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U.S. Reforms Out of Sync With Top-Performing Nations' Education Path

Study urges enhancing teaching profession

By [Stephen Sawchuk](#)

The United States' education system is neither coherent nor likely to see great improvements based on its current attempts at reform, a [report](#) released this week by the National Center on Education and the Economy concludes.

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The NCEE report pushes further than other recent reports on the topic by laying out an ambitious agenda for the United States it says reflects the education practices in countries or states that have made rapid progress on international assessments, including Finland, Singapore, Japan, Shanghai, and Ontario, Canada.

Among other measures, the report outlines a less-frequent system of standardized student testing; a statewide funding-equity model that prioritizes the neediest students, rather than local distribution of resources; and greater emphasis on the professionalization of teaching.

"I think we have been for a long time caught in a vicious cycle. We've been unwilling to do the things that have been needed to have a high-quality teaching force," including raising the entry standard for teacher preparation and requiring prospective teachers to major in a content area, said Marc S. Tucker, the president of the NCEE.

"We've been unwilling to pay teachers at the level of engineers. We've been solving our problems of teacher shortages by waiving the very low standards that we have. We have been frustrated by low student performance, and now, we're blaming our teachers for that, which makes it even harder to get good people."

The paper also states that progress on any one of the reform areas alone is unlikely to result in widespread boosts in student learning. All efforts, it says, are interconnected and should be linked to a coherent vision of what students should know and a system for ascertaining whether they achieve those goals.

The report praises the United States' progress on clearer, common academic standards in English/language arts and mathematics as a first step, but notes that the success of that venture will depend on its ability to connect such expectations to the other pieces of the country's education system.

Major Findings

Once a topic primarily reserved for academics, the "international comparisons" discussion has exploded



over the past few years, with policymakers, pundits, and teachers' unions arguing that better educating students is crucial to the nation's economic success.

It has also been the subject of considerable federal interest. U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan helped convene a major forum of international education leaders in March, and he commissioned the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a forum representing a group of industrialized nations, to produce a report about what lessons could be learned from the results of the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA.

The NCEE report draws both on qualitative case studies of other countries' systems and on the quantitative data and extensive background surveys produced as part of PISA. Much of the analysis incorporates information from the OECD report commissioned by Mr. Duncan, which the NCEE also produced.

It builds on the former efforts, however, by contrasting the practices of those countries with undertakings in the United States.

For instance, the report notes that no other country has grade-by-grade national testing, pointing out that such countries tend to use such exams sparingly, only at the end of primary and secondary schooling. The tests are closely linked to curricula and carry stakes for students in terms of progressing, rather than being used for school or teacher accountability.

Such countries also have much higher entry standards for teachers and require greater content knowledge, which is better integrated with training in pedagogy. In general, the report states, such efforts have helped to elevate the status of the profession, which is reflected in higher pay, more autonomy, and additional career opportunities as teachers advance.

Finally, teachers' unions are prevalent in top-performing jurisdictions such as Finland and Ontario, Canada, but work in a "professional" rather than industrial mode. The report says that U.S. teachers must give up blue-collar work rules like seniority rights and recognize difference in performance in exchange for being treated as professional partners, who are given autonomy and trusted to diagnose and solve instructional problems on their own.

The report concludes by calling on the federal government to fund a competition, modeled on the Race to the Top program, to help states adopt a comprehensive system of education practices used by other countries.

On Track?

Agenda for Change

The report urges U.S. leaders to:

- **Build strategies** for improving student performance through the continuing study of top-performing countries' practices.
- **Create curriculum frameworks** specifying what topics are to be taught in the core subjects, grade by grade.
- **Decrease standardized testing** by choosing only a few grade levels for accountability tests. Those tests should be aligned to high standards and used as "gateways" for students to move to the next stage of the education system, such as from lower- to upper- secondary schooling.
- **Raise standards** for entry to teacher education programs, moving teacher training for low-status higher education institutions to research universities, and requiring all teachers to have in depth knowledge of the subjects they teach.
- **Apprentice new teachers** to master teachers, raise teacher pay so it is comparable to that of the leading professions, and give teachers substantial research skills so they can improve practice.
- **Move toward a centralized state**

At a release event for the report, commentators discussed whether the agenda embodied in it reflects or diverges from the current education reform efforts in the United States.

Secretary Duncan highlighted similarities between the two. He noted that, for instance, high-performing systems like Singapore use bonuses, scholarships, and salary supplements to reward great teaching and to attract teachers to hard-to-staff schools or shortage areas. The Obama administration has pursued such policies through federal competitions.

"Clearly, our education system is not as far down the track as those of top performers, nor are we anywhere near where we need to be to win the race for the future," Mr. Duncan said. "But we are not off-track or chugging down an abandoned spur line."

He praised U.S. officials' work on the common standards, while underscoring that the federal government would not prescribe a national curriculum as part of its support for the venture.

Other commentators, though, outlined perceived differences between international practices on teaching and U.S. efforts. For instance, the Obama administration supports the idea of linking test scores to teacher evaluations. But many international education leaders at the March forum raised concerns about such policies, said Vivien Stewart, who is writing a paper about the issues presented at that event.

"The perception is teacher evaluation based on narrow student test scores, and no country thinks that's a good idea," noted Ms. Stewart, the senior adviser for education for the Asia Society, a New York City-based nonprofit that facilitates policy dialogues between the United States and Asian nations, in an interview. "The evaluation systems in these countries tend to be fairly broad."

In Singapore, she added, data on student performance and teaching are widely used to improve practice, but not disseminated in the public way they are in the United States.

Challenging Views

William H. Schmidt, a professor of statistics and education at Michigan State University who has extensively studied other countries' curricula, generally praised the NCEE report, especially for its focus on defining a specific body of knowledge students should master. Mr. Schmidt, who has also researched vast differences in the math skills of middle school teachers prepared in the United States, said teacher preparation should be the next frontier.

"We're really at a precipice here. We've got these common standards, a nationally specified set of clearly focused standards. The problem is what comes next," he said. "The U.S. has such a short attention span."

The report's general principles have been debated by other scholars studying international comparisons, however, who have raised concerns that the movement to common standards and tests could lead to more rigid schooling and lockstep expectations for students.

Many of its recommendations also do not fit neatly within current U.S. debates about the use of assessments or how

model for financing schools.

- **Abandon an industrial model** of labor management in favor of a professional one, in which unions become partners in reform in exchange for giving up prescriptive work rules, such as seniority.

- **Ensure all elements** of the education system are coherent and aligned.

SOURCE: National Center on Education and the Economy

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current U.S. debates about the use of assessments or how to upgrade the quality of teaching.

For instance, the national teachers' unions have been among the strongest proponents of less standardized testing for accountability and more autonomy for classroom teachers. But doing away with seniority, which the report characterizes as a relic from industrial unionism, could be challenging.

The American Federation of Teachers has been reluctant to discard seniority as a factor in layoffs, noting that evaluation systems capable of distinguishing teachers by performance are not yet widespread.

At the release event, however, AFT President Randi Weingarten said that the union is open to discarding some work rules as long as teachers are treated fairly and maintain due process rights. She pointed as an example to the "thin" contract signed by AFT-affiliated teachers in a New York City charter school and the Green Dot charter-management organization, which among other provisions does not specify work hours for teachers.

And increasing teacher-preparation quality means tackling the perception of teacher education as an easy route to a diploma, a change that will have consequences, noted Mari Koerner, the dean of the education school of Arizona State University, a top preparer of teachers. She described losing teacher-candidates after the college increased the rigor of its preparation programs.

"These sentimental views of teachers [in the United States] drive me nuts," Ms. Koerner said at the May 24 forum. "[Preparation] is not about whether you love children; it is whether you can teach children."

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