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**COMMENTARY**

# Why Arne Duncan's PISA Comments Miss the Mark

**By Robert Weintraub & David Weintraub**

Dear Secretary Duncan:

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The U.S. Supreme Court justice and polymath Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. reportedly said: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity." It's an important statement in the context of school reform today.

The results of the 2012 Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, were released last month. Mr. Duncan, you stood with Angel Gurria, the secretary general of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which oversees PISA, and declared that the results for the United States "are straightforward and stark: **It is a picture of educational stagnation**." When the results of the 2009 PISA were released, you said: "Americans need to wake up to this educational reality—instead of napping at the wheel while emerging competitors prepare their students for economic leadership." For these comments, Justice Holmes would not even give you a fig.

As a father and son who have devoted a collective 45 years as rather passionate teachers and leaders in our public schools, we feel great dissonance when we hear the incessant critique of our failing schools, failing teachers, and failing school leaders. And, as educators who have always valued and emphasized depth of thinking in our teaching, we are disappointed in your superficial and simplistic interpretation of these scores. The scores to which you respond are the average scores. As in 2009, a much more detailed body of data is released several weeks after the average scores are unveiled. The average scores grab the headlines, but the disaggregated scores tell a much different story.

Martin Carnoy and Richard Rothstein, in their January 2013 report titled "**What Do International Tests Really Show About U.S. Student Performance?**," studied disaggregated data from the 2009 PISA. Their report for the Economic Policy Institute revealed important insights that might cause you to be more careful in your pronouncements.

For example, 38 percent of American students who sat for the 2009 PISA were from the two lowest socioeconomic categories. That is by far the largest percentage of low-income test-takers among our comparative nations. And without getting into a debate with the "no excuses" crowd, it is incontrovertible that students from low-income families and communities throughout the world score far lower than students from more-advantaged families and communities on these tests.

In 2009, the United States had **the highest poverty rate**—22 percent—of any of the comparative OECD nations, yet our PISA sample in 2009 included 38 percent low-income students. If our sampling was so skewed, what might the Shanghai or Singapore samples look like? It gives us little confidence in the validity of this test. And it doesn't take a statistics genius to predict that our average scores will be affected by these facts—and not in a positive way.

Mr. Secretary, you do not include this kind of important information when you speak about our schools and our results. You settle for the simplicity of average scores—simplicity on this side of complexity.

So how do our students' scores look when we compare them in a fairer, disaggregated manner? Much better. In fact, if you look carefully at our students' scores in comparison with those of countries with somewhat similar socioeconomic profiles—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—our lower-income students score the highest among these nations, on both the 2009 PISA reading and math tests. American schools with fewer than 10 percent low-income students score at the very top. American schools with fewer than 25 percent low-income students are near the top. The achievement gaps on the reading and math tests—between upper-income students and lower-income students—are smaller in the United States than in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The actual news about American schools, even on this flawed snapshot of our achievement, is much better than the misleading headlines, but you don't talk about this. Again, you settle for the simplicity of average scores. The press regularly communicates your unrelenting message that our mediocre schools are placing our nation's economic well-being at risk.

Then, grounded in your incomplete interpretation of the test scores—and the accompanying denigration of American schools, American teachers, and American school leaders—our public schools, with your blessing, continue to be subjected to a wrong-headed, oppressive, top-down, one-size-fits-all school reform environment. The new Common Core State Standards and the alignment of instruction to the standards, the time-consuming annual standardized tests to assess student learning and teacher performance, a cumbersome teacher-evaluation system, competitive-compensation systems, and data-driven everything ... these are your instruments for school improvement, handed down to those of us at the schoolhouse.

The implementation of your reforms is causing a significant loss of professional autonomy, the development of a test-prep culture that is anathema to real learning, and an uninspiring and unsafe professional culture for teachers and school leaders. It is no wonder that, according to the **2011 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher**, teacher morale was at its lowest point in two decades and many teachers said they planned to leave the profession. Our profession is at risk.

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We write to you representing hundreds of thousands of public school teachers and school leaders—in less-advantaged and more-advantaged communities—who view ourselves as school-based reformers every day and every year. We pay close attention to the academic and social-emotional well-being of our students, reflect upon and learn from our teaching and leading, and build inclusive organizational structures for

change within which we define our problems, enhance our aspirations, and always work to make our schools better.

We are the "owners" of our public schools; we live in them. Like responsible homeowners, we are always in the process of some renovation.

Both of us have been part of important school-based, practice-driven organic school change. At Newton South High School in Massachusetts, the professional home to the younger author (David) for the past eight years, some of our recent school-based innovations include an improved "safety net" of services for struggling students that reflects the unique personality and needs of our school community. Teachers in our school also developed interdisciplinary team-led learning communities organized around contemporary global issues, with an emphasis on project-based collaborative skills (skills for the 21st-century workplace).The elder author (Robert) was the founding principal of a K-8 magnet school in Lowell, Mass.—the nation's first John Dewey-inspired micro-society school. Later, when that author was the long-term headmaster of Brookline High, that school established a mantra, "Local solutions to national education challenges"; Brookline High created the African-American Scholars Program and the Calculus Project to address the historical underachievement of students of color.

Today, the achievement gaps at Brookline High have been dramatically narrowed. And, as a professor of practice at Teachers College, the elder writer is privileged to work with dynamic school leaders in New York City who transcend the demands of top-down school reform and, in some of our most impoverished communities, successfully provide the kind of academic support and enrichment in the arts and humanities that more-advantaged students receive in school, and at home.

We are not napping, Mr. Duncan. Perhaps, instead of continuing your doomsday proclamations, you can honor Nelson Mandela in light of his recent passing by studying some of his lessons on leadership. For example, Mandela powerfully demonstrated that seeing and recognizing the good in others helps make them even better. We would appreciate that from you. We would also love to speak with you about our ideas for school reform in our nation.

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