

# The Atlantic

## Can Schools Be Fixed?

Experts on K-12 education offer their reasons for optimism and pessimism going forward.



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7:30 AM ET | EDUCATION

It's been a tumultuous year for America's schools — one marked by an expanding minority-student population, an increasingly discontent teaching force, a backlash against standardized testing, and shifting understanding of education reform. It's seen greater attention on areas traditionally dismissed as nonessential: things like early-childhood education, after-school programs, and project-based learning. It's also seen evolving attitudes

toward discipline, with tactics such as restorative justice starting to replace zero-tolerance approaches, including in high-poverty urban districts. Debates over how to address disparities in achievement have been highly politicized. The ed-tech market has continued to grow.

Education is often touted as a means for boosting social mobility and making communities more equal, but inequality in school funding and resources has made that difficult to achieve, especially amid increasing poverty rates. Segregation in districts, both tacit and explicit, is holding scores of children back, and performance on math and reading assessments has remained relatively stagnant. President Obama has just signed into law an act that will replace the widely despised No Child Left Behind, but whether it'll succeed in its goals – boosting the attainment of disadvantaged students, reducing the amount of testing taking place in schools, promoting classroom innovation, and so on – is far from guaranteed.

We reached out to some of the leading scholars of, experts on, and advocates for K-12 education, and asked them what, as the year comes to an end, is giving them cause for hope and despair. Below are their answers, lightly edited for length and clarity.

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**Eric Hanushek**, *senior fellow at the Hoover Institution of Stanford University*

**Reason for despair:** Improved education is the key to the future for the U.S., as our economy depends on having a highly skilled workforce. While most people give lip service to the desire to improve schools in order to invest in the future, they often stop short of endorsing any significant changes in the schools. This reflects, in my opinion, two factors – an imperfect understanding of just how important quality schooling is for the country and complacency with the current situation. The complacency enters from the fact that the U.S. remains a wealthy country, leading to a sense that maybe it

is alright just to keep going along as we are. From this complacency springs a myopia that is difficult to overcome but that could harm the future of the country.

**Reason for hope:** Over the past five years, my sense of hope and optimism has actually overtaken despair with U.S. schools. First, there is now broad recognition that quality teachers can lead to revitalized schools that are competitive internationally. Second, there is a new willingness by legislatures in a majority of states to push actively for more flexibility in hiring, paying, and retaining teachers and for improved teacher evaluations so that we identify the teachers that we want to nurture and retain. By focusing attention on the effectiveness of teachers in raising student achievement, these progressive states are setting the stage for U.S. schools to climb out of their doldrums and to compete with the top schools around the developed countries of the world. For the first time in the past half century there appears to be a strong possibility that we will serve all of our students and that we will restore the strength of the U.S. workforce.