

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 17, 2011

Published in Print: October 19, 2011, as **Two Education Reform Agendas**

Creating Education Success at Home

By **Marc Tucker**

Despite the fact that the United States spends more per student on elementary and secondary education than any other nation except Luxembourg, students in a growing number of nations outperform our students. Our organization, the **National Center on Education and the Economy**, has researched the education systems of the top-performing nations for more than 20 years to find out how they do it. It turns out the explanation is pretty straightforward.

First, most of these top-10 nations put more money behind their hardest-to-educate students than those who are easier to educate. Second, most have developed world-class academic standards for their students, a curriculum to match the standards, and high-quality examinations (not cheap multiple-choice tests) and instructional materials based on that curriculum. And teachers are prepared to teach the required curriculum, though they are treated like professionals and therefore often have considerable discretion in their practice.

Most important, these nations have focused on raising the quality of their teaching forces. They greatly raised the standards for entering their schools of education to the point that they are accepting only one applicant for every six to 10 young people who apply. They insist all teachers at least minor in the subjects they plan to teach at the elementary level and major in those subjects at the secondary level. They also make sure teachers know their craft; aspiring teachers often serve under the supervision of a master teacher for a year before beginning full-time teaching. Some top performers, like Finland and Singapore, moved teacher education from their third-tier institutions into their research universities. And the top performers ensure initial pay for teachers is comparable to initial pay in the high-status professions like engineering.

These changes have paid off. As a result, these countries never have teacher shortages—and so they never need to waive their high teacher-licensing standards. The result: top-notch teaching forces and the world's highest student achievement.

It should not surprise us that countries that provide equitable funding to their students, use high-quality instructional systems, and invest heavily in their teachers outperform those that do not.

The contrast with the United States could not be more striking. Students living in wealthy U.S. communities get more and better teachers than those who live in poor ones. While the Common

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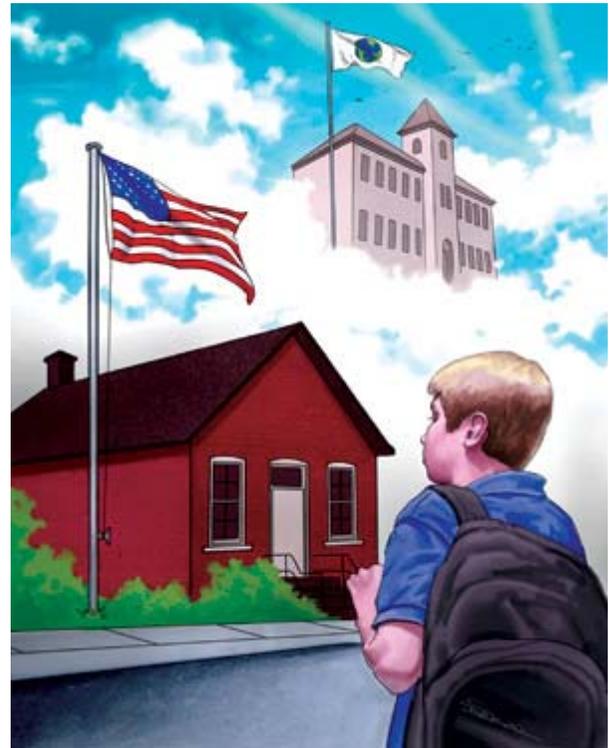
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Core State Standards are a good start, we have a long way to go to build a coherent, powerful instructional system for the whole core curriculum.

What is truly stunning is the contrast with the United States' approach to issues of teacher quality. The standards for getting into our teacher colleges are very low. Most teachers are educated in professional schools with very low status in the higher education system. Because we do not require elementary school teachers to do real college-level work in the subjects they plan to teach, many have a poor command of basic mathematics and science. "Alternative routes" make it possible for people to become teachers after only a few weeks of training. Starting salaries for entry-level teachers almost everywhere fall below the average for those with professional degrees and, in many states, are not nearly enough to support a small family at a very modest level. We routinely assign teachers to courses in subjects in which they have no background, and we waive our very low standards in the face of teacher shortages, something the high-performing countries would never dream of doing.



—Jeff Dekal

You would think that shifting to an education reform agenda based on the proven strategies of the highest-performing nations is a no-brainer. But with the exception of the Common Core State Standards Initiative, that's not the agenda the United States is currently pursuing. We have done little to ameliorate poverty's effects on student achievement and have a long way to go to match our competitors' achievements on instructional systems. And while we have a teacher-quality agenda, it is pointed in a direction and based on a set of principles that are nearly antithetical to those pursued by our competitors.

"We cannot fire our way to a world-class teaching force."

It's not hard to see how we got here. Many reformers squared off against teachers' unions for protecting incompetents and making it hard for capable principals to hire enthusiastic and bright young teachers to replace them. Encouraged by research findings that nothing approaches the power of good teachers to improve student performance, and frustrated by a system that deliberately ignores obvious differences in teacher performance, they sought strategies that reward the good teachers and eliminate the bad ones. Preventing teachers' unions from protecting incompetent teachers and installing accountability systems to reward the best teachers and weed out the incompetents became the hallmarks of the reformers' program to improve teacher quality.

Under such circumstances, it's natural for hard-charging urban superintendents and others who feel hemmed in at every turn by bureaucracy and unions to seek a way out of the trap. But they found what they were looking for in the measures just described and in another group of reformers who believed that the education professionals had used their monopoly power over public education to meet their own needs rather than their students' needs. These reformers

believed the answer was to loosen the establishment's grip with deregulation, challenge its control of the system its control of the system with vouchers and charters, and disrupt its bureaucratic methods by infiltrating the system with vouchers and charters, and disrupt its bureaucratic methods by infiltrating the system with young inexperienced education entrepreneurs.

Unlike the people who run the education systems of the top performing countries, these superintendents could not raise standards to get into education schools; revamp the education school curriculums redesign the school finance system; dramatically increase teacher pay; or change the state standards, or assessments or the offerings of textbook publishers. They worked with the few tools they had.

But it is absurd to build a national reform agenda on the strategies used by a few superintendents forced to work within a dysfunctional system. The solution is to change the system. Instead, many governors, legislatures and state boards are buying the agenda of the reformers who want to use market mechanisms to destroy what they think professional educators created. Those reformers seek to replace the system with innumerable entrepreneurs offering innovations in the deconstructed education marketplace. But lack of innovation has never been our problem; lack of an effective system is our problem. The experience of the top performers teaches us that creating an effective public education system is a job for government; it is not likely to be accomplished by reformers who don't trust government.

We cannot fire our way to a world-class teaching force. In fact, draconian accountability schemes now join mass layoffs, low pay, poor training and meager on-the-job support as reasons not to go into teaching.

Reformers on both the right and the left insist that the United States is so exceptional that nothing learned in other countries could possibly apply to us. The only thing that is truly exceptional is our stubborn refusal to learn from others. It is time for us to swallow our pride and embrace the agenda a growing number of countries are using to race past us.

Marc Tucker is the president of the National Center on Education and the Economy and editor of Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems (Harvard Education Press, November 2011).