

Flaws in the arguments made by *The New York Times* editorial, “Back to School, Thinking Globally”:

The test score rankings are virtually impossible to interpret because of the major methodological problems in conducting international comparisons—not surprising given the enormous societal differences between countries. These methodological problems yield test score rankings with large inconsistencies both within and between studies. *The New York Times* apparently is reporting rankings based on a 2003 PISA study, which showed relatively low rankings for U.S. students—even for the “top” students. However, only three years earlier, a 2000 PISA study reported that the U.S. average score was equal to the OECD average, and that the top students performed equally well, or better, than those in other OECD countries. Perhaps U.S. schools declined dramatically in the years between 2000 and 2003. Not so fast! TIMSS, another international study, reported in 2003 that the United States ranked above the international average, a significant improvement from earlier years. And then there are the NAEP comparisons, with further inconsistencies

Even apart from the confusing data, *The New York Times* editorial contains a series of non-sequiturs and unsupported assumptions:

- That the economic performance of industrialized countries can be predicted from students’ rankings on international test score comparisons—an argument that has been made, in one way or another, for the past 50 years, since Sputnik, with no evidence in all those years to support it. There simply are no data to back up an assumption that the rankings of industrialized countries on international test score comparisons bear any relationship to their economic performance.
- That outsourcing of technical jobs occurs because the U.S. has a shortage of trained personnel rather than because U.S. programmers—as an example—are not willing to take a 90% reduction in salary to compete with programmers in India.
- That the rest of the developed world does a better job of educating students of all economic backgrounds. The statement treats “the rest of the developed world” as if it were one country. Indeed, countries vary significantly on the extent to which the structure of the education system (for example, policies with respect to student tracking) advantages, or disadvantages, low-income and minority students, or indeed, what its implications are for other “at-risk” populations—language minority students and students with disabilities—and, moreover, whether these groups are represented in the test-taking population.

The political rhetoric about school reform makes it sound easy. Apparently, whatever the problem—an achievement gap, international competition, cumbersome bureaucracies—there are no tradeoffs or “costs” to consider, or they are so insignificant they do not enter the debate. The unspoken premise is that countries with effective education systems (that is, high test scores) have got it right without ever having to make difficult choices or cope with negative consequences. The rest of us can do the same if we only would adopt some other country’s system.

A book I recently edited on global education reform in sixteen countries demonstrates that while there are, indeed, global trends in school reform, all countries’ reforms—whether explicitly or by default—require difficult policy choices among conflicting goals. In every country, there are examples of tradeoffs, painful costs, ironies, and unintended consequences. The ultimate choices depend on each country’s priorities, its value system, and its societal context.

The benefit of knowing and articulating those tradeoffs are several: First, we won’t spin our wheels trying to implement a “reform” which is fundamentally inconsistent with deeply held value systems, financial capacity, or political structures. Second, policymakers after articulating and measuring tradeoffs may reconsider, or temper, the reforms as not worth the negative consequences. Third, even if worthwhile, those consequences may be ameliorated by proactive attention to those disadvantaged by the reform. Fourth, the very process of evaluating each reform and its consequences will help sell the acceptability of whatever change is recommended with less conflict.

This article summarizes, and by way of example illuminates, the major trends in global education reform and the difficult choices and tradeoffs so many countries have had to face.