

RESEARCH

It's the Same Old Song

BY GERALD W. BRACEY

Nearly December 2007, a reporter at a daily paper alerted me to a press conference to be jointly given by the Business Roundtable, the National Governors Association, ED in '08, the Asia Society, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the Alliance for Excellence in Education. The occasion was to be the release of the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the PISA overseeing agency, would be represented by Andreas Schleicher, its lead education official.

As it turned out, I didn't attend, but later in the day I checked in with the reporter to see what I had missed. "I didn't make the PISA event," he said. "I'm getting tired of these hand-wringing sessions." Me too. We're coming up on the 25th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, but judging by the critics, the schools have not improved one iota. Still, the World Economic Forum (WEF) just ranked the U.S. first in the world in global competitiveness among 131 nations. The WEF had ranked the U.S. sixth for 2006-07, but when it recalculated the figures using its new methodology, the U.S. came in first then, too.

Nevertheless, there was much weeping and gnashing of teeth at the press conference. "Our students' performance today is the best indicator of our competitiveness tomorrow," said Raymond Scheppach, executive director of the National Governors Association, once again drawing that causal link for which there is no evidence. "This is the Olympics of academics," said Bob Wise of the Alliance for Excellence in Education, formerly governor of West Virginia.

The reason for all the unhappiness? The U.S. finished behind 23 of 30 OECD countries in mathematics and behind 16 of 30 in science. The PISA reading scores were not available because the OECD discovered that the U.S. booklets had been misprinted and had badly

■ GERALD W. BRACEY is an associate for the HighScope Foundation, Ypsilanti, Mich. His most recent book is *Reading Educational Research: How to Avoid Getting Statistically Snookered* (Heinemann, 2006). He can be reached at gbracey1@verizon.net.

misdirected the test-takers. The *Washington Post* seemed almost bored as it noted that "the ranking of U.S. students in math and science is about the same as it was in 2003."

Let me remind readers that even two of the major persons whom Susan Ohanian labeled *standardistas*, Checker Finn and Diane Ravitch, declared fervently that all this emphasis on math and science and high-stakes, low-level testing is misguided. Bring back the liberal arts, they say. And so do I.

Reading scores for 9-year-olds did arrive in the form of the latest results from PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). American students scored

In the latest results from PIRLS, American students scored the same as they had on the previous administration in 2001: 540 this time; 542 then.

the same as they had on the previous administration in 2001: 540 this time; 542 then. "America Idles on International Reading Test" was a typical headline. This wasn't good enough for Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who commented, "Clearly, as the world becomes flatter, it's becoming more competitive. We need to do better than simply

keep pace." Thus Spellings placed the economic fate of the nation squarely on the backs of our fourth-graders.

Looking past the fictitious implications of the results for global competitiveness, the scores are still something of a problem for Spellings. With regard to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the secretary has been crowing for years that "over the last five years, our 9-year-olds have made more progress in reading than in the previous 28 combined." She credited No Child Left Behind, of course, but overlooked the fact that, for much of that period, NCLB didn't exist.

So the scores from PIRLS must be a terrible embarrassment. By 2006, we'd had years of NCLB and years of Reading First. The secretary issued a short press release noting that "the U.S. score has not changed measurably from 2001. While we're seeing progress under No Child Left Behind, we can do better." Spellings has never been known for her strong grip on reality, but this is evidence of denial. If we've seen more progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than ever, then shouldn't we be seeing *something* in the way of an increase on PIRLS?

If the overall results are embarrassing, the scores disaggregated by ethnicity must be even more so. After all,

in addition to rendering all students “proficient” by the year 2014, NCLB was supposed to reduce or eliminate the gaps between ethnic groups. But those gaps remain large. The PIRLS scores for 9-year-olds were: white students, 560; black students, 503; Hispanic students, 518; Asian students, 567; and American Indians, 468.

The top-ranked Russians scored 565. Hong Kong placed second with 564. If we conduct a thought experiment and imagine that the ethnic groups in the U.S. constitute sovereign nations, then this is how they would stack up against the rest of the world: Asian students, first; white students, third; Hispanic students, 25th; black students, 28th; and American Indians, 35th.

That’s right. Asian students first, white students third among the 39 nations. One thing these rankings make clear is that anyone who makes statements about “American schools” is speaking about an institution that doesn’t actually exist.

For some reason, the U.S. Department of Education abandoned its usual practice of reporting results in terms of the poverty level of the schools. It reported a much clumsier number based on whether *none* of the students in a school received free or reduced-price lunch, *some* did, or *all* did. The scores were 586, 543, and 493, respectively. That the “some” figure is so close to the overall average reflects the fact that the category contains the bulk of the schools.


Some of the PIRLS scores are suspect. Russian students gained a remarkable 37 points in order to sit atop the reading pyramid of the 39 nations. I don’t think so. The official explanation is that Russia added a grade. This was supposed to get Russian kids into school at age 6, but it isn’t working. In 2001, half of the children were using the expanded system and had been in school four years when tested, but in 2006, most Russian parents were still sending their children to school at age 7. That could make a difference.

Can the U.S. use the results from other nations to improve its performance? Spellings, as usual, was way off the mark. In reference to PISA, she said, “We’re bringing research-based strategies and best practices into our classrooms. By equipping educators with more data to customize instruction, we’re laying the groundwork to strengthen math and science education. It’s the right course for our students and our work force.” Customized instruction? Anyone who has read Linda Perlstein’s *Tested* or who has visited classrooms in the last few years knows that exactly the reverse is happening. The federal government has now decided that in Florida, even students with an I.Q. of 40 and below should be tested with a version of the state’s test and their scores included with those counted to determine adequate yearly progress.

But the results can be used, and other countries can teach us a few things. In the October *Kappan*, W. Norton Grubb explored what we might learn from Finland and how we might use that knowledge to reduce inequality. He comes up with small schools, small classes, judicious allocation of resources, a focus on individual children, and a multi-tiered, coherent structure for dealing with students having difficulties. Two aspects of Finnish education would be most difficult to replicate here — a geographically stable student body and a highly respected teaching profession, in which only one in 10 applicants to the field is accepted.

But first, we have to get those crying wolf to turn away from test scores. This won’t be easy because fear-mongering about test scores is the way the Romers, Wises, and Scheppachs of the world earn their salaries. But not only is the U.S. number one in global competitiveness; it also, as Keith Baker observed in the October *Kappan*, does better on some other indices of quality of life than the test scores might lead you to believe. Moreover, the country most often ranked as the best place in the world to live, Norway, also scores right at the median in international comparisons. Baker summarized it this way:

The fixation on test scores has so dominated policy that little attention has been paid to finding out what makes America’s schools the best in the world with regard to international economic competition. But a recent conversation I had with a Swede now living in Los Angeles seems to point in the right direction. He holds a high position in a bioscience company and has lived in 10 different nations. He told me, “There is no doubt that graduates of European high schools know a lot more than American grads, but I prefer my kids to go to school in America because Americans acquire a spirit that the other countries lack.” Other anecdotal sources suggest this “spirit” involves ambition, inquisitiveness, independence, and perhaps most important, the absence of a fixation on testing and test scores.

I included a section on this “spirit” in the 16th Bracey Report (October 2006) and quoted the words of the minister of education for Singapore, who referred to it with admiration. I ended that section with a quote from psychologist Robert Sternberg that our use of high-stakes testing had become “one of the most effective vehicles this country has created for suppressing creativity.” Certainly, the critics have been singing the same old song about economic competitiveness for the last quarter century. If test scores, which have not improved over the years, were really related to competitiveness, the nation would have collapsed shortly after *A Nation at Risk* appeared in 1983. 

File Name and Bibliographic Information

k0802bra.pdf

Gerald W. Bracey, RESEARCH: It's the Same Old Song, Phi Delta Kappan, Vol. 89, No. 06, February 2008, pp. 462-463.

Copyright Notice

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc., holds copyright to this article, which may be reproduced or otherwise used only in accordance with U.S. law governing fair use. MULTIPLE copies, in print and electronic formats, may not be made or distributed without express permission from Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc. All rights reserved.

Note that photographs, artwork, advertising, and other elements to which Phi Delta Kappa does not hold copyright may have been removed from these pages.

All images included with this document are used with permission and may not be separated from this editorial content or used for any other purpose without the express written permission of the copyright holder.

Please fax permission requests to the attention of KAPPAN Permissions Editor at 812/339-0018 or e-mail permission requests to kappan@pdkintl.org.

For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

<http://www.pdkintl.org>

Find more articles using PDK's Publication Archives Search at
<http://www.pdkintl.org/search.htm>.