

The World's Highest-Scoring Students

reviewed by Lou Sabina - January 17, 2019

Title: The World's Highest-Scoring Students
Author(s): Hani Morgan
Publisher: Peter Lang Publishing, New York
ISBN: 143315143X, **Pages:** 186, **Year:** 2018
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Hani Morgan's *The World's Highest-Scoring Students* builds the case for international comparison, something which is normal within the field of comparative and international education but rare in educational administration. Morgan uses the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) as a benchmark to guide the discussion.

Each of the book's chapters stands on its own as a useful resource. Chapters Two through Eight, for example, could be used as a primer in a comparative education course to facilitate discussion about the educational systems in Finland, Singapore, Japan, South Korea, China, Canada, or Estonia, respectively. Additionally, the entire book could be used in an educational administration's data assessment, leadership, or policy course, without the comparative and/or international education spin. Additionally, each chapter offers direct comparisons with the United States public education system, making it a great fit in a K-12 comparative education course.

Chapter One frames Morgan's entire argument, explaining his choice of the seven countries in the book, which were in the top 10 of at least one category (Science, Reading, and/or Mathematics) for the PISA. Chapter Two is Morgan's assessment of Finland, where the education system emphasizes creative play in early childhood/pre-kindergarten, individualized student development through assessment, no formal teacher evaluation, and increased access to special needs education. Teacher retention is also very important in terms of the success rate in Finland. The application process to become a teacher in Finland is extremely rigorous, and once teachers get into a teaching program and transition into the profession, they stay. The chapter closes with two criticisms of the Finnish system; the widening gender gap between male and female students, and inconsistent teacher induction and professional development for teachers once they enter the profession.

Chapter Three addresses Singapore, which Morgan correctly identifies as one of the leaders in education over the last 40 years. Singapore has accomplished this feat through increased emphasis on teacher preparation, mentoring and induction, and salaries. Of particular note is the strong emphasis on induction and mentoring for novice teachers. Novice teachers have a 20% lighter workload than experienced teachers, providing them with appropriate time for observation, support, and help from teacher leaders. Additionally, there is parental accountability; parents could be fined or imprisoned if their children are not enrolled in school. The criticisms Morgan has for Singapore include the high level of stress placed on students for test performance.

Historically, the U.S. education system has often been compared with the Japanese system in terms of test performance. In Chapter Four, Morgan takes a unique approach, focusing instead on the rigor in teacher selection and preparation in Japan. First-year teachers spend 10 hours training each week and participate in 25 days of off-site training each year. Morgan's criticisms of the Japanese system are presented in a fair manner and are familiar; rote memorization, lack of creativity, and teacher bullying (leading to instances of suicide) remain issues in the Japanese education system.

South Korea, covered in Chapter Five, is the only country Morgan chose that is not Top 10 in all three 2015 PISA categories (Math, Science, Reading). This is because South Korea has experienced arguably the largest growth in educational performance among the countries represented in this book and has the world's highest tertiary gross enrollment ratio. Morgan credits this to high-salaried teachers who are respected across the country, dedicated students who study for, on average, 13 hours a day, and tutors who can make millions of dollars per year from student success on standardized examinations. Challenges exist with the South Korean system, including high stress surrounding examinations and significant lack of sleep.

In Chapter Six, Morgan critiques the education system in China, noting the disparities in PISA examination scores based on the regions in which China chose to release scores. In both 2009 and 2012, Shanghai was overwhelmingly first in the world in all three areas of the PISA. However, Shanghai only represents three percent of the total population in China. Shanghai, always a strong performer on international examinations, compensates their teachers at a higher rate than the rest of China, employs teaching groups for teacher professional development, and focuses on active learning for students.

Canada, discussed in Chapter Seven, has only recently become a leader in international education, thanks in part to a shrinking gap between the performance of underprivileged and privileged students. Morgan discusses similarities between the U.S. and Canadian education systems, noting one distinct difference; the Canadians lack a federal department of education. Canada operates on a provincial system, dividing control between the provincial governments and the local school boards. Additionally, teacher salaries in

Canada exceed salaries in the United States, thanks in part to most teachers reaching their maximum salary potential after 10 years of teaching. Also, in some provinces such as Alberta and Ontario, schools are funded provincially and not locally. Morgan argues this reduces the imbalance caused by property taxes funding public education.

The final country discussed by Morgan is Estonia, covered in Chapter Eight. The inclusion of this country is a unique opportunity for students to read about a country not commonly covered in comparative and international education courses. Morgan notes Estonia's marked improvement and also that they have the lowest percentage in all of Europe of poor-performing students in math, reading, and science. Estonia also has one of the highest performance rates in the world for socioeconomically disadvantaged students, which may be attributed to the establishment of a national curriculum in 1998. Morgan identifies several future challenges for Estonia, including the low rate of pay for teachers and the need to support increasing numbers of Russian-speaking students.

Morgan's last two chapters discuss challenges for the U.S. education system, including teacher shortages, the Common Core, poor compensation, and the increasing presence of charter schools. I would argue that nothing unique is discussed in these chapters, but it nonetheless reinforces the growing problems facing the United States.

Overall, I recommend *The World's Highest Scoring Students: How Their Nations Led Them to Excellence*. Hani Morgan's book is a very interesting read and, as previously mentioned, is versatile in that can be broken down into individual chapters or used in its entirety.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: January 17, 2019
<https://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 22637, Date Accessed: 5/31/2022 12:19:38 PM

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