**Students and their Schools**

The typical American student spends six hours a day, five days a week, 180 days a year in school. Children in the United States start preschool or nursery school at age four or under. Most children start kindergarten at five years of age.

Students attend elementary schools (grades one through six) and then middle school or junior high school (grades seven through nine). Secondary, or high schools, are usually 10th through 12th grades (ages 15 through 18).

In 1988, about 45.4 million students were enrolled in schools (elementary and secondary) in the United States. Students may attend either public schools or private schools. About 83 percent of Americans graduate from secondary schools and 60 percent continue their studies and receive some form of post-high school education. Approximately 20.3 percent graduate from four-year colleges and universities.

School attendance is required in all 50 states. In 32 states, students must attend school until they are 16 years old. In nine other states, the minimum age for leaving school is 17. Eight states require schooling until the age of 18, while one state allows students to leave school at 14.

How are American schools changing? The quality of education in the United States has often been debated in the course of American history. During the 1960s and 1970s, many schools offered a wide variety of nonacademic courses, such as "driver's education" and "marriage and family living." Educators were worried that students were not taking enough "academic" courses, such as mathematics and English. Many other reports soon came out with recommendations calling for stricter high school requirements.

In the early 1980s, the United States National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a report called "A Nation at Risk," reporting that "a rising tide of mediocrity threatens our very future as a nation." Educators were worried that students were not learning as much as they should. Scores on high school seniors' Scholastic Aptitude Tests (college entrance examinations) had declined almost every year from 1963 to 1980. "A Nation at Risk" also reported that 13 percent of 17-year-olds were functionally illiterate (unable to read and write).

Schools began to answer the challenge. Most states and school districts have passed new, more demanding standards that students must meet before they can graduate from high school. Most high schools now require four years of English, three years each of mathematics, science and social studies, one-and-one-half years of computer science and up to four years of a foreign language.

Business organizations, realizing that their future employees needed skills that could be learned in schools, pitched in to help. In Boston, for example, the business community offered jobs and scholarships to students who stayed in school to graduate. In other communities, companies "adopted" certain schools, usually in low-income areas, and provided tutoring, scholarships and other help. By 1988, there were 141,000 educational "partnerships." According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 40 percent of the nation's schools and 9 million students are involved in some sort of partnership program. Corporations have also given grants to universities to improve teacher education.

Educators believe these and other methods to improve education are beginning to show results, and that U.S. schools are at least reversing the previous decline. Tests showed that student achievement in science and mathematics, which had declined during the 1970s, improved during the 1980s—although performance in reading and writing either declined or stayed the same. Average scores on the mathematics section of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (college entrance exams) increased by a significant ten points between 1980 and 1990—although they were still substantially below the average in 1970. But scores on the verbal section of the test hovered around the 1980 level—more than thirty points below the 1970 level. Critics point out that U.S. students consistently score lower on academic tests—especially in math and science—than their counterparts in Europe and Japan. They believe the longer school year and more rigorous requirements in those other countries produce superior achievement. And they cite a study by the National Institute of Mental Health which showed that high school seniors had spent more time in front of a television screen (15,000 hours) than they had spent in school (11,000 hours).

High school students can take vocational courses that prepare them to perform specific jobs, such as that of a carpenter or an automobile mechanic. Advanced courses prepare other students for university or college study. Special education (for the handicapped student) is offered in most schools. Schools enroll about three million handicapped students.

At least 85 percent of all public high schools have computers. Students are writing computer programs and creating charts, art and music on computers.

Many parents are involved in working for better quality education in the United States. Parents are joining parent-teacher organizations, tutoring their children, raising money for special programs and helping to keep schools in good repair.