

A Sociological Perspective of the American Education System

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Table of Contents

---Research Proposal.....	3
---Annotated Bibliography.....	4
---Outline.....	9
---Introduction and Presentation of Research Focus.....	11
---Critical Analysis of Federal Educational Initiatives and Programs.....	13
---Defunding of Programs and the Allocation of Resources.....	20
---The Standards and Testing Movement.....	27
---Finland vs. the United States.....	32
---The Future of Education in America.....	36
---Bibliography.....	38

Research Proposal

The intension of this research project is to provide a critical analysis of the modern American school system, the policies that created and maintain it, the extensive effects of its practices, and the future of education under such a system. I will begin by tracing the evolution of the current order and discuss the impacts of government educational initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (George W. Bush) and A Race to the Top (Barack Obama) among others. To support these examples I will use secondary statistical research data, scholarly journals, government sources, and other forms of evidence. In this way I will attempt to show the successes and failures over the course of history as well as the underlying effects on American education and society. The following portion of my study will be dedicated to analyzing the defunding of enrichment and fine arts programs, the allocation of resources among various schools, and the narrow method of measuring both student and teacher performance under core-curriculum standards. An in depth look at these negative consequences will be juxtaposed with championed goals and successes of these programs and policies. Finally I will compare and contrast the school system in America with that of Finland, and discuss the future of education in the United States under the current system of learning and teaching.

Annotated Bibliography

- Abbott, C. (2013). The "Race to the Top" and the Inevitable Fall to the Bottom: How the Principles of the "Campaign for Fiscal Equity" and Economic Integration Can Help Close the Achievement Gap. *Brigham Young University Education & Law Journal*, (1), 93-123. Abbott discusses failures of the Race to the Top and how New York State's education reform initiative has the potential to counteract the achievement gap. This work will be helpful in my discussion of government education initiatives and how American schools can be fixed in the future.
- Albrecht, S., & Joles, C. (2003). Accountability and Access to Opportunity: Mutually Exclusive Tenets Under a High-Stakes Testing Mandate. *Preventing School Failure*, 47(2), 86. The authors examine tenets of No Child Left Behind and the harmful results of a limited testing model to measure the academic proficiencies of students. The authors go on to discuss the alternatives and how to ensure accountability and equal access in a nondiscriminatory manner. This work will help me in my project by providing academic research for my analysis of the standards and testing movement.
- Bailey, D. F., & Bradbury-Bailey, M. E. (2010). Empowered Youth Programs: Partnerships for Enhancing Postsecondary Outcomes of African American Adolescents. *Professional School Counseling*, 14 (1), 64-74. The authors allude to a growing achievement gap between white students and students of color and poor students who receive less support to be successful. They discuss how enrichment programs, through their incorporation of families and communities, can promote and support educational achievement and success for underprivileged students. This work will assist me in my argument against the defunding of enrichment programs and the need for education reform to feature programs to assist students of lesser opportunity in order to close the achievement gap.
- Behrent, M. (2009). Reclaiming Our Freedom to Teach: Education Reform in the Obama Era. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79 (2), 240-246. This essay by a high school teacher examines the ways new age education reform punishes students and teachers, making it difficult to teach within the limitations of core curriculum and challenging for those who struggle to learn under standardized testing models. I will use this work to support my discussion of contemporary frameworks for measuring intelligence and academic success.
- (n.d.). *Central Intelligence Agency*. Retrieved May 6, 2014, from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/us.html>. This federal resource provides detailed portraits of all countries in the world, including in depth focus on population, economy, transportation, geography, government, and military. This will aid in my comparison of Finland and the United States, and further display the wide contrast they possess in relation to their education systems.
- Connell, N. (1998). Public education. *Social Policy*, 28 (3), 68-72. This article addresses the issue of educational opportunity and equality, and how a shrinking labor market exacerbate the neglect of poor minorities in public schools. Connell goes on to discuss the consequences of not educating a large portion of the American population. This work will aid my research on poor minority students and their lack of resources, educational quality, and academic opportunity for success.
- Crain, W. (2006). Testing. *Encounter*, 19 (1), 2-5. Crain presents an argument against the testing and standards movement and how it harms the development and emotional health of

students. I will use this study in my discussion of the testing and standards movement and my analysis of its negative effects versus its positive intentions.

- Dutro, E., & Selland, M. (2012). 'I Like to Read, but I Know I'm Not Good at It': Children's Perspectives on High-Stakes Testing in a High-Poverty School. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 42 (3), 340-367. doi:10.1111/j.1467-873X.2012.00597.x. The authors conduct research on a large sample of third graders in an urban elementary school and determine what attitudes they have toward high stakes testing and why. Dutro and Selland go on to explain how children's experiences with testing come to shape their relationships with school and education in general. This work will assist me in my discussion of standardized testing and how intelligence is measured in the current education framework.
- Ellinger, K., & Wright III, D. E. (1995). Brains for the bucks? School revenue and student achievement in Oklahoma. *Social Science Journal*, 32 (3), 299. The authors set out to determine the relationship between school funding and student achievement in Oklahoma during a two-year period. This work will assist me in my project by providing a study to support my argument of school funding perpetuating the achievement gap and leaving poor minorities behind.
- Hochschild, J. (1996). *Facing up the american dream: Race, class, and the soul of the nation*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7rhtn>. The author discusses the American Dream, our failure to realize these ideal freedoms and opportunities, and the implications of a population that is increasingly frustrated and pessimistic about their collective fate. This article will provide me with a relevant perspective for my introduction on the connection between America's decaying education system and the shortcomings of the mythical American Dream.
- I.G. (1985). Revitalized NSF education program emphasizes grades K-8. *Physics Today*, 38(1), 55. The author discusses the publication of "A Nation at Risk" during the Reagan administration and the attention it called to education under a previously neglectful leadership. This work will be helpful in my historical account of government education initiatives and policies leading up to the present day system of education.
- Key findings - OECD. (n.d.). *Key findings - OECD*. Retrieved May 6, 2014, from <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/>. This work discusses the key findings of the PISA test under OECD during its existence and discusses important revelations concerning contributing factors to educational success. I will use this to supplement my juxtaposition of Finland and the United States, and what components each country possesses or lacks.
- Kuehl, R. A. (2012). The Rhetorical Presidency and "Accountability" in Education Reform: Comparing the Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. *Southern Communication Journal*, 77 (4), 329-348. doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.678926. The author presents a comparison in presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush and their education policies. Kuehl investigates the rise of the standards movement and how reform policies have come to revolve around accountability with federal funds and the need to measure academic success through standardized testing and documentation. This work will assist me in my analysis of federal education reform policies and how the American school system has become what it is today.
- Lagana-Riordan, C., & Aguilar, J. P. (2009). What's Missing from No Child Left Behind? A Policy Analysis from a Social Work Perspective. *Children & Schools*, 31 (3), 135-144. In this article the authors discuss the social and emotional risk factors that prevent students from

succeeding in school, that are not addressed under the No Child Left Behind framework. They suggest that school social workers could help alleviate these barriers and enable vulnerable students to find ways to success. I will use this research in my project by applying it to my analysis of education quality among students of different races and socioeconomic status.

- Lee, J. (2012). Educational Equity and Adequacy for Disadvantaged Minority Students: School and Teacher Resource Gaps Toward National Mathematics Proficiency Standard. *Journal Of Educational Research*, 105 (1), 64-75. doi:10.1080/00220671.2010.519409. Lee presents the issue of educational inadequacy and inequity for disadvantaged minority students. The author goes on to discuss the effect that a lack of resources has on the chances of poor minority students achieving proficiency standards. This work will help me in my discussion of school funding and its relationship to academic achievement.
- Madaus, G., & Russell, M. (2010). Paradoxes of High-Stakes Testing. *Journal Of Education*, 190 (1/2), 21-30. The authors discuss various issues associated with high-stakes testing in schools, the history of testing in America, and the importance of testing related to educational accountability. Madaus and Russell go on to analyze how standardized testing has narrowed learning and made teaching practices revolve around test scores rather than actual knowledge. I will use this research in my project to help explain the way knowledge is measured in American schools and how it is affecting both teachers and students.
- Major, M. L. (2013). How They Decide: A Case Study Examining the Decision-Making Process for Keeping or Cutting Music in a K–12 Public School District. *Journal Of Research In Music Education*, 61 (1), 5-25. doi:10.1177/0022429412474313. The author provides a case study of one school district's process of deciding whether or not to cut funding for music in a K-12 district and the factors considered when participating in such a process. This research will support my investigation into the defunding of enrichment programs, music, art, and sports in schools.
- Mansell, W. (2011). What is it about Finland?. *Education Journal*, (127), 24-25. The author discusses Finland's consistent success on the PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) in all tested subjects of reading, science, and math, and top ranking among countries of the world. Mansell explores what factors might contribute to Finland's educational achievements and what aspects of their system differ from other industrialized countries. I will use this research in my discussion of Finland's education system in comparison with that of the United States.
- Nelson-Royes, A. M., & Reglin, G. L. (2011). After-School Tutoring For Reading Achievement And Urban Middle School Students. *Reading Improvement*, 48 (3), 105-117. The authors' research focuses on after-school programs and the benefits of tutoring for reading comprehension. The study found that for students whose attendance was consistent, their reading skills improved across the board. The article ends by presenting an argument for increased funding to institute more after school programs devoted to improving reading skills. I will use this study in my research to strengthen my discussion of the benefits of after-school and enrichment programs and the need for education reform in this area.
- O'Hearn, K. M., & Blumer, S. (2008). Effectiveness of a Summer Enrichment Program For Disadvantaged Middle School Girls. *Ohio Journal Of Science*, 108 (1), A-30. O'Hearn conducts a study of underprivileged middle school girls and their enrollment in a summer enrichment program. She discusses how her evidence suggests that the program succeeded in maintaining interest and competence in education throughout the middle school years for a group of young

girls who might have otherwise gone off track. I will use this study's research to assist me in my analysis of the value of enrichment programs and why they should be a major focus of government reform.

- Ornstein, A. (2010, September). Achievement Gaps in Education. *Society*. pp. 424-429. doi: 10.1007/s12115-010-9354-y. Ornstein discusses the education gap and the simultaneous decline of American human capital, and the wider view of the rise of the East and decline of the U.S. (and the West). The author argues that schools have little effect on neutralizing outside factors that create social and economic inequality, and subsequent differences in educational output. This work will assist me in my focus on the allocation of resources among school districts and how public education is unequal in its quality and accessibility for poor students of minority backgrounds.
- *Race to the top* . (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/k-12/race-to-the-top>. This white house document discusses President Obama's RTTT education program, its logistics, implementation, and future goals. I will use this to support my presentation of historical educational initiatives throughout history, their intentions, and their ultimate outcomes.
- Roe, K. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Cultural Education. (2009). *Federal education policy and the states, 1945-2009*. Retrieved from website: http://www.archives.nysed.gov/edpolicy/research/res_essay_contents.shtml. This work presents a historical overview of both federal and state educational policies and initiatives, beginning with the Eisenhower administration and culminating with the current presidency of Obama. I will use this resource to discuss the historical origin of education reform in the United States and the emergence of the standards and testing movement.
- Ryan, J. E. (1999). The Influence of Race in School Finance Reform. *Michigan Law Review*, 98 (2), 432. Ryan discusses the factor of race in school finance reform and how minority districts often times have less resources at their disposal, leading to lower quality of education and a lower academic success rate. This work will be helpful in my discussion of the way resources are allocated among schools and how this perpetuates the achievement gap.
- Sahlberg, P. (2013). Teachers as Leaders in Finland. *Educational Leadership*, 71 (2), 36-40. The author describes the leadership role teachers play in Finland, how they collaborate, their job satisfaction and the overall image of a teacher occupation in the country. The article goes on to discuss the high-performing Finnish education system and methods of reform. I will use this work to strengthen my comparative analysis of the American and Finnish education systems, what makes them achieve differently, and how the United States can import some of these education models to their own system.
- Scherer, M. (1992). On savage inequalities: A conversation with Jonathan Kozol. *Educational Leadership*, 50(4), 4. The author discusses the influential book of Jonathan Kozol with the said author, addressing issues in the education system and debating what interventions must be made to benefit students, teachers, and schools in America. I will use this article to support my argument on the negative effects of the standards and testing movement, and how education must go about alleviating barriers and obstacles for success.
- Senator Barack Obama, A More Perfect Union, Remarks at the Constitution Center (Mar. 18, 2008). This speech made by Barack Obama during his presidential campaign in 2008 refers to his stance on educational reform, its strengths and weaknesses, and how it should be addressed in

order to repair the system. I will use this work to supplement my analysis of Obama's RTTT initiative and the direction of education in America at the present time.

- Slaton, E. (2012). Collegiate Connections: Music Education Budget Crisis. *Music Educators Journal*, 99 (1), 33-35. doi:10.1177/0027432112454837. The author discusses how music is impacted by funding cuts for education budgets and stresses the various benefits of having music as a part of standard education. This research will assist me in my discussion of the defunding of arts programs in schools and its negative influence on teachers and students.
- Taylor, A. (2013, December 3). Why finland fell in the pisa rankings. *Business insider*. Retrieved from <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-finland-fell-in-the-pisa-rankings-2013-12>.
- Tenam-Zemach, M., & Flynn, J. (2011). America's Race to the Top, Our Fall From Grace. *Curriculum & Teaching Dialogue*, 13 (1/2), 113-124. The authors look at education's emphasis on global competitiveness and how education is narrowed to serve the purpose of generating a globally competitive workforce. I will use this article in my portion of research focused on measurement and definition of education and intelligence in America.
- Turgut, G. (2013). International Tests and the U.S. Educational Reforms: Can Success Be Replicated?. *Clearing House*, 86(2), 64-73. doi: 10.1080/00098655.2012.748640. Turgut examines the United States' approach to "race to the top" of international education rankings. The author goes on to explain why there is no guaranteed success in replicating foreign education systems and standards here in America. This work will assist me in analyzing the future implications of the American education system and how it compares to high achieving education systems abroad.
- Wrigley, T. (2010). Finland's school success: why don't our politicians listen? *Education Review*, 23 (1), 42-51. This article focuses on why Finland is among the perennial world leaders in education and what differentiates their system of education from the U.S. system. Wrigley focuses an argument on the American approach of privately run schools and their relationship to increased social segregation and subpar standards. I will use this research in my project to better explain the differences between Finland and America, and how the U.S. education system might import some aspects to fix their schools.
- U.S. Department of Education, (2009). *Race to the top program executive summary*. Retrieved from website: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/executive-summary.pdf>. This government document presents the basic tenets of the Race To The Top educational initiative under President Obama and discusses the goals and implications of the program. I will use this work in my presentation of RTTT and how it has affected the current American education system.

Outline

I. Introduction/Presentation of Research Focus

- A. Current state of American education and the rising importance of producing intelligent and innovative students in a globalized world.
- B. The concept of the “American Dream” expressed in the Declaration of Independence and how we have steered away from these principles of freedom and
- C. State intended goals of research on the U.S. education system and what approaches will be used to achieve them.

II. Critical Analysis of Federal Educational Initiatives and Programs

- A. “A Nation At Risk” President Ronald Reagan
- B. “No Child Left Behind” President George W. Bush
- C. “A Race To The Top” President Barack Obama

III. Defunding of Programs and the Allocation of Resources

- A. Neutralizing Student Benefits
 - 1. Enrichment and before/after school programs, and how they promote successful environments for disadvantaged children
 - 2. Fine arts programs and their marginalization in standardized formats
- B. De Facto Segregation in a Post-Brown Education System
 - 1. The relationship of funding for poor/rich schools and the achievement gap between white and colored students

IV. The Standards and Testing Movement

- A. High-Stakes Testing and the Simplification of Intelligence
 - 1. The focus of policies on accountability and the need to measure academic success
- B. Teaching and Learning Within a Core Curriculum Framework
 - 1. Students’ experiences with testing and their attitudes toward education and achievement ability
 - 2. Teaching styles and curriculum content are narrowed to fit the standardized test format
 - 3. Education’s emphasis on global competitiveness and international markets

V. Finland vs. the United States

A. Analysis of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) scores between countries

B. Teacher Differences: Job Satisfaction, Leadership, Pay, and Prestige

VI. The Future of Education in America

Introduction and Presentation of Research Focus

Unemployment, homelessness, crime, teen pregnancy, global competition—while the obvious relationship between these issues is that they all represent significant challenges in American society, there is a deeper connection that isn't immediately apparent. Whether it's the man serving a lengthy prison sentence for drug dealing in his dilapidated Chicago neighborhood, or the young single mother dependent on Section-8 housing and welfare, people's lives are shaped by education. As the U.S. labor market is in a precarious decline, less middle-income jobs are available for average Americans trying to get by, and college tuition costs are at a perpetual climb, education remains the most effective tool for achievement in life. While technology and cheaper international labor continue to shrink the amount of low-skill domestic jobs available, professions offering a livable wage remain out of reach for many Americans without the necessary level of education. Not only are effects evident in American towns and cities, but there are also vast implications on a global scale. The United States—though a world leader in areas such as military and GDP—continues to perform poorly in international educational rankings (currently 17th) while countries like China, South Korea, and Finland lead the way in science, math, and reading. In a globalized world where economies are increasingly interconnected, the importance of fostering intelligent and innovative students for an internationally competitive labor market is paramount. So if education is such an integral piece in alleviating social problems and maintaining America's economic standing, why is the U.S. education system in a state of decay?

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he made many democratic ideals sacred. The idea of a nation built on equality, and the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness came to define the American Dream. However while this theoretical utopian society is ideal, over the course of history it has proven to be lackluster in

actual implementation. In her book “Facing Up the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation,” Jennifer Hochschild challenges these tenets of the American Dream. She argues that equal opportunity, the promise of success, individual control over one’s destiny, and personal virtue conferred upon the successful, must be considered with questions such as, “Who may pursue success?” “What does one pursue?” “How does one pursue success?” and in the end, “Why is success worth pursuing?” Behind these questions Hochschild finds that the American Dream is a fantasy, a myth full of denial and impossible promises.

Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait. Thus the irony is doubled: not only has the ideal of universal participation been denied to most Americans, but also the very fact of its denial has itself been denied in our national self-image...When people recognize that chances for success are slim or getting slimmer, the whole tenor of the American dream changes dramatically for the worse. (Hochschild, 1996).

Though the traditional proclaimed tenets of democracy are usually interpreted as pertaining to issues of the socio-political nature, the area of education is often overlooked. Be it covert racism through school resources and funding, the education system’s myopic style of teaching, or the elitism of higher education, American youth have continually been denied the opportunity of realizing the American Dream.

In this research project I will provide a critical analysis of the current American education system while considering its evolution over history and how it might be changed in the future. To support my claims and conclusions I will use secondary research data, scholarly journal articles, government sources, and other forms of evidence. I will begin my research by discussing the impacts of government educational initiatives such as No Child Left Behind (under President George W. Bush) and A Race To The Top (under President Barack Obama). The following portion of my study will be dedicated to analyzing the effects of these policies, such as the defunding of enrichment and fine arts programs as well as the allocation of resources and school funding. An in depth look at these negative consequences will be juxtaposed with

championed goals and successes of these programs and policies. Next I will focus on the emergence of the standards and testing movement, and the narrow method of measuring both student and teacher performance under Common Core. Finally I will compare and contrast the school system in America with that of Finland, and discuss the future fate of education in the United States.

Critical Analysis of Federal Educational Initiatives and Programs

In 1980 Ronald Reagan made a campaign promise that when he reached the White House he would abolish the Education Department and remove federal involvement in elementary and secondary education. Soon after being elected president, Reagan cut the budget for the Education Department from \$16.6 billion to \$13.5 billion, and then again in 1983 down to \$9.9 billion (I.G., 1985). Reagan's top priority was to scale back federal aid programs as a way to save money and reduce the deficit while also giving states greater autonomy through deregulation. However there's no way of telling just how far Reagan's neglect of education might have gone had it carried on in this direction, because in 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education—an 18 member panel formed by Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell—published the revolutionary document *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The report suggested there had been a priority of access over achievement in public schools, and proposed a shift away from equality and more towards student competition through the use of standardized testing and a focus on measuring success. Furthermore it said that American education was in effect not putting students through a rigorous enough system and, as a result, was producing mediocre citizens. The ominous claims of *A Nation At Risk* brought wide attention to the alarming perceived failures of the education system in America and called for immediate action on the part of the federal government. The public and political concern that followed would impact education in America for years to come. Congressmen introduced several

dozen bills for various educational reforms while state and local governments sought to raise education standards and improve teacher quality. Reagan's education policy followed this call for reform as well, stressing "achievement" and "accountability" as prerequisites for government aid and demanding that schools produce ever-rising test scores to retain their federal assistance. At first, this new approach to education seemed to be working. Students began to score higher on tests and it looked as though the desired gains in math and science performance were imminent. However, schools soon began to report an increase in high-school dropout rates. As schools became seriously dependent on high test scores for federal aid, the idea of encouraging all students to learn and improve threatened their very existence. As a result, lower performing students were purged from schools so as to boost scores and protect against defunding. Instead of recognizing the clear link between a frequency in standardized tests and dropout rates, policymakers argued that schools simply needed more resources to help students succeed and meet the academic standards. (Roe, 2009).

This reform fever and movement of standards and testing would carry its momentum into the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. President Bush Sr. quickly extended Reagan's policy of greater accountability of schools and moved to make educational outcomes the ultimate deciders of a school's fate. Under these circumstances it became increasingly preferable to compare the quality of education between groups (racial, income) by administering tests with identical academic curriculum to all students and then comparing scores between different schools and districts. If test scores were equal, the educational quality and opportunities were said to also be equal. This practice led to greater denial of inequality in schools and thwarted desegregation efforts as schools with a lack of funding and resources were judged simply by their test performance, and not their tangible capabilities. Along with this, the establishment of common achievement standards for all students had harmful effects on students with differing abilities. Special education students and English language learners were expected

to score at the same rate as other students, and often became marginalized to an even greater extent due to their substandard performance. President Bush Sr. also held office when the idea of school choice drew increasing attention. Under his America 2000 proposal, parents were given the option of utilizing publicly funded vouchers to enroll their children in private schools. The concept of charter schools also became a popular new alternative, where schools with specialized or independent systems received support from their states to experiment and have more freedom for innovation. While Present George H.W. Bush did not achieve any significant legislative education initiatives, he continued on in the direction set by President Reagan and set the stage for future changes that would have lasting effects (Roe, 2009).

President Bill Clinton defeated President Bush Sr. in his re-election bid, and took office in 1993 with education reform still a pressing issue. A year into his term Clinton passed a piece of legislation called Goals 2000: The Educate America Act. This program gave funding to any state that was implementing the idea of standards-based reform, without calling for a focus on a particular group of students or subjects. Over his two terms as president Bill Clinton would steadily increase government education appropriations, make it compulsory that all schools and teachers operate in a standards-based environment, and most importantly continue the educational reform movement in a direction that would have drastic implications for future teachers and students alike.

In 2001, only three days after his inauguration, President George W. Bush introduced his first legislative proposal: No Child Left Behind (NCLB). While events over the previous two decades had slowly shaped the modern U.S. education system, the intentions and ramifications of NCLB would create deep fissures in American schools and classrooms for years to come. The three major requirements set forth by NCLB were 1) develop content standards to determine what students should know, 2) administer assessments to measure whether students are meetings

those standards, and 3) institute accountability mechanisms to ensure that all students attain the proficiency standards (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). Implicit in its name, a main goal of No Child Left Behind was to improve education for disadvantaged, minority students while also closing the achievement gap between white, economically advantaged students. In order to achieve this outcome, states were required to test students regularly and report on their progress. By classifying at-risk students into categories of low-income students, minority students, students with disabilities, and English language learners, the performance between all students could be monitored and compared so as to better achieve parity. However, the approach of NCLB to combat academic failure with strictly academic interventions fails to address the real causes of poor performance in school. In the article “What’s Missing From No Child Left Behind? A Policy Analysis From a Social Work Perspective,” Christine Lagana-Riordan and Jemel Aguilar argue, “from the ecological perspective, risk factors for poor school performance are linked not only to school factors, but also to factors within the community, neighborhood, family, home, and personal characteristics of a student” (Lagana-Riordan & Aguilar, 2009). When a child comes from a community where education is not valued, a neighborhood that’s filled with drugs and violence, a family with little support or encouragement, and a home where schoolwork is not a top priority, there is little opportunity for success. In order to address a student’s poor academic performance, schools cannot simply use tracking and specialized tutors to produce a higher test score. Instead, students that experience challenges outside of school must be given the help they need to overcome those obstacles before they can be asked to focus on their academic performance. Therefore the effort of NCLB to improve education and close the achievement gap fails to provide the holistic strategy needed to create substantial change in the lives of disadvantaged students.

In addition to a lack of insight to outside factors in academic performance, NCLB has also received some criticism for its veiled motivating force. While its stated purpose was to

improve the academic achievement of all students and provide better quality education, many believe that its real motivation was to force American students to catch up to their international competitors. In 1957 Russia shocked the world with its satellite launch of *Sputnik* into space, redefining what was humanly possible and pressuring the United States to quickly ascend in math and science capabilities. This was the beginning of international influence shaping the domestic education agenda in American schools. With a population of young people underperforming in the technical subjects of math and science, the United States economy could not foresee a stable future of continued supremacy in a competitive globalized market. Therefore through the punitive requirement for schools to meet certain standards in order to keep from losing funding, and the reporting of progress in areas of reading, math, and science, the American government is able to quietly achieve its economic ideals. In this way students are pressured to rapidly improve their performance in the technical subject areas while also being prepared for the competitive environment of a modern economy.

Often forgotten in the discussion of NCLB is its difficulty with implementation. Since its inception, problems with effective implementation of NCLB have significantly hindered its intended effects. Though it is a federal policy, states decide how they will meet requirements on an individual basis that is determined by their own educational systems. Across all 50 states NCLB is applied differently, making content and performance standards, assessments, and sanctions hard to consistently maintain. In some cases there are stark contrasts between national and state findings, with state data showing large increases in student performance while national data indicates no change. Aside from the negative components of NCLB though, it *has* succeeded in some of its proposed goals. Previously hidden and neglected beneath school and district averages, schools must now address low scores and substandard performance due to subgroup requirements of at-risk students. As part of NCLB, schools are also required to test all students uniformly irrespective of school location, student demographics, or student disabilities.

This is a measure of attempting to achieve equality while still striving to provide the necessary environment and tools for all types of learners to succeed. NCLB has also helped to bolster the data collection system, increasing available public information on academic achievement for student, school, and district. In the area of education, the presidential administration of George W. Bush can be defined exclusively by No Child Left Behind. The standards and testing movement that began under Ronald Reagan was taken to new levels during Bush's presidency. Reform came to revolve entirely around the idea of accountability, manifested through the high-stakes testing of students and evaluation of teachers. While most of the intended goals have failed to come to fruition, there are many lasting effects of NCLB that continue to influence the education system today.

In 2009 Barack Obama inherited a country with two wars waging in the Middle East, an anemic economy, and an urgent call for health care reform. Meanwhile, the American education system was in dire need of attention as well. With the misguided demands of No Child Left Behind putting schools in disarray and a crippled economy slashing school budgets, education at the beginning of Obama's first term was again in serious need of reform. That change came in the way of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009. As part of the piece of legislation intended to combat the Great Recession, \$840 billion of aid was set aside to be appropriated to different sectors of the economy in order to save and create jobs while also keeping the economy afloat. Of the stimulus package, \$100 billion in aid was devoted to education to be used for college grants, Head Start, special education, prevention of layoffs, and numerous other areas of need. Combined with the educational allotment of ARRA was over \$4 billion for the competitive grant program known as Race To The Top (RTTT), designed to encourage and reward states that excel in four core education reform areas. As part of RTTT, states are required to adopt standards and assessments that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace, build data systems that measure student growth and success, recruit, develop,

reward, and retain effective teachers and principals, and turn around low achieving schools (Dept. of Education, 2009). When states are ready to compete, an application to the Department of Education is submitted, and states that have best met and exceeded the requirements in their school systems are granted program funding. To date, 19 states have received funding from RTTT, while 34 states have modified their systems to facilitate the required changes, and 48 states have come together to create rigorous college and career-ready standards (*Race to the top*).

Five years after its implementation, there are still many questions surrounding Race To The Top and if it will succeed in positively reshaping America's education system. Though many of its effects are yet to be seen, some manifestations have already encountered heavy criticism. For one, some view the competitive-based grants of Obama's RTTT as perpetuating and deepening inequality. In the *BYU Education and Law Journal*, Cassandra Abbott asserts that Race To The Top "strips children of their right to an adequate, equitable education by providing students in "winning" states the opportunity to learn in high-quality environments, while children in "losing" states are deprived of this same opportunity due to a lack of funding" (Abbott, 2013). By putting states up against one another for federal funding, RTTT is in effect expanding the achievement gap rather than counteracting it. More prosperous states have greater revenue and resources to apply towards their education, and can achieve the reform requirements much easier. Meanwhile poorer states must use their limited supplies to do with what they can and continue giving insufficient amounts of state funding to their schools. While the achievement gap has persisted mainly between students, schools, and districts, RTTT heightens inequality to the macro level of the state and awards funding based on competition versus actual need. Like No Child Left Behind, there is a similar over-reliance on test scores for measuring student and teacher performance. Rather than simply being an indicator of academic achievement, student test scores are the definition. By making the adoption of standards and assessments a requirement for RTTT funding, curriculum is narrowed while teaching strategies are aimed at

having students learn to answer multiple choice questions rather than actually understand the material. In 2014—one year into his second term—President Obama continues to hail Race To The Top as a revolutionary program while also strengthening and extending its reaches. While there are many opinions already as to its effectiveness and future implications, RTTT demonstrates the government’s unprecedented level of commitment for funding to educational reforms and a genuine desire to repair America’s broken schools.

In later discussion and analysis No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top will be referred to frequently, as the defunding of enrichment and fine arts programs, allocation of resources, simplification of intelligence, and core curriculum framework are considered in relation to the educational reform initiatives of the last two decades.

Defunding of Programs and the Allocation of Resources

With the shift towards standards and testing through initiatives such as No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top, the ripples of these policies have significantly impacted all areas of education. As a result of defunding and a perceived lack of value in relation to student performance, many enrichment programs for students have suffered in the last few decades. Researchers predict that by the year 2020, more than 50% of public school students will be African American or Hispanic (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2010). And with an undeniable achievement gap existing between these groups of students and the white majority and Asian “model minority”, there is an urgent responsibility to enable them to close this gap. One of the ways this is combated is through the use of academic enrichment programs for minority and disadvantaged students. While these programs have been reconstructed to fit the student accountability paradigm in recent years—making before and after school interventions directed primarily towards increasing test scores—this approach ignores the real problems of struggling students. “Drive-by” solutions fail to establish the deep, long lasting relationships with students

and their families that are needed to make a significant difference in a child's academic success. Studies indicate that parent involvement has a higher influence on student performance in African American families than in white families, and so in order to begin closing the achievement gap a holistic approach that considers a child's life outside of school must be adopted. In a study of 8th graders at an urban middle school, researchers Andrea Nelson-Royes and Gary Reglin analyzed the effects of an after-school tutoring program focused on reading achievement. Results showed that for students who were able to practice their reading skills more often, performance improved. Reading improvement was also reported for every student whose attendance was consistent. Benefits of the after-school reading program were an exposure to more subject material, one-on-one tutoring opportunities, a relaxed environment to practice reading skills, and an implementation of research-based strategies for each individual student (Nelson-Royes & Reglin, 2011). In addition to the improvement of academic skills, enrichment programs such as this may also influence school engagement, study strategies, personal value of education, oral and written communication, and collaboration and leadership—all of which have the ability to positively impact a future in education. These findings suggest a vital need for increased funding to support after-school tutoring programs as a way of giving struggling students a fair chance to catch up. (O'Hearn & Blumer, 2008).

Another area being negatively affected by the ideals of the standards and testing movement is fine arts programs. As a result of the anemic American economy in the last several years, state and local governments have been challenged with the task of sustaining all of their programs and industries in place. In schools, many decisions have had to be made about where to cut money in order to continue providing a core education to their students, and the main area targeted in this epidemic has overwhelmingly been fine arts programs. No Child Left Behind created a strong shift in educational priorities toward those that could fulfill the agenda for

standardized achievement tests. While it is easy to measure student performance in reading, and the importance of technical subjects like math and science is indisputable, music and art programs are commonly viewed as insignificant to the “real world” and therefore disposable.

Supporters, however, argue that the need for music in schools is paramount. Not only are fine arts programs a creative outlet that is essential to human behavior, but it also enhances learning skills that can be applied to other areas of education (Slaton, 2012). While budget cuts and the movement for greater student accountability and success measurement are surely factors in the decline of fine arts programs in public schools, they are not the only contributors.

According to research by Marci Major entitled “How They Decide: A Case Study Examining the Decision-Making Process for Keeping or Cutting Music in a K-12 Public School District”, administrators considered six main questions when making educational decisions for their schools: 1) their personal values and philosophies of music education, 2) the values and demands of the community, 3) the quality of teaching that the school could afford and provide, 4) the aesthetic and utilitarian purposes of keeping music education in the curriculum, 5) the economic value that music added, and 6) how the program contributed to the overall image of the school district (Major, 2013). Results of the study found that the community has one of the most impactful voices in relation to school decision-making, and that while most parents and administrators alike value music and recognize its importance in the education process, the priority placed on a competitive education that will enable students to attend universities, attain good jobs, and improve the reputation of the school district eclipse the argument for music programs. Major concludes her study by admonishing,

...it is not enough to advocate for what music educators believe music offers. Music advocacy must also attack the problem at the root, offering administrators solutions for the difficult dilemmas they must solve regarding public policy and a finite budget. By approaching advocacy from this angle, music might be saved not only today but in the future as well.

One of the most significant effects of the recent educational policies and accountability movement has been upon the allocation of resources and school finance. In the competitive environment created by NCLB and RTTT, education is run more like a business than a public good, where various schools compete against one another for federal and state funding. Internally this tone is set as well, encouraging students to consistently improve their test scores in “high-stakes testing” situations that often dictate whether a school will be able to continue providing resources or if a student will graduate high school. Perhaps the most serious implication of this model has been the relationship of school funding to the growing achievement gap. In 1954 the watershed Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* invalidated the idea of “separate but equal” in public schools, and required by law that students be integrated in order to curb the harmful consequences of racism. However today the struggle for equal education still resonates throughout America. In her article “Public Education” for *Social Policy* publication, Noreen Connell asserts,

In a country whose public traditions embrace the concepts of equality and meritocracy, the full weight of hereditary class and race distinctions begins in kindergarten and proceeds ruthlessly and at an accelerated rate through high school. These funding inequalities are coupled with an instructional neglect that dooms the poor and the near poor to the margins of the economy and civic society (Connell, 1998).

Inequality between race and class is not a new development in American education, but with the shrinkage of manufacturing jobs and increased importance of a higher education, the damage is more conspicuous than ever.

While predominantly white, suburban schools receive greater funding, more support from the community, and reap higher revenue from local property taxes, minority filled schools in urban areas are unable to provide the adequate resources needed to give their students a basic education. Teaching methods also differ significantly between schools. Many of us were encouraged to work hard in high school with the realistic prospect of continuing on to college.

However when teachers see little promise in their students, this positive outlook is vacant. In 2008 during his presidential campaign Barack Obama stated “Segregated schools were and are inferior schools...fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*. And the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today’s black and white students” (Obama, 2008). Federally funded programs such as Headstart and Title 1 for high-poverty schools assist to a degree, but even these programs are being slashed as budget concerns worsen. There is no question that a lack of financial flexibility hinders a school’s ability to hire skilled teachers, provide relevant course tools and new textbooks, renovate school buildings, and incorporate the technological aspects of education that are said to hold the key to a modern American economy. However resisters of educational reform in this area still argue behind faulty research that money is not related to success. In the 1995 study “Brains for the Bucks? School Revenue and Student Achievement in Oklahoma” by Ken Ellinger and David Wright III, the researchers studied public schools in Oklahoma over a two year period in search of a relationship between school funding and student achievement. Through the analysis of standardized test scores, there proved to be a significant positive relationship between the two variables, even being maintained when controlling for the effects of student minority status and poverty (Ellinger & Wright III, 1995). There simply cannot be an equal education system where all of America’s youth are given the same opportunities when there is such a persistence of economic inequality. John Kozol, author of *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*, argues

To use local property tax as even a portion of school funding is unjust because it will always benefit the children of the most privileged people. The present system guarantees that those who can buy a \$1 million home in an affluent suburb will also be able to provide their children with superior schools. That is a persistent betrayal of the whole idea of equal opportunity in America. It’s a betrayal of democracy (Scherer, 1992).

No Child Left Behind was structured under the idea of holding schools accountable to adequate yearly progress (AYP). If a school performed up to the set standards, they would be

eligible to receive funding from the government as a reward for meeting the expectations. However, in impoverished and racially segregated schools, these expectations are an unfair reality from the start. Instead of setting one blanket benchmark for schools to reach regardless of their unique situations, educational policies should have a balance between pressure to perform and support to succeed so that schools are not being held accountable for results without first having adequate resources provided (Lee, 2012). This often affects two groups in specific: Hispanic or Latino students in the Western U.S. and African American communities. When schools have a higher percentage of English Language Learners who face multiple difficulties navigating the monolingual curriculum and testing formats, they are destined to fall short of the ideal benchmarks. Meanwhile, roughly two-thirds of all African American children attend schools in central city districts, where schools are populated by mostly minorities and poor students. These disadvantaged students require greater resources for learning than do affluent students—and combined with the cost of operating within a city as opposed to a suburb—schools in central city districts are bound to spend more for less. A common myth accepted in the school finance debate is that pre-dominantly minority districts are underfunded compared to predominantly or exclusively white districts. However, this misconception derives from a period before *Brown v. Board of Education* when this was commonly practiced. Today the disparities between rich and poor, minority and white schools are multifaceted and not easily uncovered. According to James Ryan's Michigan Law Review article "The Influence of Race in School Finance Reform", minority districts are more likely than not to actually spend more money than the state average. The explanation for this in many cases is the presence of state or federal money in the form of "desegregation" funding. While districts such as Boston, Little Rock, Phoenix, and Cleveland all received funding and spent above the state average, other large minority populated cities such as Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and San Francisco did not receive any funding and spent well below the state average. These inconsistencies suggest there is something going

on to explain the lack of financial disparities in some districts, and the clear presence of racially and economically biased financial resources in others. First, there is significant difference in political power among various minority districts, enabling schools who have an influence or advantage in their respective state's finance scheme to receive the most assistance. The other reason is related to the "desegregation" funding itself.

Once court-ordered desegregation decrees are lifted, districts that have been receiving additional funding through court orders will likely be unable to secure the same level of funding from state legislatures. Given the lackluster performance of districts that have received additional desegregation funds, state legislatures are not likely to be sympathetic to the argument that the flow of additional money should continue. Indeed, the reason states are seeking a court declaration of unitary status is presumably to be relieved of their desegregation obligations, including any attendant financial responsibilities. It thus seems implausible that state officials would turn around and devote the money saved from the termination of the desegregation plan to the schools that benefited from the plan. In fact, it seems just as likely, if not more, that these districts will face a takeover by the state rather than increased funding if their achievement levels remain low (Ryan, 1999).

When considering the implications of NCLB and RTTT on enrichment and fine arts programs and school finance and resource allocation, we find that there are numerous effects evident today and many more latent damages yet to be realized. The achievement gap across race and class is destined to widen as underprivileged and minority students are marginalized under AYP standards and de facto segregation. Meanwhile music and art programs are faced with continued funding cuts and undervaluing in the shadow of pressure for student accountability and a focus on core curriculum.

The Standards and Testing Movement

While policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top have been singled out as the definitive measures leading to education reform, they are in fact small pieces of the larger standards and testing movement. As mentioned earlier, the major event in the course of education reform over the past few decades was the publication of *A Nation At Risk*. The claims and accusations of this document shifted the goals of education away from equality to seeing

students as individual competitors in an economy. According to Rebecca Kuehl, in her article “The Rhetorical Presidency and ‘Accountability’ in Education Reform,” President Reagan asserted that “equality of opportunity in the United States had already been accomplished, and furthermore, that individuals—rather than the government—now had to take responsibility for any additional progress that was needed” (Kuehl, 2012). As future presidents inherited this reform movement, education became a top priority for each subsequent administration wishing to leave its mark on future generations. However, while this initial endeavor may have possessed valid goals and positive intentions, many harmful impacts have become manifest in recent years. It is true that tests have been used throughout history in all cultures and for many different functions. Today tests are employed to hold students and schools accountable and allocate scarce resources. They are attractive solutions to policy-makers aimed at influencing and regulating instruction in classrooms while not possessing the means to directly observe and participate in the process. According to the *Journal of Education* article “Paradoxes of High Stakes Testing” by George Madaus and Michael Russell, “...testing is seen as essential to developing a world-class educational system, motivating the unmotivated, lifting all students to world-class standards, increasing the nation’s productivity, and restoring global competitiveness” (Madaus & Russell, 2010). These visions are no doubt innovative and ambitious, but they are also distorted and overly idealistic. Tests may achieve some of these things and provide a component to education and society that could not otherwise be fulfilled, but a focus primarily on testing as we have seen over the last few decades can also have severe educational, social, and economic repercussions.

The most salient effects of the standards and testing movement deal with how students learn and teachers teach. Since the implementation of NCLB, standardized tests have reshaped schools in a way that is often unrecognizable and unnatural. While the definition of intelligence has been narrowed to a simple test score for students, a pervasive “teach to the test” framework

has trumped the unique approaches and strategies that make good teachers effective and inspiring. One high school teacher in New York City voiced her feelings in an article entitled “Reclaiming Our Freedom to Teach” protesting, “My students are more than data on a spreadsheet. They are individuals with unique learning styles and talents—as well as struggles and difficulties—all of which need to be acknowledged if they are to be seen as whole persons” (Behrent, 2009). The punitive environment created from high-stakes testing and mechanized learning leaves students with emotions of boredom, stress, and ultimately fear. In his editorial piece on testing, William Crain argues, “To make room for test-driven education, schools are cutting back on activities that children often enjoy, including the arts and gym” “Many schools have eliminated recess. Kindergarten, once a playful introduction to school, is now largely academic and includes homework.” (Crain, 2006). While students benefit much more from actively participating in the learning process—such as applying mathematical equations to the construction of a birdhouse or debating the ideal tenets of government—the emphasis on test-taking leaves little time for these activities, and thus represses student’s innate creative and enthusiastic tendencies. The fallacies of recent educational policies can be summarized by the law developed by social psychologist Donald Campbell, which states “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor” (Dutro & Selland, 2012). As testing has become more and more of a priority in American schools, the basic functions of education have been quieted and forgotten. While students may be inundated with multiple choice questions and eventually perform better, they will be denied the most valuable skill schooling has to offer—the ability to learn. Regardless of whether or not students continue their education in college or hold careers that incorporate material they learned in school, the skill of learning is perpetual and ubiquitous. In addition to the effects testing has on students, teachers are also negatively impacted. Studies suggest that an

increased emphasis on testing constrains teachers in their ability to provide rich and meaningful learning experiences. Teachers are not only obliged to teach test-oriented curriculum, but they are also forced to do so in the form that the tests are presented. Writing instruction is thus limited in genre, style, and process, resulting in a simplification of the subject in order to accommodate the test objectives. The essential of “accountability” in the standards and testing movement also presents trouble for teachers in their job security. Expectations of NCLB and RTTT are that as long as teachers and students are working hard enough, they should meet the standards and succeed. However when students’ test scores do not reflect the time and work devoted to achieving those standards, teachers are often held responsible. With shrinking fine arts programs, lower budgets, stricter teacher evaluations, and the “phasing-out” of underperforming schools, many teachers are losing their jobs and being robbed of their passions.

One of the major flaws of policies such as NCLB and RTTT is their failure to provide equal resources and accommodations for students with disabilities and disadvantages. The standardized test—and arguably the design of the public school itself—is modeled with a white, middle-class composition that is geared toward measuring the “ideal” student’s intelligence level. However, when performance-hindering disabilities or racial disparities exist, this single approach leaves many students with a limited chance to succeed. Since the 1990 institution of the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) under President Bill Clinton, there has been a focus on including students with disabilities in the general education setting to the maximum extent appropriate. While there are many benefits of this to students with and without disabilities, it holds damaging consequences when conducted under the standards and testing paradigm. By incorporating students with disabilities into general classrooms, they are also being held to the same proficiency standards as other students that do not have to combat visual, auditory, linguistic, or mental impairments during the learning process. Because a school’s test scores

represent the entire student body and not simply the most capable students, this also has detrimental effects for schools attempting to raise test scores and thus obtain vital funding and resources. As a result, many under-performing students are purged to alternate or continuation schools prior to testing time so that their scores are not affected. In the article “Accountability and Access to Opportunity: Mutually Exclusive Tenets Under a High-Stakes Testing Mandate”, Susan Fread Albrecht and Candace Joles discuss the harmful effects on disabled students in a high-stakes environment,

Students with disabilities already have the stigma of a label, and to stigmatize them further by subjecting them to failure as measured by performance on mandated inclusion in high-stakes testing is untenable. Students consider their test scores to reflect their personal knowledge and intellectual abilities. Failure to meet the criteria for passing the tests results in an increased number of students being labeled as disabled, grade retention, school dropouts, and low self-esteem (Albrecht & Joles, 2003).

Rather than assess disabled students on what they know, high-stakes tests manifest and accentuate their disabilities with unfair expectations and unattainable standards. By demanding that all students achieve the same academic proficiency irrespective of their cognitive, physical, or behavioral disabilities, No Child Left Behind and A Race To The Top subsequently leave many of the most challenged students abandoned at the bottom.

The three competing purposes of education are democratic equality, social mobility, and social efficiency. Schools should be equal and unbiased among students while introducing and implementing America’s democratic ideals, provide students the skills to allow them to advance in life, and provide an education that is effective. However with the growth of student accountability and a focus on meeting standards through assessment and evaluation, education has supplanted these goals with that of preparing and producing individuals to compete in a global economy. When considering the foundational objectives of the standards and testing movement, they are less about ensuring a student receives a valuable education that transmits a breadth of knowledge to be used throughout one’s life, and more about using a core curriculum

to push young people into particular areas of society based on national economic interest versus individual preference. “Society may establish values, but when the society is as pluralistic and divided as America currently is, is it possible to determine, in a national sense, what an educated person looks like?” contemplate Michelle Tenam-Zemach and Joseph Flynn in their article “America’s Race to the Top, Our Fall From Grace.” “Is it possible to nationally dictate the content and skills that *all* students need to know and be able to do to be ‘successful’, especially when success can be individually constructed?” (Tenam-Zemach & Flynn, 2011). These questions are at the heart of the debate over student accountability and the focus of measuring intelligence and success predominantly through test scores. Since the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, the notion of failing American schools has been the accepted rhetoric surrounding education, leading to a fervent emphasis on rigorous “world-class” standards. The comprehensive view of education that once prevailed has been narrowed to a superior global competition initiative with the single, paramount goal of consolidating power in the American economy. To achieve this end, the standards and testing movement recognizes greater value in some knowledge than others. No longer is a literate, productive, and participatory population the core ideal of American education, but instead one that can excel in the technical aspects of society through a mastery of science and math. The executive summary of RTTT states,

In the global economy, how well U.S. students perform is a critical yardstick. Unfortunately, the academic achievement of U.S. high school students is mediocre. Few reforms are more necessary to reaffirming the U.S. role as the world’s engine for scientific discovery and technological innovation than strengthening education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2009).

With over-arching agendas such as this, America has limited the purpose of its education system to producing a labor force that can above all secure U.S. market dominance throughout the globe. Assuming one paramount dictum as the sole educational motive fails to realize the full potential of its students, and as a result diminishes the school to a passive instrument for economic gain.

Finland vs. the United States

While America views itself as a world leader in everything from democracy to athletics, the reality is that many countries other than the United States take the lead in some of the most important areas of society. To most Americans the small Nordic country of Finland holds little significance to a superpower such as the United States. It ranks 58th in the world to America's first place position in GDP, has been an independent nation for less than a century, boasts very little military influence, and has a population only slightly larger than the state of Minnesota (*Central Intelligence Agency*). However when it comes to education, the roles of world leader and trivial onlooker are suddenly reversed. In 2000 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) instituted the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) as a way of measuring the knowledge and skills of students across the world in the areas of math, science, and reading literacy. Over the five PISA reports conducted during its twelve-year existence, Finland topped the international rankings in 2000, 2003, 2006, and finished second in 2009 before inexplicably falling to 12th in the 2012 report (Taylor, 2013). Finland has also illustrated low between-school variation in scores, a low proportion of poor performers, and shown the effect of socio-economic status on students' academic success to be minimal. Meanwhile, during that same period the United States has never finished within the top ten countries (Key findings-OECD). So when considering the fact that the U.S. has the largest economy and spends the most money per student, why is it continually being outperformed by a country the likes of Finland? While there are certain standards that we have come to view as essential to a good education in America, many of these are non-existent in Finland. There are no national tests, no performance pay for teachers, no school inspections, and no market competition between schools. Perhaps the most basic reason for the success of Finnish schools is the communal structure of society. Unlike American schools that are divided into separate districts with separate fates, schools in Finland work collectively in their effort to provide a

valuable and effective education. Regular meetings occur between teachers, school counselors, school nurses, and neighborhood social workers to best provide for the needs of students. Finnish schools are also much smaller than schools in America, with not even a school in the capital of Helsinki exceeding 1,000 pupils. This allows teachers to better attend to all children and give the direct assistance that is often needed with struggling students. All schools are comprehensive and mixed ability, and 90 percent of students continue on to general or vocational colleges. While these are all impressive factors that surely contribute to Finland's educational success, they do not entirely account for the dominance on the international stage (*Key Findings*).

In America we adore movie stars, celebrate athletes, and dream to have the life of a CEO. However the job of teacher is not often as hailed as it should be. On the contrary, the job of teacher is nearly the top position in Finnish society and teachers reported to be the most satisfied professional group in a national job survey. Teachers are educated at the Master's level in college, and jobs are extremely competitive upon graduation with ten applicants for every one opening. Finland also makes it a main focus to trust their teachers, enabling them to "design teaching programs, create school schedules, set their own learning standards, and assess pupil's progress" (Sahlberg, 2013). "Schools are regarded as a 'society of experts'", says Terry Wrigley in the article "Finland's School Success: Why Don't Our Politicians Listen?" "...innovations can come from the principal, the teachers, or government projects. And later, in relation to the punitive testing regime that proliferates throughout America, "At the present time, public education is in peril. Efforts to reform public education are, ironically, diminishing its quality and endangering its very survival" (Wrigley, 2010).

However, while many factors are clearly beneficial and strongly influential on the success of the education system, it remains a complicated task to identify which components are paramount for other countries—wishing for the same educational success—to adopt and

implement. In his article “What Is It About Finland?” Warwick Mansell discusses the various cultural elements outside the education system itself that make Finland’s success especially unique and difficult to replicate. Finland has achieved impressive reading scores throughout the PISA tests, and much of this is credited to the majority of Finnish television being broadcasted in foreign languages. As a result, subtitles are often necessary when viewing, leading many Finns to develop strong reading abilities early on. The Lutheran faith that is practiced by nearly 80% of the country preaches a “work hard, be happy” philosophy, which spreads into all areas of life including education. Finland is also a very homogenous country both ethnically and socio-economically compared to the melting pot environment of America, which may result in more egalitarian schools (Mansell, 2011). Finnish schools even spend less time in the classroom than other countries, with multiple recess breaks worked into the school day to give teachers and students the chance to unwind and refocus.

So now that the reasons for Finland’s success in education have been revealed, what is it that’s causing such failure in American schools? While it might seem that the main issues reside within the classrooms themselves, much of U.S. education’s plight is due to outside forces. Schools have little effect on reducing and neutralizing social and economic inequality and differences, causing student’s communities, families, and peer groups to have an enormous impact on their ability to succeed in school. With less enrichment programs, the evolution of de facto school segregation, and an alarming increase in children living in poverty, many of America’s youth are facing multiple barriers to performing well in school. It’s often believed that U.S. education is lacking in funding and resources, exacerbating institutional problems even further. However, when compared internationally, the United States spends more money and has more resources available than almost every other country. And yet, we get very little return on such deep investment. The fact that other countries of the world perform much higher with much less reveals that money cannot in itself create success. The issue instead has to do with a decline

in American human capital—the values, motivation, and work and study ethic of the nation and its youth. According to Allan Ornstein’s article “Achievement Gaps in Education” there are several key reasons many American youth are becoming apathetic, degenerate, and removed from the foundational experience of education. While a good amount of student lethargy when it comes to education can be blamed on the teachers and institution not motivating students to learn and succeed, some components come from the students as well. American students have less homework and engage in more social activities, extracurricular activities, and part-time jobs than their international counterparts. Much of this extra time is spent watching TV, with 3.5 hours a day on average not counting time spent on the Internet. While watching Sesame Street at early age may facilitate and accelerate learning, after age 7 there becomes a strong inverse relationship between television viewing and student achievement. However, by far the strongest impact on human capital comes from the high rate of poverty that proliferates American families and youth. 1 in 4 students live in poverty, a full 50% higher than any other industrialized country. Along with this disadvantage, U.S. students also have among the highest rates of student drug addiction, violence, gang activity, and teenage pregnancy. The family has been proven to be the single greatest determinant of a child’s success in school, and the decay of the American family has greatly contributed to the decline in academic performance among youth. More than 50% of American students live with a single head of household, with it approaching 75% in big cities where student performance is the lowest in the country (Ornstein, 2010). Therefore, the main flaw of American schools is not—in fact—the schools themselves, but rather the way schools and society fail to consider the significance of student’s lives outside of the classroom. The major lessons to take from the Finnish education system are summarized in “Teachers As Leaders in Finland” by Pasi Sahlberg,

...teachers and students must teach and learn in an environment that empowers them to do their best. When teachers have more control over curriculum design, teaching methods, and student

assessment, they are more inspired to teach...Similarly, when students are encouraged to find their own ways of learning without fear of failure, most will study and learn more than when they're driven to achieve the same standards under the pressure of regular testing (Sahlberg, 2013).

The Future of Education in America

As we venture into the 21st century amid unprecedented changes in technology, climate change, population size, and the global economy, education remains the foundation of society. Until America's education system is repaired and revitalized—producing intellectual and skilled citizens to help solve the world's problems while advancing humankind—society will be left stagnant, vulnerable, and ultimately hopeless. Schools must launch this endeavor by committing to support valuable programs that benefit students, creating an equal allocation of resources and funding between all schools, give both students and teachers the freedom to learn and teach in ways that deviate from the standards and common core framework, and remove the ethnocentrism that prevents American education from learning through successful international education systems. The United States must come to terms with what kind of “success” they envision and wish to achieve. While the standards and testing movement aim to measure success with scores and student, teacher, and school accountability, Guliz Turgut argues differently in the article “International Tests and the U.S. Educational Reforms: Can Success Be Replicated,”

Currently, success is defined in a rigid, narrow, and uniform manner. This narrow definition will, in return, create rigid citizens who are uniform in their thinking with no diversity or creativity.

Maybe a better way to define success is redefining it in a broader manner so that it will complement the diverse characteristics of the United States. Rather than enforcing uniformity, the U.S, a melting pot since its establishment, should foster diversity and variety (Turgut, 2013). By creating a new vision of success for American education, students, teachers, and schools alike will be able to thrive in ways that recognize all styles and abilities, without neglecting those that don't fit the mold. Albert Einstein once made the analogy that “Everybody is a genius. But if you

judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” The U.S. education system must address the direction of its reform initiatives, the implications of funding cuts to programs and the unbalanced distribution of resources, and the limitations of a punitive standards and testing movement. American education must not discourage personal interest and expression but inspire them, not extend the prejudices of society but alleviate them, not restrict intelligence and knowledge but expand them. Only then can education live up to its natural capabilities and give its participants the valuable experience they deserve.

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