

U.S. Educational Performance

Most everyone will agree that there is room to improve our current educational system to better meet students needs. The data received from the TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study) report has done away with the illusion Americans have held about our educational system. Although data has shown that our education system is performing better than it has in the past, we are still far behind other technological countries. Our performance on an international level, as shown by the TIMSS study, was mediocre at best in comparison to many other countries.

The TIMSS report has given the United States a way to compare many aspects of our education system to others students who are performing better in mathematics and science on an international scale. Educators in the United States have been able to look at an overall picture in which comparisons of curriculum, teacher training, hours spent in the classroom, lesson structure and teacher pay are all very important. The data from the TIMSS study showed that at least 50% of Japanese eight graders are attending tutorials outside the school environment, and that number may be as high as 80% of senior high school students and those preparing to take college entrance exams.

William Schmidt (U.S. TIMSS National Research Coordinator, Michigan State University) typified the U.S educational system as “an inch wide and a mile deep”. He believes that the problem is not teachers who lack qualifications, tracking or lack of it, or our large class sizes but it is a system that lacks national curriculum organization and standards. In Japan students at the eighth grade level study approximately eight subjects during the year. They study them in depth. American students by comparison study an average of 30 topics during the course of the year. According to this international

comparison our curriculum and our textbooks through eighth grade are highly repetitive and unchallenging in grade after grade of the middle school years.

Students in Japan regularly seek outside educational services in the form of tutoring. In Japan a providing private teaching is looked upon as a matter of prestige, parents are proud to provide their children with additional education. The objective of tutoring is also completely different in Japan as compared to the typical tutoring setting in the United States. Students are encouraged to exceed what is expected in the public education system. Parents know that in order to compete for the best schools and the best jobs their children will have to exceed the achievements of their peers. More can be understood as to the uses of tutoring by looking at the difference between Japan and the United States.

Students in the United States were not particularly embarrassed by the fact that they chose to seek the services of a tutor. Close to 90% of students were satisfied with the results tutoring achieved.

The majority of students sought tutoring in order to improve their grade in the class, some used it specifically to study for the final exam. Less than 35% sought tutoring to help them improve their score on a college entrance exam. The majority of students did not use tutoring to reach exceptional educational goals like their Japanese counterparts.

The attitudes that the students convey, and the emphasis or lack there of, on educational goals of American students are a direct reflection of the lack of expectations placed on students by both parents and the educational system. “Americans accept the need for practice and drill to achieve excellence in sports, music and or dance, but few

parents favor spending more time at home on academic activities.”¹ American parents abdicate more responsibilities to their children’s teachers as they get older, in contrast Asian parents become more involved in their children’s academic life with age. Teachers keep in daily contact with parents in the Asian society, emotional bond between student and teacher is favored. “Many American parents simply do not know how to help their children become high achievers.” Asians seemed to know how to use peer group motivation, the adoption of routines, organizational skills, note taking to help their children succeed. Question asking skills are also routinely taught at school and in the home.

Students are reluctant to get help, or work with someone to enhance their understanding simply because tutors in this country have been primarily used to remediate students with a weak understanding of subject matter. The tutoring system in Japan provides the student access to a person who can provide a support system not only to improve performance in school but also to enrich the students overall education. One Japanese teacher complained that the Juku (Tutorial center) has become so important in the education of the student that the grades received in school were of secondary importance. Since the college entrance exam in Japan has carried much more weight than grades in the admittance process, the practice tests provided at the Juku and the information students are required to learn there has become at least of equal importance to the time spent in school. The SAT , for American students holds less importance than the exams the Japanese student must take, but the SAT still accounts for upwards of 40% of a students total admittance score.

¹ The Learning Gap, page 68

Americans have held to a belief of economic world superiority. This perspective has developed because of our outstanding performance in world markets and the fact that Americans have enjoyed a high standard of living. But when it comes to our educational system it is apparent that in order to stay competitive we must provide students with educational opportunities that will fit the need of the twenty-first century. Currently our educational system functions at levels of mediocrity. We will not be able to maintain our position in the world market by allowing our students to achieve at such low levels in comparison to other countries. Only five percent of American students are achieving at the level that 50% of Japanese students achieve in mathematics. “To cling tenaciously to an unrealistic positive self image breeds complacency, and even arrogance. This is a huge obstacle to the improvement of education in this country”²

The recent release of the TIMSS statistics for 12th graders has shown that even our top performing students in mathematics is not world class. Students in this group placed among the lowest of the 16 countries participating in this part of the survey. Eleven nations outperformed the U.S. and our scores were not significantly different from the remaining other nations. The average U.S. 8th grade mathematics performance is below the international average when the average is based on all of the participating 41 countries, but is similar to the international average based on the 20 participating countries that participated in the assessment of the 12th graders. In other words, our best performing students are at the bottom in comparison to the students in the other participating nations.

The majority of the students studied used tutoring to help them to improve their grades with less citing that they used tutors to help them pass their finals. Only a small

² The Learning Gap, page 126

percentage of students used tutors to help them improve their scores on college entrance exams. *Tutorials are a valuable educational tool for students of all ability levels. They may be used to enhance a students understanding of a subject, provide enrichment, improve study skills and test taking skills, help to prepare a student for college entrance exams, or help a student study for an upcoming comprehensive final.*