

Are U.S. Students the Worst? Comparisons Seen as Flawed

By GINA KOLATA

Every few years, a new study rolls out announcing once again that American students know less math and science than even students in the poorest countries. And every time, the reports result in a national orgy of self-flagellation and cries for new rounds of reform in American schools.

The latest comparison, conducted by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, N.J., and involving 20 countries, will be reported on Feb. 3. The betting is that the United States will, as always, rank at or near the bottom.

But this time, a growing and vocal collection of revisionists has begun arguing that the comparisons are invalid. The entire United States population, they contend, is consistently being compared with other countries' elites. No wonder Americans are found wanting.

These critics stress that they in no way mean they find nothing to improve in American schools. But, they say, it is disingenuous to use international comparisons to whip up the population to demand school reforms.

"The rankings of nations in international test comparisons are meaningless," said Dr. Iris Rotberg, a program administrator at the National Science Foundation who is on leave to work as a senior scientist at the RAND Corporation's Institute on Education and Training in Washington.

Dr. Harold Hodgkinson, the director of the Center for Demographic Policy

in Washington and a former director of the National Institute of Education, said that the tests were flawed and not very helpful.

Dr. Daryl Chubin, a senior associate at the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment in Washington, said, "The international comparisons have been over-interpreted.

"In this country and in particular in this era of educational ferment, anyone who has new numbers will use them to champion an argument," he added. "We're talking about the rhetorical use of rank numbers. In the absence of good data, you get along with whatever you can."

Proponents of the tests argue that the comparisons are useful benchmarks and that it would be a mistake to throw away discomforting findings because of methodological obstacles.

Archie Lapointe, the director of assessment at the Educational Testing Service, said that the criticisms have "a kernel of truth." But, he said, the data show what sort of achievement is possible, albeit often among the very best, selected students, and give Amer-

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