

A LESSON ON ENGLISH



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EDUCATION IN AMERICA (DAYCARE THROUGH ELEMENTARY)

This issue is the first in a three-part series that gives an overview of the American educational system. Please be aware that this system is exceedingly complex and sometimes controversial. This series presented in *A Lesson on English* is simply a first brief glance at a complicated set of interrelated educational organizations and classifications.

Education is a multi-billion dollar industry in the U.S. With a consumer-oriented approach, the market for educational programs is diverse and finely-tuned to individual needs. Many American educational institutions are organized on the premise that they meet each student's needs, individually.

This interest in accommodating all people wishing an education has led to the establishment of publicly-funded schools (these receive money from federal, state and local governments and are known as public schools) and privately-funded schools (which, paradoxically, usually also receive at least some public funding in addition to non-public monies.) This issue of ALOE focuses on daycare, preschool, pre-K, and K-12 education in the U.S.

DAYCARE, NURSERY SCHOOL & PRE-SCHOOL

Infants are welcome at many day care centers from the age of 3 months on. These centers are regulated by states and municipalities, with widely-varying standards and requirements (most of which are concerned with health and safety rather than education). However, some offer an educational component, perhaps using a prescribed curriculum such as Montessori, or using mediated (not face-to-face) instruction through television (such as Sesame Street) or videos (such as Baby Einstein).

Nursery schools and pre-schools are similar, accommodating children aged 18 months-4 years. They may have an educational focus, with scheduled activities, or be free-form. Many are run by churches and schools; these tend to be more structured than those run by parent co-operatives, businesses or individuals. Pre-K programs are for 4-year-olds, are usually voluntary and are free, if provided by the state government. These programs are aimed at children whose home life is not deemed conducive to the kind of educational preparation needed for kindergarten.

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VOCABULARY OF EDUCATION

Pre-K, nursery school or day care: From the age of 3 months on, American children can attend day care programs that may have some educational components. Nursery school is generally for children ages 3-4, while Pre-K serves children ages 4-5. However, there is great overlap in the ages for these programs, and significant differences in quality and objectives. For example, Montessori programs adhere to a prescribed curriculum and socializa-

tion process, while many day care facilities simply let children play as they will.

Primary, elementary or grade school: These terms are somewhat interchangeable, describing educational programs for children ages 5-11. Grades are Kindergarten, 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, and sometimes 6th. These schools emphasize basic academic skills and further socialization skills, such as waiting your turn, sitting quietly, and cooperating with the teacher and other students. Students may or may not change classes (move from room to room) during the day.



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Sara and Jarda Tusek with Klaus

“A Lesson on English” is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

EDUCATION IN AMERICA, FROM P. 1

PUBLIC SCHOOLS, K-12

America has a nationally-mandated public education system, free to every eligible child, that begins at age 5 and ends at age 18. Generally, every child who lives in the U.S. is eligible for this education (even children of illegal immigrants); additionally, every child is obligated to attend school (public, private, or home school) from age 5 to age 16. Entry into public school requires registration in the appropriate school district, including proof of vaccination against the most virulent contagious childhood diseases (measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, pertussus, polio, hepatitis B, varicella, and tetanus) and a birth certificate.

American public education is funded by federal, state and local governments, and is administered by local school

boards that are regulated by the state (and, in some aspects, by the federal government). It is against federal law to discriminate racially, ethnically, religiously or in any other way in public educational settings. The federal government funds some customized educational programs, such as special education for children with mental, physical or emotional handicaps. These programs are administered locally, either school-by-school or county-wide

LOCAL CONTROL

Americans have a history of vocal, even combative, determination to run public schools locally. Local school boards are made up of community members elected by the public (or sometimes appointed by local governments), in order to keep control of public schools in the hands of the families and community in which the school operates.

Standards for curriculum, teacher training, school funding, etc. vary dramatically from one locality to another, and from one school to another. There are no mandatory federal standards for teacher training, though voluntary national teacher certification does exist.

Schools are divided into geographical districts that encompass neighborhoods that may be very different from each other. Funding is tied to district revenues and tends to favor richer districts over poorer, resulting in striking inequalities in public schools administered by the same school board.

SPECIAL PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Public schools can be structured to support curricula that stress particular content and skills (such as technology, the arts, foreign language, etc.). These are

known as “magnet schools” and have special requirements for admission.

Charter schools use public funds for operation but are run by private businesses and individuals, and regulated by states. These schools may offer specialization by subject areas, making them similar to magnet schools.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS, K-12

Private schools may be run by churches, universities, businesses, parents, and individuals. They cater to an enormous range of interests and expectations, from basic educational skills (emphasis on fundamental skills of reading, writing and arithmetic) to sophisticated programs including Advanced Placement courses and International Baccalaureate degree diplomas for high school students. Some states dictate strict criteria for private schools operating within their jurisdiction; other states take a more laissez-faire approach.

Often private schools deliberately socialize students according to a stated philosophy, allowing parents to choose a school that matches their own beliefs and values. In fact, many private schools were established based on particular ideologies or belief systems, in order to inculcate their principles into the students.

Most private schools charge tuition, although in failing public school districts, the school board may provide tuition vouchers to qualified students who can benefit from attending a private school. Loans and payment plans are available at most private schools. Schools associated with colleges and universities are private in one sense, yet often charge no tuition; they act as teacher training grounds for students in their institutions.

See April 2008 ALOE for more on the U.S. educational system