

TOP STORIES IN OPINION

1 of 12



The Human Wealth of Nations

2 of 12



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3 of 12



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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

The Human Wealth of Nations

The latest Program for International Student Assessment global education scores are a warning to both parties.

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Dec. 3, 2013 7:03 p.m. ET

Are the schools that serve the world's leading economy really only as good as those in Hungary, Lithuania, Vietnam and Russia? That's the conundrum posed by Tuesday's news of one more mediocre U.S. showing on international educational progress. If the findings land amid exaggerated angst about national decline, they still suggest that both Washington and the 50 states ought to be less complacent about prosperity and human capital.

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Political Diary editor Jason Riley on the announcement that American students are falling in international rankings. Photos: Getty Images

Since 1998, the Program for International Student Assessment, or Pisa, has ranked 15-year-old kids around the world on common reading, math and science tests. The U.S. brings up the middle—again—among 65 education systems that make up fourth-fifths of the global economy. The triennial Pisa report also shows—again—that East Asian countries like Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea produce the best outcomes.

U.S. performance hasn't budged in a decade. For 2012, U.S. students placed 26th in mathematics, a bit below the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development average, and 17th in reading and 21st in science, close to the average. The U.S. slipped in all categories compared to international competitors, plunging from 11th in reading as recently as 2009.

American teenagers seem especially weak in core academic subjects with high cognitive demands, such as translating concepts into solutions for real-world problems. A quarter never become proficient in math. In Shanghai and Korea, the comparable figure is 10% or fewer. Some 7% of U.S. students reached the top two scientific performance levels, compared with 17% in Finland and an amazing 27% in Shanghai. Is it tiger moms or tiger schools, or maybe both?

The U.S. is way out front in one measure: per-student spending. Only Austria, Luxembourg, Norway and Switzerland spend more. Despite laying out \$115,000 per head, the U.S. did no better than the Slovak Republic, which spends \$53,000.

Perhaps most depressingly, the data show no statistically significant U.S. achievement improvement over time. None. In an era when it pays to be thankful for small mercies, at least we're not getting worse, but America's relative standing is falling as other countries improve.

No one test is definitive. Pisa has large margins of error—that 21th place in science could be 17th or 25th—and a change of even a few points in average scores can cause a

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country than most, with many different socio-economic backgrounds and schools that vary widely in quality.



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Then again, Massachusetts has been running public schools since 1635 and today is home to some of the best performers in the nation. The state entered Pisa as if it was its own country—but students of the same age in Shanghai performed as if they had two more years of math instruction than those in the Bay State.

Such results should trouble anyone concerned about America's economic future

and the human capital produced by the K-12 system. Economies grow by exploiting scarce resources, people most of all. The ultimate source of wealth is ourselves, and the Pisa findings suggest that U.S. schools are failing tomorrow's labor force. Too few students are being prepared with the skills they'll need to compete in a world-wide market and sustain American economic dominance.

The spread of technology and information gives talent an ever-wider field abroad on which to play, from the factory floor to the C-suite to the garages where entrepreneurs are starting the companies and industries no one can predict. The wealth of nations is not guaranteed, but earned.

Republicans might ponder how little sense it makes to educate the world's smartest young people in U.S. universities only to send them home after they graduate. The U.S. still enjoys a strong comparative advantage in higher education, especially for advanced degrees in science, math, engineering and technology, but the GOP's immigration panic ensures that the U.S. loses too much of the benefit.

Pisa also adds another count to the bill of indictment for the Democrats who block reform to serve their teachers union patrons. Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#) called the report "a picture of educational stagnation," but liberals are major impediments to more accountability, merit-based compensation and school-choice competition. The Justice Department has even gone so far as to sue Louisiana to block its modest voucher program, which is a moral crime against the students consigned to failing schools.

Both parties might also reflect on the sources of U.S. economic strength. These include America's entrepreneurial energies, its openness to innovation and creative destruction, the rule of law and the free movement of labor and capital. No one would trade the broader U.S. economy for China's merely to get Shanghai schools.

But as the late Vermont Royster once wrote in these columns, America is "one of the great underdeveloped countries of the world." What he meant was that this country had yet to achieve its full potential—and his observation may be truer today than it was in 1961, given a President who governs as if 2% growth and 7% unemployment is the best we can do. Faster growth and rising standards of living aren't inevitable, and the Pisa warning is that the U.S. needs to do better at educating and attracting its future citizens or it will face a diminished future.

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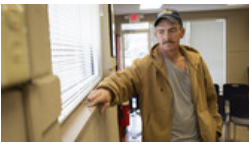
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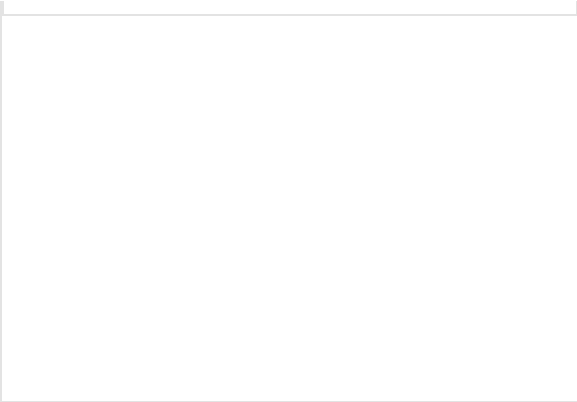
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