

## *A glimpse of the Educational System of the USA*

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This spring a group of teachers from three Russian cities (Obninsk, Zheleznogorsk, Dimitrovgrad) visited the USA on the teacher-exchange program. We spent most of the time in a small town of Maryville, Tennessee getting acquainted with the system of education from inside, as we lived in the teachers' families and they were our guides in their schools and in American way of life. During our staying there we saw different institutions from kindergarten through Pellissippi College and Tennessee University. We can state that though all in all we have the same values, the approach seems sometimes quite different. As a result of our joint work we offer you some observations about American school.

### *1. School system*

- It is divided into stages: Elementary (K–4), Intermediate (5–6), Middle (7–8) and High School (9–12). All of them work separately and even situated in different buildings. Children have 4 required courses: English, Mathematics, Social Studies and Science and electives (they can take four more). They don't have such class as English in our sense, it is either Grammar or Reading or Vocabulary or Spelling. They learn foreign languages only in high school, and their knowledge is rather limited as they are not motivated very much because wherever they go they are understood with their English all around the world.
- It is good that American children have a choice of learning things they like. But kids have little experience for it and still it's the choice of their parents rather than theirs. Kids are used to doing and getting what they like, though in their future life they are not supposed to do their favorite things, they will have to overcome difficulties as well.
- The students don't stay with the same classmates but change schools (levels), courses and classmates. On the one hand it helps them learn to adapt to social life, feel more confident in meeting and dealing with people. But on the other hand it prevents children from making close friends, makes them be only partners for a short period.
- The system of choosing courses and having them every day during a semester (intensive learning) also has its "pros" and "cons". The positive point is in the fact that the children concentrate on very few subjects which





makes them easier to understand and learn. As to the other aspects: having had a subject for a short period of time and being able to return and continue the same subject after rather a long period of time, students may forget most of things they have learnt.

- Students have an opportunity to try different things while being at school and choose their future career. But they have little chance to study their favourite subjects more carefully and thoroughly all through the learning period.

### *2. Project and group work*

Projects help students learn to work in a team, get the information they need, solve problems using the few "tools" they have. The main goal and a great advantage of this process is in teaching children to learn by themselves and use and develop their skills and it is really a great idea. Projects take a lot of time and efforts and teachers are sure to work very much but the results are obvious.

### *3. Discipline*

Very strict discipline and self-discipline help a lot. All the classes we saw were very well organized. The students in general are attentive, active and do what they are supposed to and what they are told. And the atmosphere is friendly and very easy – students are not forced to learn. However, they have a system of punishment (such things as detention, suspension and even expelling) and it works perfectly.

### *4. Assignment*

Seems to be rather little, most of the work is done at school. For example, they are trained to write an essay (150–200 words) in 10–15 minutes! It's just impossible to create something really serious and interesting for such a

short period of time (probably, it might be given as homework). But American students were shocked to learn how long it usually takes our students to do their homework. Russian students are really overloaded. The truth is supposed to be somewhere in the middle.

### *5. Handicapped students*

One of the striking things is the way American schools (and society in general) treat handicapped students (people). They are not discriminated but have special individual programs which help adapt in life. It sometimes seems that any disabled person has more rights and advantages than healthy people. But it's fair.

### *6. Equipment and technology*

Americans have many things to be proud of. The state government and the local authorities of the place we visited have done much to make education better. They spend millions of dollars in the town to support schools because they understand that it's a good investment. Every classroom has a computer, diverse visual aids, special technology labs with Internet connection and the teachers don't have to think about all these things. Besides, they have a good-working system of grants. If you are a creative person and have some ideas about improving the process of teaching or education, you can use the chance. Russian students don't have so many opportunities. In general we are still far behind in the sphere of using different technologies. But the things are changing to better nowadays. On the whole American classes are very well equipped, they have excellent textbooks and top-level teachers.

### *7. Strong patriotic accent*

It seemed to us too strong and sometimes reminded us of the Soviet times. Every school day starts with Pledge of Allegiance (a short oath taken in front of the American flag). All the system of upbringing is centered on the thought that America is the best and they are lucky to live there. Thus, they have no motivation to study foreign languages. Though studying foreign languages not only develops one's memory but also helps get to know other cultures, be more tolerant, reduce prejudices, and overcome narrow-mindedness.

We are sure that both our educational systems have long histories and obviously acquire innumerable merits. And if we want to make the most of them it is unreasonable to transfer everything thoughtlessly. We are different. But we should make use of the American experience and improve our school for the benefit of our children and society.