The Education Crisis in America

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Thesis statement: A close examination of American public education reveals its flaws and low rankings, especially in comparison to other countries; therefore, the United States must adapt a new system of education.

1. U.S. is in bad shape
2. Low test scores
3. 8th graders below proficient
4. High school SAT scores lowest in 2011
5. Compare: 25/30 with other countries
6. PISA scores are average(Anderson)
7. Dropout rates
8. 76% graduation rate; 1.2 million fail to graduate
9. Below OECD average
10. In 2008, a higher percent of 55 to 64 year-olds than 25 to 34 year-olds had graduated from high school
11. America’s current system.
12. Teachers
13. Low pay
    1. Unappealing career choice for qualifying graduates
    2. 14% less than other professions.
    3. Teacher salary: $55,000. Accountants: $64,000. Civil engineers: $75,000 (Weingarten 2010).
    4. 2/3 works a second job (Weingarten 2010).
    5. Many leave after 5 years (Weingarten 2010).
14. Teachers unqualified SAT scores
15. Bottom third of college class
16. Teacher “tenure” allows them to slack-off
17. Funds
18. Second place in spending
19. Increase in funds and teachers, same test scores
    1. 16:1 student-teacher ratio in 2007, 22:1 in 1970
    2. 123% increase in per-pupil spending from 1971 – 2006
    3. Funds have doubled since 1971, yet reading and math test scores have flat-lined
20. Inequality
21. Little to no highly performing teachers in bad neighborhoods (Adams)
22. Unevenly distributed funds (disadvantage for poor communities); 36% elementary schools (Brown & Miller 2011).
23. Less vigorous for high poverty communities (Brown & Miller 2011).
24. Other countries’ successful education systems
25. Finland
26. Less spending (30%)
27. High test scores and graduation rates
    1. 93% graduation rate
    2. Scores top in PISA
28. Great teachers
    1. Respected as professionals, most admired profession in polls.
    2. Only 1 in 10 applicants are accepted into teacher-training programs, chosen from the top 10% of graduates.
29. Emphasizes equality
    1. “Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this” – Oli Luukkainen
    2. Excellence earned through equity (Partanen).
    3. Every child same opportunity to learn (Partanen).
    4. National goals and teacher pool
30. South Korea
31. Educational success
    1. Top in PISA
    2. Good grad rate
    3. Dropping out wouldn’t occur unless avoidable (Lee, 2008).
32. Spends half the amount on school pupils as the U.S, but its performance is much higher (especially in math)

a.3,759 per student b.USA: 7,743 per student

1. More time in school; Zakaria (2011) says 2+ years than Americans
2. High teacher pay
   1. In terms of purchasing power, South Korea pays teachers on average 250 percent of what we do. (Eggers and Calegari)
   2. South Korea pays higher than average. Ratio of teacher’s salary to GDP per capita (“South Korea”, 2012).

Initial: 1.23 vs AVG 1.00 vs US .84

15 years: 2.13, 1.37, 1.02

Max: 3.42, 1.65, 1.26

1. Canada;
   1. Success

a.Canada scores are high in PISA U.S. is at average b.Considered one of the highest scoring countries (Armario)

* 1. OECD highlights 3 policies that contribute to Canada's performance:
     1. Province-wide curricula.
     2. High degree of selectivity in choosing teachers.
     3. Equalized funding for education.
        1. “Our poorest districts spend more per pupil, not less.”
        2. Provincial curricula, regulations, financing, and other quality control systems.
        3. Difference between worst and best performing students is very little
        4. No significant difference between immigrants and native born students (“Good news,” 2010).

1. How this can be fixed
2. Teachers
3. Rigorous training programs like Finland and Canada
4. Pay teachers more, like South Korea and Canada, to attract candidates.
5. Equality
   1. Equally spread out the funds (Adams), like Canada and Finland
   2. Put good teachers in poorly performing neighborhoods
6. Length of time spent in school
7. Why this must be fixed
8. College attendance rates –
   1. Greene and Forster; grad affects university attendance
   2. 41% postsecondary credits only…
   3. Need 800,000 a year until 2025 to keep up with workforce
   4. America is slipping; used to be number 1 in 1980.
   5. Education important in today’s market (Walker, 2006).
   6. Today, all jobs require higher levels of education; a secondary school degree is simply insufficient. (Walker)
9. Crime rates with/without education
10. Work force; international standards
11. The Future of America, American dream.

John F. Kennedy once said, “Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource.” His words, especially in modern society, turn out to be very true; education is the foundation of a nation. Educated, intelligent individuals carry the potential to lead a nation to excellence. However, America’s public education system, once among the world’s best, has fallen on hard times.  According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary (2011), public education refers to elementary or secondary schools in the United States supported by public funds and providing free education for children of a district, controlled by government authorities. A close examination of American public education reveals its flaws and low rankings, especially in comparison to other countries; therefore, the United States must adapt a new system of education.

The nation’s test scores are lower than ever, and high school dropout rates are soaring; in comparison with other countries, the educational performance of the United States falls *below average.* There is no doubt that America’s public education is in a bad shape. According to Ripley (2010), in 2009, over 68% of American eighth graders scored below proficient in math and reading. Moreover, the SAT scores for the high school class of 2011 were the lowest on record; combined with the math scores, they fell to their lowest point since 1995 (Bennett W.J, 2011). While America is falling behind, other countries are quickly climbing to the top.

In the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) comparison for 15 year-olds across the globe, the United States of America posted the following results: average in reading, average in science and slightly below average in math. These middling scores lagged significantly behind those from European and Asian countries such as South Korea, Finland, Singapore, and China, as shown in an OECD report (Anderson N., 2010).

Looking at these results, the nation appears to be slipping even further behind its competitors despite years spent seeking to raise student performance through the 2002 No Child Left Behind law and other reforms. In addition to the students’ unsatisfactory performance, the nation’s high school graduation rates are shockingly low. As stated by Cardoza (2012), the national graduation rate for America in 2009 stood at 76%. This means nearly a quarter of all students—more than 1.2 million individuals— fail to graduate each year. In the same year, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) graduation average was 83%; at the top of the list was Slovenia, Portugal, Japan, and Finland, all ranging in the mid-nineties (Cardoza K., 2012). This data shows that not only has the United States been omitted as one of the leading countries, but they are ranked *below* the OECD average. For a rich, well-developed country like America, these poor results are unacceptable. “The United States was the only country in 2008 where the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who had completed high school did not exceed the percentage of 55- to 64-year-olds who had completed high school” (Aud S., et al., 2011). The study conducted by Aud S. et al. demonstrates that in the U.S., newer generations are less likely to graduate from high school than older generations. With the opportunity to receive education increasing by the generation, shouldn’t more kids be graduating each year? These disappointing results are a wakeup call; America’s aspiration should be to lead the world in education, not to score *below average.*

Under qualifying teachers, unequal access for students and wasted funds are the main reasons for America’s abominable public education. First, in today’s society, a large amount of talented individuals refuse to be teachers because they can study in college for the same amount of time and find a higher paying career; teachers make 14% less than other professionals who require similar levels of education (Eggers D. & Calegari N., 2011). The average teacher salary in the United States after 15-20 years is $55,000. For accountants, it is $64,000; database administrators: $70,000 and civil engineers: $75,000 (Weingarten R., 2011). If this is the case, why would an intelligent graduate choose to pursue a teaching career? In his article, Weingarten R. (2011) states that two thirds of all teachers work a second job in order to support their families; in addition, nearly half of all teachers leave in their first five years, frustrated by the salary or lack of support. Second, it is logical to infer that excellent teachers lead to excellent students, correct? If so, the United States lies in a faulty position. Zakaria F. (2011) points out that a majority of American teachers do a poor job on their SATs: 47% of them scored in the bottom third percentile, 30% in the middle third percentile, and only 23% scored in the top. “Almost half of K-12 teachers come from the bottom third of college classes” (“Next U.S.,” 2011). How can a nation expect to have highly performing students, when its students are taught by poorly performing teachers? After all, average teachers can only lead to average results. In addition, teachers also have “tenure,” which allows some to slack-off. According to Garrett R., originally, tenure allowed teachers to seek higher salaries without the fear of their job being given to a new teacher, willing to work for a lower salary. This also protects them from being fired because of personal conflicts with administration (2012). However, this privilege has taken its toll on students. Tenure guarantees job security for *all* teachers, even the ones who are incapable. “‘Many states have set the bar far too low for the achievement of tenure,’ says Jeanne Allen, president of Center for Education Reform. ‘It is no longer based, in most cases, on teacher effectiveness, but instead on a teacher’s length of service’” (Garrett R., 2012). It permits teachers to be lazy, and still maintain their salary and job. Furthermore, an inefficient use of funds also contributes to this growing problem. Where the United States ranks 21st and 25th out of 30 developed countries for science and math test scores (Ripley A., 2010), it comes in second place for the amount spent per student; $129,000 versus to the other countries’ average at $95,000. (Axelrod J., 2010). “We have world class expenditures, but not world class results” (Axelrod J., 2010). Contrary to the common belief, an increase in funds does not always lead to a better education.

“From 1971 to 2006, there was a 123% gain in spending per pupil; the student-teacher ratio also decreased from 22:1 to 16:1. Despite the doubling of funds and addition of teachers since 1971, reading and math test scores have flat-lined.” (Ripley A., 2010)

A copious increase in funding and teachers fails to provide better results; this should be an obvious indication that the current system is faulty. If the money isn’t being used to improve students, what exactly is it doing? Similar to teacher salary, qualification, and wasted funding, the existence of inequality is an additional flaw to the American education system. As stated by Adams B. (2011), there are little to no high-performing teachers in schools located in bad neighborhoods. Thus, not all American children have equal access to a good education; where one lives should not determine whether they have the opportunity to learn or not. Not only do the schools in high poverty communities lack great teachers, but they lack funding as well. The U.S. Department of Education has released a new report documenting that school districts across the country are unevenly distributing their state and local funds, shortchanging schools with low income students. 42% of elementary schools have expenditures *at least* 10% above or below the district average; the figures are 36% for elementary schools, and 30% for middle schools (Brown C. & Miller R., 2011). If anything, shouldn’t poorly performing schools be receiving *more* resources in order to effectively raise their performance levels? In their research, Brown & Miller (2011) also stated that schools in high poverty districts are often exposed to less rigorous content. With the curriculum varying from school to school, when will this nation ever reach educational equality? To improve the achievement status of American students, each student must first be on the same page; high performance is a goal for *all* students, not just those in rich neighborhoods.

Whereas the education system of America appears to be ineffective, the systems of Finland, South Korea, and Canada’s turn out to be much more proficient. According to Hancock (2011), Finland spends 30% less per child compared to America. Despite this fact, they have a graduation rate 17% higher than that of the United States’ (93%) (Hancock L., 2011), and have scored at or near the top in all 3 competencies in every PISA survey since 2000. While Finland scores neck and neck with education overachievers such as South Korea and Singapore, the performance of the United States has been middling, at best (Partanen A., 2011). So, what makes Finland’s education system so much more adept than the America’s? First of all, in Finland, all teachers are chosen from the top 10% of college graduates; out of those, only 1 in 10 applicants are accepted into the nation’s rigorous teacher-training programs (Zakaria F., 2011). This difference is great in contrast to the United States, where a majority of teachers score in the bottom 3rd percentile of their SATs. Moreover, teachers are respected as professionals such as doctors and lawyers; in high school opinion polls, teaching is considered the most admired profession (Sahlberg P., 2011). Finnish teachers are highly qualified and respected; sadly, the same cannot be said about most American teachers. Moreover, Finland emphasizes equality; in Finland, all school options are the same. “Since the 1980s, the main driver of Finnish education policy is that every child should have the opportunity to learn, regardless of family background, income, or geographical location” (Partanen A., 2011). President of the national teacher’s union, Oli Luukkainen states: “Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this.” In Finland, every school has the same national goals and draws from the same pool, of university trained teachers (Hancock L., 2011). Thus, every child has an equal shot at receiving quality education no matter where he or she lives. Through giving priority to great teachers and equality for all students, Finland has become the home to one of the best education systems in the world. In addition to Finland, over the years, South Korea has also developed a strong education system for its students. Pellissier (2012) states that today, South Korea is often regarded, along with Finland, as one of the two premier K-12 education systems in the world. Other than scoring near top in their PISA surveys, South Korea also has a graduation rate of 97%, the highest among all countries (Pellissier H., 2012). When asked about her school’s dropout rate, Chung Chang Yong, principal of Ewha Girls’ High School responded with a disgusted look: “No one just drops out of school…to drop out is a major disaster, a catastrophe. It wouldn’t happen unless it was unavoidable” (Lee N., 2008). What’s more surprising about South Korea’s education system is that they accomplish all of this while spending *half* the amount that the U.S. spends per pupil; $3,759 vs. $7,743 (“10 things,” 2012). Moreover, students spend a greater amount of time in school. Zakaria (2011) notes that school years run from March to February; school days are Monday – Friday from 8am – 4pm with Saturday classes scattered throughout the year. By the time South Koreans are finished with their schooling, they will have 2 additional years of education compared to American students (Zakaria F., 2011). Lastly, South Korea places first in starting teacher salaries in the world.

“Their ratio of initial teacher salary to GDP per capita is 1.23; this number increases to 2.13 after 15 years of teaching and may reach a maximum of 3.42. On the other hand, the OECD average is 1.00, 1.37, and 1.65 respectively, while the United States’ is .84, 1.02, and 1.26.” (“South Korea,” 2012)

Whereas South Korea exceeds the OECD average for all 3 categories, the United States ranks below. By comparison, the starting teacher salary in South Korea almost surpasses that of the maximum teacher salary in the United States. “In terms of purchasing power, South Korea pays teachers on average 250% of what we do” (Eggers D. & Calegari N., 2011). While Finland and South Korea’s government dissimilarity may be a result of their excellence in education in contrast to the United States, a country whose government is on par to that of America’s, also outperforms the nation. “In PISA, Canadian 15 year-olds have scored among the top five countries in each of the three rounds, while U.S. 15 year-olds score at about the international average” (“Canada,” 2011). As a matter of fact, Armario (2011) considers Canada to be one of the highest performing countries in terms of education. A research conducted by OECD highlights 3 policies that contribute to Canada’s outstanding results: their province-wide curricula, high degree of selectivity in choosing teaches, and equalized funding for education. “While there is wide variation in penetration of classroom practices, the provincial curricula provides guidance as to what should be learned by which students at what ages” (“Canada Outranks,” 2012). This protocol ensures that every student, no matter what part of the province, is on the same page. Again, this is a huge difference from the United States, where poor districts have a less rigorous curriculum for its students. Similar to Finland, Canada’s teacher programs are also very selective; applicants to teacher colleges are in the top 30% of their college cohorts (“Canada Outranks,” 2012). “Canadian education policy focuses on better qualified and motivated teachers, in large part due to strong teacher unions and a consistent focus on effective professional learning” (Levin, 2010). As revealed by “Canadian Education” (2010), most importantly, Canada attracts the best teachers into the profession and places them where most needed. Like Finland, Canada greatly values equalized funding for education as well. “Our poorest districts spend more per pupil, not less” (Levin B., 2010). There is little diversity in school quality due to provincial curricula, regulations, financing, and other quality control systems; thus, the difference between the best and worst performing students in PISA for Canada is among the smallest of all participating countries. In the same subject, the U.S. has the largest difference. “The essential task is to commit to making every school at least decent, and having every school improving, so that children’s life chances do not depend on a lottery!” (Levin B., 2012). As a result of Canada’s emphasis on equality for all students, there are no significant differences between immigrants and native born students in Canada (“Good news,” 2010). In conclusion, each country, through their individual and shared educational policies, has created a system to help them lead the world in education.

By learning from other, more successful, countries, the United States can take to first step to bettering its education system. First and foremost, the nation must raise its standards and provide more rigorous training programs for teachers, who are currently underperforming. This isn’t particularly surprising news, considering that almost half of the teachers come from the bottom third of college classes (“Next U.S., 2011). In comparison, Finland elects its pool of teachers from the top 10% of all graduates (Zakaria F., 2011), and Canada from the top 30% (“Canada Outranks,” 2012). As a result of their quality teachers, both countries’ students outperform the U.S. and the OECD average. Moreover, low teacher salaries must be fixed; this element turns many talented individuals away from the teaching career path. To quote Roy J. (2008), “the United States lags significantly behind other countries in teacher compensation, which adversely impacts efforts to recruit high-quality teachers.” South Korea, who pays their teachers the most (in starting salary*,* maximum salary, and salary after 15 years of teaching), ranks at the top, even above Finland and Canada, in education (Eggers D. & Calegari N., 2011). This trend should not be missed: better teacher treatment leads to better student performance. Secondly, the United States must work harder towards educational equality. As stated previously, the inequality between schools in rich versus poor neighborhoods is great; poorly performing schools lack high quality teachers and equal funding. On the other hand, Canada spends *more* on poor districts; likewise, all Finnish schools chose from the same pile of university trained teachers. “Subsequent PISA tests confirmed that Finland…was producing academic excellence through its particular policy focus on equity” (Partanen A., 2011). In order to provide each student with an equal chance at obtaining an adequate education, all public schools must have the same amount of highly performing teachers as well as funding; all school options in America should be the same. Finland heavily stresses this element, and subsequently, their educational success continues to transcend. Furthermore, student learning will improve with an increase of time spent in school. The two year gap between American and South Korea students, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, is parallel to the gap between high school sophomores and seniors. This should be a hint that students need more time in school to fully comprehend their subjects. If their peers abroad are getting nearly two extra years of education, American students are definitely missing out on a significant chunk of learning. Via improving its teachers, placing emphasis on equality, and lengthening the school year, the American education system will be one step closer to leading the world in education once again.

The failing education system is something that can no longer wait; this issue must be dealt with *now*, for the sake of America’s future, safety, and ability to compete with other countries. In a study conducted by Greene J. and Forster G. (2003), America’s low high school graduation rates are shown to be negatively affecting the amount of graduates who attend college. An unsatisfactory secondary education decreases the college readiness level of an individual. “In the 1980s, the U.S. was the undisputed leader in terms of having a college-educated work force” (O’Shaughnessy L., 2012).

According to Snider J., the U.S. has slipped from 1st to 16th in the world when it comes to the percentage of the population aged 25-34 with post secondary credentials (41%). 63% of South Koreans hold degrees, and 56% for Canada and Japan. (2011)

Once the global leader in the production for college graduates, the U.S. is losing grounds to emerging nations like South Korea and Canada. In order to compete with other countries, it is crucial for all Americans involved in manufacturing, marketing, and a number of other fields to be knowledgeable about sales around the world. However, this is not possible if a majority of America does not have a high number of postsecondary credentials. “The U.S. needs to educate nearly 800,000 more college graduates *each year* from now until 2025 to meet growing needs of the workforce (“A stronger,” 2008). The demand for a skilled workforce is increasing; thus, America must train its students well in order for them to prosper in society. In the modern job market, education is more important than ever. Many jobs require higher levels of education; a secondary school degree is simply insufficient (Walker C., 2006). Furthermore, education will be able to lower the crime rates in the United States as well. In 2009, Klein L.W. conducted an experiment which involved prison inmates participating in educational programs.

“Participants in correctional-education programs had a 48% rate of re-arrest, while the nonparticipants had a 57% rate. Participants had a 27% rate of reconviction, while nonparticipants had a 35% rate. Participants were more likely to remain employed, and at a higher wage, than nonparticipants.” (Klein L.W., 2009)

From these statistics, it can be concluded that education *will* lower crime rates, which therefore leads to a safer America. In addition, a better educated population will lead to a brighter future for this country. “To prosper…we need our education system not only to strengthen everyone’s basics—reading, writing, and arithmetic—but to teach and inspire all Americans to start something new, to add something extra…” (Snider J., 2011). With the rest of the world getting more advanced every day, “maintaining the American dream will require learning, working, producing, relearning, and innovating twice as hard, twice as fast, twice as often, and twice as much”(Snider J., 2011). For a brighter generation capable of making great decisions for America, its education system must be improved as soon as possible.

Through a close examination of American public education, its problems that lead to unacceptable academic rankings among other countries are revealed; thus, the United States must adapt to a new system of education. By using the systems of more successful countries as a role model, the United States will be back on track in no time. For the sake of its future and safety, action must be taken now; America cannot afford to suffer from a faulty education system any longer.

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