

United States students becoming less competitive in today's world

BY DR. MARTA PEREZ



More and more, technology allows us to understand our place in the world. Education policy-makers, like school board members have an opportunity today, unlike any other time in the past, to see what other systems are doing right and adapt them to our situation whenever possible.

"Education at a Glance 2004," a recently released report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), ranks educational standards and performance for industrialized nations worldwide. The intent of the report is to enable countries to see their performance as measured against other countries using indicators such as high school and college graduation rates, spending per student, spending as compared to other social priorities, equal access to education, and other factors that shape a nation's commitment to learning.

In the United States, spending averages \$10,871 per elementary, secondary and college student annually — the highest per-student average in the world. The United States also reports the highest number of teaching hours in elementary and secondary schools, and the second highest in middle schools specifically. Even so, in terms of high school graduation rates among adults ages 25 to 34, we are falling behind Japan, South Korea, the Czech Republic, and Norway — all of which once trailed the United States in such rankings. In fact, the United States ranks 10th among industrialized nations in this category.

The implication, according to Barry McGaw, director of education for the OECF, is that the competitive gap continues to close in on the American education system. The less competitive we become educationally, the less competitive we will be economically and culturally.

For years, Scandinavian schools have outperformed their American counterparts. Torbin Riise, a South Florida resident since 1986, is a businessman who was born in Denmark. His two oldest children attended school in Denmark, but his youngest son attended public schools in Miami, so he has a basis for comparison. When asked about the difference in the two systems, he noted the following:

"In Scandinavian countries, there is a long tradition of dedication to education. Because of natural conditions, Denmark's wealth had to be built on anything other than raw materials, so early on education was the answer for the country's prosperity and the most important things we could offer our

children. And, as typical for small countries, our people became tradesmen and traveled to other countries, so learning other languages and cultures became very important for our economy.

"Teaching is a well esteemed and well paid profession. Teacher quality is a priority and teachers have a high degree of autonomy about what happens in the classroom. In addition, young people are more receptive to learning, and accept discipline better. It is not so much a discipline that is forced upon the students, rather it's a cultural self-discipline that includes respect for teachers and for adults as part of children's upbringing."

In another part of the world, over time the trend continues whereby Japan and other Oriental countries leap forward in ranking for educational progress. A clear difference between expectations in Japan versus American schools is, again, discipline. The Japanese system bears little tolerance for student disrespect of teachers. Parents are counted on to require that children behave and show consideration for their teachers.

It is little wonder then that their class sizes balloon to two and three times their American counterparts, packing up to 70 students in a class. However, the teacher is assured parental cooperation in managing disruptions. I do not advocate larger class sizes, but I do believe that professional respect of educators in managing the classroom is an area where American schools must improve.

Our children need reinforcement to understand their place in the world and the place of others, as well. On that note, elementary and secondary school systems in the United States must commit themselves to requiring foreign language education.

We would like to boast that we have the best educational programs in the world, the greatest teaching methods, and the finest resources, yet our students fall behind in understanding their future competitors. Language and cultural awareness forge the dance by which we interact internationally, and without this talent, future business and political leaders — and hence the nation, may lag farther behind — in spite of our massive spending on education.

This awareness does not mean that we can apply a Band-Aid to our educational problems simply by philosophizing about what more efficient systems do. Certainly, the American education system has its unique challenges that are unlike those of any other systems. However, it is insightful to make a mental note that in the most successful schooling models respect for teachers and language acquisition are priorities.

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