

BOARDS' EYE VIEW

# H.R. 3320: Shutting out democracy

**S**uppose Congress declared that, henceforth, major areas of legislation will be developed by a committee of congressional staff members and lobbyists. Suppose further Congress limited its own role to vote "Yes" or "No," amending the committee's work only with the approval of these staffers and lobbyists.

To complete the picture, let's suppose that this committee—primarily selected by the staffers and lobbyists themselves—also had oversight responsibility for the implementation of the legislation it developed.

Chances are that any member of Congress who supported a formal procedure of that kind would be turned out of office at the next election. Yet, Congress will be voting on legislation that would cause hundreds of financially strapped school boards to do just that when H.R. 3320, the Neighborhood Schools Improvement Act, reaches the House floor.

More precisely, H.R. 3320 requires participating school districts to establish an elite committee representing special inter-

ests within the school system and the community. The committee would determine the goals, curriculum, instructional materials, staff organization, and method for assessing the education program. The local school board, and the people who elect it, would be relegated to the sidelines—as a "rubber stamp" to the process.

**Financially strapped school systems should not have to sell out to local voters**

**GUEST VIEWPOINT: IRIS C. ROTBERG**



## What test scores don't measure

*International comparisons of students are generally meaningless*

**A**s a nation, we are too complacent about the large proportion of our students who are in poverty, about the vast disparities in educational expenditures between rich and poor school districts, about the rising costs of higher education and what it does to student motivation.

But these serious problems will not be addressed by international test comparisons that are seriously flawed and, in fact, irrelevant.

Ever since international comparisons of science and mathematics test scores began in the 1960s, Americans have believed the myth that U.S. students are outclassed by those in other nations. Yet, after almost three decades of apparent failures on international tests, we have maintained a level of productivity in science and engineering that is overwhelming.

The fact is that international comparisons of test scores are highly misleading indicators of the quality of a nation's education system.

The rankings of nations in international test comparisons are meaningless, because it is virtually impossible to control for the major societal differences among nations. For example, attendance rates in the final years of high school are much higher in the United States than in most other countries.

Indeed, the first international assessments compared the average score for more than 75 percent of the age group in the United States with the average score of the top 9 percent of the students in West Germany, the top 13 percent in the Netherlands, and the top 45 percent in Sweden.

The more students who take the test, the lower will be the average score. That score has little to do with the quality of education in any country.

Consider, for example, the results of a recent assessment of math students in Hungary and England. Hungary ranks near the top in the eighth-grade comparison. Not surprisingly, by the 12th grade, when Hun-

gary retains more students in math than any other country, Hungary ranks among the bottom countries.

Have Hungary's schools gone downhill between the eighth and the 12th grades, or is it simply a matter of more students, lower scores?

England, by contrast, scores in the bottom half in most of the eighth-grade comparisons, but ranks among the top countries by the 12th grade, when only a highly select group of students there takes the test.

When a country's rank can change so dramatically between the eighth and 12th grades, it simply shows that the test comparisons are meaningless.

It is not just a matter of attendance rates. For example, it has been observed that in a recent math assessment of 13-

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## FAST REPORT

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coaching reinforces the impacts of the SAT's biases, FairTest charges. Students already disadvantaged by the test—those who are low-income, members of minority groups, and whose first language is not English—are placed at a further disadvantage, because they are not likely to be able to afford coaching courses costing \$500 or more.

"The data prove that SAT coaching definitely works," says Sarah Stockwell, co-author of the FairTest report. "By failing to admit this fundamental truth, the College Board and Educational Testing Service (ETS) are guilty of misleading students, admissions officers, and the public."

The ETS constructs and administers the SAT under contract from the College Entrance Examination Board.

The report says the test-makers have downplayed or tried to suppress studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of coaching.

The report, *The SAT Coaching Cover-Up*, is \$7.95 from FairTest, 342 Broadway, Cambridge, Mass. 02139; (617) 864-4810.

### L.A. pay cut

tario, Ohio, reduced from \$52 million to \$46.7 million for the tax years 1987 to 1989 and to \$36.3 million for the tax years 1990 to 1995.

The school district gets about 70 percent of the real estate and personal tangible property taxes GM pays on the plant.

The district will lose about \$531,000 in taxes this year alone, says Superintendent Greg Morris, and the cumulative effect of the tax loss is about \$1 million in two school years.

Morris says the money will have to be replaced—possibly with a tax levy—or programs will have to be cut.

### Indian teachings

■ An Education Department task force is recommending schools that serve Native American students provide "a multicultural environment" that would promote tribal languages and cultures.

The task force report, *Indian Nations At Risk: An Educational Strategy for Action*, uses the six national education goals as a foundation to establish 10 goals to guide the improvement of all federal, tribal, public, and private schools that serve Native Americans.

The task force was chaired by former U.S. Education Sec-

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year-olds in six countries, 99 percent of the age group attended school.

What isn't stated is that the samples of children actually tested were not representative of the entire country. Thus, the entire United States was compared with only selected Canadian provinces. And only the largest of several language groups in Spain participated in the comparisons.

Moreover, some countries exclude from the testing significant numbers of low-achieving schools and schools in which the curriculum is considered inadequate. Several begin using a track system when students are 11 years of age.

In other countries, students take courses almost exclusively in their fields of specialization after age 16. Thus high school students who are tested in science and mathematics have studied essentially only science and math from age 16 on.

The problems are magnified enormously by the inclusion of a much greater range of countries in forthcoming studies.

China illustrates the problem. Like many other developing countries with scarce resources, China has a highly elitist education system that pro-

vides advanced math and science instruction to very few selected students.

The majority of Chinese young people either have left school by the age the test is administered or have never studied the material covered by the assessment and are unlikely to be represented in the sample. A comparative assessment, therefore, is meaningless if the test is

**"The more students who take the test, the lower the average score"**

given only in selected schools.

Differences in the incidence of poverty among students taking the test also affect the rankings. Countries with more low-income students taking the test tend to score lower than countries with less poverty or than those whose low-income students are not tested simply because they are not in school.

In addition, curriculum differences from nation to nation affect test results. For example, advanced mathematics students in the United States are more likely to defer calculus until college than are their counterparts in many other countries.

But there is a more fundamental issue. Even if the test results accurately portrayed the relative "rankings" of participating countries, we are still left with the matter of whether test scores are a useful measure of those things that are most important.

The fact is that the quality of our scientific output and the skills of our scientists and engineers are extremely high.

While our success in turning research into marketable products is questionable, our international competitiveness relates less to weakness in science education or international test comparisons than to far more subtle factors: the lack of incentives for industry to invest in long-term product development, financial incentives that lead to offshore manufacturing, licensing practices, and the emphasis placed on military at the expense of civilian research.

These issues will not be addressed by yet another round of international tests. Nor will test comparisons provide a better education for low-income students who attend schools with inadequate resources.

Let's focus our attention on the difficult public policy issues to be addressed rather than on spurious comparisons and rankings. ■