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International Test Scores, Irrelevant Policies

Misleading rhetoric overlooks poverty's impact

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Perhaps no research finding has influenced education policy more, or been subject to greater misinterpretation, than our ranking on international mathematics and science tests.

Previous critiques of international comparisons have focused largely on flaws in sampling and the limitations of test scores as a measure of the quality of a nation's education system. These problems are still relevant. Equally important, however, are the conclusions drawn from the comparisons, even assuming their technical validity.

For decades, our rhetoric and education policies have been based on the premise that the ranking of U.S. students on international tests will lead to a decline in our nation's economic competitiveness and a shortage of American scientists and engineers.

It is ironic, then, that given the rhetoric and policies surrounding international test-score comparisons—much of it unsupported by evidence—little attention is paid to two of the most powerful findings of these comparisons: the strong negative effects on student performance of both family poverty and concentrations of poverty in schools.

Instead, we draw conclusions from the international studies that are not supported either by the findings of these studies or by research more generally.

First, our rhetoric has assumed that test-score rankings are linked to a country's economic competitiveness, yet the data for industrialized countries consistently show this assumption to be unwarranted. For example, the World Economic Forum's 2010-2011 global-competitiveness [report](#) ranks the United States fourth, exceeded only by Switzerland, Sweden, and Singapore. Many of the countries that ranked high on test scores rank lower than the United States on competitiveness—for example, South Korea, No. 22, and Finland, No. 7.

"Poverty, not international test-score comparisons, is the most critical problem to be addressed by our public policies."

Although we cannot predict future economic trends, we do know that test-score rankings are a poor basis upon which to understand these trends or to know what to do about them. The reason is clear: Other variables, such as outsourcing to gain access to lower-wage employees, the climate and incentives for innovation, tax rates, health-care and retirement costs, the extent of government subsidies or partnerships, protectionism, intellectual-property

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