Is American Education Creating a New Class Divide?

October 14, 2026 - For decades, American schools have been changing what students are expected to learn. Cursive handwriting has disappeared from many classrooms, and colleges and universities have increasingly eliminated SAT and ACT entrance requirements. These changes have been justified as ways to modernize education, improve accessibility, and give students more opportunities. But could they be creating an unintended consequence? Are we developing a two-tier educational system in which some students receive a more demanding education while others are left at a disadvantage?

Consider cursive handwriting. When the Common Core State Standards were introduced in 2010, cursive was not included as a required skill. Schools increasingly emphasized keyboarding and digital communication, while classroom time was redirected toward reading, mathematics, and other academic subjects. The reasoning was that computers were replacing handwritten communication, making cursive less important.

But not every school abandoned it, and the differences between public and private education are revealing.

In 2023, the Indiana Department of Education surveyed schools about cursive instruction. Among responding traditional public schools, just 52.3% reported teaching cursive. Among responding state-accredited private schools, that figure was 91.3%. That's a difference of 39 percentage points.

Although the survey measured schools rather than individual students, the results illustrate how differently children can be educated depending on where they attend school.

States have begun reversing the trend. By 2026, at least 25 states required cursive instruction through legislation or mandatory educational standards. Apparently, the skill wasn't quite as obsolete as educators once believed.

Now consider college entrance examinations.

For generations, preparing for and taking the SAT or ACT was an important milestone for college-bound students. These examinations provided a common benchmark for evaluating applicants from different high schools. They also required students to prepare for a demanding test and demonstrate their abilities under pressure.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, universities suspended testing requirements because students couldn't reliably access testing centers. Many subsequently made those changes permanent, arguing that standardized examinations disadvantaged students from lower-income families who couldn't afford extensive test preparation.

But eliminating a measurement can also impact the overall benefits of higher education.

Dartmouth College discovered something interesting when it studied its own admissions results. In 2024, the university reinstated its SAT/ACT requirement after concluding that standardized scores helped predict academic success. Dartmouth also found that test-optional admissions could actually disadvantage capable students from lower-income backgrounds whose strong scores might otherwise help them stand out. And since one of the major arguments for eliminating these tests in the first place was that they weren't fair to lower income students, Dartmouth's findings pretty well eviscerated that argument.

MIT also restored its testing requirement, emphasizing the importance of evaluating academic preparation, particularly in mathematics.

These findings raise a broader question. Are educational institutions improving opportunities for students, or are they sometimes removing requirements without adequately considering the consequences?

And what happens when those students enter the workforce?

Employers have long evaluated job applicants partly on the reputations of the schools they attended. Professional recruiters routinely encounter hiring managers who favor graduates of particular universities while avoiding others. Sometimes those preferences reflect experience with previous graduates; other times they reflect perceptions about academic rigor.

For experienced professionals, educational background generally becomes less important as employment history and demonstrated accomplishments take precedence. But recent graduates have little professional experience to offer.

Employers must rely more heavily on academic credentials and other indicators of preparation.

It's not difficult to imagine employers becoming more selective about graduates of universities that have eliminated standardized testing requirements. Some might favor institutions that retain traditional entrance standards. Others might request SAT or ACT scores from applicants who attended test-optional schools or introduce their own assessments.

There's also a question of individual initiative. Consider two otherwise equally qualified graduates. One voluntarily prepared for and took the SAT even though it wasn't required. The other didn't. An employer might give the first candidate additional consideration for demonstrating a willingness to undertake a challenge. That doesn't establish that the second candidate lacks discipline or determination, but it illustrates how educational decisions can influence hiring judgments.

This is particularly relevant in technical professions, where employers need graduates capable of applying their knowledge to unfamiliar problems, working independently, and persevering when solutions aren't immediately apparent. If employers lose confidence in the preparation of new graduates, they're likely to seek additional ways to distinguish between applicants.

It's easy to see how a two class system can emerge from this. Reading and writing in cursive could become a job requirement. Demanding SAT/ACT scores from new applications could too. And if the courts or lawmakers were to decide to make such demands illegal, it's a fairly easy process for employers to simply pass over resumes from people who attended specific schools. Welcome to the real world.

None of this proves that cursive makes someone a better employee or that taking the SAT demonstrates superior character. Nor is there sufficient evidence that employers are already rejecting graduates simply because their universities don't require standardized tests. But that may have more to do with the fact that employers are probably somewhat concerned about the public blow-back if they start making these things requirements. There's a pretty good possibility that "discussions" along this line have already taken place. And that unwritten policies like this already exist.

So this deserves serious consideration. Educational institutions don't operate in isolation. Their decisions influence how students are prepared, how their accomplishments are measured, and ultimately how employers evaluate their qualifications.

Making education more accessible is a worthwhile goal. So is maintaining demanding academic standards. The two shouldn't be mutually exclusive.

The danger is that, in attempting to make education more accessible, we may inadvertently create a system in which even professional degrees that have been in high demand aren't worth the paper they are written on if they come from specific institutions.

That doesn't eliminate class divisions. It amplifies them.