

Another Look at PISA

By [Diane Ravitch](#) on January 4, 2011 10:45 AM | [7 Comments](#) | [Recommend](#)

Dear Deborah,

I have been fascinated by the continuing commentary and controversy about the results of the international tests of reading, mathematics, and science known as PISA (the Program for International Student Assessment). President Barack Obama and Secretary Arne Duncan immediately said that the mediocre standing of American students was "a Sputnik moment," which should produce strong support for their agenda of testing and privately managed schools. Others used the results to promote whatever their favorite remedy was.

Some worried that the high test scores of Shanghai were an omen that the Chinese were on the verge of world domination (forgetting that Shanghai is one city in China and not representative of China as a whole). Others looked admiringly at Shanghai's high scores and dreamed that American students might somehow be compelled to accept the rigorous discipline, large classes, after-school tutoring, and devotion to academic success that produced those scores. In *The Wall Street Journal*, Jiang Xueqin, deputy principal of Peking University High School, **lamented that those high scores were purchased by sacrificing** such qualities as independence, curiosity, and individuality. Even educators in Shanghai wrote, recognize that the singular devotion to test scores was "producing competent mediocrity."

Many American educators looked longingly at Finland as a successful model. Finland seems to be the educational utopia that was envisioned by John Dewey but came to fruition in Finland. Here is a nation that avoids standardized tests altogether, that prizes teacher autonomy, and that has regularly achieved great academic success on PISA. Skeptics said that Finland was ethnically homogeneous, relatively prosperous, and not at all like our society, so held no lessons for us. And the debate goes on.

Two points are worth noting about PISA. First, the two top-scoring participants—Shanghai and Finland both have strong public school systems. Neither is deregulating their schools and handing control over to private organizations. Different as they are, they achieved academic success by strengthening the public sector, not by deregulation and privatization.

The other salient factor about U.S. performance on international tests is that we have an exceptionally shameful rate of child poverty. Isabel Sawhill of the Brookings Institution says that **more than 20 percent of our children live in poverty**, and she expects that proportion to increase to nearly 25 percent by 2014. As poverty deepens, Sawhill writes, we should be strengthening the safety net that protects the lives of the poorest. Robert Reich, the former treasury secretary in the Clinton administration, says that income inequality is higher now than it has been in many decades. Most nations (and cities) that compete on PISA have far lower child-poverty rates.

In recent years, we have become accustomed to hearing prominent reformers like Secretary Duncan, Michelle Rhee, and Joel Klein say that reference to poverty is just making excuses for bad teachers or bad schools. But there is plenty of evidence that poverty affects students' readiness to learn. It affects their health, their nutrition, their attendance, and their motivation. Being hungry and homeless dist

students and injures their health; living in an environment where drugs and violence are commonpl affects children's interest in academics. Living in communities where many stores and homes are boarded up, and where incarceration rates are very high, affects children's sense of possibility and willingness to plan for the future.

Researchers for the National Association for Secondary School Principals disaggregated the PISA re by income and made some stunning discoveries. Take a look at this link ("**PISA: It's Poverty Not Stupid**"). It shows that American students in schools with low poverty rates were first in the world they were compared with students in nations with comparably low poverty levels. Thus, the picture painted by doomsayers about American education is false in this respect. We have many outstandin schools and students, but our overall performance is dragged down by the persistence of poverty. Poverty depresses school achievement because it hurts children, families, and communities.

At a time of fiscal stringency, it seems crazy to talk about helping lift children and families out of poverty. Critics say, "We can't afford to do anything anymore," "Sorry, the money is all gone," "No should pay any new taxes," "This is not a time for social innovation; it is a time for educational innovation." But in light of the overwhelming evidence of the dire consequences of persistent pover seems even crazier to ignore it and to assume that we can reach the top of the international achievement tables by closing schools, firing teachers, and hastening privatization. These strategie shatter already fragile communities. They will not give us schools that foster the creativity, originali self-discipline, and initiative that we claim to value. They are strategies that avoid the hard, incredi hard, task of economic improvement. Today's school reformers scoff at the idea of attacking pover is so much easier to fire teachers. So long as we continue to avert our gaze from the festering prob bred by deep poverty and racial isolation, it seems unlikely that any school reform agenda can prod the transformation that our society seeks.

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