

International education leaves America in the dust

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spread editor

Countries all over the world await their annual test results, but when the United States looks upon its status compared to 65 other nations, it seems that its marks are as unimpressive as they have been in the past several years.

In 2012, the United States scored below average in mathematics and slightly above average in science and reading on the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA test. These scores have actually dropped since 2000's test, giving clear sight to the fact that these other countries' education systems are advancing much faster than ours.

But what are these advancements we have failed to take on? Asian and European schools are faring much better not only in analysis of the PISA test, but also in that their students are simply learning more—effectively learning more, that is. Schedules might be the first answer to that question.

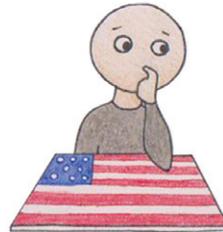
"I'm a big fan of the German schedule," German teacher Lisa Worthington-Groce said. "So when you think about your science classes, where here we might say, 'Okay, one year of chemistry and you've satisfied your chemistry credit,' in Germany, they have kind of a modified block schedule."

Germany, like many European schools, implements a schedule in which students take many classes per year—much more than the required six in the United States—attending only a fraction of those classes each day. While Monday's schedule may differ from Tuesday's and Wednesday's, the weekly schedule repeats itself throughout the school year.

"I think [this schedule] does definitely allow students to gain not only a wider breadth, but to go deeper into the material than a typical American high school student would be able to do after one year of taking a subject," Worthington-Groce said.

Having such a modified schedule requires maturity within students to be able to tackle all of the classes during one school year, and that leads itself into kids possessing the maturity to truly care about their academic progress.

"I think the focus on grades here [in America] puts a lot more stress on [students]," junior and five-year student of an



United States

Spends more money than any other country on education

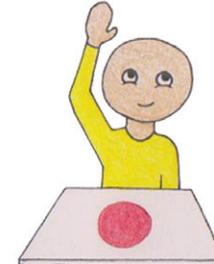
14% of new teachers resign after their first year; 50% resign after their first five years



Canada

Large effort to integrate its increasing number of immigrants into public schools

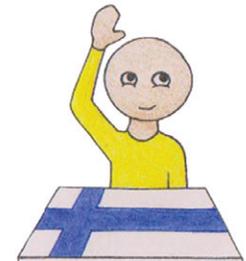
Decentralized system (each province has its own curriculum)



Japan

Students spend 240 days at school each year

Centralized system and a focus on equalizing the curriculum for each student



Finland

Elementary students have a 75 minute recess (the U.S. average is 27 minutes)

Teachers spend about four hours in the classroom each day

Graphic by Mackenzie Mitchell

Education for United States' students pales in comparison to the success of other nations such as Canada, Japan and Finland. Inferior scheduling, treatment of teachers and elongated breaks have contributed to the United States falling behind in many areas of instruction.

international school in Switzerland Miranda Cecil said. "Kids cared more in and of themselves about their grades [in Switzerland], and here it's more like, teachers tell you that you have to make good grades."

In addition, grades in both Asian and European schools are not majorly reliant on standardized testing, which is seen frequently in America.

"There is definitely a lot more focus on response questions [in Germany], not just written but also orally," Worthington-Groce said. "The idea of multiple-choice standardized tests is not common."

Critical thinking questions composed much of the PISA test, but aside from that, this kind of critical thinking that is being taught in schools around the world is exactly what is essential in post-secondary schools and, later on, jobs. Language is also a quite important difference between America and the rest of the world.

Sophomore Justine Wielemans, a student who lived in French-speaking Belgium her entire life until this year, said that it is vital to learn multiple languages, as Belgium is a country with three official languages: Dutch, French and German.

"I started Dutch in pre school," Wielemans said. "I'd have one lesson a week just to get familiar with it, and I had Dutch for all

of my primary school and secondary school. The languages are easier to learn than when you're older."

Basic knowledge of another language gets one used to words like "indirect object" and "past participle," terms normally taught until about eighth or ninth grade, then forgotten about in order to focus more on literature. In a way, learning a foreign language fortifies understanding of one's own mother language, which could be beneficial to American students.

"For my school, a big difference is here, the teachers have more of a personal relationship with you," Cecil said. "My teachers here—I wouldn't say they know me better, but they care more about how I feel about stuff."

Wielemans expressed the same feelings.

"The first day I was here, it was so hard because I didn't speak English, and all of my teachers were so nice with me and so welcoming," she said. "They all tried to help me."

There is always room for improvement. What practices should we as Americans advocate to apply into our schools?

First of all, teachers are treated with much more respect in Asian and European countries. In certain parts of Asia and Finland, obtaining a teaching degree is just

about as hard as working for a doctorate degree. Teachers are paid much, much more than they are here in the States, resulting in more incentive to do all that they can to use class time wisely and appeal to each student's learning experience.

Countries and cities that scored exceptionally high on the PISA test, including Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore, were noted on providing each of their students with an equal learning environment, encouraging everyone to learn at the same level so that nobody was left behind. Countries of Asia sincerely believe in hard work and perseverance.

"There have been studies here in America about the amount of material lost; we have these big two-and-a-half month-long summer breaks," Worthington-Groce said. "Personally, I wouldn't mind seeing a shorter summer and a few more breaks throughout the year. That would be more conducive to student learning."

If the citizens of America are educated on the rest of the world's stellar academic feats and are willing to impose, at the least, some form of those practices within their school systems, the next generation may be able to bring the United States up from "average" and into a world of more possibilities.