



Separate But Un-Equal 15-Year-Olds

AN OP-ED PIECE ON 2001 RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT

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A new look at the literacy of teens living in the industrialized world shows that American students are about average. "Average is not good enough for American kids," warns Education Secretary Rod Paige. True enough – but Paige and the Bush Administration miss the point. Hidden in those results is yet one more piece of evidence that American youngsters attend schools that are separate and markedly unequal.

The Program on International Student Assessment (PISA) seeks to understand what 15-year-olds in 27 industrialized nations learned in reading, mathematics, and science from school and non-school sources. PISA's goal is to assess how well we teach them to think and solve common, everyday problems in those three disciplines. With 85 percent of a student's waking hours up to graduation from high school spent outside of school, this is really a study of how well our society educates our young.

The answer depends on whether they are white, African-American or Hispanic. Overall, American 15-year-olds were close to the international averages in all three areas of literacy; about 10 percent scored in the top 10 percent worldwide on all three scales. The three tests correlated so highly that national scores on any one measure of literacy were almost a perfect proxy for scores on any other measure.

In reading, our strongest area, teens in only three nations—Finland, Canada and New Zealand—scored significantly higher than ours; in fact, 81 percent of US teens scored at levels two and above on a five-level reading literacy scale (with Level Five being the top).

This is noteworthy because of what PISA says a "Level Two" teen can do: make a comparison or several connections between the text and outside knowledge, draw on personal experience and attitudes to explain the text, recognize the main idea when the information is not prominent, understand relationships or construe meaning within a selected part of the text, and locate one or more pieces of information, which may require inferences to meet several conditions. Only 12 percent of our teens, those classified in Level One, cannot reach this remarkably high standard. Even among the least literate teens classified as at Level One, almost half were able to successfully respond to the more difficult items in Level Two.

On all three tests, our youth didn't do badly overall – but we didn't shine, either. Why? The answer becomes clear when the scores of different 15-year-olds are viewed separately.

PISA clearly shows we have some ill-educated 15-year-olds, and most of those are poor and minority children. On the reading literacy scale white students in the US are second in the world, but African American and Hispanic students rank 25th; in mathematics white students are seventh, African American students are 26th; in science, white students are fourth, African American and Hispanic students are 26th.

The unpleasant reality is that the United States runs separate and unequal schools and neighborhoods. The conditions of the schools and neighborhoods for our poor, African American, and Hispanic youth are not designed for high levels of literacy in reading, mathematics and science. We accept poverty, violence, drugs, unequal school funding, uncertified teachers, and institutionalized racism in the schools that serve these children and in the neighborhoods in which they live. These unequal conditions appear to be the major reason we fall short in international comparisons. We combine the scores of these ill-educated children with those of children who enjoy better resources. As long as these differences are allowed to exist we will rank about average in international comparisons.

As PISA makes clear, accepting deficient schools and troubled neighborhoods for our poor and minority students diminishes our international competitiveness. In ignoring these data about who does well and who does not, we diminish our moral authority in the world as well.

PISA exposes what we have known for too long: that we have social problems to which we pay scant attention. In every international comparison of industrialized nations the US is the leader in rate of childhood poverty. African American and Hispanic students attend public schools as segregated as they have ever been. Our poor and minority children are not getting the opportunities they need for them to thrive.

Politicians who spend their energy condemning the public schools for their supposed failure to educate American youth are ignoring what PISA tells the world: that we fail selectively, having organized our society to provide poor and minority 15-year-olds less opportunity to achieve. Shame on us.