



Fixing our schools could fix our debt crisis, too

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As Congress debates ways of controlling a burdensome national debt that threatens to blow through 100% of GDP, one way of correcting the long-term trend projected for the rest of the 21st Century is systematically ignored.

If our schools could educate our students to a level of accomplishment achieved by other countries, the returns on our education investment would be so vast that much of the entitlement and legacy costs that now threaten the nation's well being could be addressed with resources to spare—for tax cuts, defense needs, and higher standards of living for all.

Remarkably, all that can be achieved without pouring more dollars into our K-12 school system. All we need to do is spend our money more wisely.

Only 32 percent of U. S. high school students are proficient in math, placing the country in 32nd place among political jurisdictions surveyed by the Program on International Student Assessment (PISA), the world's most reliable source of comparative information on student achievement.

Our peers do much better. For example, the percentage proficient in Germany is 45 percent; in Canada, it is 49 percent; and in Singapore, the highest performing independent nation, it is 63 percent.

All that might be mere cocktail chatter were math skills not so critical for the nation's economic productivity.

In a recently released study, we report a strong, positive correlation between economic growth and the level of student math performance in high school—a relationship so large that if the United States could only lift its performance to the Canadian level, history indicates that the average paycheck for every worker would be 20 percent higher over the next 80 years.

While one might think that special factors make it difficult to match the high performance of Finland or of East Asian countries, it is hard to argue that our northern neighbor is so different from us.

With economic returns of that magnitude, concerns about the rising cost of Medicare, social security, defense spending and public indebtedness can be reduced from overwhelming to quite manageable.

Yet, despite the need for a rapidly growing economy in order to tackle outsized problems, the United States tolerates a performance of 17-year-olds today that is no higher than that of their peers in 1970.

It would be nice to report that the United States, while behind, is beginning to catch up. But when we look at trends over the past 20 years we find a U. S. improvement rate no larger than the rate for the median country among the 49 for which a reliable estimate can be made.

It is true that the United States is at least not falling further behind in the same way Sweden, Belgium and the Czech Republic are. But neither is it gaining any ground on the average country.

We do not need to spend more cash to catch up. There is no connection whatsoever between state gains in student performance and increases in state spending over the past 20 years. Nor is there any evidence that the countries that are doing better today lift their scores by spending more dollars.

Some like to pretend that we don't have to worry about school quality in the United States, because, our colleges and universities can attract talented students from around the world, many of whom remain in the United States. But with security concerns rising, recruiting talent from abroad has become more difficult—and more risky.

Meanwhile, other nations are providing foreign students with broader opportunities outside the United States than ever before. And, of course, even were this not the case it is a scandalous for a country to ignore the educational needs of its own citizens.

Why is the United States unable to do better when its economic strength and national security hang in the balance?

Two facts are critical:

First, the children upon whom our future depends have no lobbyists and cast no votes.

Meanwhile, vested interests—school districts and teacher unions—dominate the making of education policy. They fend off proposals for reform whether they be performance pay and modification of teacher-tenure laws or the introduction of more school choice via charters, school vouchers, and digital learning systems.

Second, school quality erodes so slowly that the public is seldom aroused to action. Benefits come only decades after students have been in school.

The United States will not fix its schools simply by listening to political rhetoric or tossing more dollars at the problem. It will take a concerted movement led by a strong and courageous leader willing to take on the forces of the status quo to build the 21st Century schools the country desperately needs.

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