
Measuring U.S. students

On another topic, USA TODAY notes that top U.S. students are holding their own internationally.

The good news: The top 10% of U.S. elementary students are holding their own in math and science against some tough international competition.

The not-so-good news: The other 90% are below international averages.

Educational Testing Service reported the statistics Wednesday after testing 175,000 9- and 13-year-olds in 13 different languages last March.

They do hand lots of ammo to those who'd attack U.S. schools. For a start, 13-year-olds from 16 nations including Slovenia scored higher in science than U.S. 13-year-olds; almost all other 9-year-olds tested better in math than U.S. 9-year-olds — and pupils in Japan and Germany weren't even tested.

Sounds pretty grim, doesn't it? And it is, in some respects. But implicit in the

study is the suggestion that the half-empty glass also may be half full:

▶ Other nations' educational goals differ vastly. Early on, they weed out those not destined for college. U.S. public education is designed to bring everyone at least through high school.

▶ Different countries handled the testing differently. All U.S. fourth- and eighth-graders were tested, but nations such as Italy, Spain and Israel tested only students from the best schools.

▶ That top 10% is the group likely to lead the nation — to populate the boardrooms and laboratories that could keep the USA competitive.

"These results do not reflect the quality of schools in any nation," pointed out Iris Rotberg of Rand Corp.

They do show that when it comes to how our kids are doing, we've got some things to brag about as well as bash.
