools. The public schools in many of these cities have encouraged parents and community

members to establish charter schools⁵ in an attempt to keep these children in the public schools.

- 12 There are also some elite⁶ private schools that serve mainly upper-class children. For these private schools, students must pay such high tuition costs that only wealthier families can afford them, though scholarships are usually offered to some talented, less affluent children who cannot pay the tuition. Parents often send their children to these schools so that they will associate with other upper-class children and maintain the upper-class position held by their parents, in addition to getting a good education.
- 13 Unlike private religious schools, elitist private schools do conflict with the American ideal of equality of opportunity. These schools often give an extra educational and social advantage to the young people whose families have the money to allow them to attend. However, because these schools are relatively few in number, they do not displace the public school as the central educational institution in the United States. But attending a good private school does give students an advantage when competing with public school graduates for admission to the best universities in the nation. Thirty-five percent of the students admitted to Harvard, for example, graduated from a private school.
- 14 There is another area of inequality in the American education system. Because of the way that schools are funded, the quality of education that American students receive in public schools varies greatly. Traditionally, the largest percentage

of the money for schools came from the local level (cities and counties), primarily from property taxes. School districts that had middle-class or wealthy families had more tax money to spend on education. Therefore, wealthier school districts had beautiful school buildings with the most up-to-date technology and the latest science equipment, and poorer school districts had older buildings with less modern equipment. Today, the states pay the largest amount for funding elementary and secondary schools, and the federal government pays an average of ten percent of the cost. However, the amount a local district spends on the schools still has a huge impact, and students living in low-income communities go to schools with the least resources and often the least experienced teachers.

- 15 Although the amount of money spent per child is not always the best indicator of the quality of education the child receives, it certainly is an important factor. Some believe that all schools, public or private, religious or not, should be eligible for public school funding. They would support a system of vouchers,⁷ which parents could use to help pay tuition at any school of their choice. Some states are now experimenting with voucher systems.

Attending an American University

- 16 Money is also increasingly a factor in receiving a college education. All university students must pay tuition expenses in the United States, and the cost of an education is rising much more rapidly than is the average family income. Because tuition is much lower at public universities than at private ones, wealthy

⁵ charter schools: schools to which the state, local, or federal government (or private organization) has given money and special permission to operate but that are operated by parents, private companies, etc., rather than by the public school system

⁶ elite: limited to wealthy people with a high social status

⁷ vouchers: types of tickets that can be used instead of money for a particular purpose

students have more choices. There are a number of financial aid programs in the form of loans and scholarships available at both public and private schools. About 80 percent of college students have some form of student aid. However, the expenses of buying books and living away from home make it increasingly difficult for many students to attend even the less expensive public universities. The majority of students must work during their college years to help meet costs, and sometimes their work schedule reduces the number of courses they can take and increases the time it takes them to complete a college degree. Most young people graduate from college with significant debt from student loans.

- 17 A growing number of students cannot afford to go away to college and pay the tuition and living expenses for a public or private university. They choose instead to attend community college programs for two years in their hometowns, paying much less in tuition. These two-year colleges offer a wide range of programs. Some offer two-year degrees called associate degrees. Students may also take their first two years of college at a community college and then transfer to a state university. Community colleges feed into the state university systems and offer educational opportunities to large numbers of students who ordinarily would not be able to attend a university. The popularity of community colleges continues to grow. Now a number of the community colleges offer four-year bachelor degree programs through state systems.

The differences in yearly cost among public two- and four-year colleges and private four-year colleges is significant:

	Public two-year (in-state)	Public four-year (in-state)	Private four-year
Tuition & fees	\$ 3,131	\$ 8,655	\$29,056
Room, board, books, etc.	\$12,453	\$13,606	\$14,233
Total cost	\$15,584	\$22,261	\$43,289
Net price (after scholarships, grants, aid)	\$ 4,350	\$ 5,750	\$15,680

Source: The College Board's Trends in College Pricing 2012 and Trends in Student Aid 2012 reports.

- 18 Despite its costs, the percentage of Americans seeking a college education continues to grow. In 1900, less than 10 percent of college-age Americans entered college. Today, over half of all Americans have taken some college courses, and many have attended for four years or more. There are more than 20 million students attending college now, and there are roughly 3,000 different colleges and universities to choose from. Today, many parents who were not able to attend college when they were young have the satisfaction of seeing their sons and daughters attend. About half of the students enrolled in college today are the first generation of their family to attend.
- 19 As we have seen in earlier chapters, the American definition of success has traditionally been one of acquiring wealth and a good standard of living. It is not surprising, therefore, that Americans value education for its monetary⁸ value. The belief has been widespread in the United States that the more schooling people have, the more money they will earn when they leave school. The belief is strongest regarding the desirability of certain undergraduate university degrees, or a professional degree such as medicine or law following the undergraduate degree. Both undergraduate and graduate degrees

⁸ *monetary: relating to money*

in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields offer high salaries. In the United States, there are not enough graduates with STEM degrees to fill the jobs now available, so employment prospects in these fields are excellent. The monetary value of graduate degrees in “nonprofessional” fields such as literature, art, music, history, or philosophy, however, is not as great.

a college education, even a graduate degree, or they are low-paying jobs in the service sector of the economy—such as in fast-food restaurants, stores, and hotels. New manufacturing jobs often require a knowledge of robotics, for example.

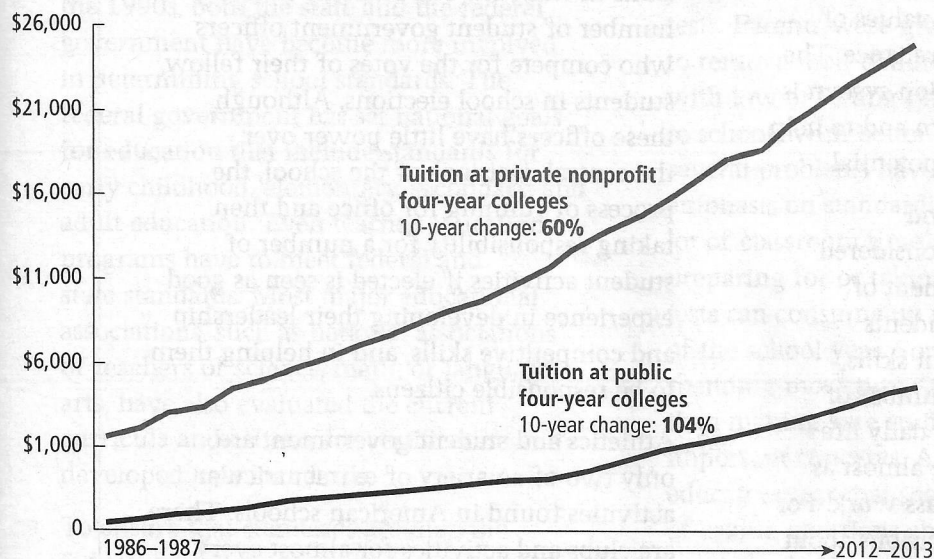
21 Because of the importance of higher education, many adults combine working with taking classes at a college. Many public and private colleges and universities

are making it easier for students to take classes through *distance learning*, using the Internet to provide materials and lectures as well as to engage students in discussion. Some students who are living on campus or commuting to classes take at least part of their coursework by distance learning, but it is also possible for a

student to obtain both undergraduate and graduate degrees without ever being on a college campus.

22 An exciting new trend is the growth of MOOCs—Massive Open Online Courses—where thousands of people can participate in courses taught by some of the most important scholars in the United States. It began with a few professors at elite American universities, but it is becoming much more frequent, and other universities around the world are joining in. The focus has been on the learning experience, not on earning college

TRENDS IN COLLEGE TUITION PRICES



Source: The College Board's *Trends in College Pricing 2012*.

Note: Tuition for public four-year colleges is for in-state students.

20 In recent years, there has been a change in the job market in the United States. In the past, it was possible to get a high-paying factory job without a college education. Workers with skills learned in vocational schools, training programs, or on the job could do work that did not require a college education. These were among the jobs that new immigrants were often able to obtain. Increasingly, however, the advent⁹ of new technologies has meant that more and more education is required to do much of the work. Many of the new jobs in the United States either require

⁹ *advent*: the time when something first begins to be widely used

credits, though some are exploring ways of providing certificates for successfully passing the examinations that go with the courses.

Educating the Individual

- 23 American schools tend to put more emphasis on developing critical-thinking skills than they do on acquiring quantities of facts. American students are encouraged to ask questions, think for themselves, and express their own opinions in class, a reflection of the American values of individual freedom and self-reliance. The goal of the American education system is to teach children how to learn and to help them reach their maximum potential.
- 17 24 The development of social and interpersonal skills may be considered as important as the development of intellectual skills. To help students develop these other important skills, schools have added a large number of extracurricular¹⁰ activities to daily life at school. These activities are almost as important as the students' class work. For example, in making their decisions about which students to admit, colleges look for students who are "well-rounded." Grades in high school courses and scores on pre-college tests like the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) are very important, but so are the students' extracurricular activities. It is by participating in these activities that students demonstrate their special talents, their level of maturity and responsibility, their leadership qualities, and their ability to get along with others.
- 25 Some Americans consider athletics, frequently called *competitive sports*, the most important of all extracurricular activities. This is because many people believe it is important for all young people, young men and young women, to learn how to compete successfully. Team sports
- such as American football, basketball, baseball, and soccer are important because they teach students the "winning spirit." At times, this athletic competition may be carried to such an extreme that some students and their parents may place more importance on the high school's sports program than its academic offerings.
- 26 Student government is another extracurricular activity designed to develop competitive, political, and social skills in students. The students choose a number of student government officers who compete for the votes of their fellow students in school elections. Although these officers have little power over the central decisions of the school, the process of running for office and then taking responsibility for a number of student activities if elected is seen as good experience in developing their leadership and competitive skills, and in helping them to be responsible citizens.
- 27 Athletics and student government are only two of a variety of extracurricular activities found in American schools. There are clubs and activities for almost every student interest—art, music, drama, debate, foreign languages, photography, volunteer work—all aimed at helping the student to become more successful in later life. A number of school districts now require all students to engage in community service—tutoring, meeting with the elderly in nursing homes, cleaning up community parks, etc.—as a requirement for high school graduation. Many parents watch their children's extracurricular activities with as much interest and concern as they do their children's intellectual achievements in the classroom.

The Standards Movement

- 28 In the late 1900s, international comparisons of education revealed that,

¹⁰ *extracurricular*: sports or other activities that you do in addition to your usual classes

in general, American students did not perform as well in math, science, and other subjects as students from many other developed countries. Some believed this was because American standards for education might not be high enough. Unlike the situation in many other countries, traditionally, local community school districts have had responsibility for determining school curricula and selecting textbooks, with only limited state and national supervision. However, since the 1990s, both the state and the federal government have become more involved in determining school standards. The federal government has set national goals for education that include standards for early childhood, elementary, secondary, and adult education. Even teacher education programs have to meet federal and state standards. Most major educational associations, such as national associations of teachers of science, math, or language arts, have also evaluated the current curricula and criteria for certification and developed new standards.

29 To ensure that standards are met, the federal government now requires annual testing in reading and mathematics in most elementary and middle grades; states also may require students to pass a series of examinations in such subjects as reading, writing, mathematics, and civics before they can graduate from high school. While most states have already set standards, at least for mathematics and reading, for all students, more recently the governors of 45 states, the District of Columbia, and four U.S. territories, created a new set of standards for mathematics and English language arts. Only Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia have remained outside. These Common Core Standards focus on concepts and procedures that are needed for entry into college or the workforce. These standards are not only in line with college and career

requirements, but they also ensure that students who move from one state to another during school will be taught and assessed with the same standards.

30 Standardized tests are not without controversy, however. In the early 2000s, the federal government began a program called No Child Left Behind (NCLB), with the goal of holding schools and teachers accountable for student progress. Schools were given grades to measure the progress of their students on standardized tests. Parents were given the opportunity to remove their children from schools with low or failing grades and send them to schools with better grades. However, several problems have occurred. The emphasis on standardized testing takes a lot of classroom time. Estimates are that preparing for or taking these standardized tests can consume up to 20 percent of the school year. Some teachers are spending more time “teaching to the test” than making sure students understand important concepts. A number of educators fear that the American tradition of asking questions and thinking for oneself is being replaced by memorization of facts to be tested.

31 One of the strongest critics of emphasizing standardized testing is Diane Ravitch, who was originally a strong supporter of NCLB. In her book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*, Ravitch explains why she believes NCLB has failed. When local schools are given a failing grade (because the students have failed to improve enough on the tests), parents can choose to have their students transfer to a better school, but they do not. Parents want to have their children attend a school in their home neighborhood. Ravitch says that after 10 years of NCLB, we should be able to see dramatic improvement in our schools and

the progress of our students, but we do not:

By now, we should be able to point to sharp reductions of the achievement gaps between children of different racial and ethnic groups and children from different income groups, but we cannot. . . . Many children continue to be left behind . . . and they are the same children who were left behind 10 years ago.

- 32 Ravitch believes that it is the responsibility of our public schools to provide equality of educational opportunity to all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income, and if they are unable to reach equality of educational attainment, we must give them special help. We cannot afford to leave any of our children behind, without the education they need to compete for good jobs and a decent standard of living—without a chance to achieve the American Dream.

Inequalities in the American Education System

- 33 The most significant departure from the ideal of equality of opportunity in education occurred in the education of African Americans. As we saw in the previous chapter, after the Civil War in the 1860s, the southern states developed a social and legal system that segregated the former black slaves from the white population in all public facilities, including schools. Blacks had separate schools that were inferior to the white schools by almost any measure.
- 34 The *Brown versus the Board of Education* Supreme Court decision of 1954 ended legal segregation in the southern schools, but segregation continued until the Civil Rights Acts of the mid-1960s. During the late 1960s and the 1970s, a series of court decisions forced the nation



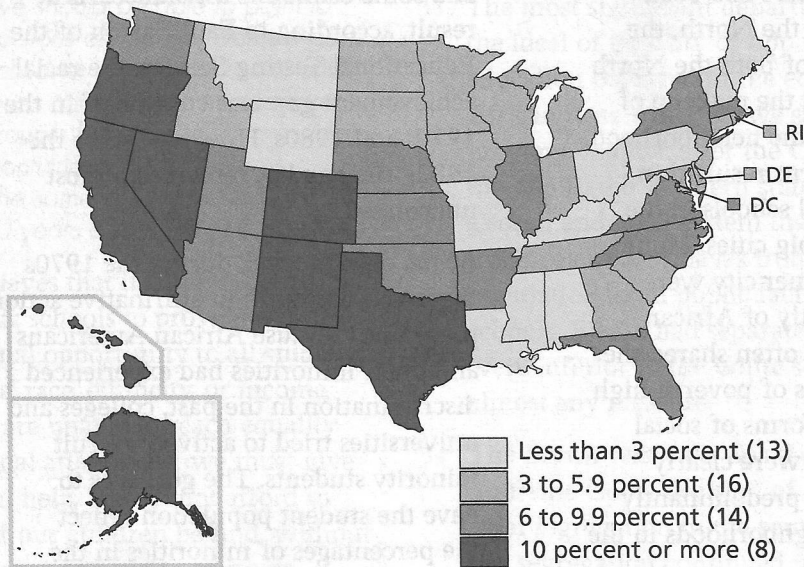
Before segregation ended, black students often attended schools with crowded, substandard classrooms and inadequate resources.

to take measures to integrate all of its public schools, in both the South and the North. Although there had been no legal segregation in the North, the neighborhood schools of both the North and the South reflected the makeup of the races who lived in the neighborhood. These residential patterns resulted in a number of segregated schools in the North, particularly in big cities. Many public schools in the inner city were composed predominantly of African-American students and often shared the neighborhood problems of poverty, high crime rates, and other forms of social disorder. These schools were clearly unequal to those in the predominantly white, middle-class neighborhoods in the suburbs.

- 35 For the next twenty years, the courts required Americans to try to achieve racial balance in the public schools. The most controversial method used to deal with unequal neighborhood schools was the busing of schoolchildren from their home neighborhoods to schools in more distant neighborhoods in order to achieve a greater mixture of black and white children in all schools. Black children from the inner city were bused to schools in predominantly white, middle-class neighborhoods, and students living in the middle-class neighborhoods were bused into the poorer black neighborhood schools. Most students did not like it, and neither did their parents, who wanted their children to attend neighborhood schools. Busing continued through the 1970s and the 1980s with mixed success, and it has been largely abandoned. Most school districts now allow children to attend school in their own neighborhood, even if it is predominantly black or white.
- 36 In addition to trying to end segregation, the federal government created assistance programs for the neediest children. These

included special reading instruction, smaller classes, early childhood programs, and some economic assistance. As a result, according to Paul Barton of the Educational Testing Service, the racial achievement gap was cut in half in the 1970s and 1980s. However, since the 1980s, the gap has remained almost unchanged.

- 37 At the college level, during the 1970s there was a growth in affirmative action programs. Because African Americans and other minorities had experienced discrimination in the past, colleges and universities tried to actively recruit minority students. The goal was to have the student population reflect the percentages of minorities in the population of the state or country as a whole. All minority students were recruited, Hispanics as well as blacks. In the previous chapter, we mentioned that Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor experienced the benefits of affirmative action, with admission to and scholarship offers from many top universities.
- 38 Over the years, there have been challenges to the use of affirmative action in determining college admissions. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled that the University of Michigan could consider a student's ethnic or racial heritage during its decision-making. As Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote in the Supreme Court decision, "Effective participation by members of all racial and ethnic groups in the civic life of our nation is essential if the dream of one Nation, indivisible, is to be realized."
- 39 In 2013, the Supreme Court considered another challenge to affirmative action brought by Abigail Fisher, a white honor roll student who had been denied admission to the University of Texas at Austin in 2008. The University guaranteed admission to the top ten percent of all



Source: U.S. Department of English, National Center for Education Statistics

graduating Texas high school students regardless of race, but it considered race and ethnicity as factors for all other students. Fisher was in the top 12 percent of her class and claimed that minority students with lower qualifications were admitted instead of her, violating her constitutional rights. The Supreme Court ruled that universities should try to achieve diversity with “race-neutral policies.” These complex legal issues cause Americans to ask themselves how to provide equality of educational opportunity to all students—white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and other minorities.

The Increasing Responsibilities of Public Schools

40 Americans place the weight of many of their ideals, hopes, and problems on the nation’s public school system. Some observers believe they have placed more responsibilities on the public schools than the schools can possibly handle. For example, public schools are often expected to solve student problems that result from the weakening of family ties in the

United States. Rising divorce rates and births to single mothers have resulted in an increasing number of children in the public schools who are raised by only one parent. Studies have shown that these children are more likely to have problems at school than are children raised in families with two parents.

41 The education of the new immigrant children provides the public school system with some of its greatest challenges. Many of the children come from countries where they have not had strong educational preparation, and their academic skills are below grade level. Others have come from school systems with standards similar to, or even more advanced than, the American schools, and their academic adjustment is much easier. However, all these children must learn English. This means that they are trying to learn new concepts at the same time that they are struggling to learn a new language. Studies show that it takes five to seven years in order for them to be able to compete with English-speaking American children on an equal basis in

classes where English is the language of instruction. There are some bilingual programs in areas where there is a large concentration of one language group, particularly Spanish speakers. However, there are more than 400 languages spoken in the United States, and some school districts report that 100 or more different languages are spoken by children in their schools. It is not uncommon for five or six different native languages to be spoken by the students in one classroom.

- 42 It is obvious that children who are not native speakers of English are going to be at a disadvantage when taking standardized tests. Many are not going to be able to compete with native speakers on these tests. Under the No Child Left Behind program, their lower scores may affect the rating of their school, and they affect the overall average test scores of American students. Thus, school districts with high concentrations of non-native speakers of English may have lower test scores than districts that do not. Unfortunately, many of these school districts are the ones that have limited financial resources and may not be able to provide students with all the extra support that they need. In general, during times of economic downturns, there is less money going to the public schools from the state and local governments that fund them. (As stated before, the national government only provides an average of 10 percent of the funding for American elementary and secondary schools.)
- 43 The limitations on school funding create fewer problems for wealthier Americans. In the last few years, the testing scores of high-income students have gone up while the scores of black students, Hispanic students, and low-income students have remained unchanged. Some reading scores have actually gone down. The lowest scores are in school

districts—such as Detroit (Michigan) and Washington, D.C.—where poverty and racial segregation are most concentrated. The inner-city public school system in Washington, D.C. has the largest achievement gap of any city in the nation between white and black students. And yet, in the area surrounding the city are seven of the ten wealthiest counties in the country, with some of the best schools and highest concentrations of adults with advanced college degrees.

- 44 In a controversial book entitled *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960–2010*, Charles Murray describes the widening gap between what he sees as a new upper class and a new lower class. Murray says that members of the new upper class live in certain super zip codes in the United States, where the income and education levels are high, and the people are often the leaders and decision makers of the country. Four cities are the centers of power: “It is difficult to hold a nationally influential job in politics, public policy, finance, business, academia, information technology, or the media and not live in the areas surrounding New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, or San Francisco.”
- 45 Murray worries that these elite Americans are isolated from the rest of the country and do not understand the problems of the middle class. They are economically secure and often some of the wealthiest people in the country. During the economic recession, their incomes went up while the rest of Americans saw their incomes fall. They have their own subculture. Generally, they are married, religious, socially liberal, physically fit, and very concerned about their children’s education. They want to send their children to the right preschool, so that they can go to the right elementary school and the right high school, so that they can get admitted to one of the most

prestigious universities, particularly Harvard, Princeton, or Yale. Interestingly, all the present Supreme Court Justices have law degrees from either Harvard or Yale, and all the U.S. presidents from George H. W. Bush through President Obama (Presidents George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama) have degrees from either Harvard or Yale.

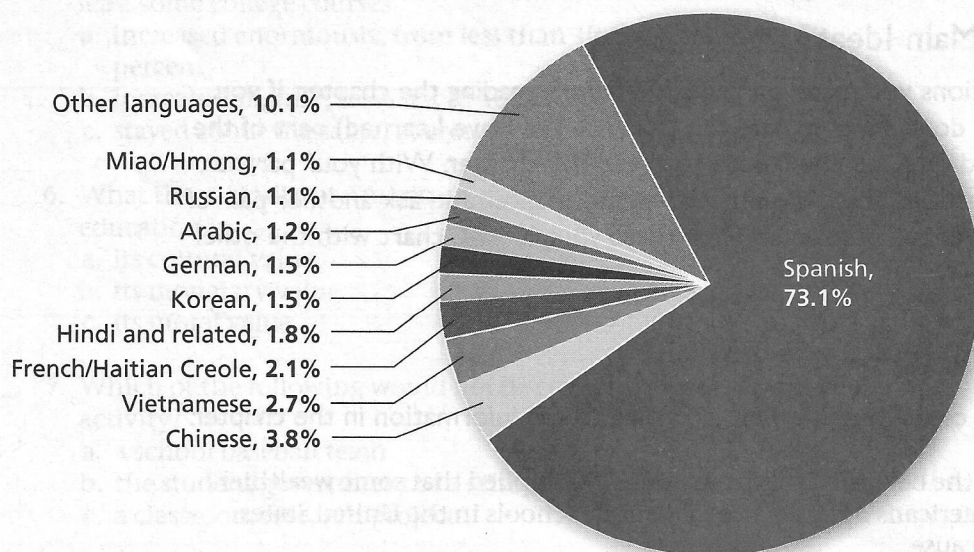
Twenty-first Century Challenges to American Education

- 46 We began by observing that the public schools in the United States reflect the ideal of equality of opportunity. When they began in the early 1800s, there was a belief that if children from all classes attended the same schools, there would be fewer social class distinctions. From the beginning, of course, the reality was that the schools were not open to all. In many parts of the country, African Americans could not attend public schools. After the Civil War, the Supreme Court tried to justify segregated schools by saying that they could be “separate but equal.” Justice John Marshall Harlan believed that the decision violated the nation’s highest law and its basic values. “Our Constitution is color-blind,” he said, “and neither knows nor tolerates classes among its citizens.” Then, in 1954, the Supreme Court held that laws that forced black students to go to racially segregated schools violated the U.S. Constitution because such schools could never be equal. The opinion of the Court was that “to separate [black school children] from others . . . solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”
- 47 And now, in the 2000s, we find that American schools are once again largely segregated, this time not by law, but because of residential patterns and the love

of local neighborhood schools. Now we find that the children of new immigrants may also be in schools where there are a majority of minority students. And we learn that the high school graduation rate for both African Americans and Hispanics is below that of white students. How will we address these critical problems? What does the future hold? On the one hand, local schools reflect residential patterns where there is significant segregation. On the other hand, however, neighborhoods are becoming increasingly integrated as minorities settle in the suburbs. Another factor is that young people are marrying other races and ethnic groups at an increasingly rapid rate. More and more children are born of mixed race/ethnicity.

- 48 The impact of the enormous number of new immigrants cannot be overstated. From 1980 to 2010, the percentage of foreign-born Americans more than doubled. One in four school children lives with a parent who was born outside the United States. Forty-five percent of the students in U.S. schools are a member of a racial or ethnic minority group. This has caused schools to examine the curricula and try to make it more inclusive. Many schools have adopted history or social studies textbooks that include more information about African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and other minorities, and literature texts that include poetry and fiction written by Americans of all ethnic backgrounds.
- 49 The challenge is to find ways to give all students, in whatever schools they are attending, the very best education possible. Most Americans would probably agree that there should be minimum core standards that all school districts meet, but there should also be flexibility to account for local diversity. There has always been an effort to find a balance between educational standards and the unique

TOP TEN SPOKEN LANGUAGES IN LEP STUDENTS' HOMES



Note: Refers to limited English proficient (LEP) students, ages 5 to 18, currently enrolled in school. LEP students are those who reported speaking English less than "very well."
Source: MPI analysis of the 2009 American Community Survey.

circumstances of local neighborhood schools. Americans of all races, ethnic groups, and levels of income care deeply about the education of their children. And the majority of parents want their children to attend their neighborhood school. If it is not a good school, they want to see it improved, not closed.

- 50 In contrast to many other countries, the local school district has always had a great deal of control over neighborhood schools. Americans are often suspicious of the federal government telling them how to run their local schools. Many school districts are administered by local school boards elected by the people in

the district. There are often public school board meetings where parents debate what is happening in the schools—sometimes about what is being taught or what books are being used.

- 51 American public schools have generally served the United States well by educating a diverse population and working to bring people together. Americans face increased challenges now as they struggle to find ways to provide all students equality of educational opportunity. And they are now debating how to bring equality of achievement to more young people. The future wellbeing of America depends on it.