

DAILY NEWS

OPINION

Upgrade U.S. skills or pay the price

American workers fall behind, despite a huge spike in education spending

BY ERIC HANUSHEK AND PAUL PETERSON / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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American students — and adults — lag far behind their counterparts in developed nations around the world.

As if we needed more evidence, new data released Tuesday shows the disheartening level of skills of the American worker compared with those in other developed countries. An assessment by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development shows that U.S. adults are near the bottom of the 23 participating countries in terms of literacy, numeracy and problem solving.

Although this is the first international comparison of adult math and reading skills, this is what we have been hearing about U.S. students for decades — without strong, meaningful action to correct the situation.

Indeed, today's political consensus is no less broad than the one in place a quarter-century ago when President George H.W. Bush, flanked by the governors of 49 states, declared that "U.S. students must be first in the world in math and science achievement" by the year 2000.

The United States has never come close to reaching that goal, or virtually any other goal the nation has set for our children in the decades since. Looking at international assessments of American students, our students rank 32nd in the world in math, trailing Estonia and Iceland. They rank closer to Croatia than to Canada.

Consider the following quite practical question. A student in Berlin and a student in Sydney, Australia, want to talk on the phone. When it is 1 a.m. in Berlin, it is 10 a.m. in Sydney. Neither student can talk during school (from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. local time) or while they sleep (from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. local time). When can they talk?

That question can be answered correctly by approximately 45% of German 15-year-olds and 50% of Canadians. In the U.S., less than a third of their peers give the accurate response. And these latest results show that our adults would have a similar outcome.

If economic growth followed historical patterns and if America could bring its students up to German standards, that would generate an increase in the average American worker's income by 12% every year for the next 80 years. Reaching Canada's performance level would increase U.S. worker income by an average of 20% annually in that period.

Given the benefits from better schools, we could certainly afford to spend more — if money alone could fix the problem. Unfortunately, that approach has been tried without success.

U.S. education spending per student, adjusted for inflation, is 250% of what it was in 1970, but the achievement levels of 17-year-olds have hardly budged. In Maine, spending per student increased by almost \$4,000 from 1990 to 2009, but the state's school system saw almost no gains in student performance. Florida's increase in education spending over that same period was relatively minuscule, yet its students made enormous improvements.

How money is spent is much more important than how much is spent. The good news is that improvement is possible through reforms that the majority of Americans support: merit pay, an end to teacher tenure (which protects the jobs of even the worst educators), more flexible teacher hiring policies and competition through school choice and charter schools.

In a nation that is supposedly divided along sharp ideological lines, the biggest disagreement about these issues isn't between Democrats and Republicans. Instead, the divide is between a general public with an interest in improving the education of our children and a powerful educational establishment including, but not restricted to, teachers unions.

Currently, the unions are calling for a three-year suspension of any Common Core accountability system, threatening the high-performance initiative before it even begins.

To build the schools that can sustain U.S. prosperity, political leaders must go beyond a rhetorical commitment to high standards and take on the vested interests that impede deep reform.

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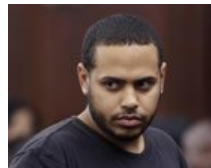
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