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Dr. Iris C. Rotberg

Program Director
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National Science Foundation
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Dear Iris;

This is an inexcusably tardy letter to thank you for sending me a copy of your article, "I Never Promised You First Place".

All my suspicions lead me to agree with your critique of test-taking student samples in international comparisons. But I've never summoned the gumption to dig into the issue. You do education a service to raise doubts about the validity of international comparisons.

My own reaction to Goal 4 about making the USA first in the world (even if we could get comparable samples) is that it's a foolish objective - an idea that comes from our naive application of analogies from sports and business, to situations that are only confused by that process. My guess is that the USA will never be "first in the world" in any standardized tests. This is because we have an open, complex and constantly changing society, as well as a unique history of racial and cultural prejudice that has long-term effects. Japan has had no immigration for three thousand years, and its "untouchables" are a minute minority. Other countries fall between these extremes, but tend to have more homogeneous societies in terms of language and culture than the USA. Because average test score differentials comparing large groups are heavily influenced by who takes the test along with other considerations (see On Further Consideration, The College Board, 1977), the likelihood is that Japan will always beat out the USA.

Of course, a way for the USA to be number one would be to keep poor kids and those with illiterate families from taking the tests. Then our average scores would go up. As you imply, that is what some countries are probably doing now. Although I thoroughly agree with your dictum that "each country's sample ought to reflect its entire population," I am pessimistic about bringing that about. Certainly it would be an immensely expensive and complex task, sort of like inspections for control of atomic weapons. Rounding up the Turkish kids in various European countries while their parents are in temporary employment is going to be a slow game. But in the USA, those kids are in the regular schools and take the tests.

Anyway, I'm glad you have written the article, and I shall make use of it. Also, I'm sending it and a copy of this letter to my friends at ETS to see if they have any observations on the subject. I believe that they are overseeing some of the newer international efforts at comparative testing.

This brings personal best wishes.

Regards,



Harold Howe II

P.S. I thought you might be interested in the enclosures.