US Education Needs Fixing

Idea In Short

The United States spends more per student than most developed nations yet achieves middling results. The core problem is distribution, not total spending. Fix funding equity, invest in the poorest children most, and recognize that parents and teachers matter more than money alone.

US Public Education Faces a Crisis

Many parents with school-age children worry about their education. They have legitimate reasons for concern. Despite recent innovation, changing business models, and the dedication of many teachers, the system struggles to deliver consistent quality.

Every three years, more than 470,000 students across 65 countries take the international Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] to gauge proficiency in reading, mathematics, and science. The results for the United States reveal a troubling picture. On the 2022 assessment, American 15-year-olds scored 465 in mathematics, below the OECD average of 472. They scored 504 in reading and 499 in science, both above the OECD average. The US ranked 26th in math, 6th in reading, and 10th in science among 81 participating systems. Math scores hit their lowest point since testing began 1.

Thomas Friedman discusses the democratization of education, the lack of boundaries, the rise of Massive Open Online Courses [MOOCs], and the drive for the best-educated global workforce. The world is flat, and there is no such thing as average when global competitors can learn from anywhere.

A World of Motivated Learners

There is a world full of hyper-motivated young people who have access to democratized educational tools. They can learn, pull themselves out of ignorance and poverty, and

compete globally. This is democratic and inspiring. It is also potentially worrying for American students if the United States does not get its act together.

The global landscape has shifted. A child in a developing nation with a smartphone and internet access can access the same lectures, courses, and materials as a student in a wealthy American suburb. The barriers to knowledge have fallen. The question is whether American schools can adapt fast enough to remain competitive.

The Funding Distribution Problem

The United States spends substantially on education. Total expenditure per student from primary to tertiary education reaches $20,387, higher than the OECD average of $15,022. Education investment represents 5.8 percent of GDP, above the OECD average of 4.7 percent. The problem is not the total amount spent but how it is distributed 2.

In the United States, much school funding is local, which seems harmless on the surface. In reality, this creates a virtuous cycle in rich neighborhoods and a downward spiral in poor ones. Good schools boost property values, which creates a higher tax base, which funds better schools, which boosts property values further. The same mechanism operates in poor neighborhoods in reverse.

The OECD points out how fatally flawed this system is. America is one of only three advanced countries that spends less on the education of poorer children than richer ones. Unlike most OECD countries, America does not systematically place better teachers in poorly performing schools, where teachers' unions often obstruct reform efforts.

All Kids Deserve a Decent Education

The country owes every single child access to great teachers, a holistic curriculum, and a safe school and home environment. Whatever that costs, it is worth it. This is not a partisan position. It is a practical one. A nation that fails to educate its children undermines its own future prosperity, security, and competitiveness.

Education should be progressive to the point where it hurts. The poorer the child, the better the education the country should provide. The current system does the opposite. It gives the most resources to children who already have the most advantages and the fewest resources

to those who need them most.

Education Is an Input, Not an Output

The logic is straightforward. Give people the inputs to success, including raw materials, foundation, and core education. Do not blindly hand out welfare, outputs, or the fruits of unearned labor. Inputs, not outputs. This framework respects individual responsibility while acknowledging that the starting line must be level.

What children do with their education is up to them. The responsibility of society is to ensure that every child receives a quality education regardless of zip code, family income, or background. The failure to do so wastes human potential on a massive scale.

Parents Matter Enormously

This seems obvious, but teachers will tell you that kids whose parents stay involved in their education make a huge difference. Multiple studies confirm that a parent's attitude and behavior have a bigger impact on a child's education than the school itself. Parents who ensure attendance, check homework, instill pride in academic achievement, and demand good grades give their children a measurable advantage.

Private schools that cost substantial money put enormous pressure on parents to maintain their half of the bargain. They expect discipline at home, parent-teacher meetings, fundraisers, community activities, and volunteering. It takes a village to raise a child, and the most expensive schools know this. The principle applies regardless of school type or funding level.

Personal experience reinforces this. Parents who never let their children miss school, who ensured homework completion, who instilled pride in academic achievement, and who nagged until good grades appeared made a measurable difference. A student need not be the brightest or most motivated to succeed when parents ensure access to good teachers and personalized attention. As Warren Buffett might say, winning the ovarian lottery of involved parents matters enormously.

Even Bill Gates Is Worried

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation focuses on the biggest global problems, including sanitation, malaria, and women's rights. US education made that list, which is remarkable. The foundation has spent billions attempting to reform American public education over fifteen years. Their experience offers both hope and caution about the difficulty of systemic change 3.

The projections are stark. By 2025, two-thirds of all jobs in the United States will require education beyond high school. At the current rate of college graduation, the country faces a projected shortfall of 11 million skilled workers over the next decade. The problem is that too many students drop out before completing their degrees, especially those from low-income families. A student from a wealthy family is eight times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age 24 than a student from a low-income family.

Teachers Matter Too

This is obvious but needs emphasis. Teachers who make their classrooms experiential and student-centric, who care enough about their students to visit them at home, and who bring creativity to their practice make a transformative difference. The system needs to reward this creativity and entrepreneurship.

We should rage against the machine when laws, unions, organizational cultures, or bureaucracies impede good change. Innovation is never a straight line. We need tolerance of failure, reinvention, and progress. The teachers who go above and beyond deserve recognition, compensation, and the freedom to experiment.

The Personal Question

Many people in professional networks are teachers, professors, mentors, and coaches with a passion for teaching, learning, and sharing. They are doing important work. A couple from a local church holds ad-hoc tutoring for non-English speaking children every Saturday. A high school friend is starting a charter school in an economically disadvantaged neighborhood. A college friend spent several years with Teach for America in a tough part of South Central Los Angeles.

The burden each person must take, and the question to answer, is how to make a dent in the education crisis. It requires action at multiple levels. Policy reform to fix funding distribution.

Parental engagement to support learning at home. Teacher empowerment to innovate in the classroom. And personal commitment to contribute time, expertise, or resources to the communities that need them most.

- 1OECD
- 2OECD
- 3PBS News

Summary

Education is an input, not an output. Give every child access to great teachers, safe environments, and a holistic curriculum. Invest most in the poorest children. Parents and teachers matter enormously. The question is how each of us makes a dent.