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Have We Gotten It Wrong on School Reform?

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Benchmarking is popular in business. After studying the performance of the top companies in a particular arena, other companies emulate the leaders' best practices seeking the same level of success.

This method has made its way into education. For example, the new common state standards for reading and mathematics were written after study of the academic standards of the world's top-achieving countries. These new American standards will be nearly universal in the United States because 45 states and the District of Columbia [have adopted](#) them.

Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems by Marc S. Tucker and colleagues takes benchmarking one step further. The systems of schooling in Shanghai (China) Finland, Japan, Singapore, and Ontario (Canada) are analyzed, since students in those countries or provinces consistently outperform American students on international tests of academic performance.

According to this analysis, six key factors underlie the success of those top performers:

1. Funding schools equitably, with additional resources for those serving needy students
2. Paying teachers competitively and comparably
3. Investing in high-quality preparation, mentoring and professional development for teachers and leaders, completely at government expense
4. Providing time in the school schedule for collaborative planning and ongoing professional learning to continually improve instruction
5. Organizing a curriculum around problem-solving and critical thinking skills

6. Testing students rarely but carefully -- with measures that require analysis, communication, and defense of ideas

In the book, Tucker concludes, "high-performing states and nations are focused on building coherent *systems* of teaching and learning, focused on meaningful goals and supported with universally available, strategic resources."

In the United States, common state standards are intended to bring greater coherence to education, but those standards are just beginning to be implemented, and it is too early to see the effects. Furthermore, setting standards is an essential step but only one element of success.

Unfortunately, most other practices of high-achieving countries are not being implemented broadly and consistently in the U.S. Grossly unequal funding between school districts is tolerated in far too many states. Teacher pay is not comparable to that of other college-educated workers ("[Teacher Pay: U.S. Ranks 22nd Out of 27 Countries](#)," Huffington Post blog, 8-30-11). Teacher preparation programs vary widely in quality, and too many professional development efforts are short-term, disconnected or irrelevant.

In addition to not adequately addressing factors that are essential to the success of high-performing countries, the U.S. is pursuing school reforms unknown in those countries. Extensive student testing, leading to punitive actions for schools with inadequate test results, is at the heart of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The creation of charter schools, operated by a variety of for-profit and nonprofit groups, is encouraged by conservatives and liberals. Many states have endorsed alternative routes to recruiting teachers that provide candidates with minimal preparation.

As Tucker points out, "none of these jurisdictions -- Finland, Japan, Ontario (Canada) Shanghai (China) or Singapore -- is focused on the pursuit of narrow test results, market-based reforms, a deskilled teaching force presumably motivated by threats of firing, or a competitive approach that sets up some schools, teachers, and, consequently, students as winners, while setting up others as losers."

Some will argue that the United States is unique -- that what brings success in other countries is not relevant to our situation. The American steel and automotive industries once also believed that. They sank, until they realized that knowledge did not stop at our nation's borders.

Are our leaders making the same mistake with school reform that those decimated industries made in their areas? In his 2011 State of the Union address, President Obama [noted](#) that "America has fallen to ninth in the proportion of young people with college degrees" and that "as many as a quarter of our students aren't even finishing high school." Other countries have overtaken us.

Not everything done abroad is good, nor is it always transferable to the U.S. But, with school reform, we are unique in pursuing so much testing, punitive measures against

schools and teachers, and the creation of so many independent charter schools. At the same time, we are ignoring financial inequality among schools and school districts, not paying our teachers a comparable wage, and encouraging practices that lead to incoherence.

This year and next, the NCLB requirements will undoubtedly change, through either waivers granted to states by the U.S. Secretary of Education or amendments to the law crafted by the Congress. Now is a good time to ask whether we are on the right path to better schools. If not, we had better change fast if we want to be competitive in the world.