

EDUCATION

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN GREATER CLEVELAND

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SCHOOLS IN A CHANGING WORLD

There's an old joke in education that when Rip Van Winkle finally awoke from decades of slumber, the only thing he recognized was the typical American high school. The point: while the world around them has shifted dramatically, most schools have changed very little in the last 150 years. More often than not, a teacher still stands at the front of the classroom and lectures to students seated in rows of desks. The majority of lessons still originate from textbooks. Most all schools are closed during the summer, a nod to a long-gone agrarian calendar that enabled students to work on their family farms. High school remains a four-year affair, regardless of the progress a student makes. For many college-bound students who have completed their modest requirements, the senior year is largely wasted time

Like Rip, many Americans are beginning to wake up to the fact that much of their public school system exists in a time warp. Sure, sophisticated calculators have replaced the abacus. But the basic way we deliver education is remarkably unchanged. That might not be a problem, had the rest of the world not changed so quickly and dramatically.

When young people in Greater Cleveland dropped out of school 50 years ago, they may have ended their hope of ever attending college. But they could still get a decent-paying union job at a steel mill or an automobile plant. They could move to the suburbs and buy a house. They could purchase a new car or take a vacation to Florida. And they could save enough money to send their own children to college.

Today, that world has disappeared like the smoke that once poured out of the manufacturing plants. The mills and auto plants have either moved or shut down, or are operating with dramatically smaller workforces. The percentage of workers who belong to a union is at its lowest point since just before the Great Depression. Service industry jobs, such as work in restaurants and retail stores, tend to pay poorly, offer few benefits, and rarely last a lifetime. The higher-paying breadwinner jobs that remain are in fields like health care and technology. Competition for them is fierce, and some kind of post-high school training, ranging from certification to post-graduate degrees, is usually required.

The dramatic loss of population in parts of Ohio and other states has even lessened the demand for professionals such as lawyers, accountants, and teachers.

Students in Greater Cleveland no longer compete with their classmates for positions at large companies that operate around the globe. Rather, they compete with young people from places like China, India, and Korea, and students in those countries are outscoring American students on most international mathematics and science exams. In fact, a 2005 study ranked U.S. 15-year-olds 24th out of 29 industrialized nations on practical math applications.

That's a concern to business leaders like Intel Chairman Craig Barrett, whose company sponsors the national Science Talent Search, a 70-year-old competition for high school seniors, known as the "junior Nobel."

Barrett says the problem isn't American students, but rather an unfocused curriculum and a high percentage of math and science teachers not trained in the subjects they teach. Unlike most developed nations, the United States has no national curriculum. Instead, each state has its own set of standards, its own set of textbooks, and its own set of tests.

"Kids are capable of so much more than we give them credit for," says Barrett. "But you don't get there by comparing Columbus to Cleveland. In my mind, that misses the point by about a million miles."

A COMMON SYSTEM OF SCHOOLS

Our current concept of public schools hasn't really been around that long. The most robust education system for settlers in Cleveland in the 1820s and 1830s was religious schools, many of them Catholic. But the country was going through some dramatic changes. Reform movements, such as abolitionism, women's rights, the temperance movement, and prison reform, were blossoming. Society was struggling to find a unifying way to deal with change and diversity in a growing country.

Reformers, such as Horace Mann in Massachusetts and Samuel Lewis, Ohio's first superintendent of public instruction, led movements to establish common schools for all, publicly supported and publicly controlled.

Even so, most of the early schools in and around Cleveland served only white, elementary-age children. Living in a mostly rural economy, most Ohioans saw little reason for schooling beyond the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. But as the city grew, so did its school system. By 1842, there were 15 schools in Cleveland serving about 1,200 students. On July 13, 1846, Cleveland proudly opened Central High School, the first public high school west of the Alleghenies. The idea of public schools for all citizens was also gaining traction at a state level. In 1851, a lawmaker from Canton named Harmon Stidger proposed language in the state constitution calling for a "thorough and efficient system of common schools." That language remains to this day and has been the subject of years of court fights over the state's responsibility to adequately fund public education.

As factories expanded during the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, Greater Cleveland was emerging as a significant population center. After the Civil War, Superintendent Andrew Rickoff divided the school system into 12 grades in three divisions (primary,

grammar, and high school) and eliminated separate schools for boys and girls. Rickoff was an innovator. In an effort to attract immigrant German children from their private schools, Rickoff formed a bilingual program. Such efforts appeared to work. During his 15-year tenure, the school system grew from 9,643 students to 26,990.

By the end of World War II, Cleveland was one of the nation's largest cities and its school system one of the country's best. The district was known for its vocational programs as well as its Major Works program, a series of high-level classes for the brightest students that became a national model. In the baby-boom years after the war, the district was building many new schools. As an emerging middle class sought newer homes and quieter surroundings, suburban school systems also grew.

By the 1960s, Cleveland's enrollment had swelled to 150,000 students. Much of the growth was fueled by the massive post-war migration of African Americans from the South to industrial jobs in the North. But some social activists complained that Cleveland was actually operating two school systems—one for white children, and one for African-American children. In 1973, the NAACP sued, accusing the district of running an intentionally segregated school system that kept black children in poor facilities with less-qualified teachers. The district argued that segregation in the schools was the result of residential housing patterns that were beyond their control. But in 1978, Federal Judge Frank Battisti ruled in favor of the plaintiffs. The judge found that the district used busing and student assignments to deliberately consign black students in inferior schools, violating their 14th Amendment right to equal protection under the law.

Battisti's order to integrate the schools—especially using the controversial practice of cross-town busing—is often blamed for the flight of stable, middle-class families from the city, resulting in the district's slide into academic mediocrity and fiscal woes. The reality is more complicated. At the time of Battisti's order, Cleveland was a city on the decline. Factories were closing, and jobs were moving to the Sun Belt or overseas. From 1980 to 1990, the number of residents on welfare rose more than 200 percent. During that same time, crime, teenage pregnancies, youth delinquencies, and drug use skyrocketed. Federal court records also cast doubt that the case resulted in "white flight"—the exodus of middle-class white families to the suburbs. Of the 12,967 student transfers out of the district that occurred during the court-ordered busing period of 1978–80, only 6,705 were white students. Many of those transfers were moves out of state, suggesting they were not motivated by school desegregation.

By the time the desegregation case ended in 1998, the district was in the throes of fiscal and academic woes and under the control of the state education department. Federal Judge George White placed the district under the control of then-Mayor Michael White. Cleveland was the first Ohio school district under mayoral control, a practice that was also being tried in other struggling big-city districts, such as Chicago, Boston, and Baltimore.

Around that time, the standards movement, which put a premium on data and accountability, was gaining ground in Ohio and across the nation. Standardized tests benchmarked what students were learning and enabled districts to be compared against one another. They also underscored how much high-poverty districts, such as Cleveland, were struggling. Test scores tracked closely with the average household income and the

educational level of parents in the district. Predictably, affluent suburban districts posted high test scores. Poor urban and rural district regularly had the lowest scores.

Meanwhile, Cleveland's shrinking population, along with new options for students, such as charter schools, is expected to reduce the district's enrollment to fewer than 36,000 by the 2018–19 school year. That sharp decline, along with a disappearing tax base, has raised questions about the district's long-term sustainability.

Those questions aren't unique to Cleveland. The landmark No Child Left Behind, the sweeping federal policy then-President George W. Bush signed into law in 2002, required schools to have all students proficient in reading and math by 2014. But, for all its good intentions, the law didn't address what was happening outside the school. No one was requiring all students to have a roof over their head or an adequate meal every evening. No law mandated that their parents had jobs or health care. More and more was being demanded of teachers and school officials, but the world beyond the school was growing more and more complex.

SCHOOL FUNDING: THE \$1 BILLION PINT OF ORANGE JUICE

People who talk about school finance often talk about the \$1 billion pint of orange juice. The story goes something like this: Back in the 1990s, California lawmakers, looking to make a lasting mark on the state's education system, came up with the idea of giving a carton of orange juice each day to every child in the public schools. Who could oppose such an idea: it's good for nutrition, high in fiber, and loaded with vitamins.

Then someone did the math. The state had six million youngsters in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Each pint of orange juice cost about \$1. There were 180 days in the academic year. So the price for providing a pint of juice for each child every morning: \$1 billion.

The point of the story is that in school finance, scale matters. Seemingly small expenditures can swell at a frightening pace.

Ohio has no orange juice mandate. With about 1.8 million public school students, it is not as large as California. Even so, education remains the largest public expenditure. Per year, the budget of the Cleveland public schools has exceeded that of the city.

Figuring out fair and efficient ways to pay for education has been a vexing problem in many states. No state has struggled with the issue more than Ohio. Beginning in 1991, eleven years of litigation resulted in four Ohio Supreme Court decisions that found the state's school-funding system unconstitutional, because it relied too heavily on local property taxes.

The case, *DeRolph v. State of Ohio*, was named for schoolboy Nathan DeRolph. Nathan attended school in Perry County, a rural county east of Columbus that included five small scattered rural districts. The county, mostly rolling farmland and abandoned strip mines, embodied the flaws in the way Ohio funded its schools. The buildings were crumbling. Science labs lacked microscopes. Textbooks were tattered and old.

One school, Thornville Elementary, was built seven years before Albert Einstein developed the theory of relativity. The inside walls of the building were exposed brick.

In 1998, the third-floor hallway of the school started to collapse, because bat feces had collected on an attic floor and corroded the hallway ceiling.

The school was part of the Northern Local School District, which ranked near the bottom in most economic measures, including household income and value of taxable property. Those measures are important, because local property taxes make up a large part of how Ohio funds its schools.

Many believe such a reliance on local property taxes creates huge disparities among communities. Districts with lots of factories, retail stores, and expensive homes in their boundaries have high tax bases. Towns with little industry and low housing values have low tax bases. As a result, the quality of education children receive often depends on where they live.

“Look at the kind of land we have,” says Finn Laursen, former superintendent of the Firelands Local School District in rural Lorain County. “In a district like ours, the property value is much lower than in suburbia or in the city. Funding becomes a challenge, and that leads to difficulty in paying things like competitive salaries for teachers.”

The DeRolph decisions pushed the state to contribute a greater share of money to schools. The case also sparked a massive program to rebuild and replace schools like Thornville Elementary. Today, most of the schools in Perry County are modern and well equipped. But inequities remain.

A year after the court issued its fourth and final ruling in 2002, Northern Local was spending \$5,650 per pupil, with about \$1,500 of it coming from local property taxes. By contrast, the suburb of Beachwood was spending \$16,450 per pupil, with about \$13,000 coming from local property taxes. That’s a difference of nearly \$11,000 per child.

That kind of disparity was a major issue in the 2006 governor’s race. Former U.S. Congressman Ted Strickland campaigned on the promise that he would fix school funding in Ohio. After taking office, Strickland pushed a plan that called for dramatic changes in the way the state funded schools.

For years, Ohio funded education by essentially calculating how much money the budget could afford for schools and then dividing it among the state’s students. That method was known as residual budgeting.

Strickland proposed turning that equation on its head. He said the state should first identify the programs necessary to educate children—full-day kindergarten, smaller class sizes, more Advanced Placement classes, and the like—and then fund them. It’s a method known as evidence-based funding.

The governor’s plan, which was adopted as part of the state budget, also calls for the state to gradually assume a greater share of funding responsibility. The goal is to lessen the reliance on local property taxes.

Unfortunately, launch of the plan coincided with an economic downturn. That caused Strickland and legislators to delay or scrap some parts of the plan. Still, the measure was widely viewed as a step forward in Ohio’s long-running battle to make its school-funding system constitutional.

“After 10 years, someone finally understood what the court said,” says former Ohio Supreme Court Justice Andy Douglas, who signed all four majority opinions calling for a funding overhaul. “I’m glad I lived long enough to see us vindicated, to a degree.”

The most significant change in school funding in Ohio and across the nation is at a federal level. Historically, federal funds have made up no more than 6% or 7% of a school district budget. Most of that was in the form of Title 1 money —the federal money designed to give poor children extra help.

But in 2009, Congress approved a massive economic stimulus package aimed at preserving and creating jobs for teachers and other school personnel. The windfall was a lifeline for many districts that were facing layoffs and program cuts because of shrinking budgets.

President Barack Obama followed that up by offering states competitive Race to the Top grants. The extra money, which was designed to fund innovation, was contingent on states conforming to the president's agenda, which included reforms like charter schools and tying teacher pay to student performance. By mid-2010, only two states, Delaware and Tennessee, had been awarded grants. Ohio and other states resubmitted applications and were still hopeful they would share in the money.

IMAGINING A WHOLE NEW EDUCATION SYSTEM

It's been more than 25 years since the Carnegie Report declared a state of emergency in our nation's schools and a warning that the U.S. was losing its competitive edge around the world as a result. In the interim, much has been tried, in the name of reform. But it's difficult to point to single large urban school system in which meaningful reform has taken root.

For decades, schools have sought to replicate what they call "best practices" —find out what works, study it, and implement it. In theory, the concept makes sense. But finding out what works is only part of the problem. It's just as crucial to find out why it works, and if it is truly the ingredient needed for success.

Imagine that you are trying to put together a successful professional football team. In studying Super Bowl winners, you find that they all had one thing in common: they were coached by men over the age of 30. You might be tempted to identify that fact as a best practice of winning football programs. There's only one problem, of course. Year in and year out, the league's worst teams also were coached by men over the age of 30.

Some reformers say it's time to look beyond best practices and to start from scratch. They encourage educators to re-imagine schools. Writer Frederick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute calls the idea "greenfield schooling." The goal, he says, is to create school systems capable of evolving with the students and society they serve.

While there is widespread agreement that all children can learn, there is also a consensus that children learn at different speeds and in different ways. To provide those opportunities within the framework of shrinking budgets, we might have to change the way we deliver education.

Take Fairfax County, Virginia, for example. Administrators in that district, the nation's 12th largest, discovered they could offer French at a cost of \$11 per student, using the popular Rosetta Stone language program. Offering traditional French instruction cost the district \$400 per student.

It might seem like a small example. But put enough of them together and you have suddenly changed the way education is delivered. Let's look at several examples:

1. RETHINKING HIGH SCHOOL

By the time spring rolls around, many high school seniors have been accepted to college, have a job lined up, plan to travel overseas, or are simply bored with school. Senioritis—the tendency for seniors to slack off in their final year of high school—is a uniquely American malady.

Some researchers believe that's a waste of time and money and will eventually hurt the nation's ability to compete globally. They propose overhauling high school into something that would look very different from the traditional freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior divisions.

One of the most dramatic plans was proposed by Marc Tucker of the National Council on Economic Education. Tucker says we ought to essentially do away with the last two years of high school, as least as we now know them. He proposes giving 10th-graders a test that would allow most of them to leave high school and enter community college directly. Those who scored the highest would still take some advanced high school coursework to prepare for admission to selective colleges and universities. The money saved from eliminating the last two years of high school would be spent on providing high-quality early childhood education to all 4-year-olds and all low-income 3-year-olds.

Ohio and other states are already experimenting with some of those ideas. Most of Ohio's largest cities have "early college" programs, in which students spend half of their day in high school, and half at a local community college. By the time they graduate from high school, many of those students have completed a year or more of college—for free.

A variety of specialty high schools are also emerging as a powerful force in education. Most of them link a traditional high school education with a specific career program, such as health, architecture, or business. Others offer alternative learning environments, such as single-gender academies or performance arts. Still others specialize in attracting older students who have dropped out of school. These schools, often called dropout-recovery programs, help young people earn the necessary credits and pass the required state tests to get a high school diploma. Much of the work is done on a computer, rather than in a traditional classroom, and most of the students are required to also hold down a part-time job.

One of the most unusual such programs is the Dayton-based charter school operation called ISUS, Inc. The program, which stands for Improved Solutions for Urban Systems, offers training in skilled trades, such as carpentry, electrical work, and manufacturing. ISUS students have built or rehabilitated more than 50 homes in blighted neighborhoods. In the process, many have earned high school diplomas, gained certification, found jobs, and gotten accepted into college. Before enrolling, nine out of 10 had dropped out of high school, and 80 percent were in the criminal justice system.

2. GIVING FAMILIES A CHOICE

It used to be that a family's choice of where to send a child to school was fairly limited. Some families favored religious schools, either for the quality of instruction, safety, and discipline, or for the moral and religious instruction that was included. A few families sent their children to private schools, where the level of instruction was generally rigorous. The default choice, of course, was the nearby public school. By law, those schools had to attempt to educate everyone who came through the door, regardless of their economic status, disabilities, or behavioral challenges.

That all changed in 1992. That was when the first charter school was established in Minnesota. Charter schools are unique, because they are publicly funded, but privately operated. Not part of a school district, they operate as a stand-alone venture. The state money that would normally go to a school district for a child's education instead follows that child to a charter school.

The idea of charter schools was to provide an environment free of bureaucratic red tape, where innovation could flourish. It has proved to be an extraordinarily popular idea: there are more than 5,000 charter schools in 39 states and the District of Columbia, serving 1.5 million students. That includes more than 300 in Ohio, where they are called community schools.

The success of charter schools has been difficult to gauge, in part because their very existence is often a subject of controversy. In Ohio, the involvement of for-profit companies in running charter schools has drawn criticism. Critics say those companies make a profit at the public expense and drain much-needed resources from traditional school districts. Nationally, most studies show that charter school students perform about the same as their peers in regular public schools. In Ohio, even charter school advocates that admit charter schools have not made the academic gains they had hoped.

But most people agree that a small but growing number of high-performing charter schools have been beneficial. They have provided good educations to their students, and have forced regular public schools to change, if they hope to stay in the marketplace. They have often demonstrated, by closing achievement gaps among students of different races and ethnic origins, that all children can learn, when they are given the opportunity.

Another controversy in the school-choice movement is the issue of school vouchers. Vouchers give parents the chance to send their child to a private or religious school with a publicly-funded scholarship. In 2002, a voucher program in Cleveland drew national attention when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it constitutional. Supporters of vouchers hailed the ruling as an opportunity for poor families to send their children to better schools—an opportunity affluent families have always had. Those who challenged the program had argued that the practice of using public money for education at religious schools violated the separation of church and state. Later, the school-voucher program was expanded throughout Ohio.

One of the more interesting choices parents now have for their children doesn't involve sending them to a bricks and mortar building. Cyber schools, also called virtual schools, provide instruction online through a computer the school delivers to the child's home. The computer-based instruction, usually delivered on an electronic intranet system, is augmented by field trips, teleconferences, and other enrichments. A large number

of cyber school students are from families who have home-schooled their children and welcome the additional instruction and curriculum virtual schools can provide. Ohio's largest cyber school, the Columbus-based Electronic Classroom of Tomorrow, has thousands of students living all across Ohio. ECOT was the first electronic school in the nation to graduate students from high school. The school's annual commencement marks the first time many of its students meet one another face to face.

Some worry about the lack of social interaction and personal contact with teachers in virtual schools. But advocates say the schools offer a valid learning opportunity for many students who, for a variety of reasons, don't flourish in traditional school environments.

"Kids are not going to show up because we build them a brand-new building," said ECOT founder Bill Lager. "But every kid in Ohio is a password away from taking part in a robust digital academy.

3. BUILDING THE 21ST-CENTURY TEACHER

Few people look back at their school days and remember a favorite school board member or middle-level administrator. But most of us can name at least one teacher who had a positive impact on our lives.

Research is clear that the quality of the teacher in the classroom is the single most important ingredient in education. In fact, research shows that students who have three ineffective teachers in a row will score as much as 50 percentage points lower on standardized tests than students who have three effective teachers in a row.

"That's the difference between being ready to go to an Ivy League college and not finishing school," says Stanford University professor Linda Darling-Hammond, an authority on teacher training.

But what makes a teacher "effective" or "ineffective"? What is the best way to evaluate and pay teachers? Can we make struggling teachers better?

Those are some of the questions dominating today's education conversation. The questions are difficult, and the answers can be polarizing.

The toughest question is whether teachers should—or can—be judged on the performance of their students. Most teachers strongly resist being evaluated on test scores alone. Let's say the majority of a teacher's class are newly arrived immigrants who speak little English. The teachers might make tremendous progress with those students, but the progress won't likely be apparent in the class's standardized test scores. Likewise, a teacher in a wealthy community, whose students are the children of doctors and lawyers, may do very little to challenge his or her class. Even so, the test scores of such a class are likely to be well above the state norm. And how can you judge art or music teachers on the test scores of their students?

Most people in education believe some compromise will emerge. The most intriguing so far has been the "value-added" analysis, which measures the academic growth of a student over a period of time. The analysis also takes into account factors such as the economic status of the child's family. Although not perfect, it comes closer to determining whether teachers are succeeding.

Another subject of debate is the role of teachers unions and the contracts they negotiate. There was a time when a teacher could be fired for putting on too much weight, or for his or her sexual orientation or political beliefs. Teacher unions emerged and negotiated an agreed-upon set of work rules that included a salary structure based on longevity and graduate degrees. Many now argue that the way contracts protect and pay teachers no longer makes sense. Charter schools, which are largely non-union, have often viewed teacher tenure and seniority as impediments to change and academic success.

But the answer is far from a simple one. If seniority is scrapped, what system will be used to replace it? And if union contracts are an impediment, why are schools in right-to-work states, like Mississippi and Louisiana, consistently the lowest performers, and schools in strong union states, like Connecticut and Massachusetts, consistently among the top performers?

One of the most successful programs in the nation for evaluating and improving teaching is in the Toledo Public Schools. Nearly 20 years ago, the Toledo Federation of Teachers proposed to the district a system in which veteran teachers would mentor new and struggling teachers and then recommend them for continued employment or dismissal. Over the years, thousands of teachers have been made stronger, and hundreds of ineffective teachers have been removed from the district's classrooms.

"We want to find out if someone is good enough to teach here, and I want to find out if they're good enough to be in my union," says Dal Lawrence, the former president of the teachers union, who proposed the plan.

The preparation and training of teachers is another hot issue. About 90 percent of the nation's 3 million teachers come out of traditional teacher-preparation programs at colleges and universities. In a four-year study of teaching schools, former Teachers College President Arthur Levine found that students intending to become teachers scored lower, on the whole, on college-entrance exams than their college-bound peers. He also found that education professors, on the average, were weaker than their peers, receiving tenure less frequently and getting paid less. He found the preparation programs hopelessly out of touch with what was happening in the real world of education.

That sort of criticism has fueled interest in programs like Teach for America, which puts the best and the brightest college graduates—most of them non-education majors—into hard-to-fill classroom jobs in big cities and rural areas. Teach for America requires a two-year commitment, but rewards the participant with a master's degree. At its best, the program replicates efforts in other nations that encourage the top-performing college graduates to teach. Unfortunately, a low percentage of Teach for America participants have remained in teaching, raising questions about whether it is a large-scale solution to improving the quality of teaching.

LOCAL CONTROL VERSUS CONSOLIDATION

Ohio delivers education through a crazy-quilt patchwork of 614 sovereign school districts. Although the offices for these districts are often only a mile or two apart, each district has, by law, its own superintendent, its own treasurer, and its own school board. Virtually all operate their own food-service systems, their own bus fleets, and their own

athletic departments. In Cuyahoga County alone, there are 31 public school districts and scores of independent, publicly financed charter schools. Some lawmakers and policy makers have asked whether this is the most efficient and sensible way to deliver public education.

“Maybe we need to think out of the box and get more serious about streamlining,” says former Ohio Senate Minority Leader Greg DiDonato of New Philadelphia. “We cannot afford this system.”

DiDonato is not suggesting that individual rural districts—some of them with fewer than 300 students and only one school building—disappear. But he does believe that two or three small districts can share the same school board, administration, and services. In rural Tuscarawas County, where DiDonato lives, there are eight school districts.

“I’ve looked in my own county and said, ‘We have eight administrations, eight transportation systems, and eight food service systems. There has to be a better way,’” he says.

As resources shrink, districts are taking a more regional approach to delivering education. Many districts in Greater Cleveland, for example, band together to purchase items like gasoline and heating fuel. Services like special education and teacher training are often provided on a regional basis.

But changing the basic structure of the system is not easy. In Ohio, bitter feelings linger from a consolidation push that began in the 1930s, when the state had more than 1,900 school districts, and ended in the 1980s. Since 1985, only a handful of small, cash-strapped school districts have consolidated.

Part of the problem is that consolidation seems to run counter to the mantra of American public education: local control. For small towns and rural communities, the school is often the center of entertainment, culture, employment, and civic pride. Folks look forward to rooting for their school’s football team on Friday nights. Parents don’t like the idea of putting their child on a bus to attend a school far from home.

But in some states, local control has been taken to absurd lengths. New Jersey had 22 districts that were so small they had no buses, no cafeterias, no football team—and no schools. Those districts, called “non-operating,” paid tuition to send their students to neighboring districts. A quirk in the state law there created the districts-without-schools, which had taxing authority, a board of education, and a business administrator. Sometimes, administrators outnumber students. In one case, a municipal golf course made up the entire school district, and the caretaker’s children were the only students!

Another peculiarity of the American system is the lack of one curriculum. All 50 states and the District of Columbia have their own set of standards and assessments, all at different levels of rigor. Most developed nations have a common set of educational standards, and the lack of such standards in the U.S. is often blamed for our students falling behind their international peers in science and mathematics.

In 2010, governors, business leaders, and education leaders in 14 states, including Ohio, came up with what could be the first set of national standards in language arts and mathematics. While most states have said they liked the idea, none has officially adopted the new standards as their own. Still, advocates are hopeful it is the first step to offering a uniformly strong curriculum to all children.

“Zip codes might be great for sorting mail, but they should not determine the quality of a child’s education or success in the future workplace,” says former West Virginia Governor Bob Wise.

Finally, more and more people are thinking about education as a cradle-to-grave endeavor. Historically, colleges and universities, K–12 systems, and preschools have operated independently. Policymakers hope that, by working together in what are known as P-16 councils, those three networks can produce better-educated and successful graduates. In Greater Cleveland, the Cuyahoga County Educational Services Center last year convened stakeholders from education, business, and economic development, with the hope of forming a P-16 council here. The idea is to work together in the interest of all area school-age youngsters: 220,000 in public schools, 50,000 in Catholic schools, and 15,000 in charter schools.

“It’s all about how we, as a region, can get better and stronger,” says William Wendling, director of public-private partnerships for the Education Services Center.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many international tests show U.S. students falling behind students in other developed nations in science and mathematics. Is our curriculum in science and mathematics rigorous enough? How can it be improved?
2. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District struggled for years with integrating its schools, so that black children and white children were not segregated. Why is that an important goal? Does desegregation help students deal better with people after they leave school and encounter people different than themselves?
3. Many school systems are faced with less money. What can be done to deal with budget shortfalls, and who should make sacrifices?
4. Ohio has 614 school districts. Is that too many? Should some of those districts be consolidated?
5. Some have proposed eliminating the last two years of high school and sending students who are ready on to college-level studies. Is that a good idea? Do you think the senior year of high school is a waste?
6. There’s a running debate on how teachers should be evaluated and compensated. Do you think teacher evaluation and pay should be tied to how their students perform? How do you evaluate the quality of a teacher?

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