



**GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES**

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INTRODUCTION

Education in the United States

Many international students, scholars and visitors are surprised to learn that the United States has no national education system. Since education is not mentioned in the U.S. constitution, school policy is a matter for each state to decide. The Federal government can influence education only by the funding it offers, but this is limited. For example, in Minnesota, almost 80 percent of public education funds come from state sources. About 17 percent comes from local sources, while less than 5 percent comes from the Federal government. There is no national high school graduation examination, although Minnesota does have state graduation tests. Curriculum is determined at the district level; for example, Minneapolis and St. Paul Schools each set their own curricula. There are, however, state standards, which are a set of goals schools must reach. Students must pass state graduation examinations.

At the higher education level, students have a wide range of options when they choose a college or university. Although there are agencies that attempt to place American colleges and universities in rank order, the concept of "fit" is also important. The grade point averages of admitted students are important, but majors offered, location, number of students enrolled, and campus culture are all factors in a prospective student's decision. For example, a student with excellent grades may choose the University of Minnesota, but the state of Minnesota is also home to many high-quality, highly selective colleges and universities. These are located in large and small towns all over the state. Some enrol less than 200 students; some enrol tens of thousands. Some colleges and universities are publicly funded, while others are privately supported. For Minnesotans, the goal of a college search is to find a place where the student can live and learn effectively. Each prospective student (not the parent) reaches his or her own decision after much reflection.

An important value in American education is equal access. At all levels, the goal is for each learner to reach her or his potential, whatever that might be. We do not always reach this goal, and disparities remain. Nevertheless, the United States aspires to offer everyone opportunities to achieve as much education as they can. As an international student, scholar, or visitor, you will hear lots of debate about the proper balance of excellence and equality. Americans are hopeful that these two values are compatible and not competing goals.