



Institute *for* Public School Initiatives  
The College of EDUCATION  
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

## *How About a Trip to Finland?*

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**The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI)** was founded in 2004 at the University of Texas System. IPSI serves as a strategic partner in education program and product innovation as well as an idea incubator and evaluator of program effectiveness and productivity. IPSI's mission is to improve student achievement from preschool through high school via its relationships with The University of Texas institutions, community colleges, school districts, and state agencies. Funding for IPSI is made possible through the generous contributions from private foundations and public agencies.

## How About a Trip to Finland?

The current volume of pronouncements on how poorly US students do on international academic assessments pushes us to anticipate a pending decline in our country's economy unless we emulate the school systems of allegedly higher performing foreign school systems. Quickly, off to Finland or Singapore to find out how to educate students successfully, we are told.

However, in pondering the reality of the doom and gloom pronouncements about our school systems, some caution occurs. The well traveled path of jumping to popular and convenient, but misleading, conclusions by analyzing student performance without considering the makeup of the student population raises important questions.

We should not forget our early experiences with school achievement results. When the high performance, on the average, of students in affluent suburban school districts was analyzed separately by ethnicity and economic status, suburban student performance was often not significantly different from the performance of urban students. Well above average "overall" student results in many states and districts turned out to be below average when scores were compared by student group. Much to the distress of local officials and realtors, who naturally want to promote their community, their schools' results too often reflected student demographics rather than educational quality. Some parents who commuted many miles and stretched their budget to find better schools were understandably displeased.

While considering international comparisons then, experience suggests that we think about the potential influence of student characteristics. How well would conclusions about poor US student academic performance based on international comparisons be sustained if student ethnicity and economic condition were considered? Is it possible, once again, that we are being misled by system averages?

Unfortunately, student demographic data are not included for most countries in the commonly cited international studies, so the reality of all current comparisons must be considered with care. Yet there are some interesting, isolated data points that should be considered. These data points do not necessarily suggest that publicized international comparisons are misleading, but rather that there may be some rushing to judgment that may not survive more complete analyses.<sup>1</sup>

For instance, an interesting report from Gary Phillips of the American Institutes for Research<sup>2</sup> linked scores on TIMSS, an important international assessment of mathematics

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<sup>1</sup> At the suggestion of the National Assessment Governing Board, common items have been inserted into the current administration of TIMSS, an important international assessment, and NAEP. More direct comparisons of US student results, separated by ethnicity and family income, to those of students in other countries will be reported in 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Linking NAEP Achievement Levels to TIMSS, Gary Phillips, Chief Scientist, American Institutes for Research, 2007

and science achievement to the NAEP, The Nation's Report Card. With the high interest level in mathematics and science achievement and the constant reporting of US student weaknesses in math and science, it is interesting to note that the levels of proficiency reported in the AIR analyses for selected groups of high scoring Asian students are not too different from those reported in recent NAEP mathematics assessments for selected groups of high scoring Asian-American students. Another example from the same AIR report, show average proficiency in mathematics for students in Finland below those reported in NAEP results for US white students.<sup>3</sup>

It must be noted that Dr. Phillips properly identifies the difficulties in making cross-country comparisons and the limitations of going too far with inferences from data with varying assumptions that are more rough approximations than clear evidence. Never the less, the data cause one to wonder whether differences cited in international comparisons actually reflect school system differences.

PIRLS<sup>4</sup>, a frequently-cited international study, reports 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading results for selected international jurisdictions and by student sub-group for US students. Not forgetting the complexity of crossing assessment design, school system, cultural and language differences, some selected results are interesting. For instance, when compared to students in countries with some student diversity (i.e. England or France), US students overall compete well. As a group, American white students score well above those in Sweden and Netherlands, and Asian-American students score higher on the average than students in Singapore or Hong Kong.

Reviews of another international study, PISA<sup>5</sup>, suggest that average US student scores in reading, mathematics and science for 15-year-old students are at or above average scores for students in most countries sampled when disaggregated by ethnicity and poverty rates. Again, differences in assessment frameworks and assessment implementation only suggest that claims of US system superiority are premature, at best, but also suggest caution in claiming that overall averages show that US schools are inferior internationally.

Questions raised here do not suggest that education in the US is without problems. Whether current standards are adequate or not is not addressed. Without question, large numbers of US students are performing below international averages. Obviously, international competitiveness issues have important potential consequences. However, at the end of the day, it may be that reducing the well documented differences in performance between student demographic groups in the US is still our major challenge and the idea that the answer to that challenge can be solved by international travel may not prove up too well.

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<sup>3</sup> TIMSS report above and Mathematics 2011, National Assessment of Educational Progress, National Center for Educational Statistics

<sup>4</sup> Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), National Center for Educational Statistics, 2006 PIRLS Assessment Results

<sup>5</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009

It is not possible to extend the sketchy pieces of data noted above into “findings”, but the thought occurs that we should hesitate in encouraging fact finding missions to Europe or Asia to learn about superior educational systems. It is far less expensive to go to Boston or Austin than Singapore or Helsinki.

Parroting the oft used phrase that more research is needed, more research is needed.

## **About the Author**

**Dr. Darvin Winick** is a Senior Research Fellow at the College of Education and the Executive Director of the Institute for Public School Initiatives at The University of Texas at Austin. He has served as Chair of the National Assessment Governing Board from 2002 to September 2009 and is currently an advisor to the Governing Board's 12th Grade Preparedness Commission. He is the President of Winick & Associates. Previously, Dr. Winick was an advisor to the 1984 Texas Select Committee on Public Education, and also helped organize the Texas Business and Education Coalition and Texans for Education. He was the Chairman of the Research Advisory Committee of the Texas Educational Economic Policy Center, which set out the framework for the current Texas Public School Accountability System. He has served as volunteer Chief of Staff for the Texas Governor's Task Force on Education, Vice Chair of the Governor's Focus on Reading Task Force, as a member of the Education Commissioner's Committee on Accountability and as an advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Education. He co-authored *Four-Star Schools of Texas*, a report on public school campus performance, and has edited reports on education accountability, early reading instruction, and teacher preparation. Dr. Winick is a certified management consultant and a founding member of the Institute of Management Consultants. He holds a doctorate in organizational psychology from Purdue University.



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