



GUIDE
TO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN THE UNITED STATES

BY

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AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: AN OVERVIEW

General Information

The American education system is unlike that in many other countries. Though the U.S. Federal government contributes almost 10% to the national education budget, education is primarily the responsibility of state and local government.

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.

Every State has its own department of education and laws regulating finance, the hiring of school personnel, student attendance, and curriculum.

States also determine the number of years of compulsory education: in most states, education is compulsory from five or six to sixteen; but in some states teens have to stay on in school until age 18.

So, every state has great control over what is taught in its schools and over the requirements that a student must meet, and it is also responsible for the funding of schooling.

In most States, the public education system is further divided into **local school districts**, which are managed by a **school board**, representing the local community. School districts can be small, covering just a small town or rural county, or enormous, covering a whole large city; according to their local policy, they are responsible for coordinating education policies, planning for changing educational needs in the community, and often even establishing programs and curricula. They will also delegate a varying amount of freedom or independence to each individual school within their sector (with some exceptions, such as general rules concerning health and safety).

Public schools have also relied heavily on local property taxes to meet the vast majority of school expenses. American schools have thus tended to reflect the educational values and financial capabilities of the communities in which they are located.

Therefore, there is huge variation among schools regarding courses, subjects, and other activities – it always depends on where the school is located. Still, there are some common points, as e.g. the division of the education system into three levels: elementary/primary education, secondary education, and postsecondary/higher education (college or university).

Formal schooling lasts 12 years, until around age 18. Compulsory schooling, though, ends by age 16 in most states; the remaining states require students to attend school until they are 17 or 18. All children in the United States have access to free public schools. Private schools (religious and non-sectarian) are available, but students must pay tuition to attend them.

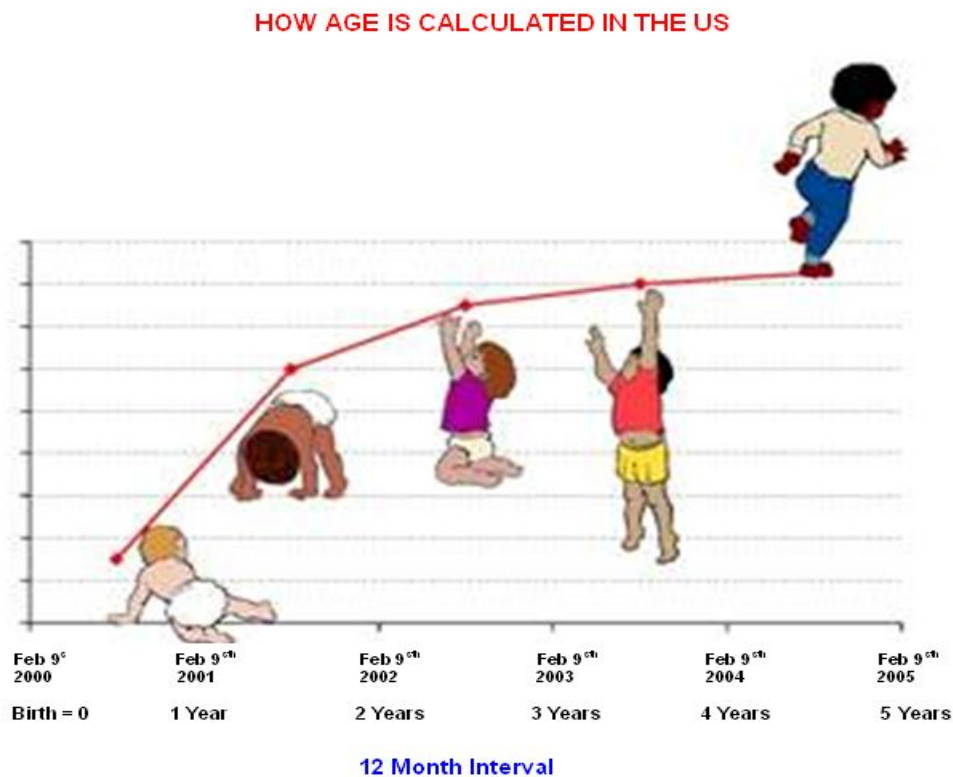
Many states and communities provide schools or special classes for children with special educational needs, including those with emotional and behavioural problems, moderate and severe learning difficulties, communication problems, partial hearing or physical disabilities. There are also private schools catering for gifted and talented children, and most public schools have gifted and talented programs.

In the following description of the U.S. education structure, we will focus on early childhood, primary and secondary education systems.

How Age is counted in the United States

In the United States, a person's age is counted starting from physical birth (rather than, as in some cultures for example, from conception).

Newborns start at zero, and each passing of a 12 months period from the original date of birth adds one year to the person's age. So, for example, if a child was born on February 9th, 2000, the same child would be: 1 year old on February 9th, 2001; two years old on February 9th, 2002; and so forth.

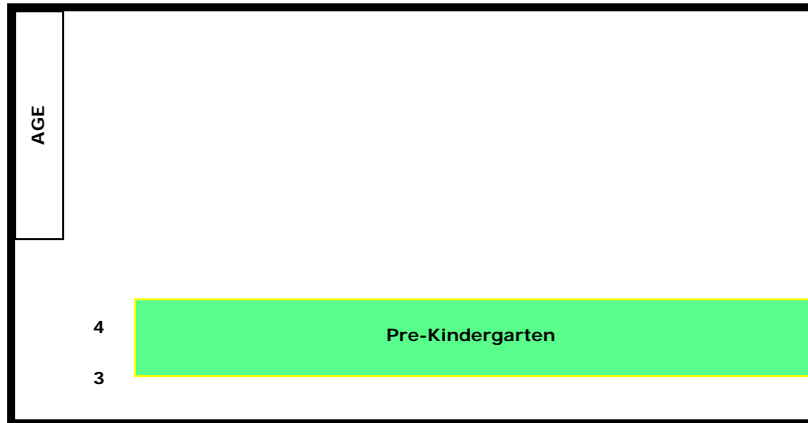


Education System Structure

Age Newborn to 5 years: Early Childhood Education

DayCare is one form of early childhood education. Day Care refers to early childhood settings that focus their goal on substitute care for children while their parents are absent (i.e.: working or in school). They could involve academic training, or they could involve solely socializing activities. Day Care is not required and is not free; in fact, depending on the setting, it could be quite expensive. Day Care programs usually offer daily programs, for up to 12 hours. Meals, depending on the school, may be provided by the family or by the school. Transportation to and from the program is generally the responsibility of parents. Some private day care programs might offer private transportation, but these are the exception rather than the rule. Parents' degrees of use of Day Care services vary greatly across families, depending on their specific situation (i.e.: parents' schedule, availability of funding, etc.).

Pre-School (also called Pre-K or PK or Pre-Kindergarten) refers to the first formal academic classroom-based learning environment that a child customarily attends in the United States. It begins around the age of three in order to prepare for the more didactic and academically intensive kindergarten, the traditional "first" class that school children participate in.



Pre-Schools differentiate themselves by *equally* focusing on harvesting a child's (1) social development, (2) physical development, (3) emotional development, and (4) cognitive development. They commonly follow a set of organization-created teaching standards in shaping curriculum and instructional activities/goals.

Some pre-school programs have adopted specialized methods of teaching, such as [Montessori](#), [Waldorf](#), High Reach Learning, [High Scope](#), The Creative Curriculum, [Reggio Emilia approach](#), Bank Street and various other Western pedagogies which contribute to the foundation of education.

Pre-School is not required. On the other hand, it acts as a way to prepare children to better succeed in a kindergarten. Pre-School programs usually offer two- or three-hour sessions per day, a few days per week. Children learn the alphabet, colors, and other elementary basics.

Pre-School programs are not free: they have to be financed by the family. Meals, depending on the school, may be provided by the family or by the school. Transportation to and from the program is generally the responsibility of parents (although some pre-school programs might make busing available to families for a fee; these programs are the exception, rather than the rule).

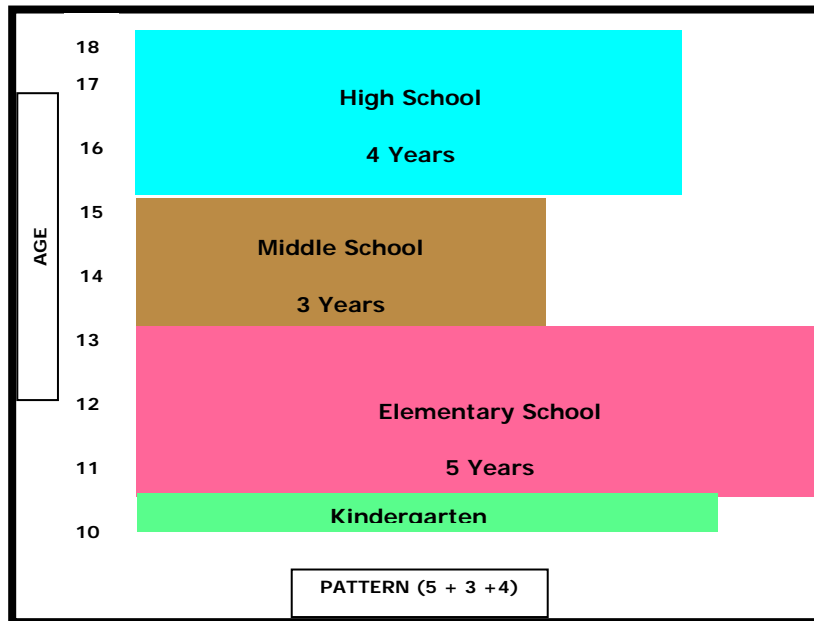
To learn more about Day Care and Pre-School Programs, and to access additional resources available to you, visit the **Day Care and Pre-School Education** section.

Age 5 years to 18 years: K-12

U.S. educators frequently use the terms K-12 education to refer to all primary and secondary education, from Kindergarten prior to the first year (or 1st grade) of formal schooling, through secondary graduation (12th Grade).

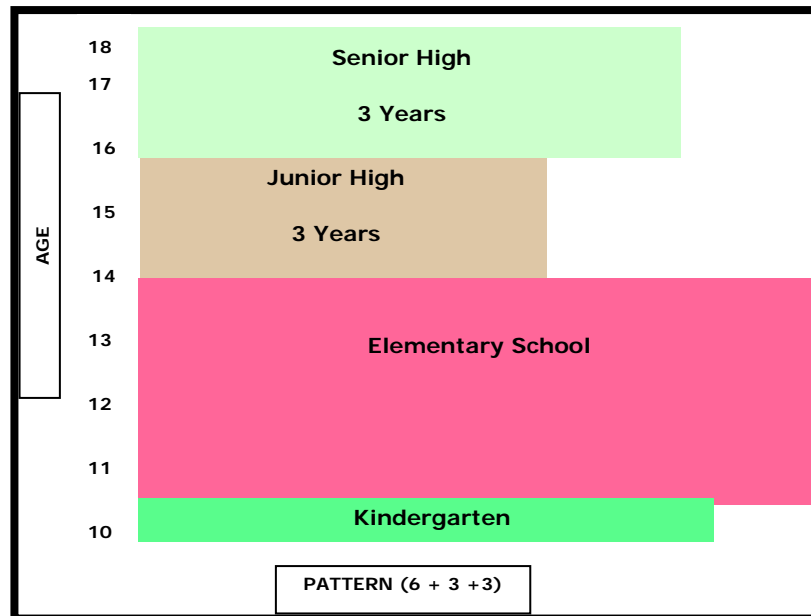
One of the following four patterns usually prevails in the community:

- Elementary school (K-5), **middle school (6-8)**, high school (9-12);



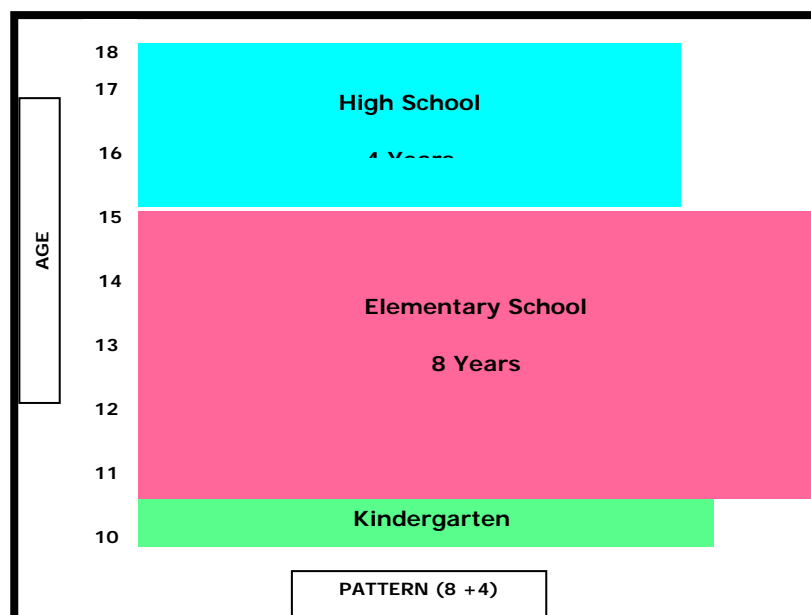
Or

- Elementary school (K-6), **junior high school (7-9)**, senior high school (9-12);



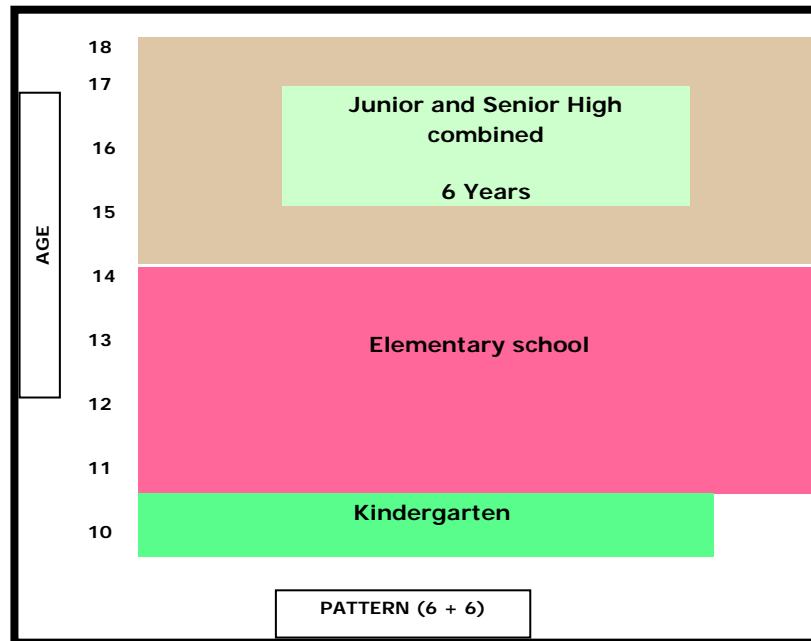
Or

- Elementary school (K-8), high school (9-12).



Or

- Elementary school (K-6), and junior and high school combined (7-12).



U.S. children enter formal schooling around age 5. The first pattern (see above) is the most common one. Elementary students are typically in one classroom with the same teacher most of the day.

After elementary school, students proceed to junior high school (also called middle school), where they usually move from class to class each period, with a new teacher and a new mixture of students in every class. Students can select from a wide range of academic classes and elective classes.

During both Elementary and Middle School (or Junior High), children generally stay in the classroom an average of 6.5 to 7 hours. Families have the option to select before and after school programs < School-Age Child Care >, which are generally made available through the school. However, these programs are not free: the family will have to finance their cost. If the programs are in a location different from the school grounds, transportation from and to school will be provided by the school.

In High School, students in their first year are called *freshman*, in their second year *sophomore*, in their third year *junior*, and in their last and fourth year *senior*.

There is an even greater variety of subjects than before. Students generally stay in the classroom an average of 7.5 hours and must earn a certain number of credits (which they

get for a successfully completed course) in order to graduate and be awarded with a High School Diploma – there is no final examination like in many other countries.

The number and combination of classes necessary depend on the school district and on the kind of diploma desired. The following two links are examples of different high school graduation requirements:

[Edina Graduation Requirements](#)

[South St. Paul Graduation Requirements](#)

Only with a high school diploma students can enroll in postsecondary education. It is important to know that colleges and universities sometimes require certain high school credits or tests (e.g. SAT) for admission, and students must plan their high school career with those requirements in mind.

During their high school years, students are given "grades" for all their courses, and these are recorded. At the end of 12th Grade, the pupil's grades are averaged out to provide a "GPA" or Grade Point Average, which will often be used as a selection criterion when they apply to college or university. Students in 12th Grade also take "SAT's", Scholastic Aptitude Tests, or "ACTs", American College Tests. These are the second principal tests used as criteria for admission to college or university; but they are not exams in the same way as their European or Japanese equivalents (French baccalauréat, German Abitur, English "A" levels), and are generally less demanding.

The SAT Reasoning Test is a standardized test for college admissions in the United States. The SAT is owned, published, and developed by the College Board, a non-profit organization in the United States. The College Board claims that the SAT can determine whether or not a person is ready for college. The current SAT Reasoning Test takes three hours and forty-five minutes. Since the SAT's introduction in 1901, its name and scoring has changed several times. In 2005, the test was renamed as "SAT Reasoning Test" with possible scores from 600 to 2400 combining test results from three 800-point sections (math, critical reading, and writing), along with other subsections scored separately. The test consists almost entirely of multiple choice questions, with the exception of the essay writing section.

The ACT test is another standardized test for college admission in the United States. The ACT test assesses high school students' general educational development and their ability to complete college-level work. It consists of a multiple-choice section covering four skill areas (English, mathematics, reading, and science), and a Writing Test, which is optional, measuring skill in planning and writing a short essay.

Generally, colleges require one or the other test for college admission.

For Additional Information about K-12 Schooling you can visit the Elementary and Secondary Education section.

Separation of State and Religion

The US constitution requires the separation of state and religion and forbids religious observance in public schools, but in some schools children are still expected to participate in the ritual morning pledge of allegiance to the American flag in many schools (although the words 'under God' are optional).

Parental Involvement

An aspect of the US education system is the high degree of parental involvement. 'Parent power' isn't only accepted, but is welcomed and encouraged through local Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) attached to every school. PTAs meet regularly and concern themselves with many aspects of a school's affairs including the curriculum, facilities, school hours and after-school activities and programs. Parents are encouraged to attend meetings and show an interest in the school and their children's education (it's also a good way for newcomers to make friends). Schools organize parent days, 'back to school' nights and parent-teacher conferences, where parents can meet teachers and examine their child's school timetable.

Individual Responsibility

Individual responsibility has an important place in the American value system. This value is taught to children from a young age. For example, beginning from kindergarten, each year students are given a handbook that outlines the details of the school's policies and procedures, and the consequences for violating them. The handbook includes policies on Hazing, Personal Possessions, and Harassment, and is designed to help parents and students understand the district's guidelines for acceptable behavior in all of these areas. BOTH parents and students are expected to read it and sign a form attesting they are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Many teachers also ask students to sign a handout detailing policies and procedures to follow in their classes.

The following is a Map of the U.S. Education System combining all patterns at the primary and secondary education level and including post-secondary education system.

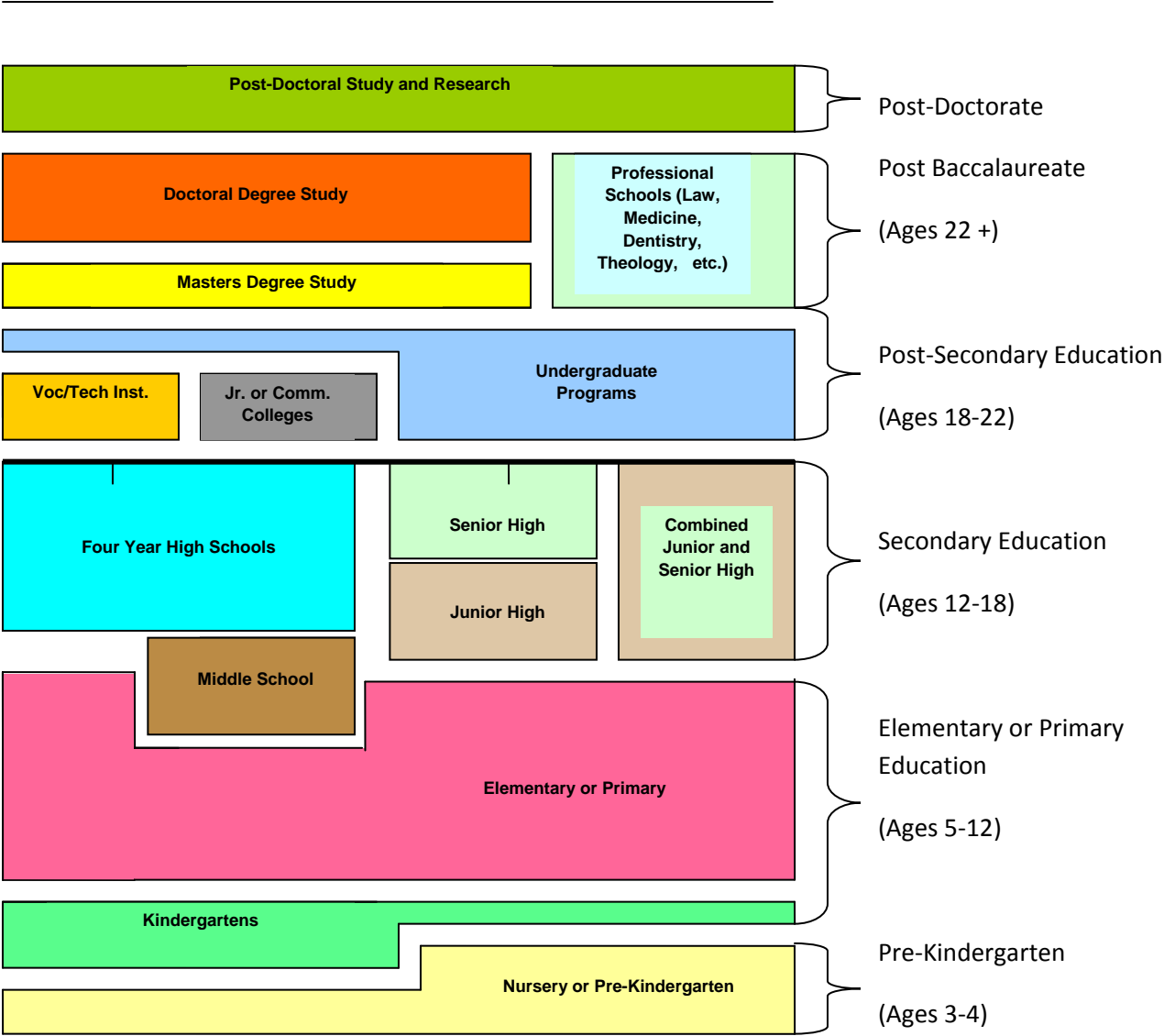


Chart Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, NationalCenter for Education Statistics