

The Status of America's Educational System and Efforts to Improve It

By Kenneth Davis

For a number of years now, America's educational system has been on a downward spiral. Once a global leader in education, the United States now trails behind several advanced nations in math and reading scores. During a Senate hearing on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act last March, education expert Andreas Schleicher stated that other countries are surpassing the United States in educational attainment, including Canada, where 15-year-old students are, on average, more than one school year ahead of their American counterparts. Schleicher went on to say that America's "unrivaled" education advantage that was enjoyed during the post-World War II years is "eroding quickly" as a greater proportion of students in more and more countries graduate from high school and college and score higher on achievement tests than students in the United States.

Schleicher is a senior education official at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in Paris, which helps coordinate policies for 30 of the world's richest countries. He based his comparisons on the OECD Program for International Student Assessment, which tests students in scores of countries every three years in math, reading or science.

He also found in his comparisons that among OECD countries, only New Zealand, Spain, Turkey and Mexico have lower high school completion rates than the United States. About 7 in 10 American Students get a high school diploma.

Additionally, sources from the 2009 [Programme](#) for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that 15-year-old students in the U.S. are performing about average in reading and science, and below average in math. And out of 34 countries, the U.S. ranked 14th in reading, 17th in science and 25th in math. Although those scores are higher than those from 2003 and 2006, they are far behind the highest scoring countries, including South Korea, Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai in China and Canada.

"This is an absolute wake-up call for America," U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said in an interview with the Associated Press. "The results are extraordinarily challenging us and we have to deal with the brutal truth. We have to get more serious about investing in education."

What Are Some of the Factors Behind America's Poor Showing in Global Academic Rankings and Scores?

Many education experts believe the chief problem lies in the teaching methods and curriculum offered in the U.S. public school system. Questions have been raised as to whether students in American public schools are being properly taught and if they are being adequately prepared to compete at a competent level in the international workforce once they finish school. These are among the key concerns currently being addressed in efforts to reform America's declining

educational system. Some experts believe that America's public school system is so fraught with problems that a complete overhaul is in order before it will be able to regain its footing with other developed nations. Scores of scholars, authors, politicians, education experts and others have examined the issue and have come up with a number of factors that they believe are behind America's shortcomings in education.

Some believe that a major problem that is not being properly addressed is that U.S. teachers are not being held accountable enough for the failings of America's educational system. "Nothing... is more important than hiring good teachers and firing bad ones," wrote Evan Thomas and Pat Wingert in a 2010 *Newsweek* article titled [Why We Must Fire Bad Teachers](#). "Although many teachers are caring and selfless, teaching in public schools has not always attracted the best and the brightest."

"There once was a time," the article continues, "when teaching (along with nursing) was one of the few jobs not denied to women and minorities. But with social progress, many talented women and minorities chose other and more highly compensated fields." The article goes on to say that powerful teachers' unions protect educators from being terminated for doing a poor job. "In most states, after two or three years, teachers are given lifetime tenure," the article states. "It is almost impossible to fire them. In New York City in 2008, three out of 30,000 tenured teachers were dismissed for cause. The statistics are just as eye-popping in other cities."

So with this type of protection, bad teachers don't have enough incentive to try to improve, as they don't have to worry about getting fired.

However, others believe that U.S. educators and the public school system are not entirely to blame for the poor academic showing of American students, and that some of the blame should fall on the students' families, as well as a cultural setting that is not conducive to academic achievement, an environment that accommodates short attention spans with a slew of distractions, such as live-action video games, iPhones, 24-hour cable television, the Internet, texting, among others, and a pervading indifference to education in general. Charles Butt, CEO of H-E-B supermarket chain in Texas, stated the following at the Senate hearing on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: "America's sagging academic achievement does not lie solely with public schools," he said, "but also with dysfunctional families and a culture that undervalues education. Schools are inheriting an over-entertained, distracted student."

Senator Tom Harkin, the Iowa Democrat who leads the Senate Committee, agreed with Butt's assessment and added, "The problem lies with many kids before they get to school," the senator opined. "And if we don't crack that nut, we're going to continue to patch and fill."

Efforts to Improve America's Educational System

Schleicher pointed to OECD countries with strong educational systems as models for America to emulate. He said that Finland had the world's "best performing education system," partly because of its highly effective way of recruiting, training and supporting teachers. And "South

Korea," he said, "which was in economic ruin after World War II, today is an economic dynamo partly because of its educational attainment, which, among other measures, has achieved a 96 percent high school graduation rate, the world's highest." Additionally, he said that Poland is improving its education system most rapidly. "In less than a decade, it raised the literacy skills of its 15-year-olds by the equivalent of almost a school year," Schleicher said. "If the U.S. would raise the performance of schools by a similar amount, that could translate into a long-term economic value of over 40 trillion dollars."

He also believes that more central control over standards and curriculum would help America's educational system get back on its feet: "America's system of standards, curriculums and testing controlled by states and local districts with a heavy overlay of federal rules is a 'quite unique' mix of decentralization and central control," he said. "More successful nations maintain central control over standards and curriculum, but give local schools more freedom from regulation."

Schleicher added that the question for the U.S. is not just how many charter schools it establishes but how to build the capacity for all schools to assume charter-like autonomy, as happens in some of the best-performing education systems.

In addition, the outlook is not quite as grim as once believed, as American students have shown some improvement in science and mathematics, according to an [international assessment](#) released last month by the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Department of Education. The results show that American 15-year-old students have improved in science, gained ground in mathematics and held steady in reading.

And one of the more promising developments in the United States' education reform movement is the [American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009](#). The Act is designed to lay the foundation for a generation of education reform by encouraging states to adopt standards and assessments to ensure that high school graduates are prepared for college or a career. It is designed to build sturdy data systems that would allow districts to better track the growth of individual students to turn around failing schools and embrace innovative learning models and to invest heavily in teacher and principal quality initiatives that both elevate the teaching profession and help recruit and retain great teachers and principals for underserved schools and communities.

Also, President Barack Obama has set a goal for the U.S. to have the highest proportion of students graduating from college in 2020.

So there are small glimmers of hope that America's educational system could possibly pull itself out of its slump. But there's still much work to be done, and everyone needs to be actively involved, from educators and lawmakers to parents and students.

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be." - Thomas Jefferson