

**THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF THE USA: PRESCHOOL
EDUCATION, SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION, SCHOOL FORMS**

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Abstract: The education system of the United States is a complex and diverse structure that encompasses multiple levels and institutional types, reflecting the country's federal approach to governance and emphasis on educational accessibility. This article examines the major components of the U.S. education system, including preschool (early childhood education), secondary education (middle and high schools), and higher education (colleges and universities). Each stage of education is explored in detail, with attention to curriculum design, teaching methods, school types (public, private, and charter schools), and the role of standardized testing. Special focus is given to the variety of school forms and educational pathways that students may follow, depending on their interests, talents, and regional regulations. The article also highlights key features such as the academic calendar, grade levels (K–12), the credit system in high schools and colleges, and the structure of degrees in higher education (Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral levels). By analyzing these elements, the article aims to provide a clear and informative overview of how education functions in the United States and how it prepares students for the challenges of modern life and global competition.

Key words: USA education system, preschool education, secondary education, higher education, public vs private schools.

The education system of the USA

The education system of the United States plays a fundamental role in the development of individuals and the progress of society as a whole. It is known for its diversity, flexibility, and emphasis on personal choice and equal opportunity. Unlike many countries with a centralized education structure, the USA operates under a decentralized system where each state and local government has considerable authority over its own educational policies, curriculum, and funding mechanisms. This means that while there are national educational trends and standards, the exact experience of a student can vary widely from one state or district to another. The USA education system is typically divided into several major stages: **early childhood education (preschool), primary and secondary education (K–12), and higher education (college and university levels)**. Each of these stages is designed to build upon the previous one, helping students grow academically, socially, and emotionally. Education is compulsory in most states from around age five or six until at least sixteen, ensuring that all children receive a basic education. One of the key characteristics of the American education system is the wide variety of school forms and learning paths available to students. Public schools, which are funded by taxes and free to attend, serve the majority of American children. However, private schools, charter schools, and homeschooling also play significant roles. This variety provides families with choices that best meet their children's needs and values. Another important feature is the strong emphasis on developing not only academic knowledge but also critical thinking, creativity, and independence. Students are encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports, music, arts, and volunteer work, all of which are considered important parts of a well-rounded education.

Preschool education: preschool education, also known as early childhood education, refers to the stage of learning that occurs before a child enters formal primary school. In

the United States, preschool typically includes children from ages **3 to 5**, and although it is not mandatory, it is widely regarded as an essential foundation for later academic and social success. Preschool education in the U.S. is designed to support the overall development of children—**cognitive, emotional, social, and physical**—through age-appropriate learning activities. Unlike formal schooling, preschool emphasizes **play-based learning**, where children explore the world around them through games, creative tasks, storytelling, music, and interactive group activities. This helps children build basic skills such as language, communication, problem-solving, and self-regulation.

There are several types of preschool programs available in the United States, including:

- a. **Public preschools:** These programs are often funded by state or federal governments and may be free or low-cost for eligible families. For example, the Head Start program, established in 1965, provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, and nutrition services to children from low-income families.
- b. **Private preschools:** Operated by private organizations or individuals, these schools usually charge tuition and may offer specialized curricula based on religious, educational, or philosophical approaches (e.g., Montessori, Reggio Emilia, or Waldorf).
- c. **Pre-kindergarten (Pre-K):** A bridge between preschool and kindergarten, Pre-K programs are often offered in public schools and aim to prepare 4-year-olds for the academic and social demands of elementary school.
- d. **Nursery schools and daycare centers:** These facilities often provide both childcare and early education, especially useful for working parents. While not all daycare centers follow structured educational programs, many include learning activities tailored to young children's developmental stages.

Curriculum and teaching approach

Preschool curricula in the United States vary depending on the program type and educational philosophy. However, most programs focus on:

Language development (alphabet, vocabulary, storytelling)

Mathematics readiness (counting, shapes, patterns)

Fine and gross motor skills (drawing, cutting, physical play)

Social-emotional learning (cooperation, empathy, self-control)

Creative arts (music, dance, painting)

Teachers in preschool settings are trained in early childhood education and are skilled in creating safe, supportive, and stimulating environments. In high-quality programs, class sizes are small, allowing for individual attention.

Importance of Preschool Education

Research has shown that children who attend preschool are more likely to perform well in school, graduate from high school, and experience long-term academic and social success. Preschool helps reduce achievement gaps between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and supports early brain development during the most critical years of a child's life.

Access and Challenges

Despite its benefits, access to quality preschool education is not universal in the United States. Many families face challenges such as high costs, limited availability in rural areas, or long waiting lists. To address this, many states have expanded public Pre-K programs and increased funding for early education, but disparities still exist.

Secondary Education

Secondary education in the United States plays a vital role in the academic, personal, and social development of students. It follows elementary education and typically includes students **from 6th through 12th grade**, generally between the ages of **11 and 18**. This stage is compulsory in all states, although the required school attendance age varies—most states mandate schooling until age 16 or 18.

In the U.S., secondary education is divided into two main stages:

- **Middle School** (Grades 6–8): This serves as a transition from childhood to adolescence. Students are introduced to subject-specific teachers, a more structured schedule, and greater personal responsibility.
- **High School** (Grades 9–12): This final stage of K–12 education prepares students for higher education or the workforce. Students typically enter high school at age 14 and graduate at 18.

Each grade level in high school has a specific designation:

9th grade – Freshman

10th grade – Sophomore

11th grade – Junior

12th grade – Senior

To graduate from high school and receive a **High School Diploma**, students must fulfill specific credit and course requirements. These usually include:

4 years of English

3–4 years of Mathematics

3 years of Science (Biology, Chemistry, Physics)

3 years of Social Studies (History, Civics, Geography)

1–2 years of a Foreign Language

Physical Education and various **elective courses**

In some states or districts, students may also be required to pass exit exams, complete community service hours, or present a final senior project. The *curriculum* in secondary schools is broad and diverse. Alongside core subjects, students can choose from a variety of elective courses based on their interests or career goals. Electives may include:

- Visual and Performing Arts (music, theatre, drawing)
- Business and Economics
- Computer Science and Robotics
- Journalism and Media
- Vocational Training (automotive repair, culinary arts, cosmetology)

High-achieving students can enroll in **Advanced Placement (AP)** or **Honors** courses, which offer more rigorous content and, in the case of AP, can lead to college credit if passed with high scores. Another important aspect of American secondary education is extracurricular activities. Students are encouraged to participate in sports, academic clubs, music bands, debate teams, student government, and community service. These activities help foster leadership, teamwork, time management, and a sense of community.

Secondary education is provided through different types of schools, including:

1. Public Schools – Funded by government taxes, free of charge for residents.
2. Private Schools – Funded by tuition and private sources, often with religious or alternative educational focuses.
3. Charter Schools – Publicly funded but independently managed, offering innovative curricula.
4. Magnet Schools – Public schools with specialized programs in subjects like STEM or the arts.

5. Alternative Schools – Designed for students with special learning needs or behavioral challenges.

Despite the many strengths of the U.S. secondary education system, several challenges remain. These include educational inequality, underfunded schools, teacher shortages, and high dropout rates in some regions. Efforts at the federal and state levels continue to focus on improving access to quality education, closing achievement gaps, and preparing students for the demands of the modern world.

Higher Education

The higher education system in the United States is considered one of the most diverse, flexible, and prestigious in the world. It offers a wide range of academic, professional, and vocational opportunities for students after they complete high school (secondary education), usually beginning around the age of 18. Higher education in the USA is provided by different types of institutions, including community colleges, universities, liberal arts colleges, and vocational schools. There are several main types of higher education institutions in the USA. *Community colleges* are two-year institutions that offer associate degrees. They are often more affordable and allow students to transfer to four-year colleges or universities later. *Four-year colleges* and *universities* offer bachelor's degrees and often also provide graduate programs. The term "college" usually refers to institutions that focus mainly on undergraduate education, while "university" refers to institutions that also offer graduate and research programs. In addition, *vocational or technical schools* provide practical and job-focused training in specific fields like nursing, culinary arts, information technology, or mechanics. USA higher education includes several academic levels. The *Associate Degree* usually takes two years to complete and is often earned at community colleges. The *Bachelor's Degree* is a four-year undergraduate degree awarded in fields such as science, business, education, or the arts. After earning a bachelor's degree, students may continue with a *Master's Degree*, which typically requires one to two additional years of specialized study. The

highest academic level is the *Doctoral Degree (Ph.D.)*, which involves in-depth research and can take several years to complete. Admission to American colleges and universities is competitive and based on a variety of factors. These may include a student's high school grades, standardized test scores (such as the SAT or ACT), letters of recommendation, personal essays, and participation in extracurricular activities. International students are also required to prove their English proficiency, often through exams like TOEFL or IELTS. One of the challenges of higher education in the U.S. is its high cost. Tuition fees can be expensive, especially at private universities. However, there are many options available to help students afford their education. These include scholarships, grants, student loans, and work-study programs. Scholarships and grants do not have to be repaid and are awarded based on academic achievement or financial need. Student loans must be repaid after graduation, while work-study allows students to earn money through part-time campus jobs. Another important feature of the U.S. higher education system is its flexibility. Students can choose from a wide variety of majors and minors, transfer between institutions, and even switch their academic focus after beginning their studies. Many universities also offer online programs and part-time options for non-traditional or working students. Higher education in the USA offers students not only strong academic training but also opportunities for personal growth, professional development, and social engagement. Its global reputation and innovative structure continue to attract millions of students from around the world.

Private Schools vs Public Schools

The American education system includes both public and private schools, each with its own features, strengths, and challenges. Understanding the differences between them helps students and parents make informed decisions about education.

- **Public schools** are funded by the government through local, state, and federal taxes. They are free to attend for all students living within the school district.

Public schools must follow state education standards and curricula. Teachers are required to be certified, and the schools are overseen by local school boards.

- **Private schools**, on the other hand, are funded through tuition paid by families and sometimes by donations or religious organizations. They are not controlled by the government and have more freedom in setting their own curricula, hiring teachers, and establishing rules and policies. Most private schools charge tuition, which can range from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars per year.

Conclusion

The education system of the United States is a comprehensive and diverse structure that guides students from early childhood to advanced academic and professional levels. Beginning with preschool education, it fosters foundational skills and social development. Through elementary and secondary education, students gain essential knowledge and prepare for future academic or career paths. The system offers both public and private schooling options, allowing families to choose according to their values and resources. Higher education in the USA is known for its flexibility, quality, and global recognition. Institutions such as community colleges, universities, and vocational schools provide a variety of academic opportunities and career pathways. Although challenges such as high tuition fees exist, scholarships and financial aid make education more accessible. Overall, the American education system emphasizes independence, critical thinking, and creativity—values that contribute to the success of individuals and the progress of society.

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