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U.S. 12th-Graders Close to Bottom on International Tests

Results "Unacceptable"

Two days after the closing ceremonies at the Winter Olympics, the results of another international competition were released. The Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) compared the math and science achievement of 12th-graders from 21 industrial nations. Sadly, the performance of U.S. students was about as far from a gold medal as it gets, with results ranking among the worst in the world.

So bleak was the American performance, that officials from the President on down felt compelled to call for an overhaul in what, and in the way, students are taught. "There is something wrong with the system," said the President, "and it is our generation's responsibility to fix it."

Described by Pascal Forgione, Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics (and keynote speaker at CAPE's legislative conference this month), as "the world's largest, most comprehensive, and most rigorous international education comparison ever," TIMSS examined student achievement in general math, general science, advanced math, and physics. In general math and science, defined as "the knowledge of mathematics and of science needed to function effectively in society as adults," the United States outscored only two countries, Cyprus and South Africa, of the 21 countries

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Policymakers Call for Wholesale Reform

In the best tradition of Americans responding quickly to a crisis, high-level officials in Washington were spewing forth treatments for the poor performance of 12th-graders on the TIMSS tests faster than cherry blossoms were blooming at the Tidal Basin (see related story). The ink on the international report had hardly dried before lots of ideas were proposed to get American students out from under and back on track.

A+ Accounts

Responding to the embarrassing test results at a news conference on March 3, Sen. Robert Torricelli (D-NJ) said, "The status quo is not defensible. Everything is not fine." He said the proposal for A+ Accounts, which he and Sen. Paul Coverdell (R-GA) cosponsor, would pump billions of new dollars into preparing children for competition in the 21st Century by encouraging parents and others to save for and invest in education. The proposed accounts would offer tax-free interest on annual savings of up to \$2,000 per child. The Senate is expected to vote on the measure in mid-March.

Meanwhile, Sen. Coverdell, the bill's primary author, reacted to the TIMSS tests by saying the current system is "failing our children" and by

calling for immediate and sweeping change — "real reforms that address America's growing education crisis."

Urging those who defend the *status quo* to abandon their "unyielding allegiance to the old, failed system and embrace real education reform," Coverdell said A+ Accounts "are an important first step in this direction."

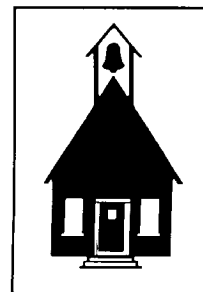
Scholarships

Speaking about the TIMSS results earlier this month at a Congressional advocacy day sponsored by the United States Catholic Conference, House Speaker Newt Gingrich told the group to ask their legislators if the disheartening performance of U.S. students on the international exam was "bad enough" to warrant "dramatic and decisive" reform. He said the current system "has to be replaced; it cannot be repaired." For Gingrich, a main road to school reform is school choice. He noted the House would soon vote on a Senate-passed proposal to give low-income parents in

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Sen. Bob Torricelli (D-NJ) at A+ Accounts news conference - March 3, 1998



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that participated. In the advanced math and physics tests, which were given in 16 countries to students taking challenging coursework, no country scored lower than ours. "Our best students in mathematics and science are simply not world class," observed William Schmidt, the U.S. director of TIMSS.

Anticipating criticisms leveled against earlier international comparisons of student performance, the TIMSS report noted that the general student population of the United States was "not being compared to more select groups in other countries." The general knowledge component, for example, was given to a representative sample of 12th grade students, "not just those in academically-oriented programs."

Because the scientifically-selected group of test takers mirrored all U.S. 12th-graders, it included students in private schools. However, the private school component was not large enough to permit a breakout of performance. On the math and science tests of the National Assessment of Educational

science performance of 4th-graders and 8th-graders. Taken together, the three reports show that when it comes to international comparisons, the longer American children stay in school, the worse they do. In math, for example, U.S. 4th-graders scored above the international average, but by 8th grade they were below that benchmark, and by 12th grade they were all but at the bottom of the barrel.

Although the TIMSS report itself refrained from offering any reasons for the disheartening performance of American students, a number of education leaders and policymakers were quick to put forth some explanations as well as a complement of solutions (see related story). U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley called the test results "entirely unacceptable," and said they "absolutely confirm our need to raise our standards of achievement, testing, and teaching." The Secretary offered the following six-step remedy.

**Riley's Remedy
for Poor Math &
Science Scores**

1. Build a firm foundation by having more students study algebra and geometry by 8th and 9th grade.
2. Raise state and local standards of academic performance in mathematics and science.
3. Measure student performance against rigorous standards, like the voluntary national test in 8th grade mathematics.
4. Offer a challenging curriculum and encourage students to take demanding mathematics and science courses, such as calculus and physics by 12th grade.
5. Improve the teaching of mathematics and science through teacher training, and reduce the large number of teachers teaching out-of-field.
6. Destroy the myth that advanced mathematics and science are for only a few students.

**% of 12th Grade
Students With
1996 NAEP
Scale Scores At
or Above 300**

Public	Private
Math	
59.0%	71.5%
Science	
47.8%	56.5%

Progress (NAEP), which is given only to students in the United States, 12th grade students in private schools score above the average (see chart).

The TIMSS report released last month is the last in a series of three. Earlier reports looked at the math and

Court Watch

March roared in like a lion on the school choice litigation front. On March 4, the Wisconsin State Supreme Court heard 75 minutes of what one participant described as "grueling" oral arguments on the constitutionality of the state's school choice program. Clint Bolick of the Institute for Justice joined other choice defenders against attorneys from the NEA, the ACLU, and the NAACP. Bolick observed, "The two justices who twice before voted against the program seemed opposed again; we need the remaining four justices to win."

Prior to the court hearing, a caravan of buses brought Milwaukee parents and students to a rally on the capitol square to show support for the program, which allows low-income students to attend the school of their choice. Addressing the group, Gov. Tommy G. Thompson said, "School choice gives parents a powerful tool in making sure their child gets a world-class education, regardless of their income and regardless of where they live." And on the issue of including religious schools in the program, Thompson said, "When it comes to education, we don't need to fear religion, we need to fear low test scores, high dropout rates and low graduation rates."

Gov. Thompson described the cause of school choice as noble and said he was confident the court would render a favorable ruling. "As we pursue this noble cause, we must never forget who is at the center of this debate," he said. "This is about our children — nothing more, nothing less."

In another state, the Vermont Supreme Court was to hear on March 10 the case for allowing religious schools to be included among the options provided parents who live in areas where there are no public schools. Dick Komer of the Institute for Justice was scheduled to argue the case for the town of Chittenden



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the District of Columbia the chance to "send their child to a school they believe in." Calling D.C. public schools a "national disgrace," Gingrich said the country has a "civil rights duty to not allow children to be destroyed."

Last fall, the Senate approved by voice vote S.1502, a bill that would provide 2,000 scholarships of up to \$3,200 to low-income students in the District of Columbia. The House was unable to take up the matter before recessing last year, but it now looks like it will vote on the Senate bill sometime

this month.

In a related development, it was reported that 7,573 children from the District had applied for the 1,000 tuition scholarships offered to low-income students for the 1998-99 school year by the privately-funded Washington Scholarship Fund. According to the Fund, one out of every six children who are eligible for the scholarship applied. House Majority Leader Dick Armey said the 6,573 students remaining on the scholarship waiting list constitute "a lot of reasons" why the House should approve the Senate bill.

E-Rate Update

Time is running out for schools that want to apply for E-rate discounts during the 75-day window, a period in which all applications will be treated as if received on the same date. The window closes April 15, according to a recent clarification from the Schools and Libraries Corporation (SLC). In practical terms, that means Form 470 must be filed with the SLC on or before March 18 to allow for the 28-day waiting period that must occur between the filing of Form 470 and Form 471. Form 471 must be received by the SLC no later than April 15. Both forms must be filed for the application to qualify within the window. Applications filed after the window closes will be processed on a first-come, first-served basis.

According to the SLC, schools are applying at a breakneck pace, with 26,500 applications filed as of March 5.

About 10 new reference materials have been, or soon will be, added to the SLC's Web site (www.slcfund.org) to assist applicants in preparing Form 471. These new materials include a document on minimum standards, that will help applicants avoid automatic rejection, and also a document on methods to ease the filing of Form 471. Beyond what is posted on the SLC site, additional information may be found at www.neca.org.

Form 471 lets the SLC know the service provider(s) with which a school has contracted, the services and equipment for which the school is requesting discounts, and the percentage discount being sought.

Unlike Form 470, which can be submitted electronically or on paper, Form 471 can be submitted only on paper. Schools can submit the form via express mail to Schools and Libraries Corporation, c/o Sherri Chalupa, 2510 N. Dodge Street, Iowa City, IA 52245.



In His Own Words: Newt Gingrich

On March 2, House Speaker Newt Gingrich addressed a group of Catholic school parents and officials at a Congressional advocacy day sponsored by the U.S. Catholic Conference. Here are excerpts from his remarks.

On certification: "We are certified and credentialed beyond common sense....If you want to improve science teaching, hire a scientist; cut out all the credentialing malarkey; that is nonsense. Allow a real scientist to teach science; allow real mathematicians to teach math; allow people who are actually fluent in the language to teach the language."

On Catholic schools: "I'm here in part to say thank you because you have the courage to stand up and to say...that values are important, and to say that young people should grow up understanding their roots...that they are in fact children of God, and that they have wonderful opportunities and great responsibilities."

"[I]f a Martian anthropologist came to earth and said show me the most effective inner city schools, he'd be led 8 times out of 10 to a Catholic school....For less money, with more love and more discipline, Catholic schools educate more children better....You are living proof that when you recruit teachers who care, who take the time to talk to parents, and when you set a standard of discipline, when you establish goals within a framework of God's love and God's law, you can achieve miracles."

"My first advice is: Be the best you can at what you are, and let others model you. Because the truth is, if you water yourselves down to please our friends who aren't doing very well, you have destroyed what is one of the few real bastions of learning in America. So I think it's important for you to be proudly who you are."

On scholarships: "I'm a product of public schools.... I'm for public learning. But the purpose is the learning...and I want to support public learning wherever it occurs. If giving a scholarship means that students learn, then I have supported public learning."

"The people in America who have the greatest vested interest in scholarships are poor blacks and poor Hispanics in the inner city. It's beginning to sink in....It's not a hard issue; here it is: Why shouldn't parents be allowed to send their child to a school that works?"

"Show me a single elected official who if they were told their child was in the worst school in their state would keep their child in it. They wouldn't...they didn't, when it was personal. Well, it ought to be personal for every child."



capenotes

• “The independent schools are in many ways the most innovative and creative educational laboratories we have,” said **Coretta Scott King** last month at the annual conference of the National Association of Independent Schools. Mrs. King knows about private schools, having student-taught in one after being barred from doing so in a predominantly-white public school. Noting that private schools have “more flexibility in experimenting with teaching methods,” Mrs. King asked those schools to “lead the way” toward a “new era of hope and opportunity through educational reform.”

Observing that our culture is saturated by violence, through TV, videos, movies, and music, Mrs. King called on schools to stress peacemaking and to teach the message of nonviolence, unconditional love, and reconciliation — a message which her husband had taught and lived. She challenged private schools to provide “leadership in teaching young people how to cope with interpersonal conflict in a creative and constructive way.”

• If politicians know anything, they know how to count,” observed another speaker at the NAIS conference: recently-retired U.S. Representative **Floyd H. Flake** (D-NY). Flake added that the most recent polls are showing a groundswell of support for school choice within the minority community, and predicted that more legislators would be boarding the school choice bandwagon, if not leading the parade.

Defending vouchers as a means to make public schools more responsive to the needs of urban youth, Flake said competition would force a huge improvement in school quality.

• From legislation to litigation, from polls to proposals, from research to reality, 1997 was a year of significant gains in the school choice movement. The Heritage Foundation has catalogued the main events in a monograph titled *School Choice 1998: A Progress Report*. The concise and authoritative paper is a must-read for anyone who supports the right of parents to choose their children’s schools. The document is available on the Web at <www.heritage.org>.

• Wanted: Excellent Elementary Schools to Apply for Recognition in the

Blue Ribbon Schools Program.

To learn about the program and to download a draft application, go to the BRS Web site at <www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/BlueRibbonSchools/>. Be sure to pay attention to capitalized letters when entering the URL.

Although the final printed application packet will not be available until late May (it is going through a government review process), the draft application on the Web is close to final form. It will provide schools a chance to get a jump on the application process.

For information on how to receive the final packet when it becomes available in May, private schools should send the following one-sentence e-mail message to <cape@impresso.com>: “Please send me BRS application information.” We’ll then send you via e-mail a form you can use to request the packet.

• CAPE is once again the fortunate recipient of generous gifts from **Apple Computer, Inc.** Two state-of-the-art desktop computers, a digital camera, color printer, and an eMate laptop arrived at our offices last month, kindness of Martha Rolley and the folks at Apple. We are most grateful for Apple’s long-standing support of CAPE.

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