

The Broken Classroom: Why the Education System No Longer Works

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Half of the students in the United States need to be on grade level. Around 32 percent of students have fallen behind since the end of the 2023-2024 school year, compared to 33 percent of students who have fallen behind since June 2022. Since the early 2000s, the school systems have been doomed. According to former President Obama, educators have all the resources they need but don't always use them: "...we let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teachers' quality fall short, and other nations outpace us" (Splitt). Looking at the education system in depth reveals its decline into failure and how students are growing increasingly incompetent to "survive" in the real world independently. This research will hopefully provide a comprehensive look at what changes need to be made immediately and what adaptations can be made over time. The hope is that more people know and understand the need to change the education system. More people will fight to make it happen.

Historical Background

Everyone didn't always have the blessing of being able to learn, and that's what left some people suffocated because wanting to know more is part of human nature. So, what is the actual concept of education? Who created the education system, and what was its purpose? Why were people driven to become educators? Three things are key to understanding the educational system: ethnicity, gender, and social class. There are four crucial terms: learning, education, training, and school. Learning aims to lock in a new skill and understand it. If we don't know, we don't have education because education is an organization built on learning. When the educational system is an organization that trains students to focus on skills like math, reading, history, and science, where did these core classes come from, and why are they so important? In

a school, a group of authorities should show students how to love learning and teach them those core classes, but why wasn't this accessible to everyone? Simply, due to Jim Crow laws that were based on the history of slavery and discrimination, it wasn't until 1954 that they passed the Brown v. Board of Education was passed, which allowed black students to be able to get an education. So, was it Horace Mann's purpose to allow white students access to education, or was it supposed to be for everyone?

In the 1800s, the nature of the curriculum was determined locally. Teachers were to be the model of strict moral behavior. That set the rule of the school community itself: schools would be free and supported by taxes, teachers should be trained, and children should be required to attend school. Later in the 1800s, the next goal was the preparation of teachers. This goal was necessary because the goal was to ensure the reliable behavior of future citizens. Therefore, the need for norms of moral behavior led to the creation of the first uniform, formalized national educational curriculum. This curriculum was brought into the "Normal Schools." It was tasked with developing this new curriculum and techniques through which teachers would communicate and model these ideas, behaviors, and values for students who, through formal education, might desire and seek a better quality of life. Since the 19th century, pedagogy has attempted to define the minimal characteristics needed to qualify a person as a teacher: knowledge of the subject, teaching methods, and practical experience in applying both.

These Reform Movements throughout the 20th century introduced child-centered learning, assessment of learner achievement, inquiry-based practice, educating the whole person, ensuring educational opportunities for all, and serving children of the public, not just the elite. School segregation went to the Supreme Court in 1954 with Brown v. Board of Education to express equality and create a world with all good citizens. This made Math, Science, and

research prevalent because they needed to know these core subjects to train students to become good citizens and vote for good people.

In the 1980s, America turned to “norming,” but now the norms were not measuring one child against others. Instead, each child is assessed as they approach the “national standards” that theoretically define the knowledge and skills necessary for all to achieve. The primary subjects taught were the 3 R’s, Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic, because they were considered essential for basic literacy and practical life skills for everyday tasks; additionally, moral instruction was emphasized to instill good character and civic values in students. As time passed, the subject content grew to equip students with the foundational knowledge and skills needed to function effectively in society. They are believed to require critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills.

In 1998, states defined standards for math and reading that equaled the principals and teachers who were judged. Students were promoted or retained based on whether or not they could meet requirements set by a law created. In 2000, “Righting the Ship” was the standards-based curriculum and became a teacher-proof system that ensured all children were taught the same material. Creating a curriculum that was the first focus for school planning persisted through Clinton’s administration with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the G.W. Bush No Child Left Behind, and Obama’s Every Student Succeeds Act and the Accompanying federal funding called Race to the Top (“Race to the Top”).

The Common Core created all materials that were equally taught and distributed uniformly. Teacher Autonomy was Suppressed. It focused on Language Arts and Math, which strictly helped students prepare for politics.

The Education Reform

The grim picture of the education system in 1983 was of a nation at risk. Education wasn't critical; some children didn't know how to read, write, or add. The teachers were not educated enough or paid enough. America had fallen to the bottom in mathematics, English, and science. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was a federal law that reformed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The government would give schools money, but to keep that money, they would have to prove that they had grown with the state government testing.

Politics Background (presidents)

President Ronald Reagan's view on the education system, March 4th, 1986: *What works* (the book). Since 1982, high school students in 35 states have improved their academics. The graduation rates were up, dropout rates were down, and SAT rates rose about 9 points, the most significant annual gain since 1963. They believe the Book on *What Works* will continue the education system's success. Discipline and consistent education policies create a successful school. However, 16 out of 17 states have said that the lack of discipline is their number one concern. The School of Justice has ensured that the staff in these buildings have everything they need to set the students and schools up for success. Students should be taught respect for hard work and the fundamentals of more demanding academics. Higher standards make a student smarter; when homework is given, students are successful, and good teachers and good schools do not need a lot of government interference to create a successful school. Three years ago, a nation at war made the headlines. Without education, their minds would call it a nation at war. In *What Works*, James Madison states, "Knowledge will forever govern ignorance, and the people who mean to be their governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives" (21).

President George W. Bush passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 to reform the public education system. The main goal was to give the schools the funding they needed, but hold the school accountable for ensuring students performed well on the government Standardized testing. If any school did not meet that requirement score, it would be put on an improvement plan using research-based strategies. The act has some benefits, including teachers' funding for training, improvement in reading resources, and help getting tutoring services. Following the Act, he also increased the size of Pell Grants for college students and created the Helping America's Youth Initiative. Mrs. Bush helped at-risk children, provided adults to help them, and led initiatives for the success of schools.

Obama influenced the act of race to the top to influence the standards of the educational system. While English and math were still just as important, they wanted to pass a key component that helped with college and career readiness and gave schools money to help them. Then, they started to analyze how the No Child Left Behind law worked and how reading and math proficiency were by 2014. Instead of looking at the students, they evaluated teachers using students' test scores (Sanchez and Turner).

The NAEP Report

National Standard Achievement has increased because of the Pandemic. Teachers need to be masters of the 20-minute attention span, entertainers, and facilitators—which is not at all what their role is meant to be. So, eventually, we get burnt-out educators.

How the education system has changed in the present time

One example of an educational leader in the private school sector is Mr. Jegernian, who works at *The Neighborhood Academy*. He was the head of the middle school and has now transitioned to the assistant head of school. He noticed that the public has a lot fewer boundaries and structure,

and they bear critical decision-making. When E’Niyah Swan, Senior at *The Neighborhood Academy*, asked about politics, he said, “Imagine being in a school, and the people who created the schools never step foot inside the building; they are looking at it from the outside in.” However, the people inside the school have no power to change or fix anything, which differentiates it from a private school that benefits your students in learning and having the ability to be seen and heard. The educators in private schools have much more freedom to teach their students but still have to follow a schedule, unlike a public school where they have to follow a set schedule and get told how and when to teach a particular subject, when I asked Jernigan about Covid-19 he said, “It affected everyone's mental habits. Because of aversion, students became heavily dependent on social media and technology.” Lastly, Swan asked what statistics show: “They show growth from kids who come from a public school to a private school in all subjects also with critical thinking and confidence. Private schools are somewhere where you can find your strengths and weaknesses. It's not a one-sided spin-off; with the public, it's one side to teach the masses” (Jernigan).

Mr. Snyder is the head of the middle school at *The Neighborhood Academy* and teaches middle school history. When Swan asked him if he thought politics were an issue within the educational system, he said, “No, I believe education is a massive issue within politics, and at times, it feels like political parties will add in the education factor for more votes rather than talk about book banning, like DEI, and inclusivity. They want to make it seem like they care, and it's important to them when it's just what people want to hear” (Snyder). E’Niyah Swan asked what he thinks is the main difference between public schools and private schools, and he said, “ I often see the class sizes, which considerably impact the students. In contrast, at *The Neighborhood Academy*, there have never been more than 15-16 students in a class that offers more one-on-one

time, unlike in a public school, where there are approximately 30-40 students in a class.

However, public schools have more opportunities to be involved in things they want because the state funds much of their money. However, they have standardized testing, which is an evaluation, compared to private schools, where it's made to be a measuring stick (Snyder).

Swan proceeded to ask about COVID-19, and he said it impacted the educational system and set it back about a decade. Our students' scores decreased and stayed the same” (Snyder).

While interviewing the Dean of Student Affairs, Mrs. Shannon Prentiss, Swan asked if she had ever visited any other schools and what the experience was like. Dean Prentiss responded, “I have visited a few different schools. I enjoy seeing what other schools are doing and how they do it. I have visited the following schools: Delaware Valley Friends School-Paoli, PA, Christina Seix Academy-Trenton, NJ, S.hadyside Academy-Pittsburgh, PA, and Urban Academy-Pittsburgh, PA” (Prentiss). Swan was curious about how different it was out of state or the experience: “ In other states, there are WAY more options for independent schools. When I visited the school in New Jersey, I gained a greater appreciation for their school systems. There might not have been many options in the specific city of Trenton, but students could access schools in other major cities and even New York if they elected to go there.

(Prentiss). How is a charter school different from a Private school? Based on what you observed or saw? Charter schools differ from private schools in that they are still bound, in some ways, to state regulations. Because they receive state funding, they must still administer and meet standards for state testing like the PSSA and the Keystone test. Charter schools also are not free to define an admissions process to select students. They are also not permitted to have specific policies around discipline, as they are a faith-based school.

Private schools, on the other hand, because they are traditionally tuition-based, have more autonomy over admissions, enrollment, curriculum, school policy, and religious identity. Lastly, how has COVID-19 impacted students and teachers? Growth? COVID-19 has impacted students' and teachers' interpersonal relationships. I fear that for a particular cohort of students who were at a critical age developmentally during the height of COVID-19, a lot of the social and executive functioning skills they should have developed during that time are lacking/delayed. In response, teachers are spending more time managing behaviors. I think COVID-19 and virtual learning have allowed us to explore technology in schools differently. However, technology overall has also contributed to a lack of interpersonal skills, short attention spans, and the need to be constantly stimulated. COVID-19 allowed educators and schools to see their students and families differently, especially if you work in a school serving a marginalized population. For example, the Delaware Valley Friends School I visited serves students with learning differences in grades K-12. They realized during COVID-19 that some of their students did a lot better when it came to exams in a virtual setting during COVID-19, so they found a way to allow students to take exams on a computer while not compromising the integrity of the test.

E’Niyah Swan interviewed Mr. Conor McAteer, an English teacher at the neighborhood academy (3 years), who previously worked with Taylor Alderdice (½ year as a long-term substitute) and Propel Andrew Street (5 years). Swan asked What is the difference between private, public, and charter? What was your experience? He said, “Educationally, the differences are minimal in education itself. For example, at a Pittsburgh Public School like Alderdice, the curriculum is the same as that of Propel. One difference is that the class sizes are much larger in public schools. Alderdice had an unmanageable class size of around 26, and at Propel, it was a little smaller. However, I worked with students who were less invested in the educational process

at both schools. At a private school like TNA, the class sizes are smaller and much more manageable. I don't feel that it indicates all private schools, but I feel more supported by the administration here at TNA, and the students are more invested.

Additionally, public and charter schools are both required by the state to take standardized tests, so there is a considerable emphasis on that when they take them in the spring. So, at a private school, we don't have to take them, so we get to focus on education instead of regurgitation.” Swan then asked how COVID-19 affected classroom settings. How did a student's performance go down or up? I was teaching at Propel Andrew Street during the pandemic. Schools were utterly unprepared for COVID-19 across the world. No one was prepared. In my experience, no one knew what they were doing, especially the administration. We had no guidelines, and we were told to do live video classes, use Google Classroom, and hold synchronous and asynchronous courses. I believe student attention spans have gone down since the pandemic. I think they went down because there was no way during COVID-19 to hold students accountable. Even when we told students they were going to fail, we didn't forget them, and at this point, it was like they had finally seen what was behind the curtain. So, after the pandemic, it has become easier for students to call our bluff, so to speak, and this causes them to be less attentive. At TNA, though, we can hold students accountable more with grades. Kids here want good grades straight up. When I was at Alderdice and Propel Andrew Street, we had a 50% cap—they couldn't earn less than 50% on an assignment, no matter what. This sounds like grade inflation to me [he chuckles]. They learn to play the system by basically turning in crappy assignments with a few decent ones and still pass. Students learned the tricks, but teachers really couldn't keep them accountable. So clearly, the attention span went down and continues to go down. She proceeded to ask how politics plays a role in the school system. I've been lucky in my

time not to have to consider that. Many high schools have challenging books and curricula if you go a little into the suburbs. I feel fortunate to be situated within the city limits, but I teach a very tolerant student body. I haven't had to consider whether the parents will be mad about what I am teaching regarding topics. In other schools, the topic of parental backlash and administration approval has to be considered.

Keeping the poor in Poverty

Kandice Summers was a former teacher who came from a poverty living situation but her parents made a way for her to get a decent education. She now teaches in a low poverty school that doesn't have an educational promise land that can help students get out of poverty. She says the education system where she tries to teach cannot teach her kids the way they need to be taught due to the lack of resources. The education gap is now an education debt. She brings up many cases where the system has failed the educational program. For example brown vs the education system case and even what it feels like going to an all black school and not seeing any white kids. The kids are willing to learn if they know someone supports and someone who believes in them. The example she gives is that she created a teachers wish list where 1000's of people donated books to her class. The strangers made a huge impact on students' reading because now the resources are there and there are books. Also strangers caring and investing into kids' education that they don't even know about makes them want to learn more and strive for better. (Summers)

Data Star Testing

Math

Class of 2025 at The Neighborhood Academy (TNA)	Years	Students above proficiency	Students below proficiency
9th grade	2021-2022	71%	25%
10th grade	2022-2023	100%	0%
11th grade	2023-2024	55%	45%
12th grade	2024-2025	62%	38%

Class of 2025 Hillel Academy	Years	Students above proficiency	Students below proficiency
9th grade	2021-2022	50%	50%
10th grade	2022-2023	50%	50%
11th grade	2023-2024	67%	33%
12th grade	2024-2025	33%	67%

Class of 2025 at Oakland Catholic	Years	Students above proficiency	Students below proficiency
11th grade	2023-2024	25%	75%
12th grade	2024-2025	0%	100%

Class of 2025 at Yeshiva Boys	Years	Students above proficiency	Students below proficiency
10th grade	2022-2023	33%	67%
11th grade	2023-2024	14%	86%

Class of 2025 at Yeshiva Girls	Years	Students above proficiency	Students below proficiency
10th grade	2022-2023	0%	100%
12th grade	2024-2025	100%	0%

Class of 2025 Central Catholic	Years	Students above proficiency	Students below proficiency
11th grade	2023-2024	0%	100%
12th grade	2024-2025	71%	29%

Different types of school systems in-depth

Public schools are operated with local, state, and federal government funding. This type of school has to abide by specific standards required by the state that do not require students to pay any tuition. But must follow the U.S. Department of Education. Charter schools are free but have limited space and must enroll your child separately. Anybody can apply to open a charter school and get a certain amount of funding, usually up to 5 years, but if they fail to meet the expectations, the school will be shut down. Charter schools have more freedom within the staff and often choose a mission that meets their community's needs. Magnet schools usually specialize in technology, sciences, or arts; they are free public schools in which a group of districts. Magnet schools are generally there for talented and gifted students to get into these schools, but they would need to test. The public virtual or online school meets the exact requirements of public schools in a way that keeps the students within their needs of flexibility and independence. It allows the students and their families more freedom within their education, allowing them to not feel like prisoners all year. (Brianna Flavin)

Traditional Private schools do not rely on the government or government funding; this gives them the freedom to pursue their curricular independence. That means funding comes from students' tuition, nonprofits, or for-profit businesses. On the other hand, boarding schools have the same structure as traditional private schools in that students must stay on campus for the school year. This creates a deeper connection with staff and students and provides more mentorship.

Language immersion schools provide a second language for their students and educators, who are bilingual starting from a young age. This allows students to be fluent in not only one language but many other languages and proficient in all areas and subjects as well.

Montessori schools allow more one-on-one time for your children. If your students are hands-on learners and take in information better that way, a Montessori school is the way to go. Lastly, a plus of a Montessori school is that it allows your students to connect with their teacher by enabling them to have that same teacher for up to three years.

Private special education schools are for students with special needs. These schools allow accommodations for your child to be successful. This allows a safer environment for your child, with more students who understand them and staff who are great at accommodating your child's needs.

Parochial schools are religious private schools that receive money from churches and allow the churches to be more connected with their school. Religious schools are still private, but many organizations and associations help define a religious school.

Lastly, Waldorf schools are nonprofits that allow students to find themselves while focusing on child development and corresponding curricula. Students have the same teacher for up to 8 years, making them feel safer and secure in their education.

The failures within the education system

The educational system has been going downhill for years, and it's really due to a lack of accountability, readiness, discipline, and care for educators and students. COVID-19 has impacted students with the increase in technology. Remote learning has affected students' ability to stay focused and has affected their ability to ask for help when needed. Students are now most likely to drop out of school because they are spending less time learning together. More time spent on technology equals more time spent on social media. Social media is known for causing several mental health issues, like depression and anxiety (*The Annie E. Casey Foundation*). However, social media has also opened up opportunities to connect with people when individuals have to stay home.

Once Covid was over, it was the only thing our education system couldn't recover from. The success rates due to the educational funding were that some may get a better education than others because they can afford it, leaving our students to find other ways to be successful, but eventually ending up in prison. The lack of critical thinking and creativity has gone entirely because of the amount of testing to keep funding up. Lack of teachers, so students aren't getting the help they need due to the overcrowding in schools. Students and their support system have learned to take accountability and responsibility for their grades; it now creates a place of disconnect with the teacher vs the student, rather than coming together.

Students

Students often feel like machines or robots. They are told to memorize, perfect the material, and never forget how to do it. However, the material being shoved into students' brains often leaves them wondering when they will use these subjects in the real world. Students frequently feel dehumanized because they are seen as those who can not make any mistakes.

Instead, students want to learn from their mistakes and figure out different ways for a subject to stick with them, but they are getting robbed of the critical thinking learning that schools should teach. On top of being robbed of something, they should eventually learn time management and balance management skills, which should also be taught in schools. Students have school and home lives, some harder or easier than others, and they have social lives, so learning to balance these activities is crucial to their success.

Stress is a huge issue, and mental health is more severe. The lack of safety within schools has caused outbreaks of fights, bullying, students and teachers fighting, and gun violence. Bullying has become a big issue in why students commit suicide. Fighting and bringing guns into the schools has created an unsafe environment in the school buildings, leading students to either be homeschooled or drop out of school altogether.

Conclusion

To conclude, the education system has much to improve, especially in terms of earning students' trust. If students no longer trust that the education system will provide the knowledge they need, it will continue to fall enormously. Teachers and staff will be burned out more quickly than ever due to the lack of support and overplaying roles they didn't sign up for. Funding will continue to go downhill while letting politicians invade the educational system. In the next 15 years, there will be uneducated, overcrowded prisons that hold students who were failed by the system. The education system can change for the better, inspiring and encouraging students to be educated, hardworking individuals.

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