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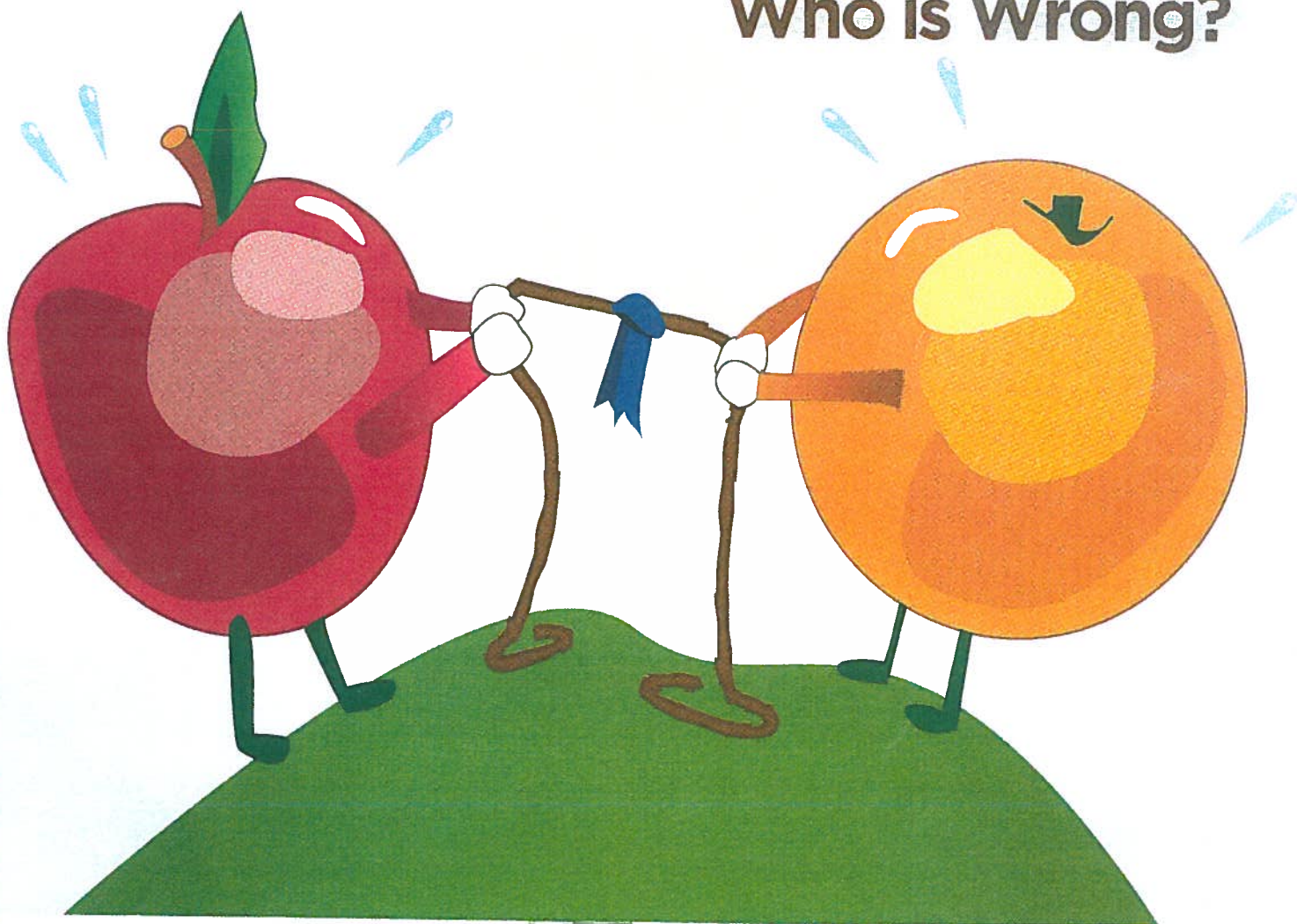
Spring 2013 Vol. 59, Issue 2

JOURNAL

THE MAGAZINE OF THE INDIANA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

EDUCATIONAL POSTURING:

Who is Right?
Who is Wrong?





EDUCATION REFORM

The Roadmap to a World-Class Education System

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It has been said that when it comes to student learning, failure is not an option. In order for U.S. students to succeed in the 21st century they will need to be competent, innovative, creative and problem-solvers. However, as mandated by legislation the current structure of public schools more heavily emphasizes the regurgitation of facts rather than emphasizing the aforementioned attributes. Knowledge is important and students must demonstrate mastery of certain knowledge sets. However, all U.S. students must have a public education system where innovation and creativity are celebrated. The country that accomplishes this has the best opportunity at setting the pace for the world's future.

The National Center on Education and Economy, in its report titled *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (2008), indicates that the “best employers the world over will be looking for the most competent, most creative and most innovative people on the face of the earth and will be willing to pay them top dollar for their services” (p. XXIV). The report goes on to say that the education problem we face in America is caused by the system,

not by the educators. The people who have the responsibility do not have the power and the people who have the power do not have the responsibility (p. XXVI).

THE SYSTEM

A new organizational system must be considered in order to ensure all U.S. students will be able to meet the global workforce requirements of the 21st century. A revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) should include world-class standards, curricula and assessments for improving teaching. The federal government should support states in implementing educational systems for evaluating student achievement that are performance based--including assessments such as research papers, essays and science experiments that are embedded in the curriculum and are assessed by teachers using common criteria – promoting academically ambitious learning and providing information that will improve teaching. Specifically,

1. Schools should be accountable for growth in student learning.
2. Tests should be appropriate for the students being tested.

3. Any comparisons between American schools and other countries should be fair.
4. The playing field should be level.
5. The system needs to be changed from being punitive to one that offers constructive assistance.

As the U.S. proportion of the world's population of college students has dropped from 30 to 14 percent, job market demands have increased to require not only advanced preparation in traditional subjects, but helping students to be comfortable with ideas, innovation and creativity. Many studies of the American educational system suggest the following structural changes:

- Develop standards, assessments, and curricula that reflect today's needs and tomorrow's requirements.
- Take affirmative steps to address the achievement gap of children living in poverty, minorities, and special education students through the support of universal preschool and early intervention programs in public schools.
- Create a system to recruit the top 1/3 of high school graduates into teacher training programs.
- Replace a "one size fits all" education with multiple models that provide alternative pathways to the same end and strong support to the students who need it most.
- Increase accountability at all levels of governance.

The American public education system's organizational structure, which has been in place for over 100 years, should be the focus of true reform. The current system is a "one size fits all" model where some students succeed and some fail. Failure cannot be an option. Unless the U.S. education system is redesigned to ensure those held responsible have the decision-making power over education, America's best days are behind her.

COMPETING WITH THE BEST

Mr. Friedman's op-ed piece titled "Average is Over, Part II" in the January 25, 2012 edition of *The New York Times* indicates that the current education reforms being implemented throughout the nation will never allow U.S. public schools to compete with the best school systems in the world. As Mr. Friedman expresses in his article, if U.S. public schools are only in competition with each other and compared with each other, our public schools will never compete on the stage we ask our

children to compete, which is the rest of the world.

The West Lafayette Community School Corporation (WLCSC) Board of School Trustees has just recently approved a five-year strategic plan with the following mission: Our mission is to engage students in a world-class educational experience that prepares them to be well-rounded, innovative, creative, productive, and adaptive citizens who will shape our global society.

Although this is a lofty mission statement, the school district's leadership team and staff believe this can be accomplished with the right educational reforms. WLCSC's Creative Team, which formed out of its strategic plan initiative, has been working on an education documentary titled *Rise Above the Mark*. Recently the team interviewed Dr. Marc Tucker who is vice-chairman and staff director of the National Center on Education and the Economy. During his interview Dr. Tucker provided a series of responses to questions that initiate a discussion about the current education reforms being implemented in Indiana. He indicates that if legislators want U.S. public schools to provide the best education in the world, why wouldn't they look at how other countries do it and learn from them? (www.Riseabovethemark.com)

Unfortunately, this is not happening. For example, in Indiana, legislative mandates continue to drive educational reform in the direction of comparing schools with each other in the state rather than that of implementing world-class benchmarks and assessments so that they can be compared with the best education systems in the world.

TRUE EDUCATION REFORM

So how can U.S. public schools become competitive with the best school systems in the world? How can the U.S. become the top nation in the world for educational achievement? William Brock, Ray Marshall, and Marc Tucker in their article "10 Steps to a World-Class System" (2009) provide some insight on how to accomplish this. Some of their recommendations include the following:

- Replace *No Child Left Behind* with a National World Class Schools Act
- Raise standards and compensation to recruit into teaching the top third college graduates
- Reward schools that do a great job

- Replace standardized testing with high-quality, core-based assessments
- Offer high-quality early-childhood education

The authors go on to say that in order to create a world-class education system, we must put teachers in charge of their schools. By doing so, the teaching profession will be changed in a way that will encourage outstanding college students to consider the profession of teaching because teachers are being treated like professionals.

RISE ABOVE THE MARK

The purpose of *Rise Above the Mark* is to begin a discussion about this and other topics important to the future of public education. To date WLCSC's Creative Team has had the privilege of working with Dr. Marc Tucker, Dr. Diane Ravitch, Dr. Pasi Sahlberg and Mr. Jamie Vollmer. *Rise Above the Mark* is narrated by award winning actor and narrator Peter Coyote.

The school district's leadership wants to begin a conversation with legislators, education leaders and business leaders about a new model of education that can be utilized by all school districts that will make the U.S. public education system the best in the world. The current legislative mandates, as stated by Dr. Marc Tucker in *Rise Above the Mark*, will not get us there. To get there, community members, educators, parents and students must push back on the corporate-backed reforms that are just making our students better test-takers.

COMMONALITIES OF THE WORLD'S BEST EDUCATION SYSTEMS

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.

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. There are some who might argue the OECD rankings are not a fair comparison since each country has unique population characteristics. However, the question remains whether or not there are commonalities among the top education systems that might be considered by those countries lagging behind in the OECD rankings?

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 (September 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.

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 they used) competition to improve their 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, 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 educational decision-making back to the public schools (pp. 70–93).

The results speak for themselves. Finland now has the 4th highest GDP 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

Another commonality found in almost the entire top performing education systems in the world is a focus on drawing the best

and brightest candidates into 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 (2012), "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."

The National Center on the Education and the Economy indicates in *Tough Choices or Tough Times* (2008) that by drawing the top 1/3 of high school graduates into the teaching profession, the U.S. can greatly improve education outcomes. Also, as previously stated, if the U.S. invests in early childhood education, and if the investment truly saves \$67 billion dollars in educational expenditures, this money can be used to increase salaries for beginning teachers. As Finland did, the U.S. could draw the best and brightest high school graduates into the teaching profession by offering a competitive salary compared to other professions.

SUMMARY

The current educational reforms being used throughout the U.S. are based on competition, standardized test scores, and are being mandated by U.S. legislators and policy makers. As stated before, if the U.S. is truly interested in reforming public education, all Americans must first consider if the aforementioned mechanism really works. The National Center on Education and Economy indicates that the problem we face in public education is caused by the political system, not by the educators. "We have built a bureaucracy in our schools in which, apart from the superintendent of schools, the people who have the responsibility do not have the power, and the people who have the power do not have the responsibility" (p. XXVI). Legislators craft and pass educational legislation. Then, they direct school boards and administrators to implement their legislation. When their legislation doesn't work, school boards, educators and administrators are generally blamed for the failure.

If the U.S. is to have the best education system in world then the influence of political agendas must be removed from the equation. This does not mean that politics will never play a role in supporting the education system. What it does mean

is politicians and policymakers must allow a public education system that empowers local school boards, administrators and educators to make educational decisions for their respective communities and then hold them accountable for their decisions. When this type of governance is truly embedded within the U.S. public education system, then and only then will true education reform begin to work because those working closest with the students, educators, are making the educational decisions and not some political or special interest group hundreds of miles away from the classroom.

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. The countries that have implemented these kinds of reforms have risen above the mark. If the U.S. wants to rise above the mark, it must consider implementing these proven reforms. 🏠

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