An Education:

England, the United States, and the Fight to Modernize the School System

Hayley Keon

4A

**England**

England has historically been revered for its accomplished education system; one created from centuries of trial and error, success and failure. Since the medieval times, it has drawn students the world over, beckoning them with an expansive, age-old dedication to both skillful learning and rigorous academics. However, the English education system used today- which is also emulated by many industrialized nations, including the United States- is rather new.

Radically redefined in 1988, the modern English public school is governed by a national curriculum that each of the 23,000 state schools in the country must follow. This curriculum is designed through discussions between head teachers (principals) and the 150 Local Education Authorities (LEAs) that run school districts throughout England.

This education plan is then returned to the head teachers, who must ensure their schools are meeting the Key Stages- standards for learning- as outlined in the curriculum. With such rigid goals, it would appear that schools have little leeway to individualize. However, it is the general consensus among teachers in England that this is not so. “While [the English system] appears to be rigid, most educators feel they have leeway to teach subject matter that might reach more students.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

This may be attributed to another aspect under the school’s discretion. Though the above curriculum is mandatory for all state schools, it is not the end all, be all. In fact, many schools impose their own additional standards in order to further educate students and remain competitive with parents, who (under the Education Act of 1988) have the right to declare which public school they prefer their child attend.

**Successful Reforms**

The most notable reform in recent history has been the Education Act of 1988[[2]](#footnote-2), which, as previously mentioned, established a national curriculum and gave parents a say in which school their child receives his education. This act also sanctioned for the creation of Local Management Schools (LMS), which are the English counterpart to the US charter schools, as well as the removal of academic tenure (a senior educator’s contractual right to not lose his position)[[3]](#footnote-3) in order to improve quality of public education.

However, the polls are still out, two decades later. The success of this reform is directly related to the reliability of the source. Many educators still feel that the standardized system elicits results at the expense of vast knowledge- that, in teaching the strict Key Stages, students lose the diversity in their education.

**Remaining Flaws**

Though it has numerous accomplishments, the English model is not perfect. Still, even with a more standardized education system, children- especially in urban areas- are falling through the cracks. Government funding, allocated based on the number of students and financial need per school, is often unequally distributed. Difficulties with choosing the right public school send some students far out of their way just to attend class.

**The United States**

Unlike England, The United States has not had a multitude of centuries to practice educating, or the historic prestige of their western counterparts. However, through ingenuity, experimentation, and that characteristic dedication that has come to be expected, America has earned its place amongst the ranks of highly educated nations.

The United States did model, in part, after the new English system (in fact, the most known US education reform- No Child Left Behind (NCLB) - was founded on principles of the Education Act of 1988). Though the two nations have come to take on similarities in the area of education, they are marked by noticeable differences.

The United States has 100,000 public schools that are organized by 14,000 school districts[[4]](#footnote-4). The districts separately determine their curriculum for the schools within their control. This decentralization has visible pros and cons: by governing at the local level, districts can quickly and efficiently gauge the needs of their facilities. However, the national government contributes only eight percent of the schools’ funding (and mainly for NCLB pursuits), which often leaves much to be desired by way of school materials and staffing.

**Successful Reforms**

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 has been a contentious issue among educators, parents, and students. It is successful in that it was passed and school districts are still required to uphold NCLB’s standards, though many are appealing for relief from under the math literacy requirements imposed

**Remaining Flaws**

Like England, the U.S also struggles to close the gap between underprivileged and wealthy children (a highlighted problem in urban areas); as well as lacking financial support from the federal government. Another pointed issue is the chaotic variety of curriculums within the United States, which leave some American students more learned than others (an example being Elementary students in New Hampshire, whose scores in fourth grade reading and mathematics exams far exceed those of New Mexico, pointing to a series of weaker curriculums throughout the state)[[5]](#footnote-5).

1. Hannaway, Jane, Marilyn Murphy, and Jodie Reed. Leave No City Behind. Issue brief. Leave No City Behind. The Urban Institute, 2004. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311123\_LNCB.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. "Education Reform Act 1988." Legislation.gov.uk. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/40/contents>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. "Tenure | Define Tenure at Dictionary.com." Dictionary.com | Find the Meanings and Definitions of Words at Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tenure>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Hannaway, Jane, Marilyn Murphy, and Jodie Reed. Leave No City Behind. Issue brief. Leave No City Behind. The Urban Institute, 2004. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311123\_LNCB.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. "Ranking of Elementary Schools in USA." PSK12 Public School Rankings. PSK12. Web. 30 Nov. 2011. <http://www.psk12.com/rating/USthreeRsphp/STATE\_US\_level\_Elementary\_CountyID\_0.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)