

FOREWORD

WE HEAR IT ALL THE TIME: America's competitiveness in the global economy will suffer if our students continue to fall behind their peers abroad.

Many of us in education wince at the idea that schools determine our nation's economic standing. Yet there is no denying that schools do build human capital and do ultimately affect the social and economic well-being of our nation, albeit not in the short run.

Over the years, American students consistently have ranked below those from Finland, Canada, Japan, and at least a dozen other industrialized nations on international tests of mathematics, science, and reading.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has done nothing to close this gap. And we suspect that the law may be making matters worse. In part, this is because NCLB has narrowed the curriculum so that most of our students are not acquiring the broad base of knowledge they need to succeed as they advance through school.

While American students are spending endless hours preparing to take tests of their basic reading and math skills, their peers in high-performing nations are reading poetry and novels, conducting experiments in chemistry and physics, making music, and studying important historical issues. We are the only leading industrialized nation that considers the mastery of basic skills to be the goal of K–12 education.

The nations that consistently outrank us on math and science examinations do not owe their success to concentrating solely or even mostly on those subjects. Nor are they focusing relentlessly on skill subjects like reading and math, as we do, shorn of any connection to history, science, or literature.

That is what the researchers who compiled this report have learned. The nations that consistently outrank us on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) deliver a comprehensive, content-rich education to their young citizens. They have adopted a wide range of approaches to getting the job done.

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Hong Kong, Korea, Finland, and Japan each have a national curriculum. Australia is in the process of writing a curriculum and already has national tests. Netherlands and New Zealand have national standards. Switzerland and Canada have school leaving exams that carry high stakes for students on a college-bound track.

These very diverse nations (Hong Kong is a territory, of course) ensure that their students receive a deep education in a broad range of subjects. Why is this important? Because America is on the opposite track. And because cognitive scientists have consistently agreed that the high-performing nations are taking the approach that works.

Learning experts have long recognized that the key to acquiring knowledge and mastering skills is to have a base of background knowledge. The basic principle is known in education as “the Matthew effect,” that is, those

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who have knowledge get more knowledge, and those who have less, get less (or, the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer).

Background knowledge allows one to acquire new knowledge, to read and comprehend new information, to navigate unfamiliar challenges, to make inferences, and to deduce solutions. Imagine having to play a chess game without knowing how the pieces move, or even the point of the game. Or being told someone's rhetoric sounds "Kennedy-esque" without knowing anything about JFK—or perhaps not even recognizing the initials. Or hearing someone speak of the lessons of Munich without having a clue what the expression refers to. That is the level of puzzlement that people face when they lack background knowledge.

We believe that all of America's schoolchildren deserve to receive the kind of comprehensive, content-rich education that will give them the background knowledge required to effectively pursue their dreams.

We're publishing these excerpts while experts and policymakers debate whether the United States should adopt national standards. We hope this report informs that discussion by focusing it on questions of content that have heretofore been overlooked. We hope as these discussions proceed they avoid the narrow trap created by NCLB and that they recognize the importance of the arts, history, literature, science, geography, civics, foreign languages, and other realms of knowledge and experience

essential to educating our children. This is what we can learn from the nations that are most successful in educating their children.

We at Common Core believe that national standards will not improve education unless they acknowledge that content matters. They could even make education worse by cementing in the status quo. So we're not moved by the idea of standards, per se, until we are convinced that they will be excellent and that they will not encourage continued indifference to the full education that we believe all our students need. We're also nonplussed by the frenzy over "competitiveness." What we have learned from the present study is that the best nations do what is best for their students and that means building a great education system, not just attempting to prepare them for the labor market.

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