How do international systems of education compare to and contrast with U.S. education?

When one compares education on a global scale, one must assure that there can be a direct correlation to all the involved systems. It is not possible to compare apples to oranges. Therefore, as educators, we must assure that we level the playing field before we get all bent out of shape over student achievement across the globe. The following information, and this is not a complete list, must be factored into the mix:

1. Compulsory school attendance
2. Educational tracking
3. School financing
4. Public schools versus Private or Charter Schools
5. Length of the school term
6. Hours of class time
7. Central governmental control over curriculum versus state and local control
8. Statistically significant differences between scores

Such data varies greatly form nation to nation and even from one part of a country to another part of that same country. Even so, stakeholders in the education of each nation demand to know just how their schools compare to schools around the globe. (Hull, 2007; Staff, 2009)

One must ask just what the fascination is with how a student in Japan compares to a student in the U.S. or Italy. Is it more than just bragging rights? Or do such attempts at ranking point to issues and problems that need to be addressed? According to Hull (2007), many of the stakeholders argue that it is the U. S. position in the future global economic picture that drives the movement for higher student achievement. This is particularly true in the areas of mathematics and science.(Hull, 2007)

According to the Center for Public Education, the United States rankings in literacy and numeracy in grades 4 and 8 have not changed greatly form 1995-2003. However, the rankings have fallen slightly for students aged 15 or roughly grade 9. The center also points out that many of the participating nations actually experienced gains during the testing time period. In science literacy, the United States is basically at a standstill. However, the U.S. standing in science will most likely fall during the next cycle of tests. (Hull, 2007; Staff, 2009)

The international community utilizes several tests to assess student achievement. These include Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), Program for International Student Achievement (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) to assess reading literacy, numeracy, and science literacy. Adult Literacy and Life-skills Survey (ALLS) is used to assess these same skills in persons aged 16 to 65. According to the National Science Teachers Association, the fallout from the current No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has resulted in a shift in educational focus toward numeracy and literacy an away from science literacy. While it is noted that the US has yet to lose ground, other nations are steadily gaining ground. The good news is that the current administration is seeking to increase funding for all education and to include a focus not just on numeracy and literacy but also science literacy. (Staff, 2009)

In the report *Chance Favors the Prepared Mind*, Gary Phillips states,

(T)he United States needs to substantially increase the scientific and mathematical competency of the general adult population so that the voting citizenry can better

understand and reach a consensus on policies that address many of the world’s most pressing problems.

In addition, we need larger numbers of people working in the scientific disciplines in order to better compete in a global economic environment. To achieve these goals, national and state policy makers need indicators of scientific and mathematical progress early in the educational pipeline. It is argued that the strategy of linking NAEP to TIMSS helps to provide this system of indicators.(Phillips, 2007)

Phillips also echoes the previously noted position on the student achievement in the United States to that of students in other countries. In addition, he noted student test results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Regardless of the report being cited, the results for the U.S. are both good news and bad news. On an international scale, the U.S. is doing better than most other nations but the highest achieving students in the U.S. are still performing well below the highest achieving students at an international level. (Hull, 2007; McQuillan, 2007; Phillips, 2007; Staff, 2009)

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