

Weak Education Leaves Americans Unprepared

More than ever, the prospects of a nation and its children depend on the strength of its schools. Unfortunately, America's schools are not keeping pace with the demands of today's world. Our schools are failing to prepare all students for college, for careers, and for life. And they are failing to prepare our nation to compete in today's high-tech global economy.

Too many students drop out.

- More than 1.2 million students drop out of school every year. That's more than 6,000 students every school day and one every 26 seconds.¹
- The national high school graduation rate is only 70%, with states ranging from a high of 84% in Utah to a low of 54% in South Carolina.²
- Graduation rates are much lower for minority students. Only about half of the nation's African American and Latino students graduate on time from high school.³
- Dropping out has dire consequences. Thirty years ago most dropouts could still find jobs that paid enough to support a family, but young people who leave school today face a lifetime of economic hardship.
 - The poverty rate for families headed by dropouts is more than twice that of families headed by high school graduates.⁴
 - Nearly 44% of dropouts under age 24 are jobless,⁵ and the unemployment rate of high school dropouts older than 25 is more than three times that of college graduates.⁶
 - Over a lifetime, dropouts earn \$260,000 less than high school graduates and contribute about \$60,000 less in federal and state income taxes. Each cohort of dropouts costs the U.S. \$192 billion in lost income and taxes.⁷

High schools are a problem, but failure starts early.

- Ninth grade English teachers say they spend one-third of their time trying to re-teach skills that students should already have learned in middle school.⁸
- About 70% of U.S. 8th graders are below the proficient level in reading, and most will never catch up.⁹

Weak preparation has terrible social and economic consequences for all Americans.

Too many graduates leave unprepared for college, careers, and life.

Students who drop out face ever-diminishing opportunities, but so do many high school graduates. In fact, a high school diploma is no longer a guarantee that young people have the skills to succeed in college or work.

Not ready for college.

- Even among students *who prepare for college* by taking four years of English and three each of math, science and social studies, only one out of four leaves high school fully prepared to handle college courses.¹⁰
- Nearly one in three freshmen fail college placement tests and have to take remedial courses to catch up on skills they should have learned in high school.¹¹ Those classes cost families and taxpayers money but earn students no credit toward a degree.
- In the nation's community colleges, which now enroll nearly half of all undergraduates in America, the remediation rate climbs to 40%.¹²
- In some states the numbers are even worse:
 - More than half of the freshmen (56%) admitted to the California State University system in 2006 had to take remedial math or English courses. Most of them were among the top third of high school graduates in the state and had earned a B average or better in high school.¹³
 - "More than three-quarters of students entering Florida's community colleges need remedial courses in math, reading or writing before they even can begin classes that count toward a degree."¹⁴
- The amount of time that college students have to spend in remedial courses is rising. From 1995 to 2000, the percentage of colleges reporting that students had to spend at least a year in remedial courses increased from 28% to 35%.¹⁵
- Lack of preparation for college has dire consequences.
 - Poor preparation contributes to America's huge college completion gap.
 - ✓ Only 56% of freshmen entering four-year colleges manage to earn a bachelor's degree after six years—one of the lowest college completion rates in the world.¹⁶
 - ✓ College freshmen who take remedial classes are much less likely to earn a degree. Only 30% of students who take remedial reading in college ever earn a degree.¹⁷
 - ✓ The biggest predictors of college completion are taking rigorous high school classes and acquiring strong math skills.¹⁸

- Poor preparation costs billions of dollars.
 - ✓ Just at the community college level, families spend \$283 million to pay for remedial courses every year, and taxpayers foot an additional \$978 million.¹⁹
 - ✓ One group estimates that, counting in lost productivity because students who take remedial courses are much less likely to earn a degree, poor preparation for college costs the U.S. \$2.3 billion annually.²⁰

Not ready for careers.

- Four in five American manufacturing companies (84%) say schools are not doing a good job preparing students for jobs, and more than half cite specific deficits in math and science.²¹
- Nearly three in four human resource officials (72%) rate young hires as deficient in basic writing skills, with 81% citing difficulties writing memos, letters, and reports.²²
- Nearly half of recent high school graduates who entered the workforce (46%) say they are not prepared for the jobs they hope to get in the future. Employers agree, estimating that nearly half of high school graduates (45%) are not prepared with skills to advance beyond entry level jobs.²³
- Among recent graduates who do not go on to college, nearly three in four (72%) regret not taking tougher math, science, or English classes during high school.²⁴
- Jobs that pay enough to support a family but don't require a bachelor's degree now demand the same level of preparation as college. The testing company ACT looked at the math and reading skills required by electricians, construction workers, upholsterers, and plumbers and concluded they match what's necessary to do well in college courses.²⁵
- Local trade union apprenticeship programs are struggling to find qualified applicants.
 - Jonathan Mitchell, training director at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 490 in Concord, New Hampshire, says that last year about half of applicants failed a required entry test in math and reading.²⁶
 - Jane Templin, outreach coordinator at the Electrical Training Institute in Los Angeles, says that fewer students are passing the test required to become an apprentice electrician. Out of about 150 who take the test each month, only about a third pass—down from 40-45% ten years ago.²⁷
 - The National Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee of Southern Nevada says that, of the 60 or so applicants who take an apprenticeship entry test each week, only about half pass.²⁸
 - Rosane Mesmer at the Ohio Plumbers and Pipe-fitters Local 425 says that most applicants earn only five or six points out of ten on a test of very basic math—addition, subtraction, and finding length, width, and area.²⁹

Not even ready for life itself.

We like to think we are giving our young people practical thinking skills that will allow them to make good decisions in their daily lives. But recent evidence says we are failing to do even that.

- American students have a harder time solving real-life problems compared with students in other countries.³⁰
 - A 2003 test called *Problem-Solving for Tomorrow's World* gave 15-year-olds real-life problems that called for decision making and troubleshooting. Problems included:
 - ✓ Reading movie showtimes and coordinating schedules with two friends for a visit to the cinema;
 - ✓ Using a map to plan a trip that includes overnight stays;
 - ✓ Using a subway map and information about fares and schedules to figure out the best way to get from one part of a city to another;
 - ✓ Designing a bunking arrangement at a children's summer camp; and
 - ✓ Creating a plan to complete a set of technical training courses over a three-year period.
 - The average American student could only solve very simple problems.
 - One in four American students (24%) couldn't even solve simple problems. Among 29 developed countries, the U.S. had the fourth-highest percentage of very weak problem-solvers and the sixth-lowest percentage of strong problem-solvers.
 - Even countries like Latvia, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic are producing better problem-solvers than the United States.

America is falling behind the rest of the world—with dire consequences for all Americans.

- According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, education is one of the biggest challenges facing the U.S. economy: "A country's ability to compete in an ever more integrated world economy depends on a highly educated workforce. However, with many countries making more progress in this respect, the United States has lost its leading position."³¹
- America once had the best high school graduation rate in the world, but has now slipped to 19th out of 26 countries.³²
- Although the U.S. still ranks 8th in percentage of 25-34 year-olds with an associates degree or higher among 30 developed nations, it is one of only two countries where the older generation has more education than the younger generation.³³

- America is rapidly falling behind other nations in producing young adults with a 4-year college education.³⁴
 - As recently as 1998, the U.S. still ranked first in percentage of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor's degree, but by 2004 it had dropped to 5th.
 - Out of 24 countries, the U.S. was one of only two that showed no increase in bachelor's degree attainment between 2000 and 2004.
 - According to one analysis, "If recent trends continue, the United States will rank 9th by 2007, 13th by 2009, and 18th by 2019. In another 12 years most of the world's industrialized democracies will have surpassed the United States in bachelor's degree attainment."

- American 15-year-olds are below average in math, science, and problem-solving. Out of 29 countries participating in a 2003 assessment, America ranks
 - 24th in math;
 - 24th in problem-solving;
 - 18th in science; and
 - 15th in reading.³⁵

- The performance gap is huge. American students lag about a full year behind their peers in the best-performing countries.³⁶

- As computers take over routine work tasks that do not require a lot of thinking, more jobs are demanding that workers have strong communication and problem-solving skills.³⁷ But American students are not being prepared for the new job market. Fewer than half of our 15-year-olds are analytical, reasoning problem-solvers who can communicate well about solutions—a rate that ranks 24th out of 29 industrialized democracies.³⁸

- We like to think America's best students can compete with any in the world, but that's no longer true either.
 - According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, "the United States does not just have more students performing badly—it also has many fewer students performing well."³⁹
 - America's **top** math students rank 23rd out of 29 countries when compared with top students elsewhere in the world.⁴⁰

- We like to say that America's weak performance is due to social ills or underfunding. But that's not true either.
 - According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development:

"The United States should be among the world leaders. On average, and relative to other [industrialized] countries, U.S. students come from well-educated, wealthy families and they go to schools that are unusually well-financed. Given any of these factors, U.S. students might be expected to be among the world leaders. But no."⁴¹

- America's affluent 15-year-olds rank 23rd out of 29 when compared with affluent students in other industrialized democracies.⁴²
- We have low expectations for American students.
 - By the end of 8th grade, what passes for the U.S. math curriculum is two years behind the math being studied by peers in other countries.⁴³
 - Although they rank 24th in actual math performance, U.S. 15-year-olds rank 1st in the percentage of students saying "I get good grades in mathematics."⁴⁴
- If America could raise the skills of our students to just the middle of the pack of European nations over the next decade, our Gross Domestic Product would grow by two percent extra over 20 years and five percent extra over 30 years. That would mean an extra \$1.5 trillion in 2037 alone—more than triple what we currently spend on K-12 public education.⁴⁵

¹ Education Week. (2007, June 12). *Diplomas Count 2007: Ready for What? Preparing Students for College, Careers, and Life after High School*. Bethesda, MD: Editorial Projects in Education Research Center. Per day figure derived by dividing 1.23 million by 180 school days per year.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

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¹² Ibid.

¹³ The California State University. (2007, March 13). *English, Math Proficiency of CSU Freshmen Remains Steady*. Retrieved from <http://www.calstate.edu/PA/news/2007/results.shtml>

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²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ National Association of Manufacturers. (2005). *2005 Skills Gap Report – A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce*. Deloitte Development LLC.

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