

Education at a Glance 2023

Country note

United States

This country note provides an overview of the key characteristics of the education system in the United States. It draws on data from *Education at a Glance 2023*. In line with the thematic focus of this year's *Education at a Glance*, it emphasises vocational education and training (VET), while also covering other parts of the education system. Data in this note are provided for the latest available year. Readers interested in the reference years for the data are referred to the corresponding tables in *Education at a Glance 2023*.

Highlights

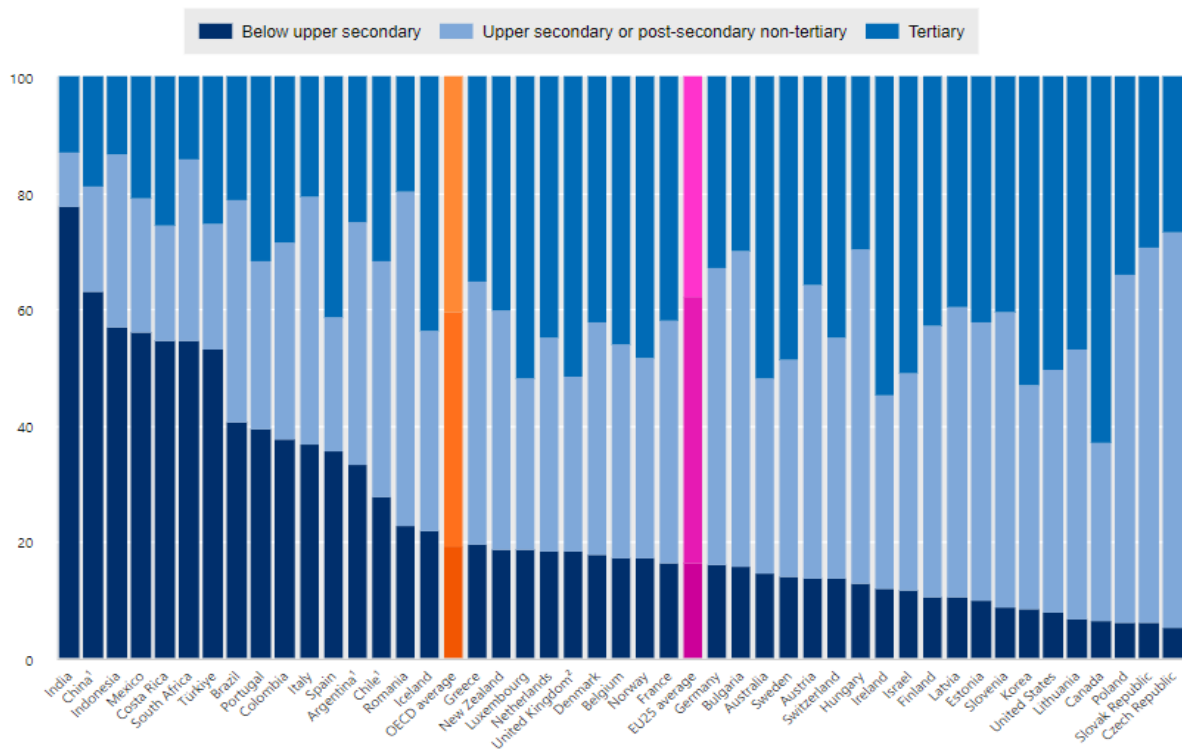
- **In the United States, 50% of 25-64 year-olds have attained tertiary education**, which is higher than the percentage of those with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education (42%). Among 25-34 year-olds, 46% of men and 56% of women have attained tertiary education, higher than the OECD averages for both groups (41% and 54%, respectively).
- **A larger share of 15-19 year-olds are enrolled in tertiary education in the United States (19%) than on average across OECD countries (12%)**. However, the total enrolment rate of this age group across all levels of education in the United States (85%) is similar to the average across OECD countries (84%).
- **The share of new entrants into short-cycle tertiary education is higher in the United States (42%) than on average across OECD countries (19%)**. Unlike most OECD countries, where students can enter tertiary education directly at the master's level, students in the United States can only enter at the short-cycle tertiary or bachelor's level. This difference in entry points contributes to a larger proportion of students entering at short-cycle tertiary education in the United States compared to many other OECD countries.
- **Unlike most OECD countries, the United States does not have dedicated vocational programmes at the upper secondary level**. The primary forms of vocational attainment in the United States are certificate programs at the post-secondary non-tertiary level and vocational associate's degrees at the short-cycle tertiary level.
- **The United States invests substantially more per student (USD 19 973) on average across all levels of education compared to the average across OECD countries (USD 12 647)**. However annual expenditure per student varies widely across states, at primary and secondary level it ranges from USD 9 534 in Idaho to USD 29 707 in the District of Columbia.
- **Statutory salaries for upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualification and 15 years of experience are higher in the United States (USD 69 641) than on average across OECD countries (USD 53 456)**. However, in the United States upper secondary teachers earn 42% less than similarly educated workers, one of the largest pay gaps among countries with available data. In addition, in the United States and about half of OECD countries, teachers' salaries decreased between 2015 and 2022.

The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning

- Education is an asset not only because of its intrinsic value, but also because it provides individuals with skills and acts as a signal of such skills. Yet, there are differences across countries in educational attainment. On average across OECD countries, about 40% of adults (25-64 year-olds) have a tertiary credential as their highest level of education, about 40% have attained upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education, while about 20% have not obtained an upper secondary education. In the United States, 50% of adults have completed a tertiary degree, 42% have attained upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary education and 8% have not completed upper secondary education (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Educational attainment among 25-64 year-olds (2022)

In per cent



1. Year of reference differs from 2022. Refer to the source table for more details.

2. Data for upper secondary attainment include completion of a sufficient volume and standard of programmes that would be classified individually as completion of intermediate upper secondary programmes (11% of adults aged 25-64 are in this group).

Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 25-64 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment.

Source: OECD (2023), Table A1.1. For more information see Source section and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023_[1]).

- In most OECD countries, unemployment rates (i.e. adults without work, actively seeking employment and currently available to start work, as a percentage of the labour force) decrease as educational attainment increases. On average across OECD countries, 13% of 25-34 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment are unemployed, followed by 7% of 25-34 year-olds with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment and 5% of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary attainment. Unemployment rates in the United States follow a similar pattern, although rates are

lower than the OECD average for all levels of educational attainment: 10%, 6%, and 3% respectively.

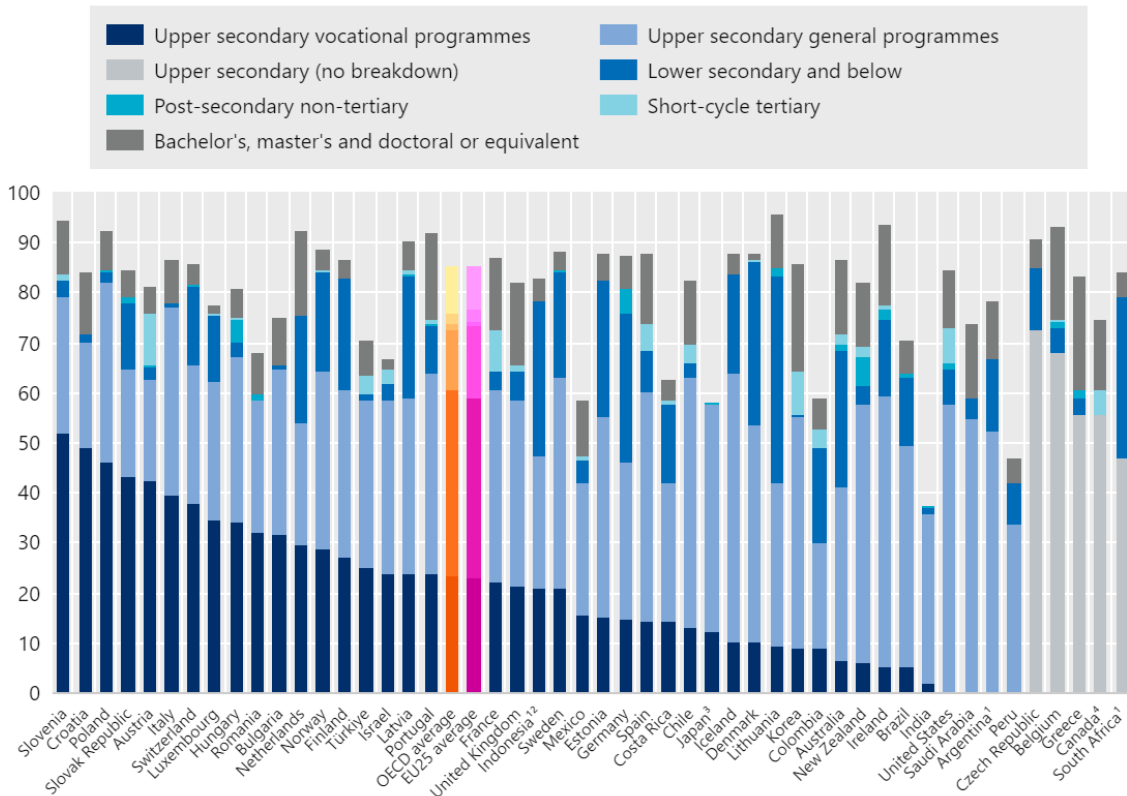
- Although an upper secondary qualification is often the minimum attainment needed for successful labour-market participation, some 25-34 year-olds still leave education without such a qualification. On average across the OECD, 14% of young adults have not attained an upper secondary qualification. In the United States, the share is lower than the OECD average (6%).
- In almost all OECD countries, tertiary degrees provide a large earnings advantage compared to lower levels of educational attainment. In the United States, 25-34 year-old workers with bachelor's attainment earn 63% more than their peers without upper secondary attainment, while those with master's or doctoral attainment earn 100% more.
- On average across the OECD, tertiary attainment is becoming as common as upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment among 25-64 year-olds. In the United States, 50% of the population in this age group have tertiary attainment, a larger share than those that have upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment (42%).
- On average across OECD countries, 15% of young adults aged 18-24 are not in education, employment or training (NEET), while in the United States the corresponding figure is 16%. Reducing NEET rates among young adults is a particularly important challenge in all countries because those who become NEET face worse labour-market outcomes later in life than their peers who remained in education or training at this age.

Access to education, participation and progress

- Across OECD countries, the majority of 15-19 year-olds are enrolled in education. In the United States, 58% of this age group are enrolled in upper secondary education, 7% are enrolled in lower secondary programmes, 1% in post-secondary non-tertiary programmes and 19% in tertiary programmes. This compares to an OECD average of 37% enrolled in general upper secondary programmes, 12% in lower secondary programmes, 1% in post-secondary non-tertiary programmes and 12% in tertiary programmes (Figure 2).
- Bachelor's programmes are the most popular programmes for new entrants to tertiary education. On average across OECD countries, they attract 76% of all new students, compared to 58% in the United States. Short-cycle tertiary programmes are the second most common level of education for new entrants into tertiary education, but their importance differs widely across countries. In the United States, they are chosen by 42% of all new entrants to tertiary education compared to 19% of all new entrants on average across OECD countries.
- Perhaps surprisingly, the share of international students at tertiary level has not been negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in many OECD countries. However, a few countries experienced double digit declines in the share of international students. The United States is not one of them, as the share of foreign students remained stable between 2019 and 2021 (5% of all tertiary students).

Figure 2. Enrolment rates of 15-19 year-olds, by level of education (2021)

In per cent



1. Year of reference differs from 2021: 2020 for Argentina and South Africa; 2018 for Indonesia.

2. Excludes students enrolled at tertiary levels.

3. Breakdown by age not available after 15 years old.

4. Excludes post-secondary non-tertiary education.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of students enrolled in upper secondary vocational education.

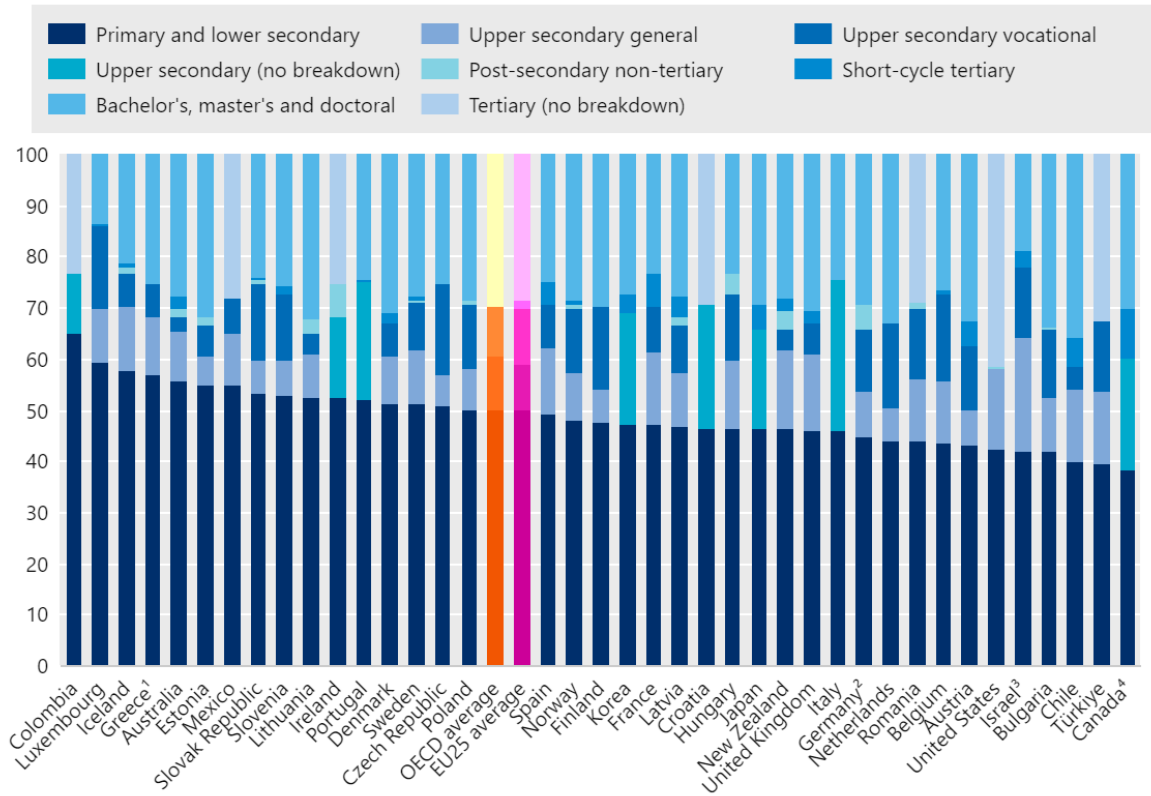
Source: OECD/UIS/Eurostat (2023), Table B1.2. For more information see Source section and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023^[1]).

Financial resources invested in education

- OECD countries spend on average 5% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on primary to tertiary educational institutions. In the United States, the corresponding share is 6% of GDP, of which 27% was dedicated to primary, 15% to lower secondary, 16% to upper secondary and 41% to tertiary educational institutions (Figure 3).
- Funding for education in absolute terms is influenced by countries' income levels. Countries with higher per capita GDP tend to spend more per student than those with lower per capita GDP. Across all levels of education (primary to tertiary), the United States spends USD 19 973 annually per full-time equivalent student, compared to the OECD average of USD 12 647. Expenditure per student is equivalent to 31% of per capita GDP in the United States, which is above the OECD average of 27%.

Figure 3. Total expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions, by level of education (2020)

In per cent



1. Year of reference differs from 2020. Refer to the source table for more details.
 2. Upper secondary vocational programmes include lower secondary vocational programmes.
 3. Upper secondary programmes include lower secondary programmes.
 4. Primary education includes pre-primary programmes.
 Countries are ranked in descending order of total expenditure on primary and lower secondary institutions.

Source: OECD/UIS/Eurostat (2023), For more information see *Source* section and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023^[11]).

- The COVID-19 pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for education systems across the world. On average across OECD countries, expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions per full-time equivalent student (including expenditure on research and development) grew by 0.4% from 2019 to 2020 (the first year of the pandemic and the latest period with available data). In the United States, it increased by 1.7%. This change in expenditure per student is the result of total expenditure on educational institutions increasing by 1.4% and the total number of full-time equivalent students decreasing by 0.3%.
- Government sources dominate non-tertiary education funding in all OECD countries, while the private sector contributes 9% of the total expenditure on educational institutions on average. Private funding in the United States accounted for 8% of expenditure at primary, secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary levels.
- On average across OECD countries, more than half of government expenditure on primary to post-secondary non-tertiary education comes from subnational governments. In the United States, 1%

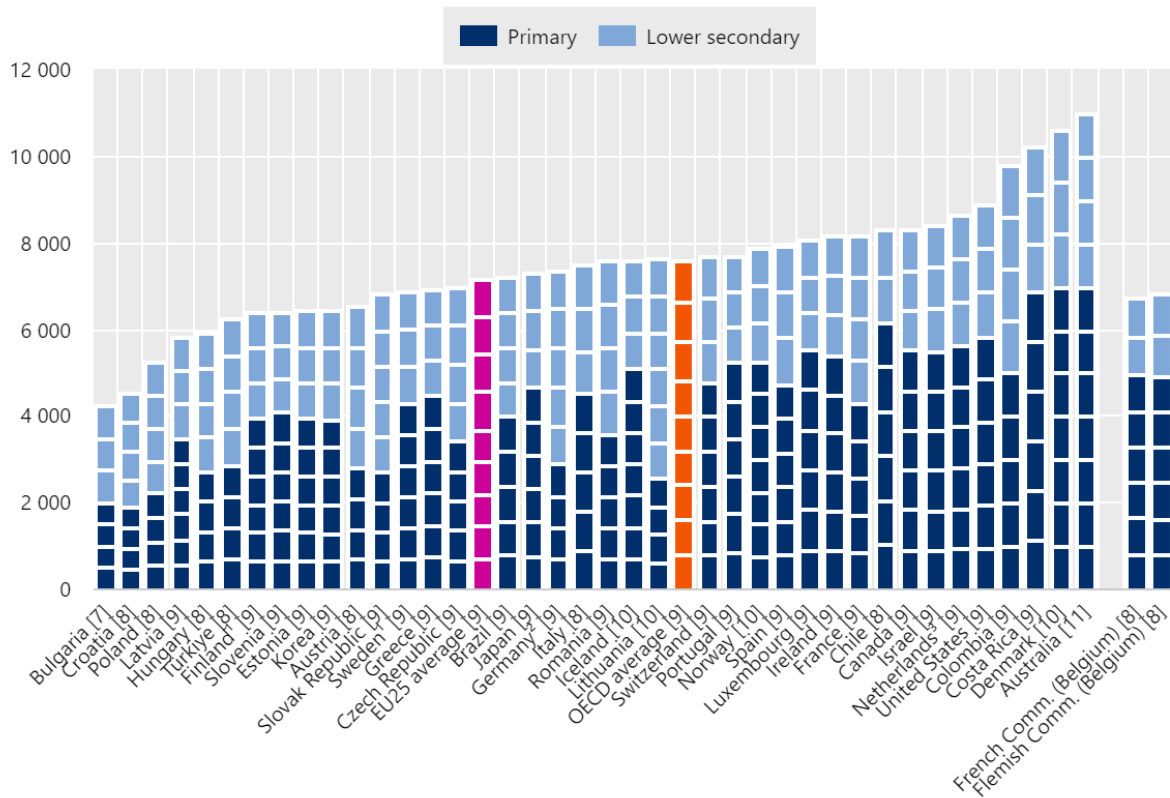
of the funding comes from the central government, after transfers between government levels, 2% from the regional level and 97% from the local level.

Teachers, the learning environment and the organisation of schools

- The total compulsory instruction time in primary and lower secondary education varies widely from country to country (Figure 4). Across OECD countries, over the course of primary and lower secondary education, compulsory instruction time totals an average of 7 634 hours, distributed over nine grade levels. In the United States, total compulsory instruction time in primary and lower secondary education is higher than the OECD average, at 8 909 hours, distributed over nine grade levels.

Figure 4. Compulsory instruction time in general education (2023)

In hours, in primary and lower secondary education, in public institutions



Note: Instruction hours for each grade refer to average hours per grade for the level of education. Numbers in square brackets refer to the total number of years for primary and lower secondary education.

1. Estimated number of hours by level of education based on the average number of hours per year, as for some subjects, the allocation of instruction time across multiple levels is flexible.

2. Year of reference 2022.

3. The number of grades in lower secondary education is three or four, depending on the track. The fourth year of pre-vocational secondary education was excluded from the calculation.

Countries and other participants are ranked in ascending order of the total number of compulsory instruction hours.

Source: OECD (2023), Table D1.1. For more information see *Source* section and [Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes](#) (OECD, 2023_[11]).

- On average across OECD countries, 25% of compulsory instruction time in primary education is devoted to reading, writing and literature and 16% is devoted to mathematics. In lower secondary education, the share is 15% for reading, writing and literature and 13% for mathematics. The United States is one of the few OECD countries where there is no fixed share of instruction time spent on reading, writing and literature or mathematics at either level, since regulations vary by subnational entity.
- Teachers' salaries are an important determinant of the attractiveness of the teaching profession, but they also represent the single largest expenditure category in formal education. In most OECD countries, the salaries of teachers in public educational institutions increase with the level of education they teach, and also with experience. On average, the annual statutory salary for upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualification and 15 years of experience is USD 53 456 across OECD countries. In the United States, the corresponding salary is USD 69 641.
- Between 2015 and 2022, statutory salaries of upper secondary teachers in general programmes (with the most prevalent qualification and 15 years of experience) declined in real terms in roughly half of all OECD countries with available data. In the United States, upper secondary teachers' salaries decreased by 2% between 2015 and 2022.
- National assessments (standardised tests with no consequence on students' progression through school or certification) are more common at primary and lower secondary levels, while most OECD countries conduct national examinations (standardised tests with formal consequence) in the final years of upper secondary education. These national assessments and examinations take place at different grade levels and can have different periodicities; their content may vary over years and/or across students and are not necessarily compulsory for students. In the United States, there is one national assessment at primary level, one at lower secondary level, and one at the upper secondary level. National examinations span all three education levels, with subnational entities required to administer certain content to all students annually in grades 3 through 8.

References

- OECD (2023), *Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en>. [1]
- OECD (2023), Education at a Glance Database, <https://stats.oecd.org/>. [2]
- OECD (2023), *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>. [3]

More information

For more information on *Education at a Glance 2023* and to access the full set of indicators, see: <https://doi.org/10.1787/e13bef63-en>.

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, see *Education at a Glance 2023 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/d7f76adc-en>).

For general information on the methodology, please refer to the *OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics 2018* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found on line at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-data-en> and by following the *StatLinks 2* under the tables and charts in the publication.

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using the Education GPS:

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Key facts for the United States in *Education at a Glance 2023*

Indicator	Country		OECD average		Source	
Educational attainment of 25-34 year-olds by gender	2022		2022		Table A1.2	
	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women		
	Below upper secondary	7%	5%	16%		12%
	Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary	47%	38%	44%		35%
	Tertiary	46%	56%	41%	54%	
NEET rates of 18-24 year-olds by gender	2022		2022		OECD (2023 ^[2])	
	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women		
	15%	16%	14%	16%		
Employment rates of 25-64 year-olds by educational attainment and gender	2022		2022		OECD (2023 ^[2])	
	% Men	% Women	% Men	% Women		
	Below upper secondary	67%	43%	70%		48%
	Upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary	77%	64%	84%		69%
	Tertiary	87%	79%	90%	83%	
Enrolment rate of children aged 3 in ECEC	2021		2021		Table B2.1	
	30%		73%			
Enrolment rate of 15-19 year-olds	2021		2021		Table B1.1	
	85%		84%			
Share of upper secondary students enrolled in VET programmes	2021		2021		Table B1.3	
	Not applicable		44%			
Upper secondary completion rates by programme orientation	2021		2021		Table B3.1	
	General	Vocational	General	Vocational		
	By the end of the programme duration	87%	Not applicable	77%		62%
Two years after the end of the programme duration	Missing data	Not applicable	87%	73%		
Expenditure on educational institutions per full-time equivalent student by level of education (in USD PPP)	2020		2020		Table C1.1	
	Primary	USD 14 321	USD 10 658			
	Lower secondary	USD 15 302	USD 11 941			
	Upper secondary	USD 16 775	USD 12 312			
	Tertiary	USD 36 172	USD 18 105			
Total expenditure on primary to tertiary educational institutions as % of GDP	2020		2020		Table C2.1	
	6%		5%			
Share of total education expenditure on upper secondary educational institutions by programme orientation	2020		2020		Figure C2.2	
	General	Vocational	General	Vocational		
	16%	Not applicable	11%	10%		
Total compulsory instruction time in primary and lower secondary education	2023		2023		Table D1.1	
	8 909 hours		7 634 hours			
Statutory salaries of upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualifications after 15 years of experience (in USD PPP)	2022		2022		Table D3.1.	
	USD 69 641		USD 53 456			
Change in statutory salaries of upper secondary teachers in general programmes with the most prevalent qualifications after 15 years of experience (in real terms)	2015-2022		2015-2022		Table D3.7	
	-2%		4%			
Share of teachers in general upper secondary programmes aged 50 or older	2021		2021		Table D7.2.	
	36%		39%			

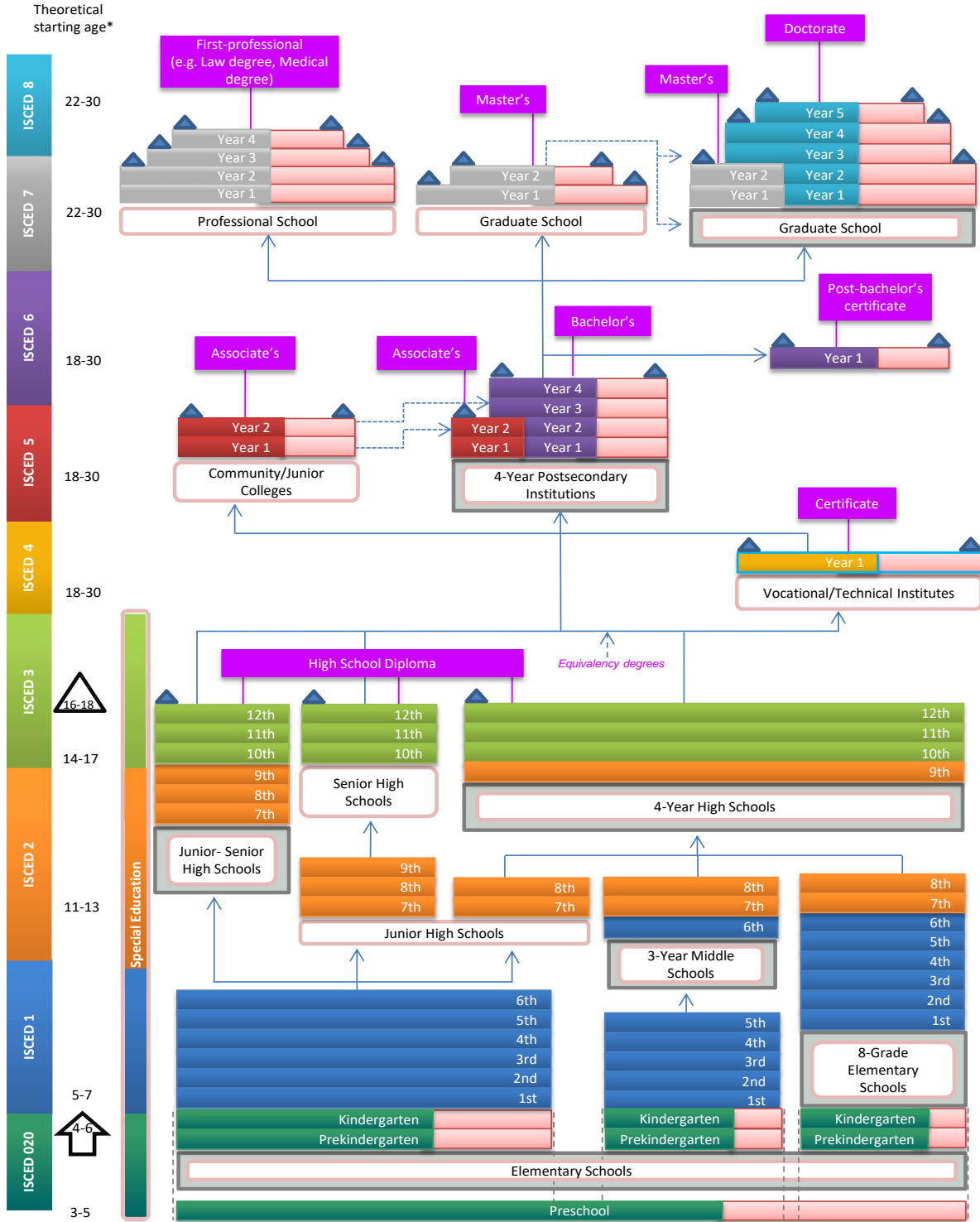
Note: The OECD average for completion rates reflects a different country coverage (see Indicator B3).

Source: OECD (2023^[2])

Diagram of the education system

United States

2023



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Source: OECD (2023), "United States: Diagram of education system", OECD Education GPS, http://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/MapOfEducationSystem/USA/USA_2011_EN.pdf
 Please refer to "United States: Diagram of education system" for information on the keys.