
Why American Education Fails

And How Lessons From Abroad Could Improve It

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In his landmark 1973 book, *The Coming of Post-industrial Society*, the sociologist Daniel Bell heralded the United States' transition from a labor-intensive economy that produced goods to a knowledge-based one geared toward providing services. No longer could success be achieved through manual, assembly-line work; it would require advanced skills and creativity. At least since then, American politicians and pundits have regularly stressed that education holds the key to the country's future. Everyone seems to agree that good schools are prerequisites for broad economic prosperity, individual social mobility, and a healthy civil society in which informed voters engage in the public issues of the day.

Although no one disputes the value of education, how the country should improve it is fiercely contested. Every few years, along comes a new idea to save American schools, be it enforcing standards, opening charter schools, providing vouchers for private education, or paying teachers based on their performance. Most recently, two federal programs have sought to remake the U.S. education system: No Child Left Behind, a 2001 law that sought to use standards and accountability to push all students to proficiency by 2014, and Race to the Top, an Obama administration initiative that has tried to incentivize change by offering competitive grants to states pursuing reform agendas. All this activity

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Signs of a broken system: a classroom in Youngstown, Ohio, November 2009

has generated progress in some areas, but it has not led to widespread improvement. U.S. schools still languish in the middle of international rankings, behind the schools of such countries as Estonia and Slovenia. And half a century after the end of official segregation, huge gaps continue to divide students by race and class, with the average black 12th grader scoring in reading at a level equivalent to the average white eighth grader on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the most trusted long-term yardstick of U.S. school performance.

The United States needs a more thoroughgoing and systematic approach to educational improvement. To see what such an effort might look like, consider that any professional field consists of the following four components: human capital, which involves attracting, selecting, training, and retaining the people who work in the field; a core of knowledge that guides the field; effective organizational structures; and overall performance management and accountability. Every profession needs to set its priorities within and among these four elements; ideally, they work together in harmony.

In recent years, the U.S. education system has become overly focused on the last element—accountability—at the expense of progress on the others. The most ambitious federal education reform in recent years, No Child Left Behind, increased accountability by measuring schools annually on student tests in reading and math, with escalating

consequences for those that did not improve. But it largely failed to address the other elements of the field, an imbalance that partially explains why the initiative has not achieved its aims. By contrast, stronger professions in the United States, such as medicine, law, and engineering, focus more on building their foundations than on holding their practitioners accountable. Doctors, for example, must clear a series of high bars before entering the field; develop a broad knowledge base, through course work and then extensive clinical training; and continually revisit their training, with practices such as hospital rounds. The medical profession places less emphasis on setting targets and making sure physicians meet them—there is no such thing as No Patient Left Behind.

Other countries, meanwhile, have figured out a better way to educate their children, one that looks less like the United States' education system and more like its stronger professions. Recent international research suggests that the countries that top international education rankings owe their success to approaches that are in many ways the inverse of the American one. Such countries—which include Canada, Finland, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, top scorers on the Program for International Student Assessment, an internationally recognized test for 15-year-olds that measures higher-order problem solving in math, reading, and science—all do certain things similarly. They choose their teachers from among their most talented graduates, train them extensively, create opportunities for them to collaborate with their peers within and across schools to improve their practice, provide them the external supports that they need to do their work well, and underwrite all these efforts with a strong welfare state. Because these countries do a good job of honing the expertise of their educators to begin with, they have less of a need for external monitoring of school performance.

If the United States wants to lead the world in student achievement, it will need to borrow some ideas from the countries that currently top international rankings. Rather than simply holding accountable the teachers and schools that have failed to live up to expectations, the country will need to build a new system from the ground up—an expert profession that can consistently deliver high levels of performance.

SCHOOLHOUSE AS FACTORY

The U.S. school system assumed its contemporary form a little more than a century ago, during the Progressive Era. In one generation, between 1890 and 1920, a group of civic elites transformed a country of

one-room schoolhouses into a set of district school systems. Influenced by prevailing models of business organization, which prioritized efficiency, this system empowered mostly male superintendents to act as the CEOs of school districts, where mostly female teachers would follow the rules and programs that their superiors chose.

In this hierarchical model, teachers had little formal power to resist dictates from above, although the system's "loose coupling"—the lack of close monitoring of practitioners by supervisors—gave teachers considerable control over what happened inside their classroom walls. Teachers received minimal training, the assumption being that they did not have a complicated job. The top education schools mostly avoided training teachers, seeing teaching as carrying the stigma of low-status, feminine work; they instead focused on cultivating the male administrators who would govern the system.

For half a century, this model worked relatively well, largely because the expectations for what schools needed to produce were fairly limited. Loose coupling left the teachers with enough autonomy to make them feel as if they were in charge. School boards and superintendents had enough formal power to preserve the sense that their school systems were supervised and, since these leaders were elected or appointed by elected officials, that the schools were subject to democratic control. Teachers were mostly women, who had few other employment options and were generally not the breadwinners in their families, so their low pay did not provoke significant resistance.

More broadly, Americans tolerated the system because by 1960, most white students graduated with a high school degree, which qualified them for middle-class occupations in manufacturing and other similar sectors, regardless of how much they had actually learned in school. A small number of privileged youth went to better public schools or to private schools and then on to college. The result was that people throughout the system got what they needed, even though the country was not doing much to maximize the learning of all its students.

Over the past 50 years, the limits of this model have become more apparent as the expectations for schooling have increased. Driven both by civil rights imperatives and the shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, policymakers now expect all students to achieve at fairly high levels. But the means to realize these ambitions are not there. American poverty rates, always high by international standards

because of the country's weak welfare state, have been exacerbated by the collapse of manufacturing and increasing segregation and joblessness in many of the nation's largest cities – and schools in high-poverty neighborhoods have been largely impervious to reform. Educated women, who had always turned to teaching in large numbers, have seen their options proliferate, shrinking the talent pool for the profession. The highly decentralized nature of U.S. education has become a weakness rather than a strength, because, as the scholars David Cohen and Susan Moffitt have pointed out, it has limited the ability of the federal government to foster good teaching throughout the nation. Now, the country wants consistent, high-level performance across the school system, but it has not built the system to achieve that.

The result has been a vicious cycle in the interaction between policymakers and practitioners, one that leaves little hope for the much-needed improvements in American education. Policymakers understandably want to intervene in the failing system, given the highly uneven performance among schools, with dropout rates as high as 40-50 percent in some urban districts. They have done so through a variety of mechanisms, but most notably through an effort to set higher standards for student performance and to create consequences for schools that fail to improve. Teachers, for their part, resent the external mandates developed by people who know little of their daily work and who are unwilling to provide the social support that their students need. Teachers' unions worry that their members are being scapegoated for their schools' failure, and so they frequently harden their positions and seek to resist what they see as unfair and unwise external accountability measures. Many policymakers, in turn, see schools as units that need tighter coupling to overcome the teachers' opposition and think of unions as an obstruction to necessary reforms. The cycle continues, with each group playing its appointed role, but with no improvement in sight.

AMERICAN UNEXCEPTIONALISM

The country needs to stop this downward spiral and build a better system from the ground up. A good place to start would be to address the technical requirements for teaching. Education scholars identify three kinds of knowledge that good teachers have: "substantive knowledge," that is, knowledge about the subjects they teach; "pedagogical knowledge," about how to teach; and "pedagogical content



Top of the class: at an elementary school in Fukushima, Japan, April 2011

knowledge," about how students are likely to understand the subject, what errors or preconceptions they may harbor, and how to respond to these misunderstandings. Good teachers know how to draw on and apply these different forms of knowledge in real and fast-changing situations; research by the University of Chicago's Philip Jackson suggests that teachers make more than a thousand decisions over the course of a single day.

The problem in American education is that developing these skills is not systematized in any way. Teachers learn mostly through experience, and U.S. teachers generally report that the training they do receive is of limited utility in practice. Licensing exams for teachers lack the rigor of the bar and board exams that exist in law, medicine, engineering, accounting, and many other professions. Some teachers master their craft over time, but others merely learn to control a classroom. A recent study by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation of more than 3,000 classrooms in the United States found that over 60 percent were competently managed, meaning that the students were not unruly and did the work assigned by the teacher, but only 20 percent were engaged in ambitious learning that challenged students to think, reason, and analyze texts or problems.

Not surprisingly, these patterns in how teachers teach are mirrored in what students can do. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress regularly show that two-thirds or more of American students of all ages have mastered basic skills, such as reading and recalling information, but only one-third can do more advanced work that involves the application of information or analysis. American students fall in the middle of the pack on international assessments that measure higher-order thinking, scoring 14th in reading, 17th in science, and 25th in math on the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment. Building a twenty-first-century school system will require teachers who can help students do this kind of advanced work.

What would such a system look like? Examining the countries that lead international educational rankings, several patterns emerge. Very broadly, they do a better job at nurturing human capital, developing knowledge, and helping teachers grow. Unlike the United States, whose strategy emphasizes using tests to hold teachers and schools accountable, more successful countries rely on investments on the front end to achieve quality control. The success of schools in these countries creates a virtuous cycle, boosting public support for investing in education and making teaching a more attractive profession. Although correlation is not causation and more research remains to be done, these countries share certain approaches to reform that look quite different from the ones pursued by the United States.

To be sure, the countries that lead the international assessments differ from the United States in many ways, making it difficult to directly import their lessons. Most notably, they are generally smaller and more racially homogeneous than the United States. That said, it would be wrong to conclude that the United States can learn nothing from foreign countries, particularly given how much successful educational systems have in common across otherwise very different cultures. The characteristics they share can also be seen in other, stronger professions in the United States, as well as in leading American charter-school networks, suggesting that they are central elements to improved performance.

RAISING THE BAR

Any attempt to reform American education would have to start with attracting better teachers, retaining them, and helping them develop their practice. The most striking finding of comparative

international research is that the best-performing school systems draw their teachers from the top third of college graduates, whereas lower-ranking school systems do not. A recent McKinsey report found that most U.S. teachers come "from the bottom two-thirds of college classes, and, for many schools in poor neighborhoods, from the bottom third." In Finland, teaching is the single most preferred career for 15-year-olds, a priority that allows the country to accept only one in ten applicants to its teacher-training programs. Similarly, in Singapore, only one in eight is accepted to such programs. By contrast, in the United States, even the most prestigious education schools commonly accept 50 percent or more of the applicants to their teacher-training programs.

How might the United States make teaching a more attractive and selective occupation? In the past year, the country's two largest teachers' unions (the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association) and the Council of Chief State School Officers, which is the main organization representing state-level education officials, have released reports advocating raising the bar for entry into teaching. Under their proposals, prospective teachers would start out with provisional status for their first several years. Before becoming fully licensed, they would need to demonstrate their knowledge of their subjects and their skill in the classroom. Tenure would no longer be an expected and near-immediate step but would become an accomplishment similar to getting tenure at a university or making partner at a law firm. These changes have the potential to remake the whole field: if it became harder to become a teacher, respect for the profession would grow, and schools might start to show better results. This process could boost public confidence in schools, potentially leading to higher teachers' pay and, in the long run, a greater desire by talented people to join the profession.

A higher bar for teaching should go hand in hand with a revamped approach to teacher education. The United States has more than 1,300 traditional institutions for teacher preparation, a growing number of alternative certification providers, a smaller number of city-sponsored "teacher residencies," and a few primary and secondary schools that run their own training programs. The most successful of these programs share several common features. They attract people who majored as undergraduates in the subjects that they wish to teach, they focus more on clinical practice than on classroom theory, they choose their applicants carefully (rather than simply

treating students as a revenue stream), and they use data about how their students ultimately fare as teachers to assess and revise their approaches. Ideally, many lower-quality providers would be closed, but shutting down existing programs would prove difficult politically. Instead, the equivalent of a bar exam for teachers, which could measure demonstrated teaching skills, as well as substantive and pedagogical knowledge, might achieve the same outcome. The training programs whose graduates passed this comprehensive exam would attract more applicants, whereas those whose students did not would become irrelevant.

WHAT TEACHERS KNOW

Improving teacher training will also require educators to better develop granular, usable knowledge to guide the field. Professions are fundamentally grounded in their claims to specialized information. Pilots are permitted to fly planes, lawyers to draw up contracts, and doctors to prescribe drugs because they possess an exclusive understanding of how to do these things. Teaching, however, lacks the type of codified, shared knowledge that ensures quality control in other professions—hence the huge inconsistencies from classroom to classroom. In some regards, American education today is where medicine was a little more than a century ago: instead of relying on a shared knowledge base, teachers draw on a mix of hunches, occasional research, and some outright quackery.

A major obstacle to progress in education is that nobody is specifically tasked with developing such a shared knowledge base. Education researchers write mainly for other researchers; teachers generate new ideas daily but don't necessarily share them or put them to a test; an entire industry creates classroom materials, but it focuses more on what will be bought by districts and states than on what would improve learning for teachers or students. Anthony Bryk, the president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, has estimated that whereas fields such as medicine and engineering spend 5-15 percent of their budgets on research and development, the U.S. education system invests less than one-quarter of one percent for those purposes. Not only does the field lack knowledge; it lacks the resources and infrastructure needed to produce it.

The good news is that there are a number of independent pockets of knowledge that the profession can expand on. Education scholars have

conducted serious academic research on several practical topics, including how to teach early reading, the guidelines of which are developed and specific enough to be used in the classroom. Charter-school operators and independent researchers have also studied what the best teachers and principals are doing and, through books and videos, have shared these insights. Teacher-to-teacher websites help break down the isolation of teaching and allow educators to draw on the work of their peers in developing lessons and units. Schools and teachers can turn to many commercial and nonprofit institutions that offer advice and programs, although they vary widely in quality and few mechanisms exist to separate the wheat from the chaff. What is needed is a substantial push, either from the government or from private philanthropy, to integrate these different sources of information, develop shared standards by which they can be vetted, and build new knowledge where it is lacking.

ISOLATION IS THE ENEMY OF IMPROVEMENT

Knowledge and training will be of little use without organizational processes to ensure that educators apply what they learn. K-12 education largely lacks the common standards that govern day-to-day work in other professions, such as peer review in the academy. (These are standards internal to the profession that guide everyday work, not external accountability measures, which offer punishment but little guidance.) What happens in one classroom generally has little bearing on what happens in another. This kind of isolation is the enemy of consistent improvement; if teachers are going to get better, they need time to work together, discuss lessons, reflect on their students' performance, and develop new and better approaches.

In this regard as well, the countries whose schools top international education rankings have it right. In Japanese schools, for example, teachers regularly come together to study one another's lessons and refine them. Doing this sort of work well depends on both structure and culture. Structurally, U.S. teachers spend more time in the classroom and less time planning and working with one another than do teachers in countries with higher-performing schools. Secondary school teachers in the United States teach an average of nearly 1,100 hours a year, compared with an average of 660 hours across the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and fewer than 600 hours in Japan and South Korea. Culturally, for growth through professional collaboration to be effective, U.S. teachers

need to feel as though they are members of a shared profession with a common knowledge base, rather than freelancers accountable only to what they think is right.

Here, too, there have been a number of recent developments that the U.S. education system should build on. Principals in the United States have historically acted mostly as building managers and have thus relied largely on administrative skills. The recent push for greater academic performance, however, has led to an increasing recognition that successful schools require pedagogical leadership, and preparation programs for administrators have started training principals on how to work with teachers to improve instruction. The field has also seen the proliferation of "professional learning communities" – teams of teachers who work together on problems that they encounter in the classroom. The challenge for the next generation will be to combine and accelerate these efforts, in particular to link the largely local initiatives to improve particular schools or districts to a broader effort to build a shared knowledge base.

Schools also need ways to more formally recognize and incorporate different levels of expertise. The U.S. education system has long operated on the principle of teacher equality – the idea that each teacher possesses equivalent levels of knowledge and skill. But this is clearly not true, and the country should not organize its schools as if it were. Singapore, for example, offers advanced teachers the same type of salary increases that in the United States are generally available only to those who move out of teaching and into administration. The United States could implement a similar system in order to create career ladders in teaching, which would formally reward teachers who have more expertise and are willing to take on more responsibility by upping their pay and status. In the long run, career ladders could better integrate teacher training into the profession. New teachers, carefully trained in effective methods by experienced mentors, would enter schools where what they had learned would be reinforced and strengthened over time; then, as they gained expertise, they would develop and share their knowledge to train the next generation.

A DIFFERENT ROLE FOR THE STATE

If the country succeeded in building a skilled and knowledgeable teaching force, the role of the state – including federal, state, and

local government bodies – would change. Currently, a central part of the problem in American education is that government officials are trying to remake teaching from afar. But teaching is hard work and has proved difficult to change from above; efforts to do so have set teachers against policymakers. If the country implemented the needed processes to ensure skilled teaching – better recruitment, training, knowledge development, and school organization – teachers would come to be seen as experts, like those in other professions. The state could then shift its function from holding teachers accountable to taking on roles in which it has more of a comparative advantage and is more likely to be effective.

In particular, the state could assist in the creation of curricula, invest in research and development, screen teacher resumes, and provide expert technical assistance. It also could perform administrative functions, dealing with payroll, real estate, and food services. It could do a better job supporting students outside of school, in ways that would mitigate some of the worst consequences of the weak American welfare state. And it could retain some accountability functions: presumably, many more schools would be performing well given how much the field would be investing in training, knowledge, and organization, but if some consistently were not, they could still be closed by districts or states.

But the government should not try to micromanage education from above, putting forward an endless array of requirements, regulations, and accountability targets, in the hopes that doing so will somehow force schools to improve. This approach has been tried before, again and again, and it has yielded what the sociologist Charles Payne has called "so much reform, so little change."

The U.S. school system still bears the imprint of its origins. Created in the era of the assembly line, it was never intended to push all its students to engage in the kind of complex learning and critical thinking that the twenty-first-century U.S. economy demands. In the intervening years, the country has layered more rules and higher expectations on top of that initial structure, but it has not fundamentally remade teaching into a modern profession. To do so will not be easy; it will require political will and significant changes to long-standing institutions. But it is time to start anew and to build the school system that might actually yield the results that the country seeks and that its students deserve.