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## Chapter 11

### Schools and Education

#### Social Problems in the News

“Baltimore Students Lead Rally for Better School Facilities,” the headline said. On a crisp fall day, some 240 students, teachers, and parents held a rally at City Hall in Baltimore, Maryland, to call for massive improvements in the city’s deteriorating schools. According to the news article, students displayed photos of decaying conditions in their schools and “spoke of horrific learning conditions: roaches, rodents, decaying roofs, rotting walls, sewage overflows, and inadequate heating and cooling systems.” A high school senior said, “It’s not that the teachers aren’t the best, because they are, and it’s not that the students are misbehaving. That’s not it. We have buildings that you can’t do anything with.” The president of Baltimore’s City Council agreed. “We owe it to our students to have state-of-the-art schools,” he said. “Our school buildings are conducive to our kids’ learning. If they go into school buildings that don’t have running water, where bathrooms aren’t functioning properly, with outdated furniture and no books in the library, then what do we expect from our kids?”

Source: Burris, 2011Burris, J. (2011, November 3). Baltimore students lead rally for better school facilities. *The Baltimore Sun*. Retrieved from [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-11-03/news/bs-md-ci-rally-facilities-20111103\\_1\\_school-buildings-baltimore-students-city-schools](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/2011-11-03/news/bs-md-ci-rally-facilities-20111103_1_school-buildings-baltimore-students-city-schools).

Charles Dickens’s majestic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, begins with this unforgettable passage: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way.”

These words are timeless, and they certainly apply to the US education system today. In many ways it is the best of systems, but in many ways it is also the worst of systems. It teaches wisdom, but its many problems smack of foolishness. It fills many people with hope, but it also fills many people with despair. Some students have everything before them, but many also have nothing before them. In the wealthiest nation on the face of the earth, students in one of America’s largest cities, Baltimore, attend schools filled with roaches and rodents and reeking of

sewage. They are hardly alone, as students in cities across the nation could easily speak of similar ills. If Dickens were alive today, he might well look at our schools and conclude that “we were all going direct the other way.”

Education is one of our most important social institutions. Youngsters and adolescents spend most of their weekday waking hours in school, doing homework, or participating in extracurricular activities, and many then go on to college. People everywhere care deeply about what happens in our nation’s schools, and issues about the schools ignite passions across the political spectrum. Yet, as the opening news story about Baltimore’s schools illustrates, many schools are poorly equipped to prepare their students for the complex needs of today’s world.

This chapter’s discussion of education begins with an overview of education in the United States and then turns to sociological perspectives on education. The remainder of the chapter discusses education in today’s society. This discussion highlights education as a source and consequence of various social inequalities and examines several key issues affecting the nation’s schools and the education of its children.

## 11.1 An Overview of Education in the United States

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why compulsory education arose during the nineteenth century.
2. Summarize social class, gender, and racial and ethnic differences in educational attainment.
3. Describe the impact that education has on income.
4. Explain how the US education system ranks internationally.

**Education**<sup>1</sup> is the social institution through which a society teaches its members the skills, knowledge, norms, and values they need to learn to become good, productive members of their society. As this definition makes clear, education is an important part of socialization. Education is both *formal* and *informal*. **Formal education**<sup>2</sup> is often referred to as *schooling*, and as this term implies, it occurs in schools under teachers, principals, and other specially trained professionals. **Informal education**<sup>3</sup> may occur almost anywhere, but for young children it has traditionally occurred primarily in the home, with their parents as their instructors. Day care has become an increasingly popular venue in industrial societies for young children's instruction, and education from the early years of life is thus more formal than it used to be.

Education in early America was only rarely formal. During the colonial period, the Puritans in what is now Massachusetts required parents to teach their children to read and also required larger towns to have an elementary school, where children learned reading, writing, and religion. In general, though, schooling was not required in the colonies, and only about 10 percent of colonial children, usually just the wealthiest, went to school, although others became apprentices (Urban & Wagoner, 2008). Urban, W. J., & Wagoner, J. L., Jr. (2008). *American education: A history* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

To help unify the nation after the Revolutionary War, textbooks were written to standardize spelling and pronunciation and to instill patriotism and religious beliefs in students. At the same time, these textbooks included negative stereotypes of Native Americans and certain immigrant groups. The children going to school continued primarily to be those from wealthy families. By the mid-1800s, a call for free, compulsory education had begun, and compulsory education became widespread by the end of the century. This was an important development, as children from all social classes could now receive a free, formal education.

1. The social institution through which a society teaches its members the skills, knowledge, norms, and values they need to learn to become good, productive members of their society.
2. Learning that occurs in schools under teachers, principals, and other specially trained professionals.
3. Learning that occurs outside the schools, traditionally in the home.

Compulsory education was intended to further national unity and to teach immigrants “American” values. It also arose because of industrialization, as an industrial economy demanded reading, writing, and math skills much more than an agricultural economy had.

Free, compulsory education, of course, applied only to primary and secondary schools. Until the mid-1900s, very few people went to college, and those who did typically came from fairly wealthy families. After World War II, however, college enrollments soared, and today more people are attending college than ever before, even though college attendance is still related to social class, as we shall discuss shortly.

An important theme emerges from this brief history: Until very recently in the record of history, formal schooling was restricted to wealthy males. This means that boys who were not white and rich were excluded from formal schooling, as were virtually all girls, whose education was supposed to take place informally at home. Today, as we will see, race, ethnicity, social class, and, to some extent, gender continue to affect both educational achievement and the amount of learning occurring in schools.



*In colonial America, only about 10 percent of children went to school, and these children tended to come from wealthy families. After the Revolutionary War, new textbooks helped standardize spelling and pronunciation and promote patriotism and religious beliefs, but these textbooks also included negative stereotypes of Native Americans.*

*Image courtesy of Joel Dorman Steele and Esther Baker Steele, <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Spinninginthecolonialkitchen.jpg>.*

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## Education in the United States Today

Education in the United States is a massive social institution involving millions of people and billions of dollars. More than 75 million people, almost one-fourth of the US population, attend school at all levels. This number includes 40 million in grades pre-K through eighth grade, 16 million in high school, and 20 million in college (including graduate and professional school). They attend some 132,000 elementary and secondary schools and about 4,200 two-year and four-year colleges and universities and are taught by about 4.8 million teachers and professors (US Census Bureau, 2012). US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab>.

### Correlates of Educational Attainment

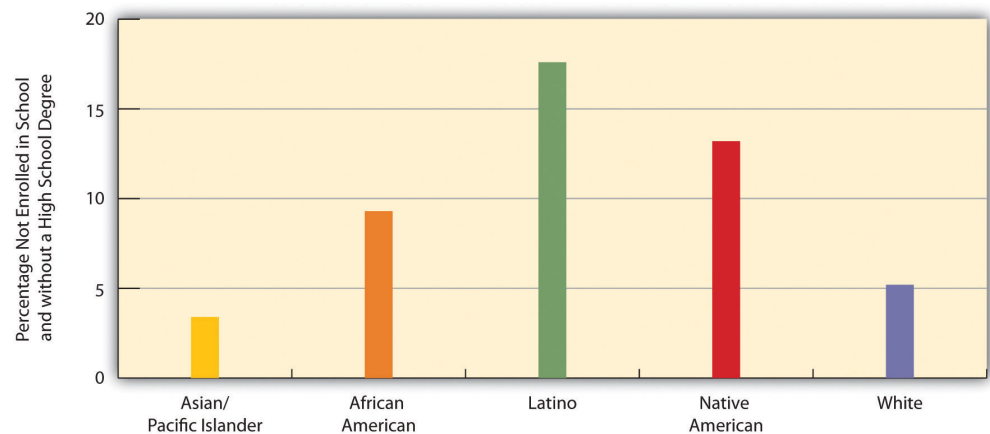
About 65 percent of US high school graduates enroll in college the following fall. This is a very high figure by international standards, as college in many other industrial nations is reserved for the very small percentage of the population who pass rigorous entrance exams. They are the best of the brightest in their nations, whereas higher education in the United States is open to all who graduate high school. Even though that is true, our chances of achieving a college degree are greatly determined at birth, as social class and race and ethnicity substantially affect who goes to college. They affect whether students drop out of high school, in which case they do not go on to college; they affect the chances of getting good grades in school and good scores on college entrance exams; they affect whether a family can afford to send its children to college; and they affect the chances of staying in college and obtaining a degree versus dropping out. For all these reasons, **educational attainment**<sup>4</sup>—how far one gets in school—depends heavily on family income and race/ethnicity (Tavernise, 2012). Tavernise, S. (2012, February 10). Education gap grows between rich and poor, studies say. *New York Times*, p. A1. Family income, in fact, makes a much larger difference in educational attainment than it did during the 1960s.

4. How far one gets in school, which has been shown to depend heavily on family income and race/ethnicity.

### Family Income and Race/Ethnicity

Government data readily show the effects of family income and race/ethnicity on educational attainment. Let's first look at how race and ethnicity affect the likelihood of dropping out of high school. **Figure 11.1 "Race, Ethnicity, and High School Dropout Rate, Persons Ages 16–24, 2009 (Percentage Not Enrolled in School and without a High School Degree)"** shows the percentage of people ages 16–24 who are not enrolled in school and who have not received a high school degree. The dropout rate is highest for Latinos and Native Americans and lowest for Asians and whites.

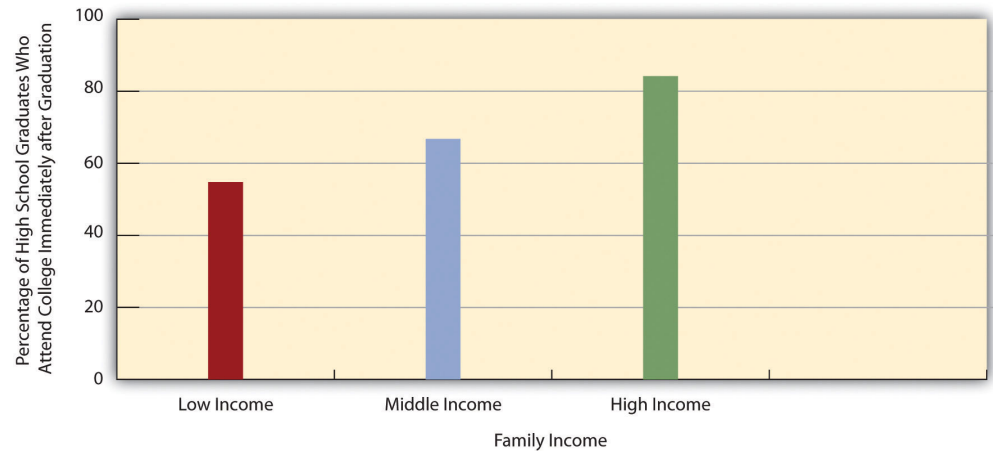
**Figure 11.1** *Race, Ethnicity, and High School Dropout Rate, Persons Ages 16–24, 2009 (Percentage Not Enrolled in School and without a High School Degree)*



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Now let's look at how family income affects the likelihood of attending college, a second benchmark of educational attainment. **Figure 11.2 "Family Income and Percentage of High School Graduates Who Attend College Immediately after Graduation, 2009"** shows the relationship between family income and the percentage of high school graduates who enroll in college immediately following graduation: Students from families in the highest income bracket are more likely than those in the lowest bracket to attend college. This "income gap" in college entry has become larger in recent decades (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Bailey, M. J., & Dynarski, S. (2011). *Gains and gaps: Changing inequality in US college entry and completion*. Ann Arbor, MI: Population Studies Center.

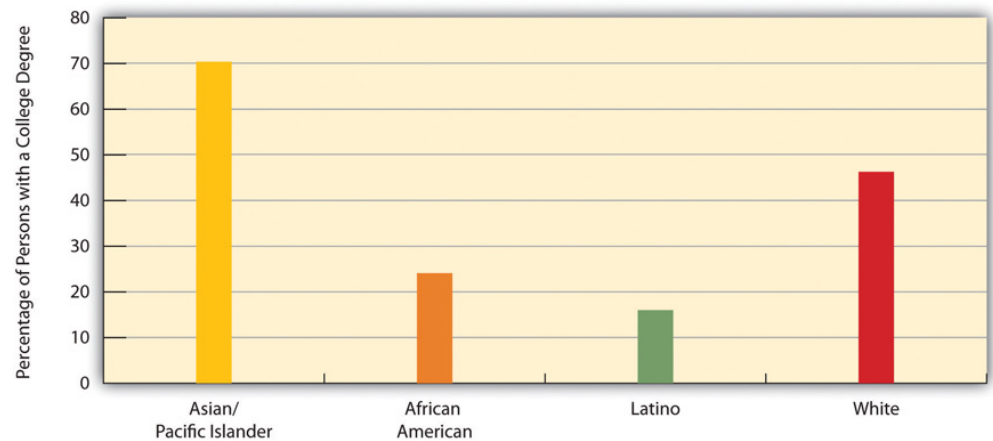
**Figure 11.2** Family Income and Percentage of High School Graduates Who Attend College Immediately after Graduation, 2009



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Finally, let's examine how race and ethnicity affect the likelihood of obtaining a college degree, a third benchmark of educational attainment. **Figure 11.3 "Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Persons Ages 25 or Older with a Four-Year College Degree, 2010"** shows the relationship between race/ethnicity and the percentage of persons 25 or older who have a bachelor's or master's degree. This relationship is quite strong, with African Americans and Latinos least likely to have a degree, and whites and especially Asians/Pacific Islanders most likely to have a degree.

**Figure 11.3** Race, Ethnicity, and Percentage of Persons Ages 25 or Older with a Four-Year College Degree, 2010





Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

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### Explaining the Racial/Ethnic Gap in Educational Attainment

Why do African Americans and Latinos have lower educational attainment? Four factors are commonly cited: (a) the underfunded and otherwise inadequate schools that children in both groups often attend; (b) the higher poverty of their families and lower education of their parents that often leave children ill prepared for school even before they enter kindergarten; (c) racial discrimination; and (d) the fact that African American and Latino families are especially likely to live in very poor neighborhoods (Ballantine & Hammack, 2012; Yeung & Pfeiffer, 2009). Ballantine, J. H., & Hammack, F. M. (2012). *The sociology of education: A systematic analysis* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall; Yeung, W.-J. J., & Pfeiffer, K. M. (2009). The black-white test score gap and early home environment. *Social Science Research*, 38(2), 412–437.

The last two factors, racial discrimination and residence in high-poverty neighborhoods, need additional explanation. At least three forms of racial discrimination impair educational attainment (Mickelson, 2003). Mickelson, R. A. (2003). When are racial disparities in education the result of racial discrimination? A social science perspective. *Teachers College Record*, 105, pp. 1052–1086. The first form involves tracking. As we discuss later, students tracked into vocational or general curricula tend to learn less and have lower educational attainment than those tracked into a faster-learning, academic curriculum. Because students of color are more likely to be tracked “down” rather than “up,” their school performance and educational attainment suffer.

The second form of racial discrimination involves school discipline. As we also discuss later, students of color are more likely than white students to be suspended, expelled, or otherwise disciplined for similar types of misbehavior. Because such discipline again reduces school performance and educational attainment, this form of discrimination helps explain the lower attainment of African American and Latino students.

The third form involves teachers’ expectations of students. As our later discussion of the symbolic interactionist perspective on education examines further, teachers’ expectations of students affect how much students learn. Research finds that teachers have lower expectations for their African American and Latino students, and that these expectations help to lower how much these students learn.

Turning to residence in high-poverty neighborhoods, it may be apparent that poor neighborhoods have lower educational attainment because they have inadequate schools, but poor neighborhoods matter for reasons beyond their schools' quality (Kirk & Sampson, 2011; Wodtke, Harding, & Elwert, 2011). Kirk, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (2011). Crime and the production of safe schools. In G. J. Duncan & R. J. Murnane (Eds.), *Whither opportunity?: Rising inequality, schools, and children's life chances* (pp. 397–418). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation; Wodtke, G. T., Harding, D. J., & Elwert, F. (2011). Neighborhood effects in temporal perspective: The impact of long-term exposure to concentrated disadvantage on high school graduation. *American Sociological Review*, 76(5), 713–736. First, because many adults in these neighborhoods are high school dropouts and/or unemployed, children in these neighborhoods lack adult role models for educational attainment. Second, poor neighborhoods tend to be racially and ethnically segregated. Latino children in these neighborhoods are less likely to speak English well because they lack native English-speaking friends, and African American children are more likely to speak “black English” than conventional English; both language problems impede school success.

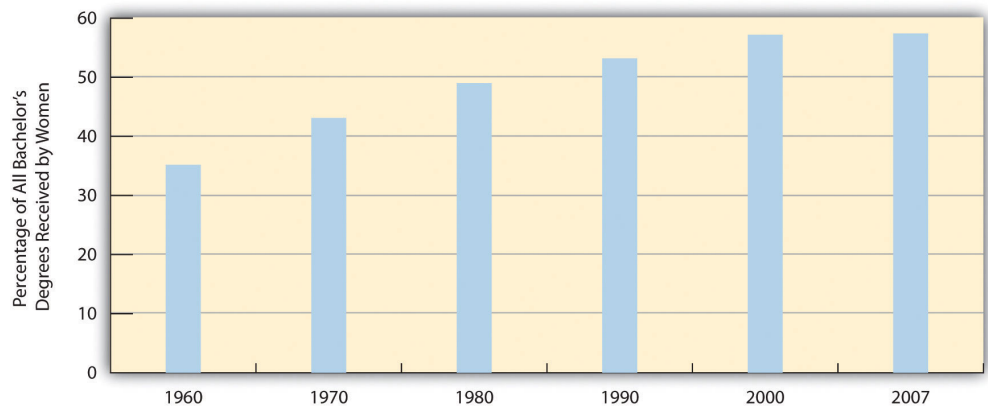
Third, poor neighborhoods have higher rates of violence and other deviant behaviors than wealthier neighborhoods. Children in these neighborhoods thus are more likely to experience high levels of stress, to engage in these behaviors themselves (which reduces their attention and commitment to their schooling), and to be victims of violence (which increases their stress and can impair their neurological development). Crime in these neighborhoods also tends to reduce teacher commitment and parental involvement in their children's schooling. Finally, poor neighborhoods are more likely to have environmental problems such as air pollution and toxic levels of lead paint; these problems lead to asthma and other health problems among children (as well as adults), which impairs the children's ability to learn and do well in school.

For all these reasons, then, children in poor neighborhoods are at much greater risk for lower educational attainment. As a recent study of this risk concluded, “Sustained exposure to disadvantaged neighborhoods...throughout the entire childhood life course has a devastating impact on the chances of graduating from high school” (Wodtke et al., 2011, p. 731). Wodtke, G. T., Harding, D. J., & Elwert, F. (2011). Neighborhood effects in temporal perspective: The impact of long-term exposure to concentrated disadvantage on high school graduation. *American Sociological Review*, 76(5), 713–736. If these neighborhoods are not improved, the study continued, “concentrated neighborhood poverty will likely continue to hamper the development of future generations of children” (Wodtke et al., 2011, p. 733). Wodtke, G. T., Harding, D. J., & Elwert, F. (2011). Neighborhood effects in temporal perspective: The impact of long-term exposure to concentrated disadvantage on high school graduation. *American Sociological Review*, 76(5), 713–736.

## Gender

Gender also affects educational attainment. If we do not take age into account, slightly more men than women have a college degree: 30.3 percent of men and 29.6 percent of women. This difference reflects the fact that women were less likely than men in earlier generations to go to college. But today there is a gender difference in the other direction: Women now earn more than 57 percent of all bachelor's degrees, up from just 35 percent in 1960 (see [Figure 11.4 "Percentage of All Bachelor's Degrees Received by Women, 1960–2009"](#)). This difference reflects the fact that females are more likely than males to graduate high school, to attend college after high school graduation, and to obtain a degree after starting college (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011). Bailey, M. J., & Dynarski, S. (2011). *Gains and gaps: Changing inequality in US college entry and completion*. Ann Arbor, MI: Population Studies Center.

Figure 11.4 Percentage of All Bachelor's Degrees Received by Women, 1960–2009



Source: Data from US Census Bureau. (2012). *Statistical abstract of the United States: 2012*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab>.

## Impact of Education on Income

Have you ever applied for a job that required a high school degree? Are you going to college in part because you realize you will need a college degree for a higher-paying job? As these questions imply, the United States is a **credential society**<sup>5</sup> (Collins, 1979). Collins, R. (1979). *The credential society: An historical sociology of education and stratification*. New York, NY: Academic Press. This means at least two things. First, a high school or college degree (or beyond) indicates that a person has acquired



5. A society in which higher education is seen as evidence of the attainment of the needed knowledge and skills for various kinds of jobs.

the needed knowledge and skills for various jobs.

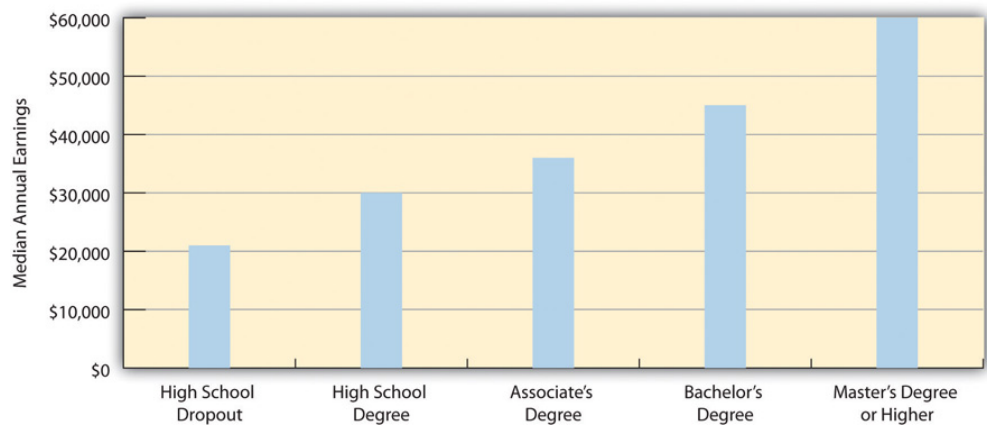
Second, a degree at some level is a requirement for most jobs. As you know full well, a college degree today is a virtual requirement for a decent-paying job. The ante has been upped considerably over the years: In earlier generations, a high school degree, if even that, was all that was needed, if only because so few people graduated from high school to begin with. With so many people graduating from high school today, a high school degree is not worth as much. Then too, today's society increasingly requires skills and knowledge that only a college education brings.

*On the average, college graduates have much higher annual earnings than high school graduates. How much does this consequence affect why you decided to go to college?*

© Thinkstock

A credential society also means that people with more formal education achieve higher incomes. Annual earnings are indeed much higher for people with more education (see [Figure 11.5 "Educational Attainment and Median Annual Earnings, Ages 25–34, 2009"](#)). As earlier chapters indicated, gender and race/ethnicity affect the payoff we get from our education, but education itself still makes a huge difference for our incomes.

Figure 11.5 Educational Attainment and Median Annual Earnings, Ages 25–34, 2009



Source: Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., et al. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

### Impact of Education on Mortality

Beyond income, education also affects at what age people tend to die. Simply put, people with higher levels of education tend to die later in life, and those with lower levels tend to die earlier (Miech, Pampel, Kim, & Rogers, 2011). Miech, R., Pampel, F.,

Kim, J., & Rogers, R. G. (2011). Education and mortality: The role of widening and narrowing disparities. *American Sociological Review*, 76, 913–934. The reasons for this disparity are complex, but two reasons stand out. First, more highly educated people are less likely to smoke and engage in other unhealthy activities, and they are more likely to exercise and to engage in other healthy activities and also to eat healthy diets. Second, they have better access to high-quality health care.

### **How the US Education System Compares Internationally**

The United States has many of the top colleges and universities and secondary schools in the world, and many of the top professors and teachers. In these respects, the US education system is “the best of systems.” But in other respects, it is “the worst of systems.” When we compare educational attainment in the United States to that in the world’s other democracies, the United States lags behind its international peers.

Differences in the educational systems of the world’s democracies make exact comparisons difficult, but one basic measure of educational attainment is the percentage of a nation’s population that has graduated high school. A widely cited comparison involves the industrial nations that are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Of the twenty-eight nations for which OECD has high school graduation data, the United States ranks only twenty-first, with a graduation rate of 76 percent (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2011). How many students finish secondary education? Retrieved November 10, 2011, from <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/62/3/48630687.pdf>. In contrast, several nations, including Finland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom have graduation rates of at least 90 percent. If we limit the comparison to the OECD nations that compose the world’s wealthy democracies (see [Chapter 2 "Poverty"](#)) to which the United States is most appropriately compared, the United States ranks only thirteenth out of sixteen such nations.

OECD also collects and publishes data on proficiency in mathematics, reading, and science among 15-year-olds in its member nations (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2010). Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2010). *PISA 2009 results: What students know and can do—Student performance in reading, mathematics and science* (Vol. 1). Paris, France: Author. In reading and science, the United States ranks only at the average for all OECD nations, while the US score for mathematics ranks below the OECD average. Compared to their counterparts in other industrial nations, then, American 15-year-olds are only average or below average for these three important areas of study. Taking into account high school graduation rates and these proficiency rankings, the United States is far from the world leader in the quality of education.

The Note 11.8 "Lessons from Other Societies" box examines what the United States might learn from the sterling example of Finland's education system.

## Lessons from Other Societies

### Successful Schooling in Finland

Finland is widely regarded as having perhaps the top elementary and secondary education system in the world. Its model of education offers several important lessons for US education. As a recent analysis of Finland's schools put it, "The country's achievements in education have other nations doing their homework."

To understand the lessons to be learned from Finland, we should go back several decades to the 1970s, when Finland's education system was below par, with its students scoring below the international average in mathematics and science. Moreover, urban schools in Finland outranked rural schools, and wealthy students performed much better than low-income students. Today, Finnish students rank at the top in international testing, and low-income students do almost as well as wealthy students.

Finland's education system ranks so highly today because it took several measures to improve its education system. First, and perhaps most important, Finland raised teachers' salaries, required all teachers to have a three-year master's degree, and paid all costs, including a living stipend, for the graduate education needed to achieve this degree. These changes helped to greatly increase the number of teachers, especially the number of highly qualified teachers, and Finland now has more teachers for every 1,000 residents than does the United States. Unlike the United States, teaching is considered a highly prestigious profession in Finland, and the application process to become a teacher is very competitive. The college graduates who apply for one of Finland's eight graduate programs in teaching typically rank in the top 10 percent of their class, and only 5–15 percent of their applications are accepted. A leading Finnish educator observed, "It's more difficult getting into teacher education than law or medicine." In contrast, US students who become teachers tend to have lower SAT scores than those who enter other professions, they only need a four-year degree, and their average salaries are lower than other professionals with a similar level of education.

Second, Finland revamped its curriculum to emphasize critical thinking skills, reduced the importance of scores on standardized tests and then eliminated standardized testing altogether, and eliminated academic tracking before tenth

grade. Unlike the United States, Finland no longer ranks students, teachers, or schools according to scores on standardized tests because these tests are no longer given.

Third, Finland built many more schools to enable the average school to have fewer students. Today the typical school has fewer than three hundred students, and class sizes are smaller than those found in the United States.

Fourth, Finland increased funding of its schools so that its schools are now well maintained and well equipped. Whereas many US schools are decrepit, Finnish schools are decidedly in good repair.

Finally, Finland provided free medical and dental care for children and their families and expanded other types of social services, including three years of paid maternity leave and subsidized day care, as the country realized that children's health and home environment play critical roles in their educational achievement.

These and other changes helped propel Finland's education system to a leading position among the world's industrial nations. As the United States ponders how best to improve its own education system, it may have much to learn from Finland's approach to how children should learn.

*Sources:* Abrams, 2011; Anderson, 2011; Eggers & Calegari, 2011; Hancock, 2011; Ravitch, 2012; Sahlberg, 2011; Abrams, S. E. (2011, January 28). The children must play: What the United States could learn from Finland about education reform. *The New Republic*. Retrieved from <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/82329/education-reform-finland-us>; Anderson, J. (2011, December 13). From Finland, an intriguing school-reform model. *New York Times*, p. A33; Eggers, D., & Calegari, N. C. (2011, May 1). The high cost of low teacher salaries. *New York Times*, p. WK12; Hancock, L. (2011, September). Why are Finland's schools successful? *Smithsonian*. Retrieved from <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-Schools-Successful.html?c=y&story=fullstory>; Ravitch, D. (2012, March 8). Schools we can envy. *The New York Review of Books*. Retrieved from <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2012/mar/08/schools-we-can-envy/>; Sahlberg, P. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York, NY: Teachers College Press.



### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Until very recently in the record of history, formal schooling was restricted to wealthy males.
- Students from low-income backgrounds tend to have lower educational attainment than students from wealthier backgrounds.
- African Americans and Latinos tend to have lower educational attainment than non-Latino whites and Asians.
- Gender influences educational attainment in a complex fashion; older women have lower educational attainment than older men, but younger women have greater educational attainment than younger men.
- The United States ranks behind many other industrial nations in the quality of the education its citizens receive.

### FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Do you think the government should take steps to try to reduce racial and ethnic differences in education, or do you think it should take a hands-off approach? Explain your answer.
2. Should the government require that children receive a formal education, as it now does, or should it be up to parents to decide whether their children should receive a formal education? Explain your answer.

## 11.2 Sociological Perspectives on Education

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. List the major functions of education.
2. Explain the problems that conflict theory sees in education.
3. Describe how symbolic interactionism understands education.

The major sociological perspectives on education fall nicely into the functional, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches (Ballantine & Hammack, 2012). Ballantine, J. H., & Hammack, F. M. (2012). *The sociology of education: A systematic analysis* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. **Table 11.1 "Theory Snapshot"** summarizes what these approaches say.

Table 11.1 Theory Snapshot

Theoretical perspective	Major assumptions
Functionalism	Education serves several functions for society. These include (a) socialization, (b) social integration, (c) social placement, and (d) social and cultural innovation. Latent functions include child care, the establishment of peer relationships, and lowering unemployment by keeping high school students out of the full-time labor force. Problems in the educational institution harm society because all these functions cannot be completely fulfilled.
Conflict theory	Education promotes social inequality through the use of tracking and standardized testing and the impact of its “hidden curriculum.” Schools differ widely in their funding and learning conditions, and this type of inequality leads to learning disparities that reinforce social inequality.
Symbolic interactionism	This perspective focuses on social interaction in the classroom, on the playground, and in other school venues. Specific research finds that social interaction in schools affects the development of gender roles and that teachers’ expectations of pupils’ intellectual abilities affect how much pupils learn. Certain educational problems have their basis in social interaction and expectations.

## The Functions of Education

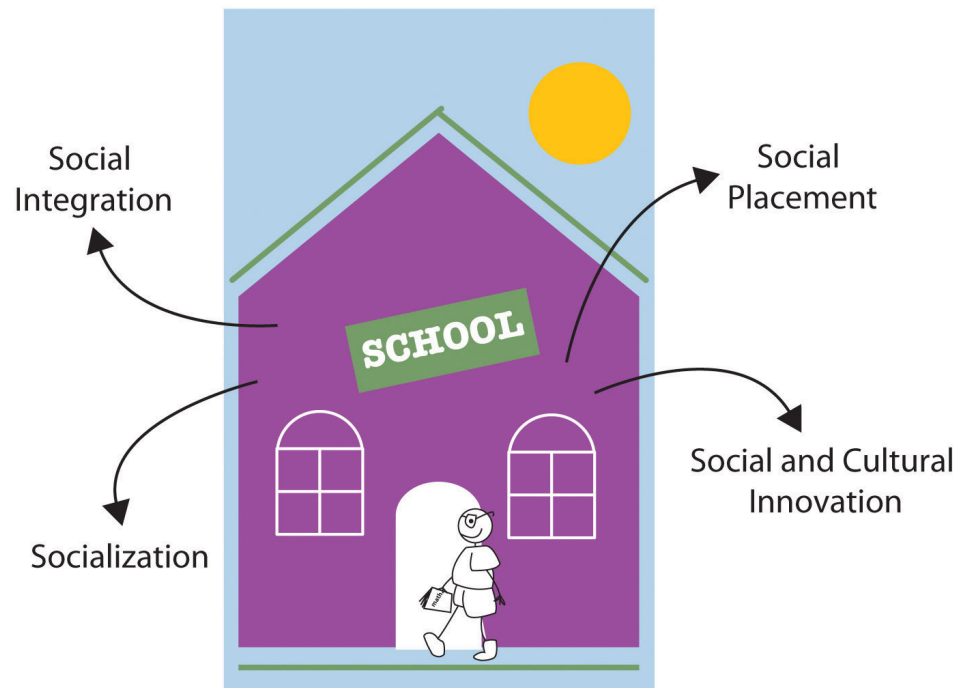
Functional theory stresses the functions that education serves in fulfilling a society's various needs. Perhaps the most important function of education is *socialization*. If children are to learn the norms, values, and skills they need to function in society, then education is a primary vehicle for such learning. Schools teach the three Rs (reading, 'riting, 'rithmetic), as we all know, but they also teach many of the society's norms and values. In the United States, these norms and values include respect for authority, patriotism (remember the Pledge of Allegiance?), punctuality, and competition (for grades and sports victories).

A second function of education is *social integration*. For a society to work, functionalists say, people must subscribe to a common set of beliefs and values. As we saw, the development of such common views was a goal of the system of free, compulsory education that developed in the nineteenth century. Thousands of immigrant children in the United States today are learning English, US history, and other subjects that help prepare them for the workforce and integrate them into American life.

A third function of education is *social placement*. Beginning in grade school, students are identified by teachers and other school officials either as bright and motivated or as less bright and even educationally challenged. Depending on how they are identified, children are taught at the level that is thought to suit them best. In this way, they are presumably prepared for their later station in life. Whether this process works as well as it should is an important issue, and we explore it further when we discuss school tracking later in this chapter.

*Social and cultural innovation* is a fourth function of education. Our scientists cannot make important scientific discoveries and our artists and thinkers cannot come up with great works of art, poetry, and prose unless they have first been educated in the many subjects they need to know for their chosen path.

Figure 11.6 *The Functions of Education*



Schools ideally perform many important functions in modern society. These include socialization, social integration, social placement, and social and cultural innovation.

Education also involves several *latent* functions, functions that are by-products of going to school and receiving an education rather than a direct effect of the education itself. One of these is *child care*: Once a child starts kindergarten and then first grade, for several hours a day the child is taken care of for free. The *establishment of peer relationships* is another latent function of schooling. Most of us met many of our friends while we were in school at whatever grade level, and some of those friendships endure the rest of our lives. A final latent function of education is that it *keeps millions of high school students out of the full-time labor force*. This fact keeps the unemployment rate lower than it would be if they were in the labor force.

Because education serves so many manifest and latent functions for society, problems in schooling ultimately harm society. For education to serve its many functions, various kinds of reforms are needed to make our schools and the process of education as effective as possible.

## Education and Inequality

Conflict theory does not dispute the functions just described. However, it does give some of them a different slant by emphasizing how education also perpetuates social inequality (Ballantine & Hammack, 2012). Ballantine, J. H., & Hammack, F. M. (2012). *The sociology of education: A systematic analysis* (7th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall. One example of this process involves the function of social placement. When most schools begin tracking their students in grade school, the students thought by their teachers to be bright are placed in the faster tracks (especially in reading and arithmetic), while the slower students are placed in the slower tracks; in high school, three common tracks are the college track, vocational track, and general track.

Such *tracking* does have its advantages; it helps ensure that bright students learn as much as their abilities allow them, and it helps ensure that slower students are not taught over their heads. But conflict theorists say that tracking also helps perpetuate social inequality by *locking* students into faster and lower tracks. Worse yet, several studies show that students' social class and race and ethnicity affect the track into which they are placed, even though their intellectual abilities and potential should be the only things that matter: White, middle-class students are more likely to be tracked "up," while poorer students and students of color are more likely to be tracked "down." Once they are tracked, students learn more if they are tracked up and less if they are tracked down. The latter tend to lose self-esteem and begin to think they have little academic ability and thus do worse in school because they were tracked down. In this way, tracking is thought to be good for those tracked up and bad for those tracked down. Conflict theorists thus say that tracking perpetuates social inequality based on social class and race and ethnicity (Ansalone, 2010). Ansalone, G. (2010). Tracking: Educational differentiation or defective strategy. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 34(2), 3–17.

Conflict theorists add that standardized tests are culturally biased and thus also help perpetuate social inequality (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008). Grodsky, E., Warren, J. R., & Felts, E. (2008). Testing and social stratification in American education. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34(1), 385–404. According to this criticism, these tests favor white, middle-class students whose socioeconomic status and other aspects of their backgrounds have afforded them various experiences that help them answer questions on the tests.

A third critique of conflict theory involves the quality of schools. As we will see later in this chapter, US schools differ mightily in their resources, learning conditions, and other aspects, all of which affect how much students can learn in them. Simply put, schools are unequal, and their very inequality helps perpetuate inequality in the larger society. Children going to the worst schools in urban areas

face many more obstacles to their learning than those going to well-funded schools in suburban areas. Their lack of learning helps ensure they remain trapped in poverty and its related problems.

In a fourth critique, conflict theorists say that schooling teaches a **hidden curriculum**<sup>6</sup>, by which they mean a set of values and beliefs that support the status quo, including the existing social hierarchy (Booher-Jennings, 2008). Booher-Jennings, J. (2008). Learning to label: Socialisation, gender, and the hidden curriculum of high-stakes testing. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 29, 149–160. Although no one plots this behind closed doors, our schoolchildren learn patriotic values and respect for authority from the books they read and from various classroom activities.

A final critique is historical and concerns the rise of free, compulsory education during the nineteenth century (Cole, 2008). Cole, M. (2008). *Marxism and educational theory: Origins and issues*. New York, NY: Routledge. Because compulsory schooling began in part to prevent immigrants' values from corrupting "American" values, conflict theorists see its origins as smacking of *ethnocentrism* (the belief that one's own group is superior to another group). They also criticize its intention to teach workers the skills they needed for the new industrial economy. Because most workers were very poor in this economy, these critics say, compulsory education served the interests of the upper/capitalist class much more than it served the interests of workers.

## Symbolic Interactionism and School Behavior

Symbolic interactionist studies of education examine social interaction in the classroom, on the playground, and in other school venues. These studies help us understand what happens in the schools themselves, but they also help us understand how what occurs in school is relevant for the larger society. Some studies, for example, show how children's playground activities reinforce gender-role socialization. Girls tend to play more cooperative games, while boys play more competitive sports (Thorne, 1993). Thorne, B. (1993). *Gender play: Girls and boys in school*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. (see [Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality"](#)).

6. A set of values and beliefs learned in school that support the status quo, including the existing social hierarchy.

## Applying Social Research

### Assessing the Impact of Small Class Size

Do elementary school students fare better if their classes have fewer students rather than more students? It is not easy to answer this important question, because any differences found between students in small classes and those in larger classes might not necessarily reflect class size. Rather, they may reflect other factors. For example, perhaps the most motivated, educated parents ask that their child be placed in a smaller class and that their school goes along with this request. Perhaps teachers with more experience favor smaller classes and are able to have their principals assign them to these classes, while new teachers are assigned larger classes. These and other possibilities mean that any differences found between the two class sizes might reflect the qualities and skills of students and/or teachers in these classes, and not class size itself.

For this reason, the ideal study of class size would involve *random assignment* of both students and teachers to classes of different size. (Recall that [Chapter 1 "Understanding Social Problems"](#) discusses the benefits of random assignment.) Fortunately, a notable study of this type exists.

The study, named Project STAR (Student/Teacher Achievement Ratio), began in Tennessee in 1985 and involved 79 public schools and 11,600 students and 1,330 teachers who were all randomly assigned to either a smaller class (13–17 students) or a larger class (22–25 students). The random assignment began when the students entered kindergarten and lasted through third grade; in fourth grade, the experiment ended, and all the students were placed into the larger class size. The students are now in their early thirties, and many aspects of their educational and personal lives have been followed since the study began.

Some of the more notable findings of this multiyear study include the following:

- While in grades K–3, students in the smaller classes had higher average scores on standardized tests.
- Students who had been in the smaller classes continued to have higher average test scores in grades 4–7.

- Students who had been in the smaller classes were more likely to complete high school and also to attend college.
- Students who had been in the smaller classes were less likely to be arrested during adolescence.
- Students who had been in the smaller classes were more likely in their twenties to be married and to live in wealthier neighborhoods.
- White girls who had been in the smaller classes were less likely to have a teenage birth than white girls who had been in the larger classes.

Why did small class size have these benefits? Two reasons seem likely. First, in a smaller class, there are fewer students to disrupt the class by talking, fighting, or otherwise taking up the teacher's time. More learning can thus occur in smaller classes. Second, kindergarten teachers are better able to teach noncognitive skills (cooperating, listening, sitting still) in smaller classes, and these skills can have an impact many years later.

Regardless of the reasons, it was the experimental design of Project STAR that enabled its findings to be attributed to class size rather than to other factors. Because small class size does seem to help in many ways, the United States should try to reduce class size in order to improve student performance and later life outcomes.

Sources: Chetty et al., 2011; Schanzenbach, 2006; Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hilger, N., Saez, E., Schanzenbach, D. W., & Yagan, D. (2011). How does your kindergarten classroom affect your earnings? Evidence from Project STAR. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 126, 1593–1660; Schanzenbach, D. W. (2006). What have researchers learned from Project STAR? (Harris School Working Paper—Series 06.06).

Another body of research shows that teachers' views about students can affect how much the students learn. When teachers think students are smart, they tend to spend more time with these students, to call on them, and to praise them when they give the right answer. Not surprisingly, these students learn more because of their teachers' behavior. But when teachers think students are less bright, they tend to spend less time with these





students and to act in a way that leads them to learn less. Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968) Rosenthal, R., & Jacobson, L. (1968). *Pygmalion in the classroom*. New York, NY: Holt. conducted a classic study of this phenomenon. They tested a group of students at the beginning of the school year and told their teachers which students were bright and which were not. They then tested the students again at the end of the school year. Not surprisingly, the bright students had learned more during the year than the less bright ones. But it turned out that the researchers had randomly decided which students would be designated bright and less bright. Because the “bright” students learned more during the school year without actually being brighter at the beginning, their teachers’ behavior must have been the reason. In fact, their teachers did spend more time with them and praised them more often than was true for the “less bright” students. This process helps us understand why tracking is bad for the students tracked down.

*Research guided by the symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that teachers’ expectations may influence how much their students learn. When teachers expect little of their students, their students tend to learn less.*

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Other research in the symbolic interactionist tradition focuses on how teachers treat girls and boys. Many studies find that teachers call on and praise boys more often (Jones & Dindia, 2004). Jones, S. M., & Dindia, K. (2004). A meta-analytic perspective on sex equity in the classroom. *Review of Educational Research*, 74, 443–471. Teachers do not do this consciously, but their behavior nonetheless sends an implicit message to girls that math and science are not for them and that they are not suited to do well in these subjects. This body of research has stimulated efforts to educate teachers about the ways in which they may unwittingly send these messages and about strategies they could use to promote greater interest and achievement by girls in math and science (Battey, Kafai, Nixon, & Kao, 2007). Battey, D., Kafai, Y., Nixon, A. S., & Kao, L. L. (2007). Professional development for teachers on gender equity in the sciences: Initiating the conversation. *Teachers College Record*, 109(1), 221–243.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- According to the functional perspective, education helps socialize children and prepare them for their eventual entrance into the larger society as adults.
- The conflict perspective emphasizes that education reinforces inequality in the larger society.
- The symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on social interaction in the classroom, on school playgrounds, and at other school-related venues. Social interaction contributes to gender-role socialization, and teachers' expectations may affect their students' performance.

### FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Review how the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist perspectives understand and explain education. Which of these three approaches do you most prefer? Why?

## 11.3 Issues and Problems in Elementary and Secondary Education

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe how schooling in the United States helps perpetuate social inequality.
2. Explain the difference between de jure segregation and de facto segregation.
3. Summarize the evidence on the effectiveness of single-sex education.
4. Describe the extent of school violence and the controversy over zero-tolerance policies.
5. Discuss how and why social inequality in the larger society manifests itself in higher education.

The *elementary* (K–8) and *secondary* (9–12) education system today faces many issues and problems of interest not just to educators and families but also to sociologists and other social scientists. We cannot discuss all these issues here, but we will highlight some of the most interesting and important.

### Schools and Inequality

Earlier we mentioned that schools differ greatly in their funding, their conditions, and other aspects. Noted author and education critic Jonathan Kozol refers to these differences as “savage inequalities,” to quote the title of one of his books (Kozol, 1991). Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America’s schools*. New York, NY: Crown. Kozol’s concern over inequality in the schools stemmed from his experience as a young teacher in a public elementary school in a Boston inner-city neighborhood in the 1960s. Kozol was shocked to see that his school was literally falling apart. The building itself was decrepit, with plaster falling off the walls and bathrooms and other facilities substandard. Classes were large, and the school was so overcrowded that Kozol’s fourth-grade class had to meet in an auditorium, which it shared with another class, the school choir, and, for a time, a group of students practicing for the Christmas play. Kozol’s observations led to the writing of his first award-winning book, *Death at an Early Age* (Kozol, 1967). Kozol, J. (1967). *Death at an early age: The destruction of the hearts and minds of negro children in the Boston public schools*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Kozol (1991) Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America’s schools*. New York, NY: Crown. later traveled around the United States and systematically

compared public schools in several cities' inner-city neighborhoods to those in the cities' suburbs. Everywhere he went, he found great discrepancies in school spending and in the quality of instruction. In schools in Camden, New Jersey, for example, spending per pupil was less than half the amount spent in the nearby, much wealthier town of Princeton. Chicago and New York City schools spent only about half the amount that some of the schools in nearby suburbs spent.

These numbers were reflected in other differences Kozol found when he visited city and suburban schools. In East St. Louis, Illinois, where most of the residents are poor and almost all are African American, schools had to shut down once because of sewage backups. The high school's science labs were thirty to fifty years out of date when Kozol visited them; the biology lab had no dissecting kits. A history teacher had 110 students but only twenty-six textbooks, some of which were missing their first one hundred pages. At one of the city's junior high schools, many window frames lacked any glass, and the hallways were dark because light bulbs were missing or not working. Visitors could smell urinals one hundred feet from the bathroom.

Contrast these conditions with those Kozol observed in suburban schools. A high school in a Chicago suburb had seven gyms and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. Students there could take classes in seven foreign languages. A suburban New Jersey high school offered fourteen AP courses, fencing, golf, ice hockey, and lacrosse, and the school district there had ten music teachers and an extensive music program.

From his observations, Kozol concluded that the United States is shortchanging its children in poor rural and urban areas. As we saw in [Chapter 2 "Poverty"](#), poor children start out in life with many strikes against them. The schools they attend compound their problems and help ensure that the American ideal of equal opportunity for all remains just that—an ideal—rather than a reality. As Kozol (1991, p. 233) Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools*. New York, NY: Crown. observed, “All our children ought to be allowed a stake in the enormous richness of America. Whether they were born to poor white Appalachians or to wealthy Texans, to poor black people in the Bronx or to rich people in Manhasset or Winnetka, they are all quite wonderful and innocent when they are small. We soil them needlessly.”

Although the book in which Kozol reported these conditions was published more than twenty years ago, ample evidence (including the news story about Baltimore's schools that began this chapter) shows these conditions persist today. A recent news report discussed public schools in Washington, DC. More than 75 percent of the schools in the city had a leaking roof at the time the report was published, and

87 percent had electrical problems, some of which involved shocks or sparks. Most of the schools' cafeterias—85 percent—had health violations, including peeling paint near food and rodent and roach infestation. Thousands of requests for building repairs, including 1,100 labeled “urgent” or “dangerous,” had been waiting more than a year to be addressed. More than one-third of the schools had a mouse infestation, and in one elementary school, there were so many mice that the students gave them names and drew their pictures. An official with the city's school system said, “I don't know if anybody knows the magnitude of problems at D.C. public schools. It's mind-boggling” (Keating & Haynes, 2007). Keating, D., & Haynes, V. D. (2007, June 10). Can DC schools be fixed? *The Washington Post*, p. A1.

Large funding differences in the nation's schools also endure. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for example, annual per-pupil expenditure was \$10,878 in 2010; in nearby suburban Lower Merion Township, it was \$21,110, or 95 percent higher than Philadelphia's expenditure (Federal Education Budget Project, 2012). Federal Education Budget Project. (2012). K-12: Pennsylvania. Retrieved January 2, 2012, from <http://febp.newamerica.net/k12/PA>.

Teacher salaries are related to these funding differences. Salaries in urban schools in low-income neighborhoods are markedly lower than those in schools in wealthier neighborhoods (Dillon, 2011). Dillon, S. (2011, December 1). Districts pay less in poor schools, report says. *New York Times*, p. A29. As a result, teachers at the low-income schools tend to be inexperienced teachers just out of college. All things equal, they are less likely than their counterparts at wealthier schools to be effective teachers.



*Jonathan Kozol has written movingly of “savage inequalities” in American schools arising from large differences in their funding and in the condition of their physical facilities.*

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## People Making a Difference

### Teaching Young Students about Science and Conservation

Since 1999, the Ocean Discovery Institute (ODI) has taught more than 40,000 public school students in a low-income San Diego neighborhood about the ocean and the environment. Most of the students are Latino, and a growing number are recent immigrants from Southeast Asia and East Africa. By learning about ocean science, the students also learn something about geology, physics, and other sciences. ODI's program has grown over the years, and it now services more than 5,000 students annually in ten schools. To accomplish its mission, ODI engages in several kinds of activities.

First, ODI instructors teach hands-on marine science activities to students in grades 3–6. They also consult closely with the schools' teachers about the science curriculum taught in the schools.

Second, ODI runs an after-school program in which they provide marine science-based lessons as well as academic, social, and college-entry support to approximately sixty students in grades 6–12.

Third, ODI takes about twenty high school students every summer to the Sea of Cortez in Baja California, Mexico, for an intensive five-week research experience at a field research station. Before they do so, they are trained for several weeks in laboratory and field research procedures, and they also learn how to swim and snorkel. After they arrive at the field research station, they divide into three research teams; each team works on a different project under the guidance of ODI instructors and university and government scientists. A recent project, which won an award from the World Wildlife Fund, has focused on reducing the number of sea turtles that are accidentally caught in fishing nets.

The instruction provided by ODI has changed the lives of many students. Perhaps most notably, about 80 percent of the students who have participated in the after-school or summer program have attended a four-year college or university (with almost all declaring a major in one of the sciences), compared to less than one-third of students in their schools who have not participated in these programs. One summer program student, whose parents were deported

by the government, recalls the experience fondly: “I have learned to become independent, and I pushed myself to try new things. Now I know I can overcome barriers and take chances...I am prepared to overcome challenges and follow my dreams.”

In 2011, ODI was one of three organizations that received the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring. Several ODI officials and students traveled to the White House to take part in various events and accept the award from President Obama. As this award attests, the Ocean Discovery Institute is making a striking difference in the lives of low-income San Diego students. For further information, visit <http://www.oceandiscoveryinstitute.org>. (Full disclosure: The author’s son works for ODI.)

Source: Ocean Discovery Institute, 2011 Ocean Discovery Institute. (2011). *Believe: A PEN in the classroom anthology*. San Diego, CA: Author.

## School Segregation

A related issue to school inequality is school racial segregation. Before 1954, schools in the South were racially segregated by law (**de jure segregation**<sup>7</sup>). Communities and states had laws that dictated which schools white children attended and which schools African American children attended. Schools were either all white or all African American, and, inevitably, white schools were much better funded than African American schools. Then in 1954, the US Supreme Court outlawed *de jure* school segregation in its famous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Southern school districts fought this decision with legal machinations, and *de jure* school segregation did not really end in the South until the civil rights movement won its major victories a decade later.

Meanwhile, northern schools were also segregated; decades after the *Brown* decision, they have become even more segregated. School segregation in the North stemmed, both then and now, not from the law but from neighborhood residential patterns. Because children usually go to schools near their homes, if adjacent neighborhoods are all white or all African American, then the schools for these neighborhoods will also be all white or all African American, or mostly so. This type of segregation is called **de facto segregation**<sup>8</sup>.

7. School segregation stemming from legal requirements.

8. School segregation stemming from neighborhood residential patterns.



Today many children continue to go to schools that are segregated because of neighborhood residential patterns, a situation that Kozol (2005) Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York, NY: Crown. calls “apartheid schooling.” About 40 percent of African American and Latino children attend schools that are very segregated (at least 90 percent of their students are of color); this level of segregation is higher than it was four decades ago. Although such segregation is legal, it still results in schools that are all African American and/or all Latino and that suffer severely from lack of funding, poor physical facilities, and poorly paid teachers (Orfield, Siegel-Hawley, & Kucsera, 2011). Orfield, G., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Kucsera, J. (2011). *Divided we fail: Segregated and unequal schools in the Southland*. Los Angeles, CA: Civil Rights Project.



Many children today attend schools that are racially segregated because of neighborhood residential patterns.

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During the 1960s and 1970s, states, municipalities, and federal courts tried to reduce de facto segregation by busing urban African American children to suburban white schools and, less often, by busing white suburban children to African American urban schools. Busing inflamed passions as perhaps few other issues did during those decades (Lukas, 1985). Lukas, J. A. (1985). *Common ground: A turbulent decade in the lives of three American families*. New York, NY: Knopf. White parents opposed it because they did not want their children bused to urban schools, where, they feared, the children would be unsafe and receive an inferior education. The racial prejudice that many white parents shared heightened their concerns over these issues. African American parents were more likely to see the need for busing, but they, too, wondered about its merits, especially because it was their children who were bused most often and faced racial hostility when they entered formerly all-white schools.

As one possible solution to reduce school segregation, some cities have established *magnet schools*, schools for high-achieving students of all races to which the students and their families apply for admission (Vopat, 2011). Vopat, M. C. (2011). Magnet schools, innate talent, and social justice. *Theory and Research in Education*, 9, 59–72. Although these schools do help some students whose families are poor and of color, their impact on school segregation has been minimal because the number of magnet schools is low and because they are open only to the very best students who, by definition, are also few in number. Some critics also say that magnet schools siphon needed resources from public school systems and that their reliance on standardized tests makes it difficult for African American and Latino students to gain admission.

## School Choice: Education Vouchers and Charter Schools

Children who attend a public school ordinarily attend the school that is designated for the neighborhood in which they live, and they and their parents normally have little choice in the matter. One of the most popular but also controversial components of the school reform movement today is **school choice**<sup>9</sup>, in which parents and their children, primarily from low-income families in urban areas, receive public funds to attend a school different from their neighborhood's school. School choice has two components. The first component involves *education vouchers*, which parents can use as tuition at private or parochial (religious) schools. The second component involves **charter schools**<sup>10</sup>, which are public schools (because public funds pay for students' tuition) built and operated by for-profit companies. Students normally apply for admission to these schools; sometimes they are accepted based on their merit and potential, and sometimes they are accepted by lottery. Both components have strong advocates and fierce critics. We examine each component in turn.

### Education Vouchers

Advocates of school choice programs involving education vouchers say they give low-income families an option for high-quality education they otherwise would be unable to afford. These programs, the advocates add, also help improve the public schools by forcing them to compete for students with their private and parochial counterparts. In order to keep a large number of parents from using vouchers to send their children to the latter schools, public schools have to upgrade their facilities, improve their instruction, and undertake other steps to make their brand of education an attractive alternative. In this way, school choice advocates argue, vouchers have a "competitive impact" that forces public schools to make themselves more attractive to prospective students (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011). National Conference of State Legislatures. (2011). Publicly funded school voucher programs. Retrieved January 2, 2012, from <http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=12942>.

9. Programs in which parents and their children, primarily from low-income families in urban areas, receive public funds to attend a school different from their neighborhood's school.

10. Public schools built and operated by for-profit companies and to which students normally apply for admission.

Critics of school choice programs say they harm the public schools by decreasing their enrollments and therefore their funding. Public schools do not have the money now to compete with private and parochial ones, nor will they have the money to compete with them if vouchers become more widespread. Critics also worry that voucher programs will lead to a "brain drain" of the most academically motivated children and families from low-income schools (Crone, 2011). Crone, J. A. (2011). *How can we solve our social problems?* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.

Because school choice programs and school voucher systems are still relatively new, scholars have not yet had time to assess whether they improve their students' academic achievement. Some studies do find small improvements, but methodological problems make it difficult to reach any firm conclusions at this point (DeLuca & Dayton, 2009). DeLuca, S., & Dayton, E. (2009). Switching social contexts: The effects of housing mobility and school choice programs on youth outcomes. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35(1), 457–491. Although there is also little research on the impact of school choice programs on funding and other aspects of public school systems, some evidence does indicate a negative impact. In Milwaukee, for example, enrollment decline from the use of vouchers cost the school system \$26 million in state aid during the 1990s, forcing a rise in property taxes to replace the lost funds. Because the students who left the Milwaukee school system came from most of its 157 public schools, only a few left any one school, diluting the voucher system's competitive impact. Thus although school choice programs may give some families alternatives to public schools, they might not have the competitive impact on public schools that their advocates claim, and they may cost public school systems state aid (Cooper, 1999). Cooper, K. J. (1999, June 25). Under vouchers, status quo rules. *The Washington Post*, p. A3.

### Charter Schools

About 5,000 charter schools operate across the nation, with about 3 percent of American children attending them. Charter schools and their proponents claim that students fare better in these schools than in conventional public schools because of the charter schools' rigorous teaching methods, strong expectations for good behavior, small classrooms, and other advantages (National Alliance for Public Charter Schools, 2012). National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2012). Why charter schools? Retrieved January 11, 2012, from <http://www.publiccharters.org/About-Charter-Schools/Why-Charter-Schools003F.aspx>.

Critics say charter schools incur the same problems that education vouchers incur: They take some of the brightest students from a city's conventional public schools and lead to lower funding for these schools (Ravitch, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2012). Ravitch, D. (2010, March 8). Why I changed my mind about school reform. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704869304575109443305343962.html>; Rosenfeld, L. (2012, March 16). How charter schools can hurt. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/17/opinion/how-charter-schools-can-hurt.html?emc=tnt&tntemail0=y>. Critics also cite research findings that charter schools do not in fact deliver the strong academic performance claimed by their advocates. For example, a study that compared test scores at charter schools in sixteen states with those at public schools found that the charter schools did worse overall: 17 percent of charter schools had better scores than public schools, 46

percent had scores similar to those of public schools, and 37 percent had lower scores (Center for Research on Education Outcomes, 2009). Center for Research on Education Outcomes. (2009). *Multiple choice: Charter school performance in 16 states*. Stanford, CA: Author.

Even when charter school test scores are higher, there is the methodological problem that students are not randomly assigned to attend a charter school (Basile, 2010). Basile, M. (2010). *False impression: How a widely cited study vastly overstates the benefits of charter schools*. New York, NY: Century Foundation. It is thus possible that the students and parents who apply to charter schools are more highly motivated than those who do not. If so, the higher test scores found in some charter schools may reflect the motivation of the students attending these schools, and not necessarily the schools' teaching methods. It is also true that charter schools do not usually enroll students who know little English (because their parents are immigrants) and students with disabilities or other problems. All such students often face difficulties in doing well in school. This is yet another possible reason that a small number of charter schools outperform public schools. Despite the popularity of charter schools, then, the academic case for them remains to be proven.

### Single-Sex Schools and Classes

Before the late 1960s and early 1970s, many colleges and universities, including several highly selective campuses, were single-sex institutions. Since that time, almost all the male colleges and many of the female colleges have gone coed. A few women's colleges still remain, as their administrators and alumnae say that women can achieve much more in a women's college than in a coed institution. The issue of single-sex institutions has been more muted at the secondary school level, as most public schools have been coeducational since the advent of free, compulsory education during the nineteenth century. However, several private schools were single-sex ones from their outset, and many of these remain today. Still, the trend throughout the educational world was toward coeducation.

Since the 1990s, however, some education specialists have argued that single-sex secondary schools, or at least single-sex classes, might make sense for girls or for boys. In response, single-sex classes and single-sex schools have arisen in at least seventeen US cities. The argument for single-sex learning for girls rests on the same reasons advanced by advocates for women's colleges: Girls can do better academically, and perhaps especially in math and science classes, when they are by themselves. The argument for boys rests on a different set of reasons (National Association for Single Sex Public Education, 2011). National Association for Single Sex Public Education. (2011). Advantages for boys. Retrieved January 2, 2012, from <http://www.singlesexschools.org/advantages-forboys.htm>. Boys in classes with girls are more likely to act "macho" and thus to engage in disruptive behavior; in single-sex classes, boys thus behave better and are more committed to their studies. They also feel freer to exhibit an interest in music, the arts, and other subjects not usually thought of as "macho" topics. Furthermore, because the best students in coed schools are often girls, many boys tend to devalue academic success in coed settings and are more likely to value it in single-sex settings. Finally, in a boys-only setting, teachers can use examples and certain teaching techniques that boys may find especially interesting, such as the use of snakes to teach biology. To the extent that single-sex education may benefit boys for any of these reasons, these benefits are often thought to be highest for boys from families living in poverty or near poverty.



*Single-sex schools and classes have become more popular for several reasons. The research so far indicates that single-sex education may be beneficial in certain respects for the students experiencing it.*

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What does the research evidence say about single-sex schooling's benefits? A review of several dozen studies concluded that the results of single-sex schooling are mixed overall but that there are slightly more favorable outcomes for single-sex schools compared to coeducational schools (US Department of Education, 2005). US Department of Education. (2005). *Single-sex versus secondary schooling: A systematic review*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development. However, the review noted that methodological problems limited the value of the studies it examined. For example, none of the studies involved random assignment of students to single-sex or coeducational schooling. Further, all the studies involved high school students and a majority involved students in Catholic schools. This limited scope prompted the call for additional studies of younger students and those in public schools.

Another review of the research evidence was more critical of single-sex schooling (Halpern et al., 2011). Halpern, D. F., Eliot, L., Bigler, R. S., Fabes, R. A., Hanish, L. D., Hyde, J., et al. (2011). The pseudoscience of single-sex schooling. *Science*, 333, 1706–1707. This review concluded that such schooling does not benefit girls or boys and in fact does them harm by reinforcing gender-role stereotypes. Boys in all-boy classes become more aggressive, the review said, and girls in all-girl classes become more feminine. The review also argued that single-sex schooling is based on a faulty, outdated understanding of how girls and boys learn and function. Drawing on this review and other evidence, two critics of single-sex education recently concluded, “So there is a veritable mountain of evidence, growing every day, that the single-sex classroom is not a magic bullet to save American education. And scant evidence that it heightens the academic achievement of girls and boys” (Barnett & Rivers, 2012). Barnett, R. C., & Rivers, C. (2012, February 17). Why science doesn't support single-sex classes. *Education Week*. Retrieved from [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/02/17/21barnett.h31.html?tkn=XNPFPP3DSaPBokSRePilYv9tz%2FsDy4SQ5jGa&cmp=ENL - EU-VIEWS1](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/02/17/21barnett.h31.html?tkn=XNPFPP3DSaPBokSRePilYv9tz%2FsDy4SQ5jGa&cmp=ENL-EU-VIEWS1).

## Children and Our Future

### The Importance of Preschool and Summer Learning Programs for Low-Income Children

The first few years of life are absolutely critical for a child's neurological and cognitive development. What happens, or doesn't happen, before ages 5 and 6 can have lifelong consequences for a child's educational attainment, adolescent behavior, and adult employment and family life. However, as this chapter and previous chapters emphasize, low-income children face many kinds of obstacles during this critical phase of their lives. Among other problems, their families are often filled with stressful life events that impair their physical and mental health and neurological development, and their parents read and talk to them much less on the average than wealthier parents do. These difficulties in turn lower their school performance and educational attainment, with negative repercussions continuing into adulthood.

To counteract these problems and enhance low-income children's ability to do well in school, two types of programs have been repeatedly shown to be very helpful and even essential. The first is *preschool*, a general term for semiformal early learning programs that take place roughly between ages 3 and 5. As the name of the famous Head Start program implies, preschool is meant to help prepare low-income children for kindergarten and beyond. Depending on the program, preschool involves group instruction and play for children, developmental and health screening, and other components. Many European nations have high-quality preschool programs that are free or heavily subsidized, but these programs are, by comparison, much less prevalent in the United States and often more costly for parents.

Preschool in the United States has been shown to have positive benefits that extend well into adulthood. For example, children who participate in Head Start and certain other programs are more likely years later to graduate high school and attend college. They also tend to have higher salaries in their twenties, and they are less likely to engage in delinquency and crime.

The second program involves summer learning. Educators have discovered that summer is an important time for children's learning. During the summer, children from middle-class and wealthier families tend to read books, attend summer camp and/or engage in other group activities, and travel with their

parents. When they return to school in September, their reading and math skills are higher than when the summer began. In contrast, low-income children are much less likely to have these types of summer experiences, and those who benefitted from school lunch programs during the academic year often go hungry. As a result, their reading and math skills are *lower* when they return to school than when the summer began.

In response to this discovery, many summer learning programs have been established. They generally last from four to eight weeks and are held at schools, campgrounds, community centers, or other locations. Although these programs are still relatively new and not yet thoroughly studied, a recent review concluded that they “can be effective and are likely to have positive impacts when they engage students in learning activities that are hands-on, enjoyable, and have real-world applications.”

Preschool programs help children in the short and long term, and summer programs appear to have the same potential. Their expansion in the United States would benefit many aspects of American society. Because their economic benefits outweigh their economic costs, they are a “no-brainer” for comprehensive social reform efforts.

*Sources:* Child Trends, 2011; Downey & Gibbs, 2012; Garces, Thomas, & Currie, 2003; Reynolds, Temple, Ou, Arteaga, & White, 2011; Terzian & Moore, 2009; Child Trends. (2011). *Research-based responses to key questions about the 2010 Head Start impact study*. Washington, DC: Author; Downey, D. B., & Gibbs, B. G. (2012). How schools really matter. In D. Hartmann & C. Uggen (Eds.), *The Contexts Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 80–86). New York, NY: W. W. Norton; Garces, E., Thomas, D., & Currie, J. (2003). *Longer-term effects of Head Start*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation; Reynolds, A. J., Temple, J. A., Ou, S.-R., Arteaga, I. A., & White, B. A. B. (2011, July 15). School-based early childhood education and age-28 well-being: Effects by timing, dosage, and subgroups. *Science*, 360–364; Terzian, M., & Moore, K. A. (2009). *What works for summer learning programs for low-income children and youth: Preliminary lessons from experimental evaluations of social interventions*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

## School Violence

The issue of school violence won major headlines during the 1990s, when many children, teachers, and other individuals died in the nation’s schools. From 1992



until 1999, 248 students, teachers, and other people died from violent acts (including suicide) on school property, during travel to and from school, or at a school-related event, for an average of about thirty-five violent deaths per year (Zuckoff, 1999). Zuckoff, M. (1999, May 21). Fear is spread around nation. *The Boston Globe*, p. A1.

Several of these deaths occurred in mass shootings. In just a few examples, in December 1997, a student in a Kentucky high school shot and killed three students in a before-school prayer group. In March 1998, two middle school students in Arkansas pulled a fire alarm to evacuate their school and then shot and killed four students and one teacher as they emerged. Two months later, an Oregon high school student killed his parents and then went to his school cafeteria, where he killed two students and wounded twenty-two others. Against this backdrop, the infamous April 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, where two students murdered twelve other students and one teacher before killing themselves, seemed like the last straw. Within days, school after school across the nation installed metal detectors, located police at building entrances and in hallways, and began questioning or suspending students joking about committing violence. People everywhere wondered why the schools were becoming so violent and what could be done about it. A newspaper headline summarized their concern: “fear is spread around nation” (Zuckoff, 1999). Zuckoff, M. (1999, May 21). Fear is spread around nation. *The Boston Globe*, p. A1.

Fortunately, school violence has declined since the 1990s, with fewer students and other people dying in the nation’s schools or being physically attacked. As this trend indicates, the risk of school violence should not be exaggerated: Statistically speaking, schools are very safe, especially in regard to fatal violence. Two kinds of statistics illustrate this point. First, less than 1 percent of all homicides involving school-aged children take place in or near school; virtually all children’s homicides occur in or near a child’s home. Second, an average of seventeen students are killed at school yearly; because about 56 million students attend US elementary and secondary schools, the chances are less than one in 3 million that a student will be killed at school. The annual rate of other serious school violence (rape and sexual assault, aggravated assault, and robbery) is only three crimes per one hundred students; although this is still three too many, it does indicate that 97 percent of students do not suffer these crimes (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010). National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2010). *Understanding school violence fact sheet*. Washington, DC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



*Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, depicted here, killed thirteen people at Columbine High School in 1999 before killing themselves. Their massacre led people across the nation to question why violence was occurring in the schools and to wonder what could be done to reduce it.*

Image courtesy of Columbine High School, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eric\\_harris\\_dylan\\_klebold.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Eric_harris_dylan_klebold.jpg).

## Bullying

Bullying is another problem in the nation's elementary and secondary schools and is often considered a specific type of school violence. However, bullying can take many forms, such as taunting, that do not involve the use or threat of physical violence. As such, we consider bullying here as a separate problem while acknowledging its close relation to school violence.

First it will be helpful to define **bullying**<sup>11</sup>. A common definition in the research literature is that bullying involves “physical and verbal attacks and harassment directed at a victim(s) by one student or a group of students over an extensive period of time” (Moon, Hwang, & McCluskey, 2011). Moon, B., Hwang, H.-W., & McCluskey, J. D. (2011). Causes of school bullying: Empirical test of a general theory of crime, differential association theory, and general strain theory. *Crime & Delinquency*, 57, 849–877. Another definition is also helpful: “The use of one’s

11. Physical and verbal attacks and harassment directed at a victim(s) by one student or a group of students over an extensive period of time.

strength or popularity to injure, threaten or embarrass another person on purpose” (St. George, 2011). St. George, D. (2011, September 5). Bullying linked to lower school achievement. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/bullying-linked-to-lower-school-achievement/2011/09/01/gIQArmQw4J\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/bullying-linked-to-lower-school-achievement/2011/09/01/gIQArmQw4J_story.html). As these definitions suggest, bullying can be *physical* in nature (violence such as shoving and punching), *verbal* (teasing, taunting, and name calling), and *social* (spreading rumors, breaking up friendships, deliberately excluding someone from an activity). An additional form of bullying that has emerged in the last decade or so is **cyberbullying**<sup>12</sup>. As its name implies, cyberbullying involves the use of the Internet, cell phones and smartphones, and other digital technologies to bully others (e.g., rumors can be spread via Facebook) (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). US Department of Health and Human Services. (2012). What is bullying? Retrieved January 5, 2012, from [http://www.stopbullying.gov/topics/what\\_is\\_bullying/index.html](http://www.stopbullying.gov/topics/what_is_bullying/index.html).

Bullying is a serious problem for at least two reasons. First, bullying is a common occurrence. About one-third of students report being victimized by some form of bullying during the school year; this rate of victimization is much higher than the 3 percent rate of victimization for school violence mentioned in the previous section (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2010). National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2010). *Understanding school violence fact sheet*. Washington, DC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Second, bullying can have serious consequences (Adams & Lawrence, 2011). Adams, F. D., & Lawrence, G. J. (2011). Bullying victims: The effects last into college. *American Secondary Education*, 40(1), 4–13. Students who are bullied often experience psychological problems that can last into adulthood; these problems include anxiety, depression, loneliness, sleeplessness, and suicidal thoughts. Their physical health may also suffer. Their school performance (grades, attendance, and participation in school activities) may also decline. In addition, bullying victims sometimes respond by lashing out in violence; many of the mass school shootings of the 1990s were committed by male students who had been bullied.

A tragic example of bullying’s effects occurred in September 2011, when a 14-year-old boy in western New York, Jamey Rodemeyer, killed himself after being bullied by classmates because he was gay. Much of the bullying involved homophobic taunts on a social media site Jamey used, including comments such as “JAMIE IS STUPID, GAY, FAT ANND UGLY. HE MUST DIE!” and “I wouldn’t care if you died. No one would. So just do it: It would make everyone WAY more happier!” A week before he died, Jamey wrote on his site, “I always say how bullied I am, but no one listens. What do I have to do so people will listen to me?” (Tan, 2011). Tan, S. (2011,

12. The use of the Internet, cell phones and smartphones, and other digital technologies to bully others.

September 20). Teenager struggled with bullying before taking his life. *The Buffalo News*. Retrieved from <http://www.buffalonews.com/city/schools/article563538.ece>.

## School Discipline and Racial Discrimination

To reduce school violence and bullying, many school districts have adopted strict policies that specify harsh punishments. A common policy involves *zero-tolerance* for weapons; this type of policy calls for automatic suspension or expulsion of a student who has anything resembling a weapon for any reason. However, this policy is often applied too rigidly. In one example, a 6-year-old boy in Delaware excitedly took his new camping utensil—a combination of knife, fork, and spoon—from Cub Scouts to school to use at lunch. He was suspended for having a knife and ordered to spend forty-five days in reform school. His mother said her son certainly posed no threat to anyone at school, but school officials replied that their policy had to be strictly enforced because it is difficult to determine who actually poses a threat from who does not (Urbina, 2009). Urbina, I. (2009, October 11). It's a fork, it's a spoon, it's a...weapon? *New York Times*, p. A1. In another case, a ninth grader took a knife and cigarette lighter away from a student who had used them to threaten a fellow classmate. The ninth grader was suspended for the rest of the school year for possessing a weapon, even though he had them only because he was protecting his classmate. According to a news story about this case, the school's reaction was "vigilance to a fault" (Walker, 2010, p. A12). Walker, A. (2010, January 23). Vigilance to a fault. *The Boston Globe*, p. A12.

Zero-tolerance or other very strict policies are also in place in many schools for offenses such as drug use and possession, fighting, and classroom disruption. However well intended these policies may be, the research evidence suggests that they are ineffective in deterring the behavior they are meant to prevent, and may even be counterproductive. As one review of this evidence puts it, "It is not clear that zero tolerance policies are succeeding in improving school safety. In fact, some evidence...suggests that these policies actually may have an adverse effect on student academic and behavioral outcomes" (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011, p. 1). Boccanfuso, C., & Kuhfeld, M. (2011). *Multiple responses, promising results: Evidence-based, nonpunitive alternatives to zero tolerance*. Washington, DC: Child Trends. When students are suspended, their grades may suffer, and their commitment to schooling may lower; these problems in turn increase their likelihood of engaging in delinquency. The expelled students find it difficult to get back into a school and eventually achieve a high school degree. Their behavior, too, may become more unlawful as a result, and they also are more likely to face unemployment and low-paying jobs. Zero-tolerance school discipline thus seems to do much more harm than good.

In addition to deterrence, another reason for the adoption of strict discipline policies has been to avoid the racial discrimination that occurs when school officials have discretion in deciding which students should be suspended or expelled (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Skiba, R. J., & Rausch, M. K. (2006). Zero tolerance, suspension, and expulsion: Questions of equity and effectiveness. In C. M. Evertson & C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 1063–1089). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. In school districts with such discretion, African American students with weapons or “near weapons” (such as a small penknife) are more likely than white students with the same objects to be punished in this manner. However, a growing body of research finds that African American and Latino students are still more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled for similar misbehaviors (having a weapon, fighting, cursing a teacher, etc.) even in school districts with very strict discipline (Welch & Payne, 2010; Lewin, 2012). Welch, K., & Payne, A. A. (2010). Racial threat and punitive school discipline. *Social Problems*, 57(1), 25–48; Lewin, T. (2012, March 6). Black students face more discipline, study suggests. *New York Times*, p. A11. School discipline, then, is often racially discriminatory.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Schools in America are unequal: They differ greatly in the extent of their funding, in the quality of their physical facilities, and in other respects. Jonathan Kozol calls these differences “savage inequalities.”
- Single-sex education at the secondary level has become more popular. Preliminary evidence indicates that this form of education may be beneficial for several reasons, but more evidence on this issue is needed.
- Although school violence has declined since the 1990s, it continues to concern many Americans. Bullying at school is a common problem and can lead to more serious violence by the children who are bullied.
- School choice programs are popular but also controversial. Charter schools on the average do no better than public schools, and sometimes worse.

#### FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. If you were the principal of a middle school, would you favor or oppose single-sex classes? Explain your answer.
2. Do you favor or oppose school vouchers? Why?

## 11.4 Issues and Problems in Higher Education

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain why certain college students flounder.
2. Describe what is meant by legacy admissions and summarize the criticism of this policy.
3. List any two factors that affect college and university graduation rates.
4. Describe the extent of physical and sexual violence on the nation's campuses.

The issues and problems discussed so far in this chapter concern elementary and secondary schools in view of their critical importance for tens of millions of children and for the nation's social and economic well-being. However, higher education has its own issues and problems. Once again, we do not have space to discuss all these matters, but we will examine some of the most interesting and important. (Recall that [Chapter 7 "Alcohol and Other Drugs"](#) discussed alcohol abuse on campus, a very significant higher education problem.)

### Cost

Perhaps the most important issue is that higher education, at least at four-year institutions, is quite expensive and can cost tens of thousands of dollars per year. This figure varies by the type of college or university, as private institutions cost much more than public institutions (for in-state students). According to the College Board (2012), The College Board. (2012). What it costs to go to college. Retrieved from <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/pay/add-it-up/4494.html>. only 44 percent of all students attend a four-year institution whose annual tuition and fees amount to less than \$9,000. That means that more than half of students attend an institution whose annual tuition and fees are \$9,000 or more; this cost averages more than \$28,500 at private colleges and universities and exceeds \$36,000 at many of these institutions. Tuition and fees average \$8,244 at public four-year institutions. Room and board expenses for on-campus students at four-year institutions range from about \$8,000 to \$14,000, and



*Higher education can cost students and their parents tens of thousands of dollars per year. This expense prevents many students from going to college*

books and supplies average at least an additional \$1,168 for students who do not have the opportunity to read free or low-cost textbooks such as this one.

*and puts many students and parents into considerable debt.*

Combining these figures, students at the least expensive four-year institutions might have bills that total \$17,000 to \$20,000 annually, and those at the most expensive private institutions have bills that exceed \$50,000.

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Scholarships and other financial aid reduce these costs for many students. Private institutions actually collect only about 67 percent of their published tuition and fees because of the aid they hand out, and public institutions collect only about 82 percent (Stripling, 2010). Stripling, J. (2010, September 15). Refining aid choices. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/2009/2015/discounting>. However, many students who receive aid may still have bills totaling thousands of dollars annually and graduate with huge loans to repay. At two-year public institutions, annual tuition and fees average almost \$3,000; these colleges are more affordable but nonetheless can be very costly for their students and their families.

In view of all these figures, it should come as no surprise that many students graduate in debt. Of all the college students who graduated in 2010, roughly two-thirds had to take out loans to pay for their various expenses. These students graduated with an average debt of \$25,250 (Pope, 2011). Pope, J. (2011, November 3). Average student loan debt: \$25,250. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/2011/2003/average-student-debt-2525\\_n\\_1073335.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/2011/2003/average-student-debt-2525_n_1073335.html). which can certainly take many years to pay off.

## Floundering Students

Although college is often said to be the best time of one's life, many students have difficulties during their college years. These students are called *floundering students*. Homesickness during the first semester on campus is common, but a number of students have difficulties beyond homesickness. According to psychiatry professor David Leibow, who has studied troubled students, many floundering students mistakenly believe that they are the only ones who are floundering, and many fail to tell their parents or friends about their problems (Golden, 2010). Golden, S. (2010, September 15). When college is not the best time. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/2009/2015/leibow>. The major cause of floundering, says Leibow, is academic difficulties; other causes include homesickness, relationship problems, family problems including family conflict and the serious illness or death of a family member, personal illness, and financial difficulties.

An estimated 10 percent of students annually seek psychological counseling on their college campus, primarily for depression, anxiety, and relationship problems (Epstein, 2010). Epstein, J. (2010, May 4). Stability in student mental health. *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/2005/2004/counseling>. About one-third of college students overall have sought counseling by the time they graduate or leave school for other reasons, and 7 percent say they have considered suicide before or after entering college (Sieben, 2011). Sieben, L. (2011, March 14). Nearly a third of college students have had mental-health counseling, study finds. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Nearly-a-Third-of-College/126726>. Many students who seek counseling are given medications to treat their symptoms. Leibow says these medications are often helpful but worries that they are overprescribed. Three reasons underlie his concern. First, although the students given these medications may have problems, often the problems are a normal part of growing into adulthood and not serious enough to justify medication. Second, some of these medications can have serious side effects. Third, students who take medications may be less motivated to address the underlying reasons for their problems.

### Social Class and Race in Admissions

We saw earlier in this chapter that African American, Latino, and low-income students are less likely to attend college. And when low-income students do attend college, they are much more likely to attend lower-ranking institutions than very selective campuses. At the very top colleges and universities, 74 percent of new students come from the wealthiest one-fourth of US households, and only 3 percent come from the poorest one-fourth of households (Krugman, 2012). Krugman, P. (2012, January 9). America's unlevel field. *New York Times*, p. A19.

These facts raise important questions about the lack of diversity in college admissions and campus life. [Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"](#) discussed the debate over racially based affirmative action in higher education. Reflecting this debate, some states have passed laws prohibiting the use of race and ethnicity in admissions to public colleges and universities. One such state was California, where voters approved this type of prohibition in 1996. During the first year after this ban took effect, the number of African American and Latino students admitted to the University of California system dropped by about 25 percent and by 50 percent at the system's two most selective campuses in Berkeley and Los Angeles (UCLA). According to the head of the University of California system, "If we had affirmative action as one of our tools, we'd do somewhat better for Hispanics, and we'd probably do significantly better for African-Americans" (Pérez-Peña, 2012). Pérez-Peña, R. (2012, April 2). To enroll more minority students, colleges work around the courts. *New York Times*, p. A9.



In three states with bans on affirmative action, California, Florida, and Texas, public universities automatically admit the top students in every high school. Because many of their high schools are predominantly African American or Latino, this strategy has helped counter their bans on affirmative action. However, because many more high schools in these states are mostly Latino rather than African American, the strategy has proven more beneficial for Latino admissions than for African American admissions (Pérez-Peña, 2012). Pérez-Peña, R. (2012, April 2). To enroll more minority students, colleges work around the courts. *New York Times*, p. A9.



Although colleges and universities are making a greater effort to attract and retain low-income students and students of color, these students remain greatly underrepresented at institutions of higher education.

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Partly because affirmative action is so controversial, attention has begun to focus on the low numbers of low-income students at many colleges and universities, and especially at the more selective institutions as ranked by *US News & World Report* and other sources. Many education scholars and policymakers feel that increasing the number of low-income students would not only help these students but also increase campus diversity along the lines of socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity (since students of color are more likely to be from low-income backgrounds). Efforts to increase the number of low-income students, these experts add, would avoid the controversy that has surrounded affirmative action.

In response to this new attention to social class, colleges and universities have begun to increase their efforts to attract and retain low-income students, which a recent news report called “one of the most underrepresented minority groups at many four-year colleges” (Schmidt, 2010). Schmidt, P. (2010, September 19). In push for diversity, colleges pay attention to socioeconomic class. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Socioeconomic-Class-Gains/124446/?key=TjgnJ124441E124444aHZGM124443hiaT124448TZzgHPSRqZR124448jY124443A YPn124440pbl124449WFQ%124443D%124443D>. The dean of admissions and financial aid at Harvard University summarized these efforts as follows: “I honestly cannot think of any admissions person I know who is not looking—as sort of a major criteria [sic] of how well their year went—at how well they did in attracting people of different economic backgrounds” (Schmidt, 2010). Schmidt, P. (2010, September 19). In push for diversity, colleges pay attention to socioeconomic class. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Socioeconomic-Class-Gains/124446/?key=TjgnJ124441E124444aHZGM124443hiaT124448TZzgHPSRqZR124448jY124443A YPn124440pbl124449WFQ%124443D%124443D>.

As part of their strategy to attract and retain low-income students, Harvard and other selective institutions are now providing financial aid to cover all or most of the students' expenses. Despite these efforts, however, the US higher education system has become more stratified by social class in recent decades: The richest students now occupy a greater percentage of the enrollment at the most selective institutions than in the past, while the poorest students occupy a greater percentage of the enrollment at the least selective four-year institutions and at community colleges (Schmidt, 2010). Schmidt, P. (2010, September 19). In push for diversity, colleges pay attention to socioeconomic class. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Socioeconomic-Class-Gains/124446/?key=TjgnJ124441E124444aHZGM124443hiaT124448TZzgHPSRqZR124448jY124443A YPn124440pbl124449WFO%124443D%124443D>.

### Legacy Admissions

At highly selective colleges and universities, the policy of **legacy admissions**<sup>13</sup> makes it easier for certain wealthy students to gain admission. Under this policy, students who are daughters or sons (or other relatives) of graduates of the institution are given preference in admissions. Because their parents are very likely to be wealthy, a legacy admissions policy in effect amounts to what critics call “affirmative action for the rich” (Kahlenberg, 2010). Kahlenberg, R. D. (Ed.). (2010). *Affirmative action for the rich: Legacy preferences in college admissions*. New York, NY: Century Foundation. According to recent research, being a child of an alumna or alumnus of one of these institutions increases one's chances of admission by forty-five percentage points (Kahlenberg, 2011). Kahlenberg, R. (2011, January 6). Do legacy preferences count more than race? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/do-legacy-preferences-count-more-than-race/28294>. Thus if a nonlegacy applicant with certain qualifications would ordinarily have a 40 percent chance of being admitted, a legacy applicant with the same qualifications would have an 85 percent chance of being admitted. Critics say legacy admissions give an unfair advantage to wealthy students and use up valuable spots that should go to more qualified students from more varied socioeconomic backgrounds. As one critic puts it, “It's fundamentally unfair because it's a preference that advantages the already advantaged. It has nothing to do with the individual merit of the applicant” (Lewin, 2010, p. A12). Lewin, T. (2010, January 9). Study finds family connections give big advantage in college admissions. *New York Times*, p. A12.

### Graduation Rates

For the sake of students and of their colleges and universities, it is important that as many students as possible go on to earn their diplomas. However, only 57 percent of students at four-year institutions graduate within six years. This figure varies by

13. A college admissions policy that gives preference to applicants who are children or other relatives of graduates of the institution.

type of institution. At the highly selective private institutions, 80–90 percent or more of students typically graduate within six years, while at many public institutions, the graduate rate is about 50 percent. Academic and financial difficulties and other problems explain why so many students fail to graduate (Gonzalez, 2010). Gonzalez, J. (2010, August 9). Reports highlight disparities in graduation rates among white and minority students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Reports-Highlight-Disparities/123857>.

The 57 percent overall rate masks a racial/ethnic difference in graduation rates: While 60 percent of white students graduate within six years, only 49 percent of Latino students and 40 percent of African American students graduate. At some institutions, the graduation rates of Latino and African American students match those of whites, thanks in large part to exceptional efforts by these institutions to help students of color. As one expert on this issue explains, “What colleges do for students of color powerfully impacts the futures of these young people and that of our nation” (Gonzalez, 2010). Gonzalez, J. (2010, August 9). Reports highlight disparities in graduation rates among white and minority students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Reports-Highlight-Disparities/123857>. Another expert placed this issue into a larger context: “For both moral and economic reasons, colleges need to ensure that their institutions work better for all the students they serve” (Stephens, 2010). Stephens, L. (2010). *Reports reveal colleges with the biggest, smallest gaps in minority graduation rates in the US*. Washington, DC: The Education Trust.

In this regard, it is important to note that the graduation rate of low-income students from four-year institutions is much lower than the graduation rate of wealthier students (Luhby, 2011). Luhby, T. (2011, November 28). College graduation rates: Income really matters. *CNN Money*. Retrieved from [http://money.cnn.com/2011/11/21/news/economy/income\\_college/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2011/11/21/news/economy/income_college/index.htm). In fact, students with high test scores and low-income parents are less likely to graduate than students with low test scores and high-income parents (Krugman, 2012). Krugman, P. (2012, January 9). America’s unlevel field. *New York Times*, p. A19.

Low-income students drop out at higher rates because of academic and financial difficulties and family problems. Their academic and financial difficulties are intertwined. Low-income students often have to work many hours per week during the academic year to be able to pay their bills. Because their work schedules reduce the time they have for studying, their grades may suffer. This general problem has been made worse by cutbacks in federal grants to low-income students that began during the 1980s. These cutbacks forced low-income students to rely increasingly on loans, which have to be repaid. This fact leads some to work more hours during

the academic year to limit the loans they must take out, and their increased work schedule again may affect their grades.

Low-income students face additional difficulties beyond the financial (Berg, 2010). Berg, G. A. (2010). *Low-income students and the perpetuation of inequality: Higher education in America*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. Their writing and comprehension skills upon entering college are often weaker than those of wealthier students. If they are first-generation college students (meaning that neither parent went to college), they often have problems adjusting to campus life and living amid students from much more advantaged backgrounds.

### **Campus Violence**

Earlier we discussed violence in the elementary and secondary schools. Violence can also happen on college and university campuses, although shootings are very rare. However, three recent examples illustrate that students and faculty are not immune from gun violence. In April 2012, a former student lined up and then shot and killed seven people and wounded three others at Oikos University in Oakland, California. In February 2010, Amy Bishop, a biology professor at the University of Alabama in Huntsville who had recently been denied tenure, allegedly shot and killed three faculty at a department meeting and wounded three others. Almost three years earlier, a student at Virginia Tech went on a shooting rampage and killed thirty-two students and faculty before killing himself.

Other types of violence are more common on the nation's campuses. [Chapter 4 "Gender Inequality"](#) noted that an estimated 20–30 percent of women students have been raped or sexually assaulted (including attempts), usually by a male student who was an acquaintance, friend, or intimate partner. Beyond rape and sexual assault, students are also sometimes assaulted or robbed. Federal victimization data show that about 6 percent of college students are victims of at least one act of all these types of violence annually (Baum & Klaus, 2005). Baum, K., & Klaus, P. (2005). *Violent victimization of college students, 1995–2002*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. Because there are about 20 million students in college, this 6 percent figure translates to about 1.2 million annual violent victimizations at US colleges and universities. It is important to note that the 6 percent rate masks a significant gender difference: 8 percent of male students experience at least one act of violence annually, compared to about 4 percent of female students. Male students are thus twice as likely as female students to be victimized by violence. For just rape and sexual assault, though, female students are much more likely than male students to be victimized.

Many colleges and universities have been accused of not taking rape and sexual assault seriously in what one news report called a “struggle for justice” for campus rape victims (Lipka, 2011; Shapiro, 2010). Lipka, S. (2011, March 20). Colleges face conflicting pressures in dealing with cases of sexual assault. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Face-Conflicting/126818/>; Shapiro, J. (2010, February 24). Campus rape victims: A struggle for justice. *National Public Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124001493>. This criticism takes two forms. First, campuses ignore many reports of rape and sexual assault altogether. Second, they hand out weak or no discipline in cases when they do heed reports. One student’s account of her university’s lack of follow-up to her alleged rape illustrates this criticism. “It was as if they were going above and beyond to ensure nothing would be done in my case,” the woman later recalled. “I felt extremely disappointed to know that the institution in charge of ensuring my safety did not recognize the massive distress the sexual assault caused me. Furthermore, I was disappointed that when I sought justice through their system, I was treated with hostility and disrespect. I was clearly not believed, and was often blamed for what had happened” (Webley, 2011). Webley, K. (2011, April 18). It’s not just Yale: Are colleges doing enough to combat sexual violence? *Time*. Retrieved from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2065849-2065841,2065800.html>.

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The cost of higher education and other problems make it difficult for low-income students and students of color to enter college and to stay in college once admitted.
- Many college students have academic and personal problems that lead them to flounder and to seek psychological counseling.
- Many campuses continue to lack racial and social class diversity, and affirmative action remains very controversial.
- Physical and sexual violence is a general problem on the nation’s campuses. At least one-fifth of college women are raped or sexually assaulted.

**FOR YOUR REVIEW**

1. If you were the director of admissions at a university, what steps would you take to increase the number of applications from low-income students?
2. Do you think alcohol use is to blame for most campus violence, or are there other important factors at work? Explain your answer.

## 11.5 Improving Schools and Education

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Understand how helpful good schooling can be to improve the lives of low-income children.
2. Discuss the importance of good teachers.
3. List any three strategies that will improve the education of low-income students.

This concluding section focuses mostly on elementary and secondary education, given its critical importance for young people's development. As we consider how to improve the nation's schools, and especially how to improve outcomes for low-income students and students of color, we need to keep in mind an important consideration: Good schooling can make an important difference for these students, and good teachers can greatly help low-income students (Chetty et al., 2011). Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., Hilger, N., Saez, E., Schanzenbach, D. W., & Yagan, D. (2011). How does your kindergarten classroom affect your earnings? Evidence from Project STAR. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 126, 1593–1660. However, a large body of research demonstrates that students' family and neighborhood backgrounds actually matter much more than the quality of schooling for their school performance (Downey & Gibbs, 2012; Ladd & Fiske, 2011). Downey, D. B., & Gibbs, B. G. (2012). How schools really matter. In D. Hartmann & C. Uggen (Eds.), *The Contexts Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 80–86). New York, NY: W. W. Norton; Ladd, H. F., & Fiske, E. B. (2011, December 12). Class matters. Why won't we admit it? *New York Times*, p. A23. Good schooling, then, can only go so far in overcoming the many strikes that low-income students and those of color have against them even before they enter kindergarten and the problems they continue to experience thereafter. As one education writer observes,

Let's be realistic: Teachers aren't miracle workers. There's only so much they can do to address problems that troubled students bring to class every day, including neglect, abuse, and unaddressed medical and mental health issues. The obvious and subtle ways that poverty inhibits a child's ability to learn—from hearing, visual and dental problems to higher asthma rates to diminished verbal interaction in the home—have been well-documented.

So let's seek to improve the state of families. Attacking schools and teachers makes everyone feel like a reformer, but the problems begin long before a child steps

through the schoolhouse door. (Farhi, 2011)Farhi, P. (2011, May 20). Five myths about America's schools. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/>.

## Teachers and School Reform

This understanding of low-income students' school performance has important implications for school-reform efforts. For example, if good schooling cannot ordinarily be expected to have a large impact on poor students' lives, this fact calls into question certain aspects of the "No Child Left Behind" movement of the last decade. This movement, begun by the federal government, uses students' scores on standardized tests to assess the quality of their schools. Perhaps inevitably, the subsequent growth in standardized testing has meant that teachers' performance ratings have become increasingly tied to their students' standardized test scores. However, because students' test scores reflect their socioeconomic backgrounds and other nonschool factors much more than the quality of their schooling, these scores are not a good measure of teachers' performance. As one education specialist summarizes this situation, "Of all the goals of the education reform movement, none is more elusive than developing an objective model to assess teachers. Studies have shown that over time, test scores do not provide a consistent means of separating good from bad instructors. Test scores are an inadequate proxy for quality because too many factors outside the teachers' control can influence student performance from year to year—or even from classroom to classroom during the same year" (Russell, 2011, p. WK12).Russell, H. B. (2011, May 1). A new measure for classroom quality. *New York Times*, p. WK12.

## The Need for More General Social Reform

The importance of students' family and neighborhood backgrounds has a significant implication beyond the issue of teacher assessment: To improve low-income students' school performance, our society must address the problems of poverty and racial/ethnic inequality. As two sociologists argue this point, "If we are serious about improving American children's school performance, we will need to take a broader view of education policy. In addition to school reform, we must also aim to improve children's lives where they spend the vast majority of their time—with their families and in their neighborhoods" (Downey and Gibbs, 2012, p. 85).Downey, D. B., & Gibbs, B. G. (2012). How schools really matter. In D. Hartmann & C. Uggen (Eds.), *The Contexts Reader* (2nd ed., pp. 80–86). New York, NY: W. W. Norton. [Chapter 2 "Poverty"](#) and [Chapter 3 "Racial and Ethnic Inequality"](#) discussed strategies to reduce poverty and racial/ethnic inequality; these strategies would also help improve the school performance of low-income students and those of color.



## A School Reform Agenda

Despite the need to address poverty and racial inequality, it remains true that schools with decaying buildings, uncommitted teachers, and other problems cannot be expected to produce students with even adequate levels of academic achievement. It is thus critical, says poverty expert Mark Robert Rank (2004, p. 208), Rank, M. R. (2004). *One nation, underprivileged: Why American poverty affects us all*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. to do everything possible to provide a quality education to the nation's poor children: "To deny children the fundamental right to a decent education is both morally wrong and bad social policy. It flies in the face of the American concept of equality of opportunity...Countless studies have documented the immediate and lingering effects of disparate educational outcomes on later life. Improving public education for low-income children is absolutely essential."

In short, good schools and good teachers do matter. In particular, good elementary- and middle-school teachers have been shown to have a lifelong impact on their students: students with good teachers are more likely years later to have lower teenage pregnancy rates and higher college attendance rates, and they are also more likely to have higher salaries in adulthood (Lowrey, 2012). Lowrey, A. (2012, January 6). Big study links good teachers to lasting gain. *New York Times*, p. A1.

Education experts urge several measures to improve the nation's schools and the education of American children (Madland & Bunker, 2011; Rokosa, 2011; Rothstein, 2010; Smerdon & Borman, 2009). Madland, D., & Bunker, N. (2011). *Middle-class societies invest more in public education: A stronger middle class is associated with higher levels of spending on education*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress; Rokosa, J. (2011). Fighting the war on poverty with early childhood education. Retrieved January 7, 2012, from [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/10/poverty\\_early\\_childhood\\_education.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/10/poverty_early_childhood_education.html); Rothstein, R. (2010). How to fix our schools. Retrieved January 11, 2012, from <http://www.epi.org/publication/ib286/>; Smerdon, B. A., & Borman, K. M. (Eds.). (2009). *Saving America's high schools*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press. These measures include the following:

- Have smaller schools and smaller classrooms.
- Provide more funding for schools, especially those in low-income neighborhoods.
- Repair decaying school buildings.
- Increase teachers' pay to attract more highly qualified applicants.
- Hold teachers more accountable for their students' learning, while recognizing the obstacles that teachers of low-income students must overcome.
- Expand early childhood (preschool) education.

On the national level, these steps will cost billions of dollars, but this expenditure promises to have a significant payoff by saving money in the long run and reducing crime, health problems, and other social ills.

As the United States tries to improve its schools, it is also important to attend to the emotional and physical health needs of low-income children (Lowe, 2011).Lowe, J. I. (2011, January 13). To boost learning, start with emotional health. *Education Week*. Retrieved from [http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/07/13lowe\\_ep.h31.html](http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/12/07/13lowe_ep.h31.html). Because of the many problems these children experience in their families and neighborhoods, including alcohol and drug abuse, hunger, illness, marital conflict, and violence, their emotional and physical health may often suffer. They cannot be expected to do well in school unless they are in good health in both respects. For this reason, many schools are now partnering with community health organizations and other agencies to address the emotional and physical health needs of schoolchildren, often by establishing well-staffed and well-equipped health centers inside the schools. Another effort involves recess (yes, recess!), as evidence indicates that children are healthier and better behaved if they go out for recess for a sufficient amount of time.

In a related issue, it is also important for the nation to try to improve parenting skills if it hopes to improve the educational performance and attainment of low-income students (Roksa & Potter, 2011).Roksa, J., & Potter, D. (2011). Parenting and academic achievement: Intergenerational transmission of educational advantage. *Sociology of Education*, 84, 299–321. As [Chapter 10 "The Changing Family"](#) discussed, low-income parents are less likely to read and talk with their young children, and this problem impairs their children's cognitive and neurological development. Home visits and other efforts by professionals to encourage parents of infants and toddlers to engage in these activities regularly hold potential for improving their children's ability to learn and do well in school.

School violence and bullying are two other problems that must also be addressed. Several of the steps just outlined should reduce school violence, but other measures should also help. One example involves antibullying programs, which include regular parent meetings, strengthened playground supervision, and appropriate discipline when warranted. Research indicates that these programs reduce bullying by 20–23 percent on the average (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009).Farrington, D. P., & Ttofi, M. M. (2009). Reducing school bullying: Evidence-based implications for policy. *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*, 39, 281–345. Any reduction in bullying should in turn help reduce the likelihood of school massacres like Columbine, because, as noted earlier, many of the students committing these massacres had been humiliated and bullied by other students. More generally, because the roots of school violence are also similar to the roots of youth violence outside the schools, measures that reduce youth violence should also reduce school violence. As

discussed in previous chapters, such measures include early childhood prevention programs for youths at risk for developmental and behavioral problems, parenting training programs, and policies that provide income and jobs for families living in poverty.

At the level of higher education, our discussion highlighted the fact that social inequality in the larger society also plays out in colleges and universities. The higher dropout rates for low-income students and for students of color in turn contribute to more social inequality. Colleges and universities need to do everything possible to admit these students and then to help them once they are admitted, as they face many obstacles and difficulties that white students from more advantaged backgrounds are much less likely to encounter.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Good schooling can be very helpful for low-income students, but these students' socioeconomic backgrounds have more impact than schooling on their futures.
- For this reason, more general social reform must accompany effective school reform.
- Several strategies, including smaller classes and better-paid teachers, will help improve the learning of low-income students.

### FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Write a short essay in which you outline what a school's superintendent might do to improve the learning of the school district's elementary school students.
2. Why do you think the United States has not more vigorously pursued the school reform agenda outlined in this section?

## **11.6 End-of-Chapter Material**

## SUMMARY

1. Education is both formal and informal. Formal education occurs in schools under specially trained teachers, while informal education takes place primarily in the home, with parents as instructors.
2. In the early nineteenth century in the United States, a movement for free, compulsory education began. Reasons for interest in such education included the perceived needs to unify the country, to “Americanize” immigrants, and to give members of the working class the skills, knowledge, and discipline they needed to be productive workers.
3. In the United States, social class, race and ethnicity, and gender all affect educational attainment. Poor people end up with less schooling than middle- and upper-class people, and African Americans and Latinos have lower educational attainment than whites and Asian Americans. Although women had less schooling than men in the past, today they are more likely to graduate from high school and to attend college.
4. Education in the United States has a significant impact on two areas. One is income: the higher the education, the higher the income. The second is attitudes: the higher the education, the greater the tolerance for nontraditional behaviors and viewpoints.
5. Sociological perspectives on education fall into the functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist approaches discussed in earlier chapters. Functional theory stresses the functions education serves for society, including socialization, social placement, social integration, and social and cultural innovation. Conflict theory stresses that education perpetuates and reinforces existing social inequality for several reasons, including the use of tracking and inequality in schooling between rich and poor communities. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the social interaction that’s part of schooling and calls attention to the ways in which the treatment of students as smart or dull can affect how much they end up learning.
6. Several issues and problems affect education in the United States today. Many schools are decrepit and lack sufficient books and equipment, and many are also segregated by race and ethnicity. Increasing interest in school choice has led to controversy over whether the government should provide aid to parents to send their children to private and parochial schools. Additional controversy surrounds the issue of single-sex schools for girls. Finally, school violence is an issue of continuing concern; however, the vast majority of schools are very safe for their students, teachers, and other personnel. Bullying is more common, with about one-third of students bullied every year.

7. At the level of higher education, students of color and those from low-income backgrounds are less likely to attend college at all, and if they do attend, they are less likely to graduate.

### USING WHAT YOU KNOW

You are the principal of a middle school in a poor urban neighborhood. Your classrooms lack basic supplies, your roof often leaks, and an ominous odor often arises from your school's water system. You have appealed many times to the school district for additional funds to deal with all these problems, but these funds have not been provided. What, if anything, do you do next?

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

To help deal with the education problems discussed in this chapter, you may wish to do any of the following:

1. Volunteer to tutor students at a local school or after-school program.
2. If your college or university has low numbers of low-income students, establish a student group to encourage your school to admit more such students.
3. Start or join a group on your campus to call attention to the need for responsible alcohol use, as drinking is associated with much campus violence.