



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on December 4, 2013

OECD: U.S. Schools Mediocre on Education Compared to World

American high-school students [scored](#) average in a standardized test created by the Organization for Cooperation and Development, when compared with the rest of the developed world. American students [scored](#) below average in math (26th among 34 OECD countries), and average in reading (17th) and science (21st). The OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tested 500,000 students from 65 countries overall, using examples where academic skills would be applied to real world situations, such as taking meaning from charts and trip calculations.



The OECD [noted](#) of its 2012 PISA that many nations had improved their academic performances in recent years, but U.S. students had failed to make any measurable progress over the past decade: "There has been no significant change [in the United States] in these performances over time." Indeed, the OECD [found](#) that simply throwing money at the problem — something Washington has done in recent decades, beginning with massive increases in educational spending during the George W. Bush administration — doesn't work:

While the U.S. spends more per student than most countries, this does not translate into better performance. For example, the Slovak Republic, which spends around USD 53 000 per student, performs at the same level as the United States, which spends over USD 115 000 per student.

This, of course, was not the lesson learned from the 2012 results of the OECD test by America's largest teacher's union. National Education Association (NEA) President Dennis Van Roekel said in a [press release](#) that the solution was — you guessed it — more taxpayer money: "What else do the high-performing nations do differently? They invest in early childhood education. They fully fund all of their schools. They make the teaching profession attractive and they support their teachers. They value the collaboration between parents, educators, administrators, communities and elected officials."

The OECD [study revealed](#), however, that the better-performing nations — largely from the Pacific Rim — all spent less money per student than the United States. Indeed, while some Scandinavian nations spent more per student than the United States, according to a separate [2013 OECD study](#), none of the top-performing nations spent more than the United States. None of the Asian economies spent more per child than the United States, including high-performing Japan (which spent some 20 percent less per student than the United States). Top-scoring students in the study came from Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, all of which spent less per child than the United States. And among high-performing European nations — such as Finland and Ireland — each spent significantly less money than the United States per student.



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The American Federation of Teachers, the second largest union of government teachers in the United States, drew a similar lesson from the results as the NEA. AFT President Randi Weingarten said in a [press statement](#) that “Today’s PISA results drive home what has become abundantly clear: While the intentions may have been good, a decade of top-down, test-based schooling created by No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top — focused on hyper-testing students, sanctioning teachers and closing schools — has failed to improve the quality of American public education.”

The NEA even bizarrely [blamed poverty](#) for the reason of poor performance. “U.S. students won’t rank higher on PISA,” Van Roekel claimed, “until the nation properly addresses poverty and its effect on students.” Of course, the United States still ranks among the top in personal income among developed nations, and is far wealthier than top-performing Asian nations South Korea and Taiwan.

Even the high-performing “Massachusetts Miracle” schools fail to measure up to top Asian educational establishments, according to the OECD: “Mathematics scores for the top-performer, Shanghai-China, indicate a performance that is the equivalent of over two years of formal schooling ahead of those observed in Massachusetts, itself a strong-performing U.S. state.”

Driving Force for Common Core?

The OECD study of more than 500,000 students over 65 economies may drive implementation of the [Common Core standards](#) in the United States. The OECD [claimed](#) of U.S. results that “An alignment study between the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and PISA suggests that a successful implementation of the Common Core Standards would yield significant performance gains also in PISA.”

The NEA picked up on this theme in the OECD press release, [claiming](#) with respect to Common Core:

If the implementation is successful, Van Roekel believes the Common Core State Standards will be a step in the right direction for U.S. students.

“The standards establish the same bar for all students, no matter their parents’ income or geography. If properly implemented and resourced, they will help to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for college, the work force, and citizenship,” he explains.

Constitutional issues with federal involvement in education aside, Common Core would indeed establish the same minimum standards for all students, but many school districts already have higher standards than those in Common Core, and some have even accused Common Core of “dumbing down” the standards for certain subjects. Furthermore, if an increasing amount of federal involvement in education has not raised student performance levels, why should even more involvement provide different results? And perhaps a key factor in the high performance of students in Asian countries (as well as many Asian students in America) is the fact that those cultures are very family-oriented and place a high value on education. In short, while the recent OECD test results are revealing, it is unlikely American high-schoolers will perform better as long as the federal government continues its current education policy.



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