



Where Excellence Is Tradition

Superintendent: Characteristics of Strong Education Systems

The appointment of Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos brings attention to the important question of what are the factors or qualities of a high achieving education system? While parent choice, market competition and vouchers are key ideas that Mrs. DeVos is advocating, let's review just what works for consistently high achieving countries around the world.

The United States recently received the results of the PISA test, sponsored by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This international assessment given every three years to half a million 15 year olds in 69 countries focuses on math, science and reading. The PISA test is one of the few metrics used to compare and contrast the quality of the educational systems of all developed countries. Unlike other tests, the PISA does not assess what teen-agers have memorized. Instead, students are challenged to solve problems they haven't seen before, identify patterns that are not obvious and make compelling written arguments. As predicted, the United States' performance was in the "middle of the pack," falling just below average in math and maintaining above average in reading and science.

Along with the scorecard comparing each country's performance, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development coordinates a research study that analyzes the conditions or elements that seem to make smart countries smart. The study highlights the factors that influence and contribute to higher achievement for greater numbers of students. The following is a summary of the success factors that each of the higher achieving countries exhibited:

1. A key factor was the country's diligence in **making the teaching profession more prestigious and selective**. Teachers in higher scoring countries enjoy high levels of social standing and professional dignity among the general public. Teacher education programs are selective to ensure only the brightest individuals enter the profession. Teaching is perceived as a noble, prestigious profession - akin to lawyers, physicians and economists.
2. Greater **resources are directed to the neediest children**. There are no ZIP codes and boundary lines that prevent the best practices, materials and programing from reaching students who need the attention and focus.
3. The top scoring countries had greater numbers of **students benefiting from quality preschool programs**. The 2 to 4 year olds from these countries have a head start on vocabulary development, math concept formation and executive functioning and skills. These skills, acquired during these crucial developmental years, provide a strong foundation for academic success in later years.
4. Teacher development, **professional growth and constant improvement is a priority** in higher scoring countries. The highest scoring country, Singapore, regularly incorporates best practices from other countries.

5. The top scoring countries applied **rigorous and consistent standards across all classrooms**. Students from all geographic areas, income levels and social standing are expected to meet these high academic standards.

As a part of the democratic process, it's important for us to debate and discuss ideas that can improve and strengthen our local public schools. But let's not be fooled by policy approaches that divide communities, drain resources and distract from pursuing the goal of each student achieving at a high level.

As we look for improvement, let's pursue the ideas that are proven and effective. Elevating the teaching profession, intentionally providing resources to needy students, funding strong preschool programming and having the same rigorous high standards for all students -- these are the factors that will strengthen local public schools. Any new Secretary of Education should rally attention and support around these key factors, which are proven to result in success for our students.

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