

LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

“THE PLURAL OF ANECDOTE IS DATA,” a political scientist once said. We agree, in part because so many important—and interesting—things defy “counting” and can best be studied via anecdote. The content of education here and abroad is one of them.

That is the conclusion we reached after a year of research into whether America’s mediocre standing on international comparison tests is due to differences between what our students and their peers in other countries are taught. We concentrated on the nine nations that consistently have outranked us on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): Finland, Hong Kong (a territory), South Korea, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Australia, Netherlands, and Switzerland.¹

But when we went looking for reports or books describing the content of education in these nations we didn’t find much. So we went to the Internet, to embassies, and to ministries of education abroad (virtually) and started collecting national curricula, standards, assessments, school leaving exams—whatever documents gave us the most detailed picture of the expectations those nations set for the content of their students’ education.

As we began examining these materials, it became obvious why national comparisons of educational content are so rare: the research is terribly messy. You have to be comfortable with juggling materials that vary by type, by grade, by level of specificity. Not to mention that policies and practices are constantly changing. National curricula are dropped and then re-embraced a few years later (Japan). Test subjects shift with a change in political leadership (Australia). And this is in addition to the complexities of tracking policies and, of course, considerable language obstacles.

Yet—despite this cacophony—a strong similarity among these high-performing nations is evident. Each of the nations that consistently outrank the United States on the PISA exam provides their students with a comprehensive, content-rich education in the liberal arts and sciences. These nations differ greatly with regard to how

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they accomplish this goal. Some have a national curriculum and standards but no tests, others have both, and some leave everything up to the states. Interestingly, no state-based nation in our sample currently has a national curriculum or standards, though one is attempting to develop some.

So what is the common ingredient across these varied nations? It is not a delivery mechanism or an accountability system that these high-performing nations share: it is a dedication to educating their children deeply in a wide range of subjects.

Our report lists the subjects each nation requires in compulsory education. But it is the raw material—the excerpts from national curricula, standards, and assessments—that conveys the richness of education in these nations:

- Fourth graders in Hong Kong visit an artist’s studio, study Picasso’s *Guernica*, and analyze the works of modernist sculptor Henry Moore.
- Finnish 5th and 6th graders study how the invention of writing changed human life and the impacts of the French Revolution; they trace a topic such as the evolution of trade from prehistory until the 19th century.
- Seventh graders in Korea are expected to know not just about supply and demand, but about equilibrium price theories, property rights, and ways to improve market function.
- Japanese 7th to 9th graders “conduct experiments regarding pressure to discover that pressure is related to the magnitude of a force and the area.”

- Eighth graders from the Canadian province of Ontario are expected to create musical compositions, conduct, and know musical terms in Italian.
- Dutch 12th graders must know enough about seven events connected to the Crimean War to be able to put them in chronological order.
- Canadian 12th graders in British Columbia are expected to identify the author of the words: “Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men” and to what Admiral Nimitz was referring when he said: “Pearl Harbor has now been partially avenged.”
- On a Swiss examination 12th graders write an essay analyzing JFK’s October 1962 proclamation that led to the Cuban Missile Crisis.

These nations’ dedication to providing their students with a content-rich education may be their only commonality. After all, these high-performing nations are scattered across four continents. None shares a border with the others. Three are republics, three parliamentary democracies, two constitutional monarchies, and one the territory of a communist state. They range in population from 4 million (New Zealand) to over 125 million (Japan). The group boasts at least 14 official languages.²

It is of course not possible to prove with absolute certainty, based on the extensive anecdotal evidence we gathered, that a causal link exists between the content of education in these nations and their students’ performance on the PISA exam. Proving such a link would take vastly more data—and more resources—than we had.

But, considering these nations’ enormous geographic, demographic, cultural, and governmental differences, what other explanation could there be? We believe more research should be conducted into the relationship between content and achievement. This research should be done now because if what this report suggests is true—that a comprehensive, content-rich curriculum is the key to high achievement—than we have a lot of work to do here in the United States.

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education policies and practices that have made our children’s education narrower and more basic. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) is part of the cause of this, but is by no means the only culprit. NCLB’s intense focus on reading and math skills has dumbed down the curriculum, but so have trends such as the 21st century skills movement, which promote the teaching of skills such as media savvy and entrepreneurship disconnected from content of any significance.

We must join our desire to compete with other nations with a willingness to learn from them. Common Core hopes that the materials assembled here will encourage that desire to learn.

In addition to extended excerpts from education materials from nine of the world’s top performing nations, this report includes essays from three education experts who found these documents, and the connection they suggest, worth contemplating. Martin West, assistant professor of education, political science, and public policy at Brown University, notes that high-performing countries emphasize liberal arts subjects not included in the PISA exams and criticizes the narrowing of the curriculum in the United States. Education consultant and former teacher Sheila Byrd Carmichael conducts a close examination of the excerpts and asks: “Is it possible that resisting content specificity in standards and assessments is a critical but overlooked aspect of stagnant student achievement both within the U.S and internationally?” And international education expert Eduardo Andere tells us that the best strategy for raising student performance is to do what top performing nations do—provide a deep, comprehensive core curriculum to all students.

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Common Core, we believe that the content of a student's education has a greater influence on his level of achievement than does delivery or accountability systems. So reform ideas like standards or tests don't impress us unless they make content a priority. Thus far, the debate in this country over those measures has discounted the importance of content. We hope this report will help to change that. But, while we're indeed presenting a wide array of examples of what other nations are doing, we don't want it to be overlooked that most of the nations included in our study are small enough to serve as models for US states.

New Zealand could serve as a model for Kansas or Nevada—Australia a model for Florida or Pennsylvania. In order to help the reader “scale” these nations and make comparisons with states, we've included in each nation's overview a list of which US states are similar in population size and in the number of students enrolled in K-12 schooling. Of course there are numerous variables a state would use to determine if a nation's education system provided a useful model. We provide this most basic information as a starting point.

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COMMON CORE