

## **EDUCATION WEEK**

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COMMENTARY

### **The Bigger Picture**

#### **U.S. Education in a Global Context**

By Iris C. Rotberg

**In our attempt to be more like the countries we most admire, we have adopted practices that few of these countries use.**

As the debate over the Bush administration's education policies continues in the president's second term, I am frequently asked whether the educational problems we face, and our attempted "solutions" to those problems, are unique to the United States, or if we are simply participants in trends that are taking place worldwide. My comments below, which attempt to address these questions, are based on a recent book I edited on education reform in 16 countries.

#### **Do other countries face problems similar to those in the United States?**

Yes. The overwhelming problem is the achievement gap between poor children and their more affluent peers. The size of the gap varies, but its existence is universal. Although education reforms are also triggered by other concerns—global competition, cumbersome bureaucracies, or rigid instructional and testing practices—the central problem in most countries is an achievement gap that is closely associated with students' socioeconomic status.

In many countries, the gap has become more visible with increasing immigration and the resulting "pockets" of poverty. Increases in the mix of racial/ethnic groups, cultures, and languages have created new challenges for countries like France and Sweden, whose education systems must respond to increasingly heterogeneous student populations. The proportion of the population that is foreign-born is now higher in London than it is in New York. In some countries, the socioeconomic gap is closely aligned with different regions of the country: Increasing income disparities in China and Russia, for example, are also reflected in increasing disparities in school funding and educational attainment as their education systems have become decentralized.

#### **Have these countries found ways to solve the problems?**

No country has found that education practices alone have solved the broader problems of society or eliminated the gap in educational performance between children of high and low socioeconomic status, although educational policies can contribute to magnifying or reducing that gap.

In the United States, for example, the negative impact of poverty on educational achievement is exacerbated by inadequate resources in many of the schools serving low-income communities. Germany's highly stratified education system also appears to increase the correlation between students' socioeconomic status and their academic achievement. In contrast, Sweden has a smaller gap. Although causation cannot be established with certainty, a reasonable hypothesis is that Sweden's relatively "flat" distribution of income and wealth, its social-support system, and its equitable distribution of educational resources have made a positive difference. But they have not eliminated the gap; indeed, as in other countries, socioeconomic status remains the best predictor of educational attainment.

**Are other countries' attempted "solutions," or reforms, similar to current reforms in the United States?**

The Bush administration's education policies have been characterized by both unprecedented federal testing requirements and, at the same time, strong advocacy for local and parental autonomy through school choice. In some respects, international policy trends are consistent with those represented by current U.S. policies; in others, the United States has been moving in a quite different direction from that in many other countries.

The United States has placed an increased emphasis on holding teachers accountable for students' test scores, which are used as indicators of teacher performance. The United States has by far the most demanding test-based accountability requirements, but a few other countries—England, in particular—are also using tests for accountability purposes. In most countries throughout the world, however, testing is typically used for purposes of student selection into academic secondary schools and universities, or to determine graduation from secondary school—not to hold teachers accountable. In fact, many countries do not administer standardized tests until the later grades, and Canadian schools, for example, rarely use them at all. This divergence in testing practices between the United States and most other countries is ironic because a major impetus for the testing movement was our perception that other countries were outperforming the United States in international test-score comparisons. Yet, in our attempt to be more like the countries we most admire, we have adopted practices that few of these countries use.

In the United States, the federal government has mandated testing requirements at the same time that it has encouraged local and parental autonomy through school choice. Thus, on the one hand, federal policies encourage increased standardization of the teaching process while, on the other, they support charter schools, vouchers, and even home schooling—all of which are specifically designed to provide more diverse educational options. Indeed, for some of these innovations (vouchers to be used at private schools, for example), there are no testing requirements at all.

This tension between centralization and decentralization also occurs in a number of other countries. England has transformed a system with the most decentralized curriculum in Europe to a system with one of the most highly prescriptive national curricula, while delegating to individual schools the authority to make decisions about budget allocations,

and to families the right to choose their schools. In Israel, as political leaders have delegated more power to local communities and families are offered greater school choice, the number of schools that represent political positions and ideologies has also increased. The bureaucracy has responded by tightening control in an attempt to mitigate that trend.

Turkey too has attempted to relax its highly centralized bureaucracy but, at the same time, fears that decentralization might have serious consequences for the country's unity, if local religious and separatist factions gain control of schools. South Africa has focused its post-apartheid reforms on equalizing school funding in what was one of the world's most inequitable education systems, one in which per-pupil expenditures for whites were 10 times greater than those for blacks; it now faces the difficult choice between maintaining the equitable distribution of resources across schools or, instead, encouraging middle-class families (now increasingly both black and white) to remain in the public school system by permitting them to contribute money to their schools.

### **Which country's reforms have been most effective?**

Or, put another way, which country has the best education system? But the question is meaningless without further specificity, particularly in defining "best" and for what purpose. A response is possible, and even then with many caveats, if we know the outcomes of the education system that are most important to the questioner: High test scores in mathematics and science? If so, for 10 percent of the population? For 50 percent? For 90 percent? A high proportion of children completing secondary school? Affordable access to higher education? If so, for what percentage of the population?

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For some, it is not the outcome measures of an education system that are important, but, rather, the processes at work in the system: Do classes have a mix of student-achievement levels? Does the system track students to ensure that those who are higher-achieving receive an elite academic education? Is there individualized instruction for both the higher-achieving students and those with special needs? Is there a wide selection of courses and extracurricular activities? Are educational resources distributed equitably across the system? Is there meaningful school choice? Is there a test-based accountability system? Each of these questions represents a fundamental issue that defines quality education in many people's minds. It is typically assumed that the processes used will lead to favorable outcomes—often unspecified—which are consistent with the questioner's underlying values.

The fact is that there is no answer to the question of which country has the best education system, because it almost always comes down to core beliefs about how a society should work—issues that have been debated by philosophers and social thinkers for centuries. It is, in my view, unrealistic to argue that a country can have it all. The best we can do is articulate where we are coming from and what our goals are.

## **Is it realistic to attempt to “borrow” educational practices from other countries?**

When a country is dissatisfied with the outcomes of its education system, it often turns to other countries perceived to be more successful and seeks to identify the educational practices that led to their success. The ease with which a reform—whether borrowed or homegrown—can be implemented depends on its consistency with the country’s traditions and values, the extent to which the political structure encourages or inhibits change, and a set of societal conditions—for example, the economic environment, poverty levels, and children’s health status—that can facilitate or constrain change.

The extent to which a reform, if implemented, makes a difference also depends on an accurate analysis of the problem to be addressed. It does little good to implement a reform if that reform is unrelated, or marginal, to the problem. It is not unusual for countries to choose, and oversell, school reforms—“quick fixes”—that have little logical connection to the problem at hand.

The success of a reform in addressing fundamental problems—for example, facilitating equal opportunity—also depends on how a society supports the growth potential of its citizens after the conclusion of their formal schooling. A nation’s practices may be consistent or at odds with policies that define the education system. For example, no matter how egalitarian or “fair” the education system, these advantages will be diminished if graduates are chosen for powerful or prestigious positions based primarily on graduation from a very few elitist schools.

Similarly, it will not be sufficient to guarantee equitable admissions standards for minorities and women if there is discrimination in the job market or if these groups, in practice, are excluded from high-ranking positions in government and the private sector.

A nation’s policies on tracking or school choice matter little if university tuition is simply unaffordable for many students. And, conversely, even in those countries where there is inequity in the financial resources available to rich and poor school districts or regions, the pernicious effects may be somewhat moderated if the society and economy are geared to providing and encouraging second and third chances, mobility of labor, or entrepreneurial opportunities. The education system is but one of many variables that affect the future of a nation and its diverse population.

Despite the societal challenges, however, there are positive educational developments in countries throughout the world: an enormous increase in educational access, as well as increased attention to educational innovation and the needs of diverse student populations. These policies have opened up societies in ways that were not thought possible even a generation ago, and have made an important difference in the opportunities available to low-income and minority students.

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*essay is adapted from her chapter in Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform (ScarecrowEducation, 2004), for which she served as editor.*  
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