

Last updated: May 28, 2010 3:28 p.m.

The education arms race

By Karen Francisco | The Journal Gazette

In most quarters today, it is accepted almost as an article of faith that U.S. students lag their counterparts in other countries. Politicians love to make the point, seldom to call for more investment in education but to disparage public schools and preach personal responsibility.

But the charges that American students are the dunces in the global classroom begs one of those Paul Harvey rest-of-the-story explanations. The edweek.com blog, Walt Gardner's Reality Check, offers just [that](#).

He points to a newly revised book, "Balancing Change and Tradition in Global Education Reform," edited by Iris C. Rotberg, looking at education in 16 countries, including the U.S.:

"What Rotberg says cannot be emphasized enough at this crossroads in the reform movement: Any education system 'represents a country's social and political priorities and often its historical antecedents.' As a result, the lessons learned from each country do not 'transfer readily to countries that are quite different in values, culture and history.' "

Gardner cites an example from the book:

"The U.S. is still agonizing over the value of high-stakes tests because of concern about their effect on democratization of education. But Singapore, whose students regularly finish near the top on tests of international competition, begins sorting out children into different tracks with its Primary School Leaving Exam, and continues the differentiation process throughout their entire schooling years without any qualms."

There's also a lesson in school choice, from Chile: "The various strategies under this wide umbrella are presented as ways to allow the most disadvantaged children to escape failing neighborhood schools. Yet as Robert W. McMeekin explains in his chapter on Chile titled 'Vouchers and Beyond,' competition has resulted in the closure of few underperforming schools in the more than two decades that choice has been in place."

Gardner points to another fact that U.S. school critics neglect to mention: That American schools are recognized worldwide for their creativity and innovation -- attributes that can't be measured on a standardized test and reported in ranking order.

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