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## **International Education Comparisons: How American Education Reform Is the New Status Quo**

**Randi Weingarten**  
**American Federation of Teachers**

*The United States participates in international studies comparing school systems across the world. Reformers have largely ignored the lessons from these studies about what works best to educate children, and a strategy of test-based accountability has become the new status quo. This article analyzes the failed policy ideas reformers keep pushing on our schools that have been shown across the globe to be unsuccessful in the areas of school choice and competition, teacher quality and evaluation, an engaging curriculum, and equity. Research examines what top performing countries do to help students succeed, as well as what works in districts across our own country. Reformers in our nation must stop advocating for school policies that do not work and instead use information from international studies and examples from the United States to implement policies that will help us succeed and help us to reclaim the promise of public education.*

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**T**his past year has seen the release of two major studies comparing school systems around the world. In December, the latest results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) were released in Washington, DC, and in June the Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) report was released in Tokyo. Both of these studies are the work of the Education Directorate at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Individually, these two studies are a treasure trove of knowledge and educational wisdom of what works in education; together, they demonstrate what is wrong with U.S. education and provide some ideas about how to improve it.

PISA and TALIS show that world-class school systems target educational resources to the children that need them the most, treat educators as educational experts, ensure that educators have the time and resources they need, and hold the entire system accountable for continuous improvement. Unfortunately, school systems in the United States fail to emphasize these critical components. For example, the latest PISA placed the United States sixty-first in educational resource allocation. And TALIS highlighted the problems associated with our country's large class sizes and high number of instructional hours per school year.

Over the past decade, the United States has largely ignored what works in other countries in educating children and instead has doubled down on the use of top-down, market- and test-based accountability as its dominant education reform strategy. When the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2001, the goal was to make sure every child had the opportunity for academic

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success by promising a funding stream that never actually materialized, while creating an accountability system that shined the spotlight on the vast educational disparities that plagued our nation's schools. The law expected all children to meet or exceed proficiency standards, as defined by the states, by 2014. Well, we have now reached that deadline, and the law has failed to improve student performance or ensure equity in the distribution of educational resources and services. While we saw the achievement gap narrow substantially during the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>1</sup> an entire generation of students has now gone through this new system of accountability-based reform, leaving us with what Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has called "education stagnation" because it has yet to address our country's inability to limit the barriers to success for all children. Test-based accountability has become the new status quo, and many so-called reformers have refused to give up on this failed policy endeavor.

How will we improve if policymakers refuse to learn from international benchmarks? Studies such as PISA and TALIS provide us with information that we can use to improve education in our country. Now is the time for reformers to get past the focus on testing above all else and turn their focus to what is best for our children.

## **Current Failing Reforms**

In a country as complex and diverse as the United States, it is imperative that the reforms we implement take multiple perspectives into account. Several unilateral ideas, however, that reformers keep pushing on our schools have been shown across the globe to be unsuccessful. To help our children, reform efforts need to look at what works and at what does not work.

## **Teacher Quality and Evaluation**

In recent years, using student test scores to evaluate the quality of classroom teachers has become the core effort of education reform in the United States. Through Race to the Top, waivers to some No Child Left Behind provisions, and recent state legislation, policymakers have created an accountability structure that effectively holds teachers and building principals responsible for student performance, almost to the exclusion of all the other factors outside the classroom walls that affect the teaching and learning process.

Numerous state and federal reform efforts have elevated standardized test scores above all other measures, even though only 30 percent of educators teach tested subjects. Furthermore, these test scores are not being used to guide interventions, so the impact of these reforms is extremely limited. Standardized test results are used mainly as a point value in an appraisal resulting in high-stakes decisions, such as salary changes and the possible firing of teachers. Teachers receive little actionable information or guidance about how these test results can improve their teaching quality. TALIS found that in most other countries, test scores are used in the appraisal or feedback of most teachers.<sup>2</sup> Note the important word "feedback." In the OECD's report *Lessons from PISA for the United States*, the authors note that "while performance data in the United States are often used for purely accountability purposes, other countries tend to give greater weight to using them to guide intervention, reveal best practices and identify shared problems."<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, states have created policies that require inappropriate uses for test scores, including to evaluate teachers on scores from students they have never taught.<sup>4</sup> Equally flawed is the way in which some evaluation systems force measures of student learning and instructional practice into complicated formulas, rendering them useless in informing a teacher what areas he

or she needs to improve, and failing to distinguish the value of an individual teacher's contribution. The stated premise of each teacher evaluation policy is to improve teaching and learning, but the overuse in this country of test scores in making high-stakes decisions—without accompanying feedback, support, and other performance indicators—is incongruous with what we know from research and from studying other countries and is detrimental to our students.<sup>5</sup>

No one doubts that with better evaluation data, school districts can be smarter about decisions related to incentives, placement, retentions, and dismissals, but to suggest that an annual evaluation should not be accompanied by support disregards teachers as professionals. Top-performing countries know this. In March 2013, representatives from the top-performing education systems in the world met at the third annual International Summit on the Teaching Profession in Amsterdam to discuss teacher assessment. The delegations agreed that evaluation systems should be first and foremost about the continuous improvement of educators. Additionally, representatives agreed that policymakers should work with professional educators to set the standards, using multiple measures that are qualitative and quantitative. They also noted that providing strong professional development is crucial to building teachers' trust in the system.

No high-performing countries have an accountability system like ours. That does not mean they do not have any accountability system. In fact, an effective accountability system is a quality present in all countries with high-performing education systems.<sup>6</sup> True professional accountability systems hold teachers accountable to their principals and to other teachers—those who know and understand what the teacher does every day. In Ontario, for instance, teachers are partners and work together to improve their practice. Similarly, Japanese teachers employ lesson study, a method used throughout their careers to design, practice, and improve lessons and teaching strategies. Some countries successfully combine professional accountability and administrative accountability. But tests are used in combination with other measures, and evaluations are used to reward or improve teaching—not to punish or fire teachers.

### **School Choice and Competition**

The bookend to the test-based accountability movement has been school choice and competition. Some say that implementing market-based policies in U.S. schools—in the form of charter schools and vouchers—creates competition for students among schools in a given area and encourages struggling schools to improve. There is no doubt that market-based theory has its place in society for consumable goods, where the market can and does drive improvement. But should basic needs like public education be boiled down into niche markets? Can public education be considered a consumable good? If we continue down this path, our reforms will mirror the principles that drive our markets, creating winners and losers. No child should “lose” when it comes to learning and public education.

Research is varied on the successes and failures of charter and private schools in the United States, but there is little evidence that charter schools, in and of themselves, result in significantly higher academic achievement.<sup>7</sup> On PISA, the OECD indicates that students in private schools perform better than students in public schools but that most of that difference is due to the ability of the private schools to attract students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>8</sup> In fact, privatization actually leads to an increase in segregation of students and greater inequities across systems.<sup>9</sup> Money is taken away from traditional public schools to provide funding for students to attend charter or private schools, further underfunding traditional

public schools and hindering their ability to provide the same resources and educational quality to their students.<sup>10</sup> This practice is irresponsible and detrimental to our children.

If so much research indicates that charter schools are not a guaranteed path to success and, in fact, might even be harmful to some students, why the continued push for school choice? For one, it is profitable. About 2.5 million students across the country are enrolled in publicly funded charter schools, operated by nonprofit and for-profit organizations.<sup>11</sup> In states such as Florida and Michigan, the majority of charter schools are managed by for-profit organizations.<sup>12</sup> The economic principle of profit motive would indicate that these organizations are more likely serving the needs of those running the schools than those who work with the students, not to mention the students themselves. When left largely unregulated, charter schools have been mired in scandal, and some charter school operators have diverted the tax dollars they were awarded to for-profit ventures,<sup>13</sup> enriching themselves and allied organizations on the backs of our children.

Funding multiple streams of public education dilutes the impact of a high-quality education, diverts resources from where they are most needed, and effectively segregates children by demographic information and learning characteristics. In urban areas where students stand to gain the most from the theoretical innovation that charter schools purport to bring, these funding issues ensure that the ability of some charter schools to reach their goals is impaired from the beginning. Moreover, it is extremely harmful to take away from the already limited budgets of traditional public schools.<sup>14</sup>

The use of market-based theory as the driving principle of system-wide reform is not only inherently flawed, it is also not supported by the research and will lead to a system that rewards the wealthy and punishes the poor.<sup>15</sup> The market can provide schools with the consumable products and services they need to operate, but it cannot guarantee the structural forces necessary to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education. Public schools provide parents, teachers, students, and taxpayers with the voice to express how students should be educated. Successful charter schools work when they are held to the same high standards of accountability and transparency, ensuring the motivations of the schools are student-based and not about power and profit. In a privatized system, it is impossible to always know where the money is going.

Having some high-quality charter schools that put the interest of students above all can be valuable, but the main reason not to pursue large-scale market-based reforms is the simple fact that they do not work. Creating competition among schools is an approach that has been tried time and again inside and outside the United States. The most extreme example of market-based education internationally is Chile, where the school system has been based on vouchers for thirty years. The result has been overall low performance compared with other OECD countries. It has also made Chile the most economically segregated school system in the world. And while some might say that Chile's poor performance is due to its high poverty level, it has the highest standard of living in South America and the lowest poverty rate on the continent (at 17.8 percent in 2011).<sup>16</sup> In comparison, the U.S. poverty rate was nearly identical at 17.4 percent, and yet the United States consistently outperformed Chile on the 2009 and 2012 PISA by a large margin.<sup>17</sup>

In recent months, the teachers in Chile have gone on strike, and parents and students have protested in effort to challenge the reform proposals of returning president Michelle Bachelet; her recently proposed education bill is controversial to both the left and the right.<sup>18</sup> The people of Chile have endured this troublesome system for years and are demanding change. The United States should learn from Chile and not saddle our own children with these same failures.

## **Engaging Curriculum**

The obsession with standardized testing has led to students' being exposed to fewer subjects and with less intensity. Teachers are forced to focus on math and language arts, because if students do not excel in those subjects, the teacher's job might be at risk or the school might face sanctions.<sup>19</sup> After No Child Left Behind was passed, a majority of schools increased the proportion of time dedicated to teaching tested subjects, which means other subjects were either reduced or eliminated.<sup>20</sup>

A well-rounded curriculum is not a luxury; it is a necessity. The marginalization of arts, science, and social studies in favor of tested subjects diminishes the overall education students receive. Studies show that students who receive arts education are far more likely to have higher attendance, better overall school performance, and improved cognitive development than students who do not.<sup>21</sup> Reducing students' curricular opportunities hurts their opportunity for success. Shanghai understands this idea, and its students are required to take courses in a variety of areas—language, math, science, social studies, art, technology—to increase their engagement in the learning process and to aid in their creativity and development.<sup>22</sup> Its students are top performers because they have a rich curriculum to develop them as whole beings who need knowledge to grow and participate in society rather than to fill in bubbles on an assessment.

Along with the increased focus on math and language arts, the accountability reform movement of recent years in our country has taken those subjects and diminished any semblance of the joy for learning or depth in understanding to which we once aspired. Students are prepared to answer multiple-choice questions—not to think critically or deeply, skills that top-performing countries know are the keys to success. Part of the reason our students perform average on PISA is that whereas U.S. policies demand that standardized tests measure only what is directly taught by the curriculum, PISA asks students to apply their knowledge in open-ended questions, along with multiple-choice, to determine not just whether they have learned facts but whether they have learned necessary critical-thinking skills that are so vital in our increasingly global society.<sup>23</sup>

PISA also included a financial literacy assessment, on which U.S. students once again ranked average in comparison with students from other participating countries.<sup>24</sup> There is some relationship between the performance on the financial literacy assessment and the math assessment, but an underlying reason our students did not excel in this assessment is that they lack fundamental math concepts. The test-based accountability system reduces teachers to drilling their students on basic math facts they need to know to pass a multiple-choice test (and in turn to protect the teacher's job or school's status), leaving students unable to truly develop the skills and deeper understanding they need in order to apply that knowledge. This assessment is a prime example of how existing education policies deny our students the ability to have meaningful learning.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will help to ensure that students have an engaging curriculum that provides them with the knowledge they need and the depth to understand how to apply that knowledge to real-world situations. Strong curriculum standards for all students also help improve problems of equity. Students, no matter their race or socioeconomic status, need a high-quality curriculum, delivered by well-prepared teachers, to ensure that they have the same opportunity to learn.<sup>25</sup>

Many top-performing countries have nationalized common standards, meant to ensure that teacher training and student learning are consistent regardless of where teachers and students go to school. In the United States, many of our low-income students, who also happen to have

the highest mobility rates, struggle when they move and are dropped into a new school with a different curriculum based on different or scant basic standards. The CCSS, in part, are aimed at supporting those students so they do not have to struggle to catch up when they change schools; all schools will be working from, at base, standards that inform a local curriculum that is aligned with what research contends provides excellent learning opportunities for students and great preparation for teachers.

Standards themselves, however, are not enough if they are not properly implemented, and unfortunately the CCSS have suffered from poor implementation. The more rigorous standards changed what and how students learn, but rather than giving teachers the guidance, support, and time to adjust their teaching to the new standards, states and districts have moved immediately to new tests. Public support for the CCSS has decreased over the past few years (support by teachers has dropped even more significantly, from 76 percent in 2013 to 46 percent in 2014)<sup>26</sup> and not because teachers, parents, and community members think that students should not have strong standards or that the CCSS are insufficient. The problem has been this botched implementation and the linking of the standards to a national testing fixation.

Americans distrust tests because they have seen that increased testing does not lead to increased performance. Nonetheless, education policymakers continue to push for more tests, leading the public to view the CCSS as just another way to sort students and teachers, offering children little more than fatigue and fear. The public needs to be able to trust that the reforms that are being adopted and implemented are going to help our children learn. The CCSS are a true way to help ensure that our children are given the tools they need to learn, but we must step away from the focus on testing and concentrate on implementing the standards in a meaningful way.

### **Educational Equality**

Every child should receive a high-quality education regardless of economic status. This statement may seem obvious, but so many children in the United States are from families living below the poverty level and come to school without their basic needs being met. As mentioned earlier, the U.S. poverty level is at 17.4 percent, the fifth-highest poverty level out of thirty-four OECD member countries, ahead of only Chile, Turkey, Israel, and Mexico.<sup>27</sup> It is difficult to learn when you are homeless, hungry, or struggling with other family challenges. But the truth is that 42 percent of our children live in low-income families, and education policies cannot ignore their needs.<sup>28</sup> Family background is one of the most important factors affecting a child's educational performance, but schools are expected to overcome those challenges with only their existing resources.<sup>29</sup>

Schools in our country are funded mainly at the local level. Only about 11 percent of an average district's budget comes from federal funding, with most of that designated for specific Title I (high-poverty schools) or Title II (teacher training) purposes.<sup>30</sup> That leaves high-poverty areas with the challenge of adequately funding their students' educations. Students coming to school already behind and given fewer resources will struggle to catch up to their peers.

Not surprisingly, schools with the lowest poverty rates have the highest performers, indicating that we are grossly lagging in our ability to educate students from lower-income families. This is not to say that these students cannot learn or that our teachers cannot teach them—of course all students can learn. But it is a simple fact that to be successful these students need more support. Current policies are ensuring that a large portion of our student population will struggle in school and in their future economic opportunities.<sup>31</sup>

We should not pretend that top-performing countries, such as Finland, Japan, and Korea, do not have disadvantaged schools, but these countries give those schools more resources to help the students who exhibit the most need. For instance, many OECD countries recruit additional teachers for low-income schools, and the better student-teacher ratios help provide students with closer teacher support.<sup>32</sup> There is, however, no singularly perfect solution to improving education; we also need to expand the supports in our nation's schools, including more guidance counselors, more school nurses, and an engaged community, so that we can provide the wraparound services our children need. Only about 1–14 percent of the variability in student test scores can be attributed to teachers, yet so many U.S. education policies are focused on sorting and firing our educators.<sup>33</sup> Although continuous improvement of teachers is a key to student learning, reforms must also address the many other issues that impact how children perform in school. By ignoring factors such as poverty, access, and resources, the reformers are neglecting at least 86 percent of what goes into student achievement.

## **What Policymakers Can Do**

We all know how critical it is to ensure that every student in our country has the opportunity for a high-quality public education. Public education is a social, democratic, and economic necessity and a fundamental civil right that must be reclaimed. Education is a linchpin of all of our other rights. Our country's policymakers cannot continue to promote "reforms" that do nothing but maintain the status quo and the ideals of those who control the purse strings. We know what works, and we must ensure that reformers stop doing what research shows does not work.

Policies must create incentives for state legislatures and local governments to fully fund public schools. Resources must be targeted to urban schools that need greater supports in curriculum, instruction, and leadership. We must reverse our failure to adequately invest in early childhood education programs in this country, which stands in stark contrast to the rising trend across other OECD countries.<sup>34</sup> Policies must foster healthy public funding for education so that all children can access high-quality programming from birth through their post-secondary education.

Caps on charter school growth must be maintained (if charter schools were the solution, we would have seen the improvement by now). Our country needs to stop investing its resources in endeavors that do not work and start putting our money where it is needed and where it will best serve children. Teachers are not the problem. The "blame the teacher" rhetoric that has been prominent since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, and most recently reflected in the court case *Vergara v. California* and the copycat lawsuits in New York, has led to an influx of reforms that continue to do nothing to improve schools. If the education of children in this country is truly going to improve, decision making must be left to practitioners who understand schools and education.

Teachers are our frontline in improving student achievement. All of the countries that outperform the United States on international assessments put this knowledge into practice, providing teachers the proper training and support and the needed continuous development to ensure that they are able to meet the needs of students. Evaluations should include multiple measures of teaching—student performance data, teacher lesson plans, contributions to schools, or other indicators—used to inform professional development that can help the teacher improve. This is what successful education systems do.

Additionally, teachers need something to aspire to as well as professional development targeted at improvement and reaching their goals. Teachers whose evaluations reveal specific



areas for needed improvement should be steered to courses or processes that will boost their performance. Likewise, teachers whose evaluations reveal strengths may seek opportunities for other responsibilities, such as supporting peers or mentoring new teachers. Good teachers should have opportunities to advance in their careers but stay in the classroom rather than be limited to moving to administrative positions.

Students must have a well-rounded, engaging curriculum to be successful. Some states have included curriculum reform in their Race to the Top grant applications, but this effort must be expanded to allow all schools to provide their students with subjects beyond math and science.<sup>35</sup> Also, a greater investment in career and technical education (CTE), and improving the alignment of CTE programs, has been shown to offer students the deeper real-world learning needed for success in our economy.<sup>36</sup> Supporting the CCSS will help guarantee that all students learn to think critically and become college and career ready and ensure that there are strong, shared expectations across states. These standards must be put in place without fear on the part of teachers or schools that they will be punished for performance on assessments. Schools must have time for proper implementation and evaluation before anyone is penalized by a test. We already know that high-stakes assessments are a challenge and a threat to real learning and improvement, and it would be a mistake—a foot planted firmly in the status quo—to make the same accountability mistakes with the CCSS.

In Cincinnati, the public school system with the support of the teachers union created community learning centers where students and their families can access a breadth of community services. Beyond an educational facility, these campuses provide recreational, social, health, civic, and cultural opportunities.<sup>37</sup> The Oyster Community Learning Center graduated more students and improved its state performance index, and schools in other districts with similar programs have seen positive results. These programs work.<sup>38</sup>

All students should have access to a high-quality education and to services that meet their emotional, social, and health needs—which is the promise of public education. This is something that top-performing countries do, and why students regardless of socioeconomic status are able to succeed. With so many of our students living in poverty, and so many of our teachers teaching those students, reforms must shift the distribution of resources and teachers and ensure that all children get the support they need to learn.

## **Conclusion**

There is a plethora of research and examples of how the United States could improve our schools and help all children succeed. By looking beyond our borders to what top-performing countries do and to what is working in districts across our own country, our nation can implement policies and practices that will help us succeed and help us reclaim the promise of public education.

Our vision for reclaiming the promise of public education includes the following:

- Providing high-quality, safe, and welcoming neighborhood public schools for all children, with targeted funding and wraparound services to meet the relative needs of students
- Ensuring that teachers and school staff are well prepared and supported and given the necessary tools, time, and trust to practice their profession

- Working with policymakers to enact policies and standards that guarantee that children receive the benefits of an engaging curriculum, absent the misguided fixation on testing and accountability

Current so-called reformers continue to attack what we know is good for our children. Austerity, polarization, privatization, and deprofessionalization all hinder student growth, yet if the current reform agenda is left to stand, they constitute the net gain of our current education policies. When reformers hold fast to failed ideas—rather than push for changes that deemphasize standardized test-based accountability—our students are denied the opportunity to achieve their dreams. By continuing with policies that ignore evidence-based practice, our international standing, our schools, and our children will suffer.

## Notes

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Cremata et al., *National Charter School Study* (Stanford, CA: CREDO, 2013), <http://credo.stanford.edu/documents/NCSS%202013%20Final%20Draft.pdf>.

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<sup>15</sup> OECD, *Equity and Quality in Education*.

<sup>16</sup> OECD, *Income Inequality Update: June 2014*, <http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/OECD2014-Income-Inequality-Update.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*; OECD, *PISA 2009 Results: Executive Summary* (Paris: OECD, 2010).

<sup>18</sup> “Chile: Schools Closed as Teachers Strike for Real Education Reform,” *Free Speech Radio News*, June 25, 2014, <http://fsrn.org/2014/06/chile-schools-closed-as-teachers-strike-calling-for-real-education-reform/>.

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