

U.S. students are not on top

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Educators and politicians have long promised that US students will lead the world in academic standing. While our students have made slight improvements in reading, math and science as measured by various international tests, their overall scores remain only about average.

The latest test scores were announced last month by the international Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), which tested half a million 15-year old students in 70 economies (mainly countries and a few very large cities). The tests covered reading, math and science and they were administered and evaluated by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Full details are at www.pisa.oecd.org.

The good news for US students is their average scores exceeded the average of students in 49 countries. The bad news is that US students were behind 14 countries and two major Chinese cities.

More important than the country rankings were the test scores. Students from Korea and Finland achieved the overall highest scores. Next were students from Hong Kong (China), Singapore, Canada, New Zealand, Japan, Shanghai (China), Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, Estonia, Switzerland, Poland and Iceland.

Then came the US, which had scores very close to the average of all countries tested.

Most countries scored below or well below average, including Russia, many Middle Eastern countries and all the participating countries south of the US.

The performance of US students is a major disappointment for the US educational establishment.

Some educators note that US scores are higher if the scores of recent immigrants are left out. But that also applies to many other countries.

There's a tarnished silver lining in the average scores of US students. Those who dismiss competition and proclaim every student a winner or a hero have been very successful, for US students get above average marks for self-esteem and confidence. For example, according to the 2003 and 2007 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), most US eighth grade students are very confident about their mathematics abilities.

Yet they are consistently outscored by Asian students with much less confidence in their math abilities. Clearly lower wages may not be the only reason many US technology firms have moved factories to Asian countries that consistently outscore US students in math and science.

Some say more money will solve the education crisis. Andrew Coulson disagrees.

In an article in the Washington Post, Coulson claimed that the annual cost per child in the poorly performing Washington, DC, public school system is nearly \$25,000.

That's significantly more than the tuition of private schools in the area, including the prestigious Sidwell Friends School attended by the daughters of presidents.

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