

The

Spring 2014 Vol. 60, Issue 2

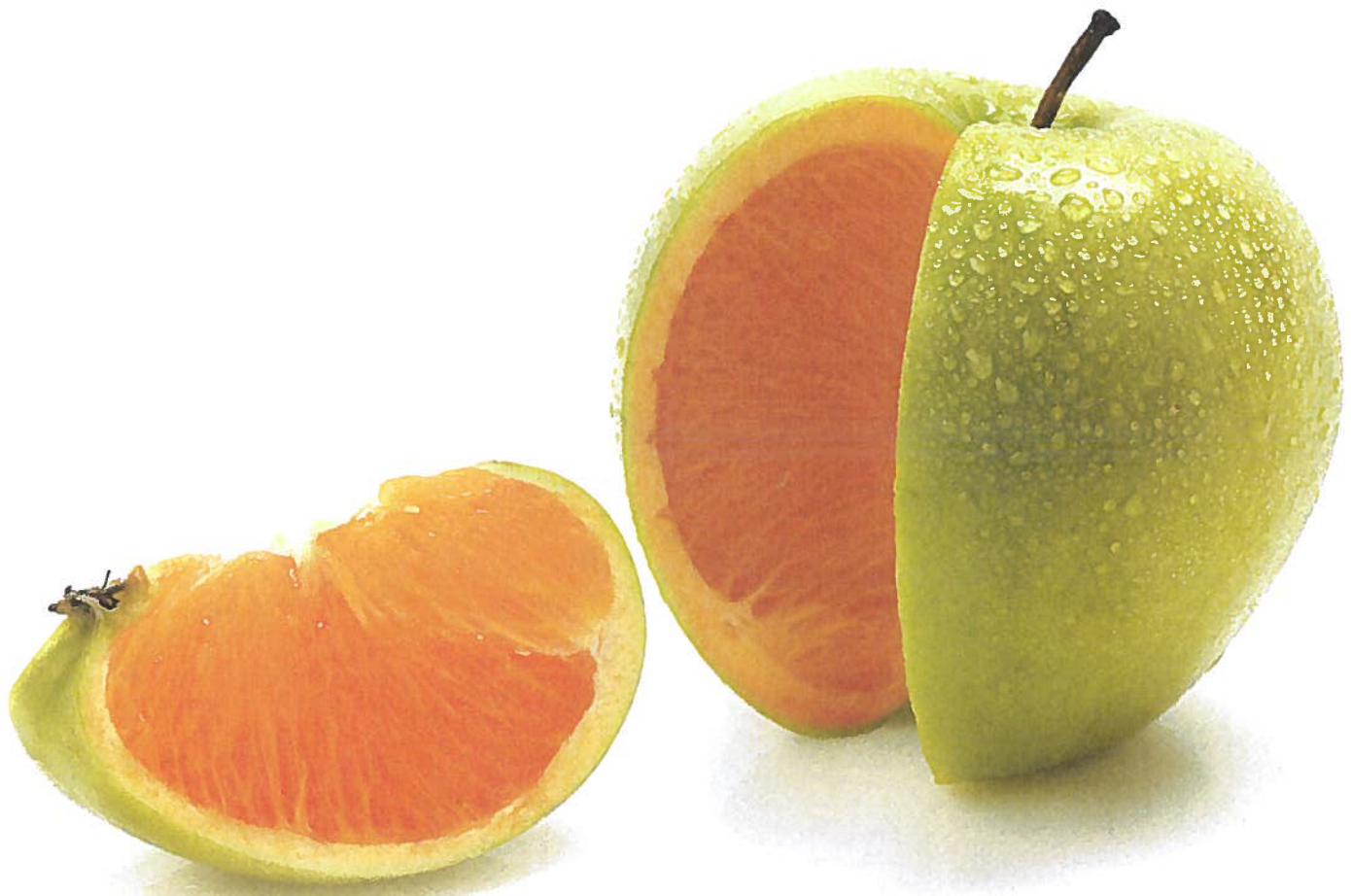
JOURNAL

THE MAGAZINE OF THE INDIANA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

A TIME TO SOW

Following a Plan





PUBLIC EDUCATION REFORM

Perception vs. Reality

By Rocky Killion – Superintendent of Schools, The West Lafayette Community School Corporation

Public school education reform seems to be the hot topic of our time. Daily it seems one can find some news article about how bad the public education system is in America when compared with other countries. What few realize is that most of these articles and newscasts are based upon the rankings provided by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) rankings from 15-year-olds who take the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). So here's a little test for everyone. What country has the highest PISA scores where 10% or fewer students are on free/reduced lunch? What country has the third highest PISA scores where there are between 10.1% and 24.9% of students on free/reduced lunch? Both questions have the

same answer: The answer is the United States. America's public schools are doing better than what is being propagated by those who want to privatize public education. It's time to report the whole story.

Background

Jessica Shepherd, in her report about world education rankings (2010) provides the world's educational rankings from the data collected by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The top five education systems in the world are found in Finland, South Korea, Canada, New Zealand and Japan. These rankings are based upon the results of the

reading, math and science assessments used by OECD called Program for International Student Assessment (PISA.) The National Center for Educational Statistics (“nces.ed.gov,” n.d.) provides the following information about PISA:

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a system of international assessments that focuses on 15-year-olds’ capabilities in reading literacy, mathematics literacy, and science literacy. PISA also includes measures of general or cross-curricular competencies such as problem solving. PISA emphasizes functional skills that students have acquired as they near the end of compulsory schooling (para 1).

One purpose of PISA is to compare the educational results for over 65 countries. According to Shepard’s report (2010), the United States ranks 14th in reading, 25th in math, and 17th in science. Are these rankings a reliable measure of how well U.S. public schools are doing?

Taking Poverty Out of the Equation

Legislators continue to march forward with education reforms that focus on a free-market model of governance, competition, and the expansion of standardized testing. However, the question remains: will these reforms make the U.S. education system competitive with the best education systems in the world?

Stephen Krashen, professor emeritus of the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California, indicates the major problem facing public education is poverty. “Our average test scores are mediocre because the United States has such a high level of child poverty, the second highest among economically advanced countries (23 percent). Study after study shows that poverty has a devastating effect on school performance” (para 4). He goes on to say that the “current obsession with teacher quality and evaluation of teachers should be replaced with an obsession to protect children from the impact of poverty” (para 5).

What would happen if the U.S. PISA test scores were grouped according to similar student populations found in Finland and South Korea? According to Mel Riddle, if the experts reporting PISA would account for the level of poverty found in U.S. public schools, U.S. PISA scores would surpass the best education systems in the world. He says, “the problem is not as much with our educational system as it is with our high poverty rates” (para

Schools in the United States with less than a 10% poverty rate had a PISA score of 551. When compared to the ten countries with similar poverty numbers, that score ranked first.

Country	Poverty Rate	PISA Score
United States	<10%	551
Finland	3.4%	536
Netherlands	9.0%	508
Belgium	6.7%	506
Norway	3.6%	503
Switzerland	6.8%	501
France	7.3%	496
Denmark	2.4%	495
Czech Republic	7.2%	478

Figure 1. Comparing U.S. PISA Scores With Comparable Poverty Rates to Those of Other Countries

10). In his blog titled “PISA: It’s Poverty Not Stupid”, he lists them above in Figure 1.

Riddle concludes that the PISA data are being misinterpreted because of the poverty factor in the U.S. He goes on to say, “if the so-called experts would have honestly reported the PISA results, we might now be on the road to responsible school improvement instead of continuing down the road of ‘reform de jour’” (para 19).

Martin Carnoy, professor of education at Stanford, and Richard Rothstein, a research associate at the Economic Policy Institute, studied the PISA sampling procedures used by OECD to administer PISA to 15-year-old students from various countries. Their findings were submitted to the Andreas Schliecher who is the OECD Deputy Director for Education. Representatives from the OECD have criticized Carnoy and Rothstein’s study indicating their statistical analysis was flawed. In response, Carnoy and Rothstein submitted a 17-page rebuttal about their conclusions to Schliecher (2013). In their synopsis, they said the PISA sampling used by the OECD to select U.S. students for PISA is suspect. In their response to Schliecher, they indicated their study shows that OECD oversampled disadvantaged U.S. students compared with its sampling procedures for other countries (p. 6). They go on to conclude that if the proper sampling procedures were used in the U.S. sample as it was used

in other countries, U.S. test scores would be far superior to that which is being reported by the OECD (pp. 8-9).

To further score the results found by Carnoy and Rothstein's study, Jonathan Rabinovitz used their study to report that the poor ranking shown by U.S. students on the PISA is misleading. In his report, Rabinovitz says, "socioeconomic inequality among U.S. students skews international comparisons of test scores..." (para 1). He cites several findings that must be considered when considering the international rankings of countries based upon PISA results:

- There is an achievement gap between more and less disadvantaged students in every country; surprisingly, that gap is smaller in the United States than in similar post-industrial countries, and not much larger than in the very highest scoring countries.
- Achievement of U.S. disadvantaged students has been rising rapidly over time, while achievement of disadvantaged students in countries to which the United States is frequently unfavorably compared – Canada, Finland and Korea, for example – has been falling rapidly.
- The highest social class students in United States do worse than their peers in other nations, and this gap widened from 2000 to 2009 on the PISA.
- U.S. PISA scores are depressed partly because of a sampling flaw resulting in a disproportionate number of students from high-poverty schools among the test-takers. About 40 percent of the PISA sample in the United States was drawn from schools where half or more of the students are eligible for the free lunch program, though only 32 percent of students nationwide attend such schools (para 7-10).

Rabinovitz indicates that if the OECD uses the same sampling and methodology for U.S. students as it does for other countries, U.S. test scores would be very competitive with the top performing education systems in the world. Also, he indicates that by factoring poverty into the sampling of U.S. students on PISA, the results would show that the U.S. PISA rankings would be near the top (para 5).

Education reform is not necessarily a quantifiable event as it is a process. Instead of creating a system of punishments and takeovers, policymakers should consider what the best education

systems in the world have done to become the best. Rather than annually investing 1.7 billion dollars in the testing industry, legislators should consider investing in early childhood, school equity, and teacher quality.

Early Childhood

Early childhood education is predominant in most of the top education systems. Danielle Kurtzleben indicates in her U.S. News and World Report article about education indicators that the U.S. is lagging behind other OECD countries in several categories including early childhood (2012). She reports the following:

In some countries, virtually all 4-year-olds are enrolled in some form of early-childhood or primary education. France, The Netherlands, Spain, Mexico, and Belgium all report the highest enrollment, at or near 100 percent. The U.S., however, reports that 69 percent of its 4-year-olds are in school, below even the OECD average of 81 percent (para 3).

According to the National Center of the Economy and Education, in its Tough Choices or Tough Times (2008) report, if the United States would fund early childhood education, nearly \$67 billion dollars could be saved from all of the support given to students when they begin lagging behind in secondary school (p. XXIX).

U.S. legislators and policy makers should seriously consider this type of investment. Rather than spending billions of dollars on multiple-choice testing, if the U.S. would make an investment into early childhood education, eventually enough resources would be saved to not only pay for that investment, but would also provide enough funding to develop international assessments that will allow U.S. public schools to fairly compete with its international counterparts.

Education Equity

The current U.S. education reform seems to focus on competition. Can competition improve public schools? If so, are the best education systems in the world using (or have used) competition to improve its schools? According to Pasi Sahlberg, in his book titled Finnish Lessons (2011), Finnish schools do not compete with each other (p. 144). The Finnish government, instead, focuses on equitable education opportunities for all students (pp. 45 – 49).

In the late 80's, when facing tough economical upheaval, high unemployment rates, and low national gross product index, the Finnish government decided something needed to change in order to improve the standard of living for the Finnish people. Therefore, with the assistance of educators like Pasi Sahlberg, the government officials implemented radical school reform unlike anything previously done by any other country. According to Dr. Sahlberg, the Finnish government focused on raising the requirements for entrance into the teaching profession, providing an equitable education for all students regardless where the students lived, implementing early childhood education, and returning the educational decision-making power back to the public schools (pp. 70 – 93).

The results speak for themselves. Finland now has the 4th highest GPD index in the world, the best education system in the world and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the world per the statistics of the OECD. Dr. Sahlberg credits all of this to the education reforms implemented in the late 1980's. These reforms are being implemented in other countries that are now enjoying better educational and economical success than that which is found in the U.S.

Teacher Quality

A commonality found in almost the entire top performing education systems in the world is a focus on investing in human capital and the teaching profession. As already highlighted by Dr. Sahlberg, the Finnish education system raised entrance requirements for those wishing to enter the teaching profession. Also, the Finnish government increased the wages for educators. In order to draw the best into the profession, Finnish officials realized that they had to offer finances comparable to other professions. According to Kurtzleben, "U.S. teachers are paid significantly less than their foreign counterparts, but tend to teach more. U.S. high school teachers spend around 1,050 hours a year teaching, behind only Argentina and Chile"(para 6).

There are several considerations for improving student achievement and academic growth. The first

consideration is teacher quality. Education research supports that student achievement is highly influenced by teacher quality and effective school leadership. Therefore, in order to improve overall academic performance of students, U.S. public schools must be able to attract and keep highly effective teachers, staff and administrators. Highly effective teachers, staff and administrators not only influence student achievement, they also ensure their students are growing academically.

The second consideration is “defining” a quality teacher or administrator. Teachers and administrators who are highly effective have several commonalities. They know their content, have successful teaching experiences, hold professional certification, and have demonstrated high academic ability. Some might argue there are highly effective teachers and administrators who lack one or more of these commonalities. While this may be true, overall, the presence rather than the absence of these commonalities is more likely to ensure academic growth and achievement.

Summary

The current education reform based upon a corporate model, that of using standardized testing, grading schools, and trying to “quantify” learning, is lacking in either common sense or empirical evidence. In order for U.S. public schools to become competitive with the world’s best education systems, educational reforms that include early childhood education, equitable education opportunities for all students, raising requirements for entrance into the teaching profession and paying beginning teachers salaries comparable with other professions must be considered. Also, the issue of poverty must be addressed. True education reform will focus on ensuring all children, regardless of their socio-economical background, will have equal access to the resources they need to be successful in school.

The perception is that U.S. public schools, based on the OECD PISA rankings, are failing. The reality is U.S. public schools have the highest PISA scores and ranks #1 when poverty is taken out of the equation. The perception is that learning can be quantified using a corporate model of accountability. The reality is education is not a business. Children learn at different times, in different ways, and at different rates. Education is a process and educators, administrators and school boards must be given the flexibility and authority to help every child succeed. The reality is policymakers should focus resources on

the following if they really want to improve public schools for all children:

- 1) Reducing the impact of children living in poverty;
- 2) Implementing early childhood education for every pre-school child;
- 3) Investing in school equity reforms rather than in school choice reforms (i.e., vouchers and charters);
- 4) Improving teacher preparation programs and;
- 5) Providing resources to improve beginning teacher salaries.



References

- Brock, W., Marshall, R. and Tucker, M. (May 30, 2009). *10 steps to world-class schools*. The Washington Post. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/29/AR2009052903012.html>
- Carnoy, M. & Rothstein, R. (January 24, 2013.) *Response from Martin Carnoy and Richard Rothstein to OECD/PISA Comments*. Economic Policy Institute 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.epi.org/files/2013/EPI-Carnoy-Rothstein-Resp-to-Schleicher.pdf>
- Friedman, T. (August 7, 2012). *Average is over, part II*. New York Times. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/08/opinion/friedman-average-is-over-part-ii.html?_r=0
- Krashen, S. (August 12, 2012). *Poverty's role in bad U.S. test scores*. Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Retrieved from <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/letters/povertys-role-in-bad-us-test-scores-648669/>
- Kurtzleben, D. (September 11, 2012). *New report shows U.S. lagging on education indicators*. U.S. News & World Report. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/09/11/new-report-shows-us-lagging-on-education-indicators>
- National Center on Education and the Economy. (2008). *Tough choices or tough times: The report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons.
- National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.) *Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/index.asp>
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (n.d.) *OECD iLibrary: Country statistical profile: Finland*. Retrieved from http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/country-statistical-profile-finland_20752288-table-fin
- Sahlberg, P., & Hargreaves, A. (2011). *Finnish lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Shepherd, J. (December 7, 2010). *World education rankings: which country does the best at reading, maths and science?* The Guardian. Retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/dec/07/world-education-rankings-maths-science-reading>
- Rabinovitz, J. (January 15, 2013). *“Poor ranking on international test misleading about U.S. student performance, Stanford researcher finds.”* Stanford Report. Retrieved from <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/january/test-scores-ranking-011513.html>
- Riddle, M. (December 15, 2010.) *Pisa: It's poverty not stupid*. The Principal Difference. Retrieved from http://nasspblogs.org/principaldifference/2010/12/pisa_its_poverty_not_stupid_1.html
- The West Lafayette Community School Corporation. *Rise above the mark*. Retrieved from www.riseabovethemark.com