

An Assessment by
Hoover Institution's
Koret Task Force
on K-12 Education

American Education in 2030



**Only if Past Trends
Persist Is the Future
Dismal**

Paul E. Peterson

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Inasmuch as most predictions of future developments—whether economic or geological—are based on projections of past trends, any speculative thoughts about the future of American education might well begin with a simple extrapolation of current trends. Once that baseline is established, one can consider possibilities that could shift current trends decisively in one direction or another.

Simple Extrapolation of Past Trends

Based on trends observed during the past forty years, one can predict the following developments over the next two generations:

Economically,

- Annual per pupil costs will triple in real dollar terms to about \$36,000 per pupil.
- Pupil-teacher ratios will fall from fifteen pupils per teacher to fewer than ten pupils per teacher.
- The ratio of pupils to all school district employees—both professional and otherwise—will decline from eight pupils per employee to five pupils per employee.
- The local share of school financing will fall from 45 percent to about 33 percent of total costs.

Institutionally,

- Control over the determination of education policy will shift further away from local school boards to more distant governmental locales—states, courts, and the federal government.
- Bureaucratic regulations will become more complex as external agencies seek to extend their authority over school operations.
- Testing systems designed to hold schools accountable will expand to cover additional grades and subjects.
- Many states will bargain collectively with teachers' unions over compensation policies as well as a broad range of school practices and working conditions.
- The percentage of students served by charter schools will increase from 2 to 6 percent of the school-age population.
- The percentage of students attending private schools will remain at approximately 10 to 12 percent of the age cohort.

Politically,

- Power will oscillate between the two political parties. Democrats will be closely allied to public-sector unions, supporting larger investments in K-12 education and not opposing the extension of collective bargaining practices to a larger set of policy domains. Republicans will oppose increases in educational expenditures and propose a variety of measures—school choice, merit pay, and the elimination of teacher licensing and tenure—designed to undermine union strength.

- Because no one party is likely to control all branches of government, policy innovation will be incremental.
- Organizations of public-sector employees will exercise increasing control over decisions made by school boards, state legislatures, and state departments of education. As the best organized, best-financed group with a vested interest in education policy, public-sector unions will be in a position to advance their interests.
- State and federal courts will bring a broader range of school activities under their jurisdiction, as they mandate “adequate” school funding, protect student rights, and regulate relations between districts and their employees. The Supreme Court will identify a federal constitutional right to an “adequate” education.

Performance levels,

- Test scores of those in the last year of high school (seventeen-year-olds) will remain essentially unchanged.
- High school graduation rates will decline from 72 to percent to 68 percent of those who entered ninth grade four years previously.
- Schools will remain largely segregated along racial lines.
- The average cognitive skills of minority students will trail those of white students by a margin roughly equivalent to the amount by which white cognitive skills trail those of Asians. (Between 1978 and 2008, the white-Asian gap in eighth grade mathematics grew by 12 points, from 2 to 14 points, whereas the black-white gap narrowed by 4, from 32 to 28 points. If recent trends continue, the two gaps will eventually come to resemble one another.)
- The performances in math and science of U.S. students will remain below the industrial world average.
- The percentage of students classified as disabled will rise from 15 to 22 percent of the school-age population.
- The quality of the teaching force will decline significantly (as indicated by the test score performances of teachers and the selectivity of the colleges teachers attend).

In sum, more money will be used to hire more people to work in schools, but their efforts will fail to translate into higher levels of student performance.

The Political Economy of Education

A change in the U.S. political economy could disrupt these trends, however. During the past forty years, the United States has enjoyed substantial growth in labor productivity. Between 1970 and 1995, average productivity growth was 1.5 percent a year; between 1995 and 2008 annual growth shifted upward to 2.5 percentage points. That high rate of growth in labor productivity generated a prosperity that permitted a major expansion of the public sector without imposing heavy costs on taxpayers. If the 2.5 percent growth in labor productivity can be sustained during the next forty years, it will alleviate

considerably the ever rising cost of education. But changes in the economy could induce a drop in the growth in labor productivity to as little as 1 percent annually, much as many European countries have experienced in recent years. Rising deficits, increased regulation of the economy, and increasing dependence on government programs are a likely concomitant of the division of power between the two political parties that has in recent decades precluded policy innovation. Neither party has been able to gain control over most institutional power centers except for limited periods of time. So if economic and political factors are decisive in shaping the future of the American school, then a simple extrapolation of current trends is as likely an outcome as any other.

Potential for Technological Change

Any predictions of the future that do not take into account potential changes in technology are at risk of being dreadfully wide of the mark. At the dawn of the twentieth century, a London commission addressed the emerging transportation problems that the city would need to address. The recommendations focused mainly on removing horse manure. Given past trends, their focus was no less reasonable than the projections we have outlined above.

But several developments are now unfolding that could disrupt past trends in American education. Taken together, these developments could create an opportunity for the rebirth of American education. Consider the following possibilities:

- Information, curriculum, and instructional tools will become readily available over the Internet at low cost. As the cost of such materials declines exponentially, they will become virtually free. Most important, the open-source production of curricular and instructional materials, often by students themselves, has the potential to revolutionize student engagement in the academic process. Students will be able to learn at the time and place and pace they choose, and the best and the brightest may produce—free of charge—curriculum that their peers could profit by.
- This technological transformation could be hastened by the almost wholesale abandonment of high school by even the most capable adolescents, who are showing an increasing distaste for a conventional high school education. Selective colleges and universities may soon decide not to require high school graduation diplomas, provided that students performed well on advanced placement examinations. Already, homeschoolers are being admitted to those colleges and universities without degrees from brick-and-mortar schools. The opportunity to learn from peers may prove to be such a powerful alternative to high school instruction that states will be forced to modify compulsory education laws, which have already become unenforceable owing to the power of the spreading homeschooling movement. To maintain local fiscal support, schools will emphasize those extracurricular offerings at which they had always done

well: athletics, drama, music, and a wide variety of other activities that allow young people to work and socialize together in voluntary settings.

- Public resistance to the rising cost of education at both the K-12 and higher education levels may prove to be the final blow to the old system. As the price of labor continues to climb, and as state and local taxes continue to rise, tax revolts can be expected to spread from one community and state to another, forcing schools to adapt to the less expensive, online model of learning that is already sweeping through higher education.

In short, the rising costs public schools, the declining quality of instruction within the schools, and the technological changes that may make it possible for students to access information and instruction directly from low-cost sources may result in the creation of a hybrid system of education that combines online learning with some elements of the brick-and-mortar school. Teachers will become coaches who help students engage with the material presented by others. Changes will move from the college level downward through high school into the middle school. The elementary school, always the best part of the twentieth-century school, will also make extensive use of online curricular materials, though mostly in classroom settings.

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The preferred citation for this publication is
Paul E. Peterson, "Only if Past Trends Persist Is the Future Dismal," in *American Education in 2030* (2010), edited by Chester E. Finn Jr.,
www.americaneducation2030.com