

Modeling Different Countries To Improve the School System in America: It Could Be the Right Thing To Do

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Educators in the United States can learn much from other countries, particularly with regard to school day structure, teacher training, and education of the poor. International tests often indicate that, overall, U.S. students lag behind students in other countries in such critical academic subjects as math and science. In 2006, for example, scores from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that U.S. 15-year-olds were behind their counterparts in many countries in both math and science (Emeagwali, 2010). In addition, the scores on the 2006 PISA test indicated that more countries performed better than the U.S. in 2006 than in 2000.

Educators often rely on the PISA test and the TIMSS test to measure how students are performing in U.S. schools in comparison to students in other countries. The PISA test is coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and is given every three years to evaluate 15-year-old students in math, science, and reading. The TIMSS test (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) also provides scores in math and science, but is given to 4th- and 8th-grade students every four years. The highest performing countries in international testing also outscore American students on the TIMSS test (Baines, 2007).

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some other countries relate to the way the school day is structured and to different requirements for teacher preparation. Another key problem affecting U.S. education, and thus students' overall performance on these international tests, is the often inferior schools available for children in poverty. Children attending schools in poor districts generally have lower test scores. Some school systems in other countries have a better commitment toward the education of the poor, and this helps those countries outperform the U.S. on international tests.

The Structure of the School Day

Many Americans may believe that students in the countries scoring the highest on international tests are spending more time in school, but this is not necessarily the case. The school day, as a rule, is longer in Asia (Stevenson, 1992; Zhao, 2007). In Finland, however, students spend much less time in school and yet generally score 10% to 20% higher on international tests (Baines, 2007). Students in Finland spend an average of 600 hours in school, whereas U.S. students average about 1,100 hours. Many hours in a U.S. school day are spent completing paperwork, keeping students busy, and on other duties not involving direct instruction (Baines, 2007).

When the school day is longer, the structure of the school day differs from that in the United States. Although Americans often believe that Asian students are likely to do better as a result of a very strict and regimented school day, Stevenson's (1992) observations indicated this was not the case. The school day is longer in Asia partly because more time is devoted to play and social interaction. As a result, students enjoy school, which, in turn, promotes motivation and decreases disciplinary problems (Stevenson, 1992).

Teacher Training

Countries that tend to achieve higher scores on international tests, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, Sweden, Ireland, the Netherlands, South Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, train teachers more

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extensively and offer more financial benefits. Darling-Hammond (2008) reports that in some countries (e.g., Sweden, Norway, and Finland), all teachers candidates get paid by the government to complete two to three years of graduate-level preparation for teaching. In the United States, teachers must pay for such training on their own, and they ultimately will get paid less than many other professionals. By contrast, many other countries recruit their top students to fill teaching positions. In Singapore, for example, the National Institute of Education recruits top-performing high school students into a teacher education program paid for by the government. When they complete the program, teachers earn a higher salary than beginning doctors (Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Schleicher and Stewart (2008) discuss international comparisons showing that the countries scoring the highest also offer programs that support new teachers during their first few years of teaching. In Singapore, for example, beginning teachers are assisted by expert teachers, work with other teachers, and visit classes other than their own for up to 20 hours a week; such opportunities are rare in the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2008).

Educating the Poor

The inadequate quality of schools serving the poor is a severe problem in the United States. In low-income districts in the United States, teachers often receive lower pay than those in wealthier districts and have to work under less optimum conditions (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003). As a result, qualified teachers will likely choose not to work there; consequently, children attending these schools are often at the very bottom in academic achievement. This scenario is less common in many of the countries outscoring the United States on international tests.

Goals To Aim For

America could benefit from some of the education practices that other countries are implementing. Two big goals must be achieved first: 1) Reduce the gap in educational achievement between students from poor households and those who come from more privileged homes, and 2) Eliminate the poor conditions that many teachers in America must endure. By exploring how other countries deal with these issues, the U.S. may learn some valuable lessons.

A relatively high rate of students coming from poor households should not be a deterrent to academic achievement. In South Korea, for example, the poverty rate is 15% (compared to 12% in the United States), but

only 9.6% of Korean students score at the very bottom on international tests, whereas one in four American students scores at the lowest level (Baines, 2007). By preparing teachers with more training and offering more financial benefits, the United States could do much to close this gap if these better-prepared teachers are teaching in the poor districts.

Finland has some very interesting programs to emulate. Halinen, Sinko, and Laukkanen (2005) report that the public broadcasting company created literacy programs and web materials and also urged teachers to take class trips in order for students to visit this television facility. One notable program was based on stories that students were invited to write. Selected stories were reproduced into short television films. International tests had revealed that students in Finland did well in basic reading, but struggled with texts requiring more advanced reading skills. In response, Finland launched “Reading Finland,” a literacy project that provided training for teachers designed to help them implement techniques known to improve reading skills for struggling students, such as partner reading, summarizing text, and using mind maps. These steps helped the Finns score highest on the 2000 and 2003 PISA reading surveys and to gain the status as the nation with some of the world’s most capable young readers (Halinen, Sinko, & Laukkanen, 2005).

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