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LETTER

International Comparisons

'Silent Crisis' or Red Herring?

To the Editor:

In her Commentary "Quick Fixes, Test Scores, and the Global Economy" (June 11, 2008), Iris C. Rotberg takes out after people who are concerned about the performance of U.S. students on international assessments. She frames common beliefs as a series of "myths," but unfortunately her myths have considerable scientific support.

Ms. Rotberg's essay reads like a legal defense of our current schools. First defense: Performance on the tests has nothing to do with schools, but instead arises from family socioeconomic status and poverty. Second defense: The international

comparisons are not meaningful because we test all kids, and other countries do not. Third defense: International-test performance has nothing to do with economic competitiveness; if anything, it is our small population (300 million) that hurts us in competition with China and India.

Unfortunately, her defense fails on all grounds. Starting from the bottom, we have clear scientific evidence that the growth of national economies is strongly related to the skills of the population as measured by international math and science assessments. On these tests, U.S. students' performance is mediocre at best.

Such skills are not the only thing that counts—and the quality of our economic institutions, the limited governmental intrusion in markets, and the strength of our colleges and universities tend to make up for the increasingly low skills of the workforce in the United States. But it would be wrong to conclude that skills do not matter.

Further, while some developing countries do not have universal secondary education (and thus, by implication, have spotty test-taking on international tests), neither do we have universal secondary education. Our rate of completion of secondary schooling now ranks below the median for countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Test administration does not explain our low international rankings.

Finally, simply noting that poverty affects student achievement is not sufficient to absolve our schools of any complicity in low achievement. Again, while multiple factors enter in,

schools can definitely change the learning trajectory even of students from low-income families.

Denying any problem, save perhaps the existence of poverty, is a huge mistake. Facing international competition with an increasingly low-skilled population by international standards is the silent crisis that will only be fully apparent some years in the future—when recovery will be very difficult, if not impossible.

Eric A. Hanushek Senior Fellow Hoover Institution Stanford University Stanford, Calif.

To the Editor:

Iris C. Rotberg said she wanted to do some myth-busting, but instead repeated one of the biggest myths of all: that poor kids in America struggle academically because of "large inequalities in school resources."

This is patently false. According to recent National Center for Education Statistics "Condition of Education" reports, in the 2004-05 school year (the latest with data) the quintile of U.S. districts with the highest concentration of poverty actually had the largest average current expenditure per pupil, at \$9,892. Districts with the lowest concentration of poverty came in a distant second, at \$9,263. Data for total expenditures—current plus capital outlays—reveal that at \$10,768 per pupil, the richest districts did spend the most in 2002-03 (again, the latest year with available data), but the poorest districts spent the second-highest amount, at \$10,191.

Apparently, the "resource inequalities" myth is one that needs a lot more bustin'.

Neal P. McCluskey Associate Director Center for Educational Freedom Cato Institute Washington, D.C.

To the Editor:

Only readers in total denial can fail to recognize that a stealth campaign is being cleverly waged to pave the way for privatization of education in this country. The latest ploy involves invoking the dire threat of global competition to gin up a crisis.

But as Iris C. Rotberg makes abundantly clear, a robust economy has little, if anything, to do with public schools. In fact, corporate malfeasance and ineptitude, coupled with myopic

government policies, have put the United States in the position it finds itself today.

Every charge that critics now make in their indictment of public schools would be immediately dropped if all K-12 education were to be privatized tomorrow, even if no evidence of better educational quality emerged. That's because what readers are being fed is a red herring.

Walt Gardner Los Angeles, Calif.

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