



Unit 4: Understanding the U.S. School System

Students' Guide

LESSON 2: Looking Inside a School

FOR MORE INFORMATION TO HELP YOU ANSWER QUESTIONS THAT MAY COME UP DURING THIS LESSON, REFER TO THE FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS SHEET "LEGAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM" AT THE END OF THIS LESSON.

Time: 2 hours

Content Objectives

- Students describe and discuss their understanding of what a teacher looks like.
- Students familiarize themselves with and analyze the structures of elementary, middle, and high school classrooms in the United States.

Rights Objectives

- Students understand and interrogate what the universal right to education looks like in classrooms in the United States.

Language Objectives

- Students continue to build their language skills around rights
- Students practice reading, writing, and speaking in English.

Materials Needed:

- Student lesson plan
- Large paper and markers

KEY VOCABULARY:

Nouns	Verbs
Education	To educate
Teacher	To teach
Desk	To sit
Table	To learn
Classroom	To go (from class to class)
Elementary School	To stay (in one room)
Middle School	To notice (a detail)
High School	

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LESSON ACTIVITIES:

PART A) Describing a Teacher

The purpose of the following activity is to explore students' perceptions of teachers in U.S. schools. Guide students through an exercise where they draw a picture of what they imagine a teacher to look like, and then move to a comparison of their drawings with one another's. Ask students especially to articulate the differences they notice between their pictures and those of their peers.

Draw a picture of a teacher, whatever a teacher looks like for you. You do not have to draw a classroom teacher, although you can.

- *What details do you notice about your picture? Write down two or three things you notice on your paper.*
- *In a small group, share what is different or the same about your drawing and the drawings of other people in your group. Write down one or two of the differences you notice on your paper.*
- *Discuss with your group: Think of a child who goes to school in the United States. If he or she were asked to draw a teacher, how would his or her drawing be similar to or different from yours?*

PART B) Talking about the Classroom

The purpose of the following activity is to investigate the structure of classrooms in U.S. schools. Guide students through an exercise where they look closely at each photograph and build an understanding by first noting details about the photograph and then moving to a comparison between what they see and their own schooling experiences.

Look closely at the following picture of an American elementary school classroom and discuss the questions below:



Source: <http://newamericamedia.org/2011/12/as-class-size-grows-more-chaotic-classrooms.php>

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- Describe a detail you notice about the photograph (Examples: “There are many colorful papers on the wall,” or “The students sit at tables, not desks.”). Write what you notice down on a white board or piece of paper everyone can see.
- Share what is different or the same about this classroom and classrooms in your home country.
- In elementary classrooms in the United States (usually ages 5-12), students generally have one teacher all day and are in a classroom with 20-25 other students. Students are grouped by age, not by ability. What do you think is good about this model of elementary education? What do you think is bad?

Look closely at the following picture of an American high school classroom and discuss the following questions:



Source: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/10/why-do-teachers-quit/280699/>

- Describe a detail you notice about the photograph (Examples: “There are many colorful papers on the wall,” or “The students face each other”). Write what you notice down on a white board or piece of paper everyone can see.
- Share what is different or the same about this classroom and classrooms in your home country.
- In middle school and high school classrooms in the United States (usually ages 12-18), students generally go to different classes throughout the day and are in a classroom with about 30 other students. Students must complete the 12th grade in order to graduate with a high school certificate. What do you think is good about this model of education for middle school and high school? What do you think is bad?

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PART C) Analyzing Daily Schedules

The purpose of the following activity is to explore students' perceptions of the American school day. Guide students through an exercise where they look closely at the schedule below and build an understanding by first noting details about the schedule and then moving to a comparison between what they perceive and their own schooling experiences. If possible, project the schedule on a screen or on a wall in addition to providing printed copies of it through the student lesson handout.

Look at the example high school schedule for a 10th grade student.

- What details do you notice about this schedule?
- What is different or the same about this school day and school days in your home country?

Schedule for Raúl Gonzales, 10th Grade

Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Lunch	Period 4	Period 5	Period 6	After school
Room 118	Room 203	Room 204	Cafeteria	Room 333	Room 119	Room 208	Room: Gymnasium
Biology	English (ELA)	Social Studies	Lunch	ESL	Math	Art	Volleyball

PART D) Reflections

The instructor should invite students to share questions and concerns the lesson raised for them that they may want to explore with their children, teachers, school staff members, or other adults they know. Record students' ideas on the board. Then, invite students to brainstorm how parents initiate conversation with their children, teachers, school staff members, or other helpful figures about their questions and concerns regarding U.S. schools, using the questions below as a guide.

As a class, discuss your answers to the following questions, considering your experiences and the lesson activities:

- What is the most interesting or important thing you learned about U.S. schools during the lesson?
- What questions or concerns about U.S. schools would you like to raise with your children, a teacher, a school staff member, or another adult, such as a fellow parent?
- How would you bring up a question or concern you have about U.S. schools to your child? A teacher? Another adult you trust?

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END OF LESSON REFLECTIONS: The teacher asks students at the end of each lesson what they learned and how they felt doing these activities. The teacher may want to take notes based on what students share to help in preparing the lesson for the following week.

Guiding questions for instructors to pose to students include the following:

- What new ideas/content did you learn?
- What new vocabulary did you learn?
- What new rights did you learn?
- What was difficult? What was easy?
- How did you feel?
- What would you change?
- How would you use this information?
- How does this content connect to human rights?
- What situations can you think of when you may want to assert your rights?

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FAQ: LEGAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM

❖ What are the major differences between district schools, charter schools, and private schools?

District schools are what we most commonly call public schools. They are funded by a mix of federal, state, and local funds. A district encompasses a certain geographic area, most often a city, suburb, or rural region. The district is governed by a school board, which is either elected or appointed by the mayor. Most school districts have elected school boards. However large cities, including Boston, as well as New York and Chicago, have school boards which are appointed by the mayor. School districts are administered by the Superintendent who works with the school board to implement the school board's directives. Large school districts also have a large staff and many departments that oversee various aspects of the schools. For example, a school district may have math, science, and ESL departments.

Charter schools also receive public funds, like district schools, but they may also receive funding from private donations and other sources. Charter schools, however, do not have a school board or superintendent. They do have an authorizer (an organization which is meant to monitor the school), a board of directors, and an executive director. They do not have the large support system of district schools. Some charter schools are part of a 'network' of schools, meaning they share the same mission.

Private schools are funded primarily through the tuition of their students or donations from alumni and the community. There are many private religious schools around the country. There are also private day and boarding schools with no religious affiliation.

❖ What other agencies or organizations influence schools?

The federal government and every state government have a Department of Education. At the federal level, the Department of Education states that its mission is "to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access." It strives to do so by:

- Establishing policies on federal financial aid for education, and distributing as well as monitoring those funds.
- Collecting data on America's schools and disseminating research.
- Focusing national attention on key educational issues.
- Prohibiting discrimination and ensuring equal access to education.

The U.S. Department of Education is led by the Secretary of Education. At the state level, the Department of Education is responsible for licensing teachers; creating statewide content standards; assessing student performance in the state through standardized testing; monitoring school district performance; publishing information about school quality; and creating and implementing programs to help schools, teachers, and students perform better.

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