



Types Of Schools

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Background

For parents and students alike, the type of education available within their community is critically important. Many people, in fact, choose the communities in which they live on the basis of the quality of the local schools. Some parents choose to send their children to public school, believing that public education provides a more well-rounded experience for children. Others feel that private education offers students a more varied and creative course of study. Those who wish to instill within their children a sense of their religion may choose religious (often called parochial) schools; these schools provide religious instruction along with the general academic program. In recent years, a growing number of parents have turned to homeschooling, which they feel allows them more control over what and how their children learn.

Each system has its advantages and drawbacks; choosing the best system is determined by a number of considerations. For example, a child who lives in an affluent community with a well-respected public school system will likely want to take advantage of this free education. A child in a poorer community, or one who needs more individualized attention, may fare better in a private school, where classes are smaller and teachers can focus more fully on specific issues. Children in small rural communities, who may have to travel dozens of miles to go to school, may profit more by being home-schooled, or they may be able to hook up to schools via technology (the concept known as distance learning). How a child is educated depends on his or her abilities and needs, the expectations of parents, and the available choices. For parents and children to make informed choices, they need to understand what each type of school offers.

Public Schools

In an address to educators in 1948, the statesman Adlai Stevenson said, "The most American thing about America is the free common school system." The concept of providing free public education to all children was born in Boston in 1635 with the establishment of a public institution that still exists today as the Boston Latin School. By the time of the American Revolution, free public schools were quite common in the northern colonies; in the South, schooling was done primarily at home until after the Civil War. By the end of the nineteenth century, public education was available to children across the country. Then, as now, the quality of education varied, sometimes dramatically, from region to region. Today, public school curricula are regulated by state and local governments.

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According to the National Education Association (NEA), there were 14,568 public school districts in the United States in academic year 1998-99. There are approximately 89,500 public schools in the United States; nearly 63,000 of those schools are elementary (kindergarten through sixth grade). The rest are mostly secondary (middle and high schools), although a small number of schools go from kindergarten to 12th grade (K-12). These schools employ some 2.7 million teachers and serve more than 53 million students.

Public schools are funded primarily by state and local sources; the federal government historically has provided less than 10 percent of public education funding. Each school district has a board of education or similar administrative group to oversee the schools' performance; each state has an education department that sets academic standards for the school districts to follow.

The public school experience varies widely from district to district. A large city such as New York or Los Angeles has to address the education of hundreds of thousands of students with extraordinarily diverse needs. A small rural school district may have only a few hundred students who all come from a similar background. Affluent suburban communities with more local funding may pay higher salaries to attract the best teachers; this makes for strong suburban school districts but leaves poorer areas under-served. State governments do try to [REDRESS](#) this imbalance (by giving more funds to poorer districts, for example) but often they meet with limited success.

Private and Parochial Schools

Unlike public schools, private schools do not rely on government funding. They are supported by tuition, by grants from charitable organizations, and in the case of religious schools, by religious institutions. There are approximately 27,500 private schools in the United States, with some 395,000 teachers serving about 6 million students. Private schools include nonsectarian schools and religious schools covering many denominations (the term *parochial* usually denotes Catholic schools but can mean other Christian or Jewish institutions).

Tuition costs for private schools vary. As of 2002, figures available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), indicated that nonsectarian private schools were the most expensive and Catholic schools were the least. Still tuition for school runs into tens of thousands of dollars over the course of a child's school years. Why would parents send their children to private schools when they have the option of sending them to public school for free?

For some, private school represents a stronger curriculum than public education can offer and a more personalized one as well. Public schools are generally much larger than private schools, and class size is also larger. Fewer students per teacher means that the teacher can spend more time one-on-one with each student.

The atmosphere in private and parochial schools is also different, sometimes vastly so, from that of public schools. A private school can focus its attention on a student's particular talents, such as music or science. As for parochial schools, they can provide religious instruction that no public school would be allowed to offer. This religious instruction is included in a curriculum that is generally strong academically.

Not merely the educational experience but also the social experience weighs in the minds of many parents as well. Schools that are unsafe (which could include anything from a building with antiquated electrical and heating systems to a school with a high rate of juvenile crime) make for a difficult atmosphere in which to learn. In general, these problems are more likely to develop in a public school than in a private one.

Teacher salaries tend to be lower in private schools, although some private schools offer teachers perks such

as free meals and even free housing on campus. This gives private institutions more of a competitive edge against public systems that can pay quite well. Parents often perceive this as a sign that private school teachers are more committed to teaching than some of their public school counterparts.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are most simply described as a cross between public and private schools. These schools are often created by teacher and parent groups who are dissatisfied with the bureaucracy that surrounds public education. The rules and regulations that shape a public school district, charter proponents argue, can cripple innovation in the schools. The result may be an uninspired and uninspiring educational program that fails to challenge students or meet their true needs.

The first charter school in the United States opened in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1993. As of the beginning of the school year in September 2001 there were some 2,400 charter schools operating in 34 states and the District of Columbia, serving 576,000 students. (Three additional states, Indiana, New Hampshire, and Wyoming, have charter school laws on the books but had not established charter schools by 2001.)

Typically, a charter school will be proposed by a group consisting of teachers, parents, and community leaders. Local and state organizations provide funding for charter schools, approve their programs, and monitor their quality. Charter schools are "public" in this sense, but unlike traditional public schools they are freed from traditional regulation. In general, the number of students per charter school is lower than in a traditional school, and there are also more teachers per pupil.

Proponents of charter schools claim that the structure not only enhances autonomy from oppressive bureaucracy but also increases accountability. Because they are monitored carefully, they have little room to do poorly. If they fail to accomplish their goal, they are closed. Moreover, because parents actively choose to send their children to charter schools, the school administrators know that if they fail to provide what they promise, parents and students will go elsewhere.

Opponents of charter schools say that they are merely private schools cloaked in a public-school mantle, allowing like-minded individuals to opt out of the public school system at the expense of those schools. This makes it even harder, they maintain, for public schools to excel. Proponents counter that charter schools create a healthy competition that forces school districts to offer more and better services to students in their traditional schools.

Privatization

One of the more controversial ideas in the public school arena is whether to privatize public school districts. This issue gained national attention in 2001 when the state of Pennsylvania initiated plans to take over the Philadelphia city school district and contract with a private firm to administer the city's schools. The move met with widespread opposition despite the fact that Philadelphia public schools had been in decline for some time. The main problem with allowing a private firm to take control of a public school district, say opponents, is that the emphasis will be on cutting costs rather than enhancing education. For-profit firms claim that they improve schools by streamlining and cutting unnecessary costs. School privatization has been tried in some districts, but the long-term benefits or drawbacks remain to be seen.

Home Schooling

A growing number of parents are choosing to turn away from public and private schools and instead educate their children in their own homes. In 1999, the most recent year for which NCES has figures, some 850,000 students between the ages of 5 and 17 were being schooled at home. Approximately 697,000 of these children are schooled completely in their homes; the remaining 153,000 are schooled primarily in their homes but also go part-time to a traditional school.

In general, the makeup of a home-schooling family is fairly traditional. Most of these families (80 percent) are two-parent families, and most of them have three or more children. Typically, one parent works while the other assumes the primary role of teacher, although the other parent may also be involved in the education process as well.

The most common reason parents give for home-schooling (a reason voiced by nearly all of them) is that they feel they can provide a better education for their children at home than the schools can. They may feel that the local school's curriculum is inadequate, or that it focuses on the wrong areas. Some parents feel that traditional schools fail to teach values to children; they school their children at home to provide a strong moral education. Or they may school their children at home for religious reasons; they may feel that the public school system is too secular for their tastes. A small number of parents turn to home schooling because they cannot afford to send their children to a private school.

In some cases, parents who home-school their children seek and receive a degree of public school support in the form of supplies, curricular assistance, and allowing home-schoolers to participate in the school's extracurricular programs. Frequently, the parents of home-schoolers do not avail themselves of these resources, preferring to keep the education centered around the home classroom. Home-schooled children are of course required to demonstrate that they are learning at the proper educational level, and parents are expected to provide structured classes, homework, tests, and projects.

Vocational Education

Before the twentieth century, education for many young people consisted of learning a trade, which usually meant serving as an apprentice to an experienced tradesman. Apprentices learned to be blacksmiths or cabinetmakers or carpenters. In some smaller towns, children were apprenticed to professions such as law. Since the early twentieth century public high schools have offered a version of these apprenticeships in the form of vocational education (also called occupational education). This includes shop and home economics courses, as well as courses geared toward specific occupations such as electrician or automobile mechanic or cosmetologist.

Although the average high school student takes fewer course-hours in occupational education today than in the 1980s (4.68 in 1982; 3.99 in 1998), the more specific programs held steady in the number of course-hours students devoted.

Distance Learning

Distance learning (the use of telecommunications technologies to broadcast classes from a central location to remote locations) has become quite popular among colleges and universities, particularly with adult or continuing education courses. Since the late 1980s, it has also been used in elementary and high schools. Through a program supported by the Department of Education called the Star Schools Program, some 1.6

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million students in all 50 states were receiving long-distance instruction by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The benefits of distance learning are clear: access to lessons not otherwise available. This arrangement is useful for students living in remote rural areas, but it also proves effective in urban locations. While a distance learning experience is not the same as a person-to-person lesson, it opens up avenues for new experiences. Moreover, many distance learning programs are interactive and thus engage children in a way designed to hold their attention. As technology becomes more efficient and less expensive, it is likely that distance learning will make up a growing element of elementary and secondary education.

Additional Resources

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Unofficial Guide to Homeschooling. Ishizuke, Kathy, IDG Books Worldwide, 2000.

Organizations

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