

From Credit Hours to Marching Bands: Explaining the American Education System to Foreign Nationals

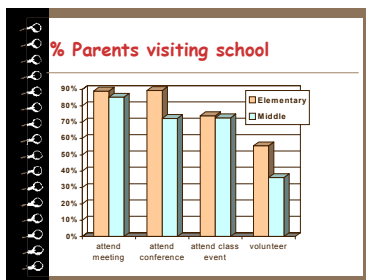
Christine Dowdeswell and Anne P. Copeland

There are five “oddities” of the American schools system that newcomers must understand:

- the expectation and demand for parental involvement
- decentralization of funding and decision making
- high university enrollment rates and their impact on K-12 teaching
- the relatively old age at which American students must focus their studies on a specialty
- the values of US culture being taught in the American classroom.

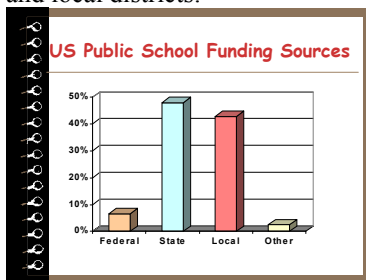
Parental Involvement

US teachers expect, even demand, parents to be involved in the schools, especially at the younger ages. Here are some data showing that American parents comply. From the point of view of some newcomers, this is an odd demand – in their view, teachers should be professionals in charge of education, and parents should keep their distance.

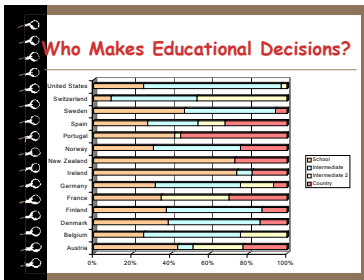
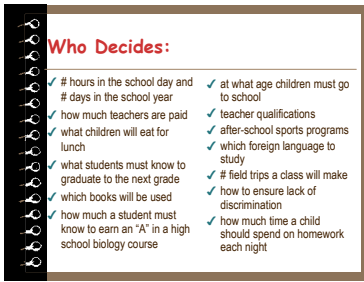


Decentralization

Very little funding of US public schools comes from the federal government. Most comes from the state and local districts:

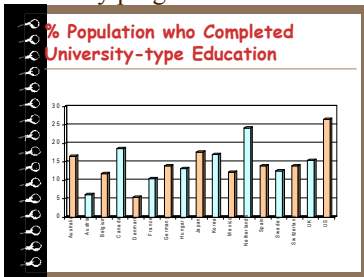


Likewise, most educational decisions – about curriculum, teacher qualifications and pay, graduation requirements, etc – are made at the local or state level, not the federal level. This is in contrast to many other countries’ systems, which are centrally controlled. It is important to explain this to newcomers, who otherwise may not understand the reasons why school districts and even teachers differ so much in quality.



High University Enrollment Rates

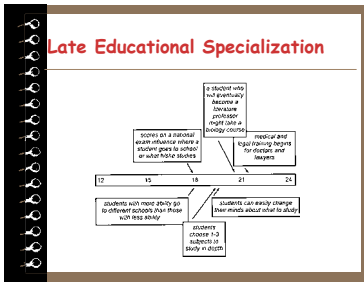
Compared to other countries in the world, more American high school graduates enter a four-year university program.



Most of these students enter a liberal arts program, in which they study a full range of science, social science, and humanities subjects. This has implications for how public school teachers (from elementary to high school) teach, as they know that their students will be taught the same topics again at a later age.

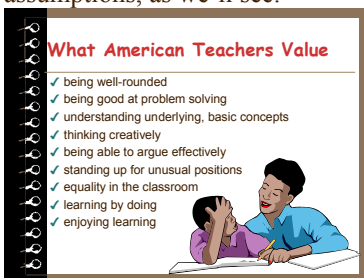
Late Specialization

In the US, students are not expected, or even allowed, to specialize in an academic field until they are almost 20 years old. Medical and law school follow a 4-year university education (while in many countries they follow secondary school). Tracking does not normally happen until 8th or 9th grades. And students of all academic abilities usually attend the same public middle and high schools (in contrast to many countries, where tracking begins much earlier). Again, public school teachers know that their students will be taught the same topics again at a later age; the way they teach may look “lite” to newcomers, but seems “developmentally appropriate” to them.



Preparation for US Culture,

Teachers in every culture try to prepare their children for success in that culture – both academically and behaviorally. Here is a list of values commonly thought to characterize American schools. To the American eye, they seem like indisputably good things. But they look odd to people from a different set of cultural assumptions, as we'll see.



These are features that are designed to promote individualism and egalitarianism, both values highly prized by Americans.

*This paper draws from charts and information in **Understanding American School: The Answers to Newcomers' Most Frequently Asked Questions**, by Anne P. Copeland and Georgia Bennett (The Interchange Institute, 2001; available at www.interchangeinstitute.org).*