



Fulfilling our Right to Education

The Right to Education Index findings for the United States 2016

What is RTEI (Right to Education Index)?

RTEI is a new global index developed by RESULTS Educational Fund (in partnership with civil society organizations) to enable countries to measure their own efforts to fulfill the right to education. The index aims to drive government accountability, measure progress and identify areas where improvements are needed.

Through use of a biennial questionnaire (based on the Right to Education International Framework), the index examines national level data through five key themes:

- governance (the legal structure of education)
- availability (of institutions and their condition)
- accessibility (for **all** students)
- acceptability (quality of education) and
- adaptability (to meet the needs of a diverse range of students).

Within these themes, sub themes are assessed and given scores ranging between 0 and 100 (with 100 being the optimum) which are then used to produce a mean score for the overriding theme. Each country is also given an overall RTEI score (an indication of the country's progress towards the right to education).

The RTEI acts as a tool for country to country comparisons, to strengthen civil society advocacy and to increase public and political support for the right to education.

RTEI results

Overall, the United States received an index score of 75 - the lowest of any of the high-income countries included within the project. This is partially attributable to the low score received for governance, more specifically, the sub themes of international frameworks and national law. Learning outcomes and the use of national assessments to evaluate them (43), overall state of education for children with disabilities (52), children of minorities (57), content of teacher training (0), and national laws prohibiting discrimination (46) also received low scores.

However, areas of strength that were identified included: availability (97), which examined pupil ratios to classrooms, sanitation (toilets and potable water), trained teachers and text books, as well as the cross-cutting themes: monitoring and reporting of educational standards (100), national educational planning (100), relative state of girls' education (105), and provision of free and compulsory primary education (93).

Issue Area 1: International frameworks

The United States received a score of 18 for international frameworks (a sub theme within governance) which was the lowest, by a considerable margin, of any of the fifteen countries included in the project. This sub theme assessed whether the state was party to many United Nations treaties, UNESCO treaties, International Labor Organization conventions, the Geneva conventions, and regional treaties relating to the protection of human rights, in particular those of children, women, and people with disabilities. Many the conventions and treaties included in the survey have not been ratified by the US government. For example, the United States is one of only two countries (alongside Somalia) that has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child despite being instrumental in the drafting of the convention (inspired by US laws) more than two decades ago.

Issue Area 2: Learning outcomes

The United States received a score of 43 in the sub theme of learning outcomes, highlighting this as an area of weakness. To understand why the U.S. scored comparatively low, it is helpful to understand that the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) puts the onus on individual states to set their own proficiency standards and design their own assessments to measure student achievement. The closest the U.S. has to a true “national assessment” is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), where the data used in the U.S. questionnaire was drawn from. The data drawn from the NAEP and used in question 4.3.3 of the questionnaire show surprisingly low passing scores on a range of topics. While there are myriad factors that could be causing low passing rates on the NAEP, it seems likely that one of the main reasons for the low scores is that the NAEP assessment is administered uniformly to all participating students across the nation, while the standards for each subject are set at the state level, and vary widely across the U.S.

The lack of a unified national assessment or exam to evaluate the progress towards the aims outlined in the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child highlighted this sub theme as an area of weakness. These aims encompass development of the child to their full potential; fostering a child’s respect for human rights, parents, their culture, their language and their country; preparation for a responsible life (through tolerance and understanding of difference) and developing respect for the natural environment.

Data availability

Within the questionnaire process, locating nationwide data proved challenging. Much of the available data were at the state level and where national data were available, it tended to be sourced from the World Bank, UNESCO, or United Nations open data bank.

In addition to this, when responding to questions examining different rates of sub- populations, data were not available for all categories. Data sources had only disaggregated per gender rather than other criteria such as income level.

There is a need for government to collect and publish:

Data type 1. Create a national database of standardized education data compiled from state wide data to be made publicly available.

Data type 2. Disaggregate education data to identify data for different sub-populations e.g. urban and rural populations; different income levels, and people with disabilities.

Recommendations

Issue Area 1 recommendation: Support relevant treaties and conventions, including:

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- The UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education
- The International Labor Organization Minimum Age Convention.

Ratification of these key treaties and conventions will ensure:

- The United States repositions itself as a global leader on human rights, specifically for vulnerable populations.
- The United States will have a more effective voice in discussions and negotiations with other countries on human rights related issues.
- The United States explicitly promotes equality of opportunity and treatment within the education system.
- Children's basic right to education will be promoted and protected.

Action can be taken by: raising public awareness of the different conventions and treaties and the need for their ratification; asking the President to prepare recommendations for ratification and letting Senators and other policymakers know about the importance of these treaties and conventions. It is worth noting that treaty ratification requires the approval of a two-thirds vote in the U.S. Senate, which has historically proved difficult to achieve.

Issue Area 2 recommendation: Further develop the instruction of human rights in U.S. schools for Kindergarten through 12th grade education to incorporate an understanding of human rights; respect for parents, cultural identity, language and values, and the child's country; individual responsibility (including tolerance and equality), and respect for the natural environment.

Provide opportunities through current history and social studies topics such as the Civil Rights Movement to strengthen instruction of these values. Implement guidance of teacher assessment of objectives to evaluate learning outcomes. The *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* can support in the development of state curriculum.

To assess learning outcomes at the national level, current national assessment systems could be enhanced to align with state level assessment. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) could be broadened to include an amalgamation of teacher assessment data, collected at the state level, evaluating pupil progress towards the aims outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.