



- SUBSCRIBE
- RENEW
- GIVE A GIFT
- DIGITAL EDITION

[Print](#) | [Close](#)

You'll Be Shocked by How Many of the World's Top Students Are American

By *Jordan Weissmann*



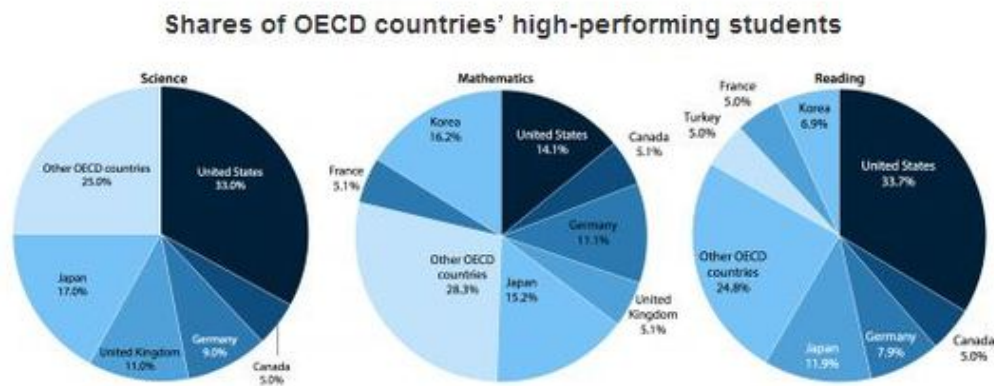
(Reuters)

When you look at the average performance of American students on international test scores, our kids come off as a pretty middling bunch. If you rank countries based on their very fine differences, we come in 14th in reading, 23rd in science, and 25th in math. Those finishes led Secretary of Education Arne Duncan to [flatly declare](#) that "we're being out-educated."

And on average, maybe we are. But averages also sometimes obscure more than they reveal. My colleague Derek Thompson has [written before](#) about how, once you compare students from similar income and class backgrounds, our relative performance improves dramatically, suggesting that our educational problems may be as much about our sheer number of poor families as our supposedly poor schools. This week, I stumbled on another data point that belies the stereotype of dimwitted American teens.

When it comes to raw numbers, it turns out, we generally have far more top performers than any other developed nation.

That's according to the graph below from the Economic Policy Institute's [recent report](#) on America's supply of science and tech talent. Among OECD nations in 2006, the United States claimed a third of high-performing students in both reading and science, far more than our next closest competitor, Japan. On math, we have a bit less to be proud of -- we claimed just 14 percent of the high-performers, compared to 15.2 percent for Japan and 16.2 percent for South Korea.



Source: Authors' analysis of Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2006)

Part of this is easy to explain: The United States is big. Very big. And it's a *far* bigger country than the other members of the OECD. We claim roughly 27 percent of the group's 15-to-19-year-olds. Japan, in contrast, has a smidge over 7 percent. So in reading and in science, we punch above our weight by just a little, while in math we punch below.

But the point remains: In two out of three subjects, Americans are over-represented among the best students.

If we have so many of the best minds, why are our average scores so disappointingly [average](#)? As Rutgers's Hal Salzman and Georgetown's B. Lindsay Lowell, who co-authored the EPI report, noted in a [2008 Nature article](#), our high scorers are balanced out by an very large number of low scorers. Our education system, just like our economy, is polarized.

What's the takeaway? Salzman and Lowell argue that our large numbers of top scorers should help put to rest the concern that we're losing the global talent race executives and politicians love to fret about. I'm not sure they'll do the trick, though. In 2009, Chinese students in Shanghai sat for the PISA test for the first time, and their scores [were spectacular](#). Although data for its other mainland provinces hasn't been published, the OECD's test guru [says they're similarly impressive](#). It seems pretty likely, in other words, that China has more young math and science geniuses at its disposal than we do (whether that's something that should be keeping any of us up at night is another issue). But Salzman and Lindsay make another point that's worth dwelling on: You can't replicate a country's style of education without replicating its culture, so instead of looking abroad for ideas about how to teach our kids, as some policy-types are inclined to do, perhaps we should look at what's succeeding here at home and spread it. Our schools are already producing plenty of bright thinkers of their own.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/04/youll-be-shocked-by-how-many-of-the-worlds-top-students-are-american/275423/>

Copyright © 2013 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.