

China Debuts at Top of International Education Rankings

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American educators received a wake-up call today when it was revealed that students in Shanghai rank number one globally in reading, math and science, far outpacing their American peers. Despite modest gains in math and science, the U.S. continues to lag behind other developed countries.

A report out today, "Highlights From PISA 2009: Performance of U.S. 15-Year-Old Students in Reading, Mathematics, and Science Literacy in an International Context," shows the U.S. now ranks 25th in math, 17th in science, and 14th in reading out of the 34 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries.

While OECD countries such as Finland, South Korea, Canada, Japan, Switzerland and New Zealand continue to outpace the U.S. in reading, science and math, all eyes are on China. In its first year to be included in the study as a non-OECD education system, Shanghai ranked first in all three categories. Hong Kong came in second in reading and science and third in math.

"The 2009 PISA data demonstrate the rise in the quality of education in Asia -- among the top performers were Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Korea," said Tony Jackson, Vice President of Education at the Asia Society. "Aligning education goals to economic development, Asian nations have scoured the world for models of effective education systems, and implemented them consistently through deliberate policies and long-term investments. Any definition of a world-class education must include knowledge of Asia and the language and cultural skills to deal with Asia. It's a two-way street: America must now learn from — and with — Asia and the world."

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the findings, "to be brutally honest, show that a host of developed nations are out-educating us."

"The findings, I have to admit, show that the United States needs to urgently accelerate student learning to try to remain competitive in the knowledge economy of the 21st century," Duncan said at a press

conference in Washington. "Americans need to wake up to this educational reality, instead of napping at the wheel while emerging competitors prepare their students for economic leadership."

The U.S. did show improvement in science and math from 2006 to 2009, but Duncan said, "I don't think that's much for us to celebrate. Being average in science is a mantle of mediocrity."

In science, American students jumped from an average score of 489 in 2006 to 502 in 2009, which is no longer below the OECD average (science, math and reading are all measured on a zero to 1,000 point scale). Finland continues to hold the top spot in science.

In math, the U.S. scores improved from 2006 but were not measurably different from scores on the 2003 assessment, and were still below the OECD average. American students scored an average of 474 in 2006, and 487 in 2009. South Korea surpassed Finland for the number one spot in 2009. Finland now ranks number two, followed by Switzerland, Japan, Canada, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Belgium, Australia and Germany in the top ten.

For comparison, in 2006 American students ranked 21st in science and 25th in math out of the 30 countries then counted by the OECD (Chile, Israel, Slovenia and Estonia have since joined the OECD).

"Relative to other countries, the United States is decidedly weaker in mathematics than in reading or even science, although there is evidence that the U.S. is making progress relative to similarly performing countries," NCES Deputy Commissioner Stuart Kerachsky said in a statement.

In reading, the U.S. average score was 500, not measurably different from previous PISA assessments, or the OECD average score of 493. South Korea also came in first in reading, followed again closely by Finland.

Also of note is the gender gap – in the U.S., girls beat out boys in reading while boys scored higher in science and math. American girls scored 25 points higher than boys in reading, one of the lowest gender differences across all PISA participants. In science, U.S. boys scored higher on average (509) than girls (495). The same was true in math, where boys scored 20 points higher than girls -- 497 compared to 477 points.

"PISA 2009 was administered between September and November 2009 in the United States. The U.S. sample included both public and private schools, randomly selected and weighted to be representative of the nation... In the United States, a total of 165 schools and 5,233 students participated in PISA 2009 in the United States," Kerachsky said.

Duncan said that much of the conventional wisdom about why the U.S. is falling behind is mistaken. "The chief reason that U.S. students lag behind their peers in high-performing countries is not their diversity or the fact that a significant number of public school students come from disadvantaged backgrounds," he said. "The problem, OECD concludes, is that socio-economic disadvantage leads more directly to poor educational performance here in the United States than is the case in many other countries... Our schools, in other words, are not doing nearly as much as they could to close achievement gaps."

The secretary said **more money is not necessarily the answer for America's educational shortcomings**, urging instead that the U.S. direct more resources to the greatest challenges. "**High performing countries tend to invest strategically very differently than us**," Duncan said. "Unlike high-performing systems, we achieve less per dollar invested."

While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, Duncan said the U.S. should focus on recruiting and supporting talented teachers in order to catch up to the rest of the world.

"In the United States, our system far too often fails to provide meaningful evaluation and incentives for the most effective teachers to teach the most challenged students. Too often we treat teachers as if they were interchangeable widgets in a school assembly line," Duncan said.

The teachers unions agree. "What the PISA results tell us is that if you don't make smart investments in teachers, respect them or involve them in decision-making, as the top-performing countries do, students pay a price," American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten said in a statement.