

Published on *The Nation* (<http://www.thenation.com>)

Restoring Our Schools

Linda Darling-Hammond | May 27, 2010

This article is adapted from Linda Darling-Hammond's The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future (Teachers College Press).

In 1989 President George H.W. Bush and the nation's governors convened to establish a set of six national education goals to be accomplished by the year 2000. Among these were to ensure that all students enter school healthy and ready to learn, that at least 90 percent of students graduate from high school, that all students are competent in the academic disciplines and that the United States ranks "first in the world in mathematics and science achievement."

In 2010 none of these goals have been accomplished, and we are further away from achieving most of them than we were two decades ago. More children live in poverty and lack healthcare; the high school graduation rate has slipped below 70 percent; the achievement gap between minority and white students in reading and math is larger than it was in 1988; and US performance on international tests has continued to drop.

Far from being first in the world in math and science, the United States ranked thirty-fifth out of the top forty countries in math—right between Azerbaijan and Croatia—when the most recent Programme in International Student Assessment tests were given in 2006. In science, the United States ranked twenty-ninth out of forty, sandwiched between Latvia and Lithuania. These rankings and scores had dropped from 2000, when the No Child Left Behind Act was introduced. While the United States performs closer to international averages in reading, its scores also dropped on the international reading tests during the NCLB era.

Declines on international tests and a flattening of growth on the National Assessment of Educational Progress occurred even as state test scores used for NCLB were driven upward. This is partly because the international assessments demand more advanced analysis than do most US tests. They require students to weigh and balance evidence, apply what they know to new problems and explain and defend their answers. These higher-order skills are emphasized in other nations' curriculums and assessment systems but have been discouraged by the kind of lower-level multiple-choice testing favored by NCLB.

In addition, inequality has an enormous influence on US performance. White and Asian students score just above the average for the European OECD nations in each subject area, but African-American and Hispanic students score so much lower that the national average plummets to the bottom tier. The United States is also among the nations where socioeconomic background most affects student outcomes. This is because of greater income inequality and because the United States spends much more educating affluent children than poor children, with wealthy suburbs often spending twice what central cities do, and three

times what poor rural areas can afford.

Both segregation of schools and inequality in funding have increased in many states over the past two decades, leaving a growing share of African-American and Hispanic students in highly segregated apartheid schools that lack qualified teachers; up-to-date textbooks and materials; libraries, science labs and computers; and safe, adequate facilities. Thus, the poor US standing is substantially a product of unequal access to the kind of intellectually challenging learning measured on these international assessments.

During his historic campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama described our large race- and class-based achievement gaps as "morally unacceptable and economically untenable." At a time when three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require postsecondary education, our college participation rates have slipped from first in the world to seventeenth. While more than half of young people are becoming college graduates in many European and Asian nations, fewer than 40 percent of American young people—and fewer than 20 percent of African-American and Hispanic youth—receive a college degree.

In minority communities, a greater number join the growing ranks of inmates in what the *New York Times* recently dubbed our "prison nation," which incarcerates more people than any other country in the world. With 5 percent of the world's population, we have 25 percent of the world's inmates, at a cost of untold human tragedy and more than \$50 billion annually to taxpayers. In an economy that requires knowledge and skills for employment and success, most inmates are high school dropouts and functionally illiterate—with literacy skills below those demanded by the labor market. States that would not spend \$10,000 a year to ensure adequate education for children of color in under-resourced schools later spend more than \$30,000 a year to keep them in jail.

Since the 1980s, national investments have tipped heavily toward incarceration rather than education. As the number of prisoners has quadrupled since 1980, state budgets for corrections have grown by more than 900 percent, three times faster than funds for education. With prisons and education competing for limited funds, the strong relationship between under-education, unemployment and incarceration creates a vicious cycle. Today, at least five states spend more on corrections than they spend on public colleges and universities, and some, like California, are decreasing slots in their higher education systems, as other nations are aggressively increasing theirs.

Also unlike high-achieving nations, we have failed to invest in the critical components of a high-quality education system. While we have been busy setting goals and targets for public schools and punishing the schools that fail to meet them, we have not invested in a highly trained, well-supported teaching force for all communities, as other nations have; we have not scaled up successful school designs so that they are sustained and widely available; and we have not pointed our schools at the critical higher-order thinking and performance skills needed in the twenty-first century. Some states are notable exceptions, but we have not, as a nation, undertaken the systemic reforms needed to maintain the standing we held forty years ago as the world's unquestioned educational leader.

A Glimpse of What High-Achieving Nations Are Doing

Other nations have been transforming their school systems to meet the new demands of today's world. They are expanding educational access to more and more of their people, and they are revising curriculums, instruction and assessments to support the more complex knowledge and skills needed in the twenty-first century. Starting in the 1980s, for example, Finland dismantled the rigid tracking system that had allocated differential access to knowledge to its young people and eliminated the state-mandated testing system that was used for this purpose, replacing them with highly trained teachers educated in

newly overhauled schools of education, along with curriculums and assessments focused on problem-solving, creativity and independent learning. These changes have propelled achievement to the top of the international rankings and closed what was once a large, intractable achievement gap.

In the space of one generation, South Korea has transformed itself from a nation that educated less than a quarter of its citizens through high school to one that graduates more than 95 percent from high school and ranks third in college-educated adults, with most young people now completing postsecondary education. Egalitarian access to schools and a common curriculum, coupled with investments in well-prepared teachers, have been part of the national strategy there as well.

Similarly, starting in the 1970s, Singapore began to transform itself from a collection of fishing villages into an economic powerhouse by building an education system that would assure every student access to strong teaching, an inquiry curriculum and cutting-edge technology. In 2003, Singapore's fourth and eighth grade students scored first in the world in math and science on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study assessments. When children leave their tiny, spare apartments in high-rises throughout the nation, they arrive at beautiful, airy school buildings where student artwork, papers, projects and awards are displayed throughout; libraries and classrooms are well stocked; instructional technology is plentiful; and teachers are well trained and well supported.

A visit to Nan Chiau Primary School, for example, finds fourth and fifth graders eagerly displaying the science projects they have designed and conducted in an "experience, investigate and create" cycle that is repeated throughout the year. Students are delighted to show visitors their "innovation walk," displaying student-developed projects from many subject areas lining a long corridor. Students study plants, animals and insects in the school's eco-garden; they run their own recycling center; they write and edit scripts for the Internet radio program they produce; and they use handheld computers to play games and create mathematical models that develop their quantitative abilities. Teachers, meanwhile, engage in research sponsored by the government to evaluate and continually improve their teaching.

Certainly there are schools that look like this in the United States. But they are not the norm. What distinguishes systems like Singapore's is that this quality of education—aimed at empowering students to use their knowledge in inventive ways—is replicated throughout the entire nation of 4.8 million, which is about the size of Kentucky, the median US state. Furthermore, Singapore is not alone. The pace at which many nations in Asia and Europe are pouring resources into forward-looking systems that educate all their citizens to much higher levels is astonishing. And the growing gap between the United States and these nations—particularly in our most underfunded schools—is equally dramatic.

Contrast the picture of a typical school in Singapore with the description of a California school, from a lawsuit filed recently on behalf of low-income students of color in schools like it throughout the state, a half-century after *Brown v. Board of Education*:

At Luther Burbank, students cannot take textbooks home for homework in any core subject because their teachers have enough textbooks for use in class only.... For homework, students must take home photocopied pages, with no accompanying text for guidance or reference, when and if their teachers have enough paper to use to make homework copies.... Luther Burbank is infested with vermin and roaches and students routinely see mice in their classrooms. One dead rodent has remained, decomposing, in a corner in the gymnasium since the beginning of the school year.... The school library is rarely open, has no librarian, and has not recently been updated. The latest version of the encyclopedia in the library was published in approximately 1988.... Luther Burbank classrooms do not have computers. Computer instruction and research skills are not, therefore, part of Luther Burbank students' regular instruction.... The school no longer offers any art classes for budgetary reasons.... Ceiling tiles

are missing and cracked in the school gym, and school children are afraid to play...in the gym because they worry that more ceiling tiles will fall on them during their games.... The school has no air conditioning. On hot days classroom temperatures climb into the 90s. The school heating system does not work well. In winter, children often wear coats, hats, and gloves during class to keep warm.... Eleven of the 35 teachers at Luther Burbank have not yet obtained full, non-emergency teaching credentials, and 17 of the 35 teachers only began teaching at Luther Burbank this school year.

Under these kinds of circumstances, when the school lacks the rudiments needed to focus on the quality of learning and teaching or the development of higher-order thinking, it is impossible even to begin to talk about developing the deep knowledge and complex skills required of young people in today's and tomorrow's society.

Learning From the Past

These declines are not inevitable. We have made strong headway on educational achievement in the past and can do so again. It is easy to forget that during the years following *Brown v. Board of Education*, when desegregation and school finance reform efforts were launched, and when the Great Society's War on Poverty increased investments in poor communities, substantial gains were made in equalizing educational inputs and outcomes. Childhood poverty was reduced to levels almost half of what they are today. Investments were made in desegregation, magnet schools, community schools, pipelines of well-qualified teachers, school funding reforms and higher education assistance.

These investments paid off in measurable ways. For a brief period in the mid-'70s, black and Hispanic students were attending college at rates comparable with whites, the only time this has happened before or since. By the mid-1970s, urban schools were spending as much as suburban schools, and paying their teachers as well; perennial teacher shortages had nearly ended; and gaps in educational attainment had closed substantially. Federally funded curriculum investments transformed teaching in many schools. Innovative schools flourished, especially in the cities. Large gains in black students' performance throughout the 1970s and early '80s cut the literacy achievement gap by nearly half in just fifteen years. Had this rate of progress continued, the achievement gap would have been closed by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Unfortunately, that did not occur. While nations that today are high-achieving built on the progressive reforms they launched in the 1970s, the United States backpedaled in the Reagan years, cutting the education budget in half, ending most aid to cities and most supports for teacher recruitment and training while also slashing health and human services budgets and shifting costs to the states. This caused states to reduce equalization aid to schools in order to pick up other social service costs.

Conservatives introduced a new theory of reform focused on outcomes rather than inputs—that is, high-stakes testing without investing—which drove most policy initiatives. The situation in many urban and rural schools deteriorated over the ensuing decades. Drops in real per-pupil expenditures accompanied tax cuts and growing enrollments. Meanwhile, student needs grew with immigration, concentrated poverty and homelessness, and growing numbers of students requiring second-language instruction and special education services. Although some federal support to high-need schools and districts was restored during the 1990s, it was not enough to recoup the earlier losses, and after 2000 inequality increased once again.

What's to Be Done?

Although some of America's schools are among the best in the world, too many have been neglected in the more than twenty years since the clarion call for school reform was sounded in the 1980s. Clearly we need more than a new set of national goals to mobilize a dramatically more successful educational system. We also need more than pilot projects, demonstrations, innovations and other partial solutions. We need to take the education of poor children as seriously as we take the education of the rich, and we need to create systems that routinely guarantee all the elements of educational investment to all children.

What would this require? As in high- and equitably achieving nations, it would require strong investments in children's welfare—adequate healthcare, housing and food security, so that children can come to school each day ready to learn; high-quality preschool to close achievement gaps that already exist when children enter kindergarten; equitably funded schools that provide quality educators and learning materials, which are the central resources for learning; a system that ensures that teachers and leaders in every community are extremely well prepared and are supported to be effective on the job; standards, curriculums and assessments focused on twenty-first-century learning goals; and schools organized for in-depth student and teacher learning and equipped to address children's social needs, as the community schools movement has done [see David L. Kirp, "Cradle to College," page 26].

Thus far, the Obama administration has taken affirmative steps on a portion of this agenda. Healthcare for children has been secured in the healthcare reform bill, and investments in early childhood education have been increased, although thus far with more emphasis on expanding access than investing in high-quality teaching. The president has increased federal funding for college, which had previously dropped to a level that precluded college-going for many qualified young people who couldn't afford it.

The administration's stimulus package, which made \$100 billion available for schools, has stanching some of the acute hemorrhaging of resources and staff that would otherwise have occurred last year as a result of the recession. And the president has signaled his interest in more intellectually thoughtful assessments that "don't simply measure whether students can fill in a bubble on a test but whether they possess twenty-first-century skills like problem-solving and critical thinking and entrepreneurship and creativity." This concern will be pursued through competitive grants to state consortiums that develop new assessments linked to new common core standards of learning in math and English.

The most touted aspects of the Race to the Top initiative, however, focus on peripheral issues rather than investments that have characterized major improvements in education systems at home and abroad. No nation has become high-achieving by sanctioning schools based on test-score targets and closing those that serve the neediest students without providing adequate resources and quality teaching. The implementation of Race to the Top has not required states to equalize funding to underresourced schools or even to maintain their existing commitments to these schools, many of which have had to slash budgets deeply, laying off tens of thousands of teachers, raising class size to more than forty in some cases and cutting successful programs.

In this context, schools serving high-need students are called on to raise achievement or face closure, despite evidence from the Consortium on Chicago School Research that closing more than 100 low-performing schools in that city and replacing them did not result in higher achievement.

Race to the Top requires that states expand charters but fails to assure quality and ensure access, despite evidence from the largest national study to date (conducted at Stanford University's Hoover Institution) that charter schools more frequently underperform than outperform their counterparts serving similar students; evidence from a UCLA study indicating that charters exacerbate segregation; and evidence from many studies that charters serve significantly fewer special education students and English-language

learners. Some excellent charters do exist, along with excellent schools run by regular public school districts, but the law does not aim to spread excellence so much as it aims to change governance. Nations that are focused on spreading quality—like Singapore, Finland and Canada, for example—have developed strategies for schools to share successful practices through networks, creating an engine for ongoing improvement for the system as a whole.

Rather than establishing a framework for dramatically improving the knowledge, skills and equitable distribution of teachers, as high-achieving nations have done, Race to the Top encourages states to expand alternative routes to certification and to reduce coursework for prospective teachers, despite findings that hiring teachers from low-coursework alternatives reduces student achievement. Further, Race to the Top largely misses the critical investments needed to prepare and distribute excellent teachers and school leaders. Pay bonuses alone cannot succeed in recruiting and retaining teachers without efforts to create competitive, equitable salaries and working conditions. Removing low-performing teachers cannot improve teaching or student outcomes without strategies to ensure a stable supply of highly effective teachers who stay in their communities.

Teacher evaluation needs to become more rigorous, and rewards for effectiveness should be encouraged, but these strategies can succeed only if they are embedded in a system of universal high-quality preparation, mentoring and support—including adequately resourced and well-designed schools that allow and enable good practice. Rather than short-term incentives and quick fixes, federal policy should focus on building capacity across the entire system.

Achieving these conditions will require as much federal attention to opportunity-to-learn standards as to assessments of academic progress, and greater equalization of federal funding across states. It will require incentives for states to provide comparable funding to students, adjusted for pupil needs and costs of living, as well as incentives and information that can steer spending productively to maximize the likelihood of student success. Finally, an equitable and adequate system will need to address the supply of well-prepared educators—the most fundamental of all resources—by building an infrastructure that ensures high-quality preparation for all educators and ensures that well-trained teachers are available to all students in all communities.

While the administration's blueprint for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (whose most recent iteration was No Child Left Behind) carries some hints of such strategies, its framework still envisions competition and sanctions as the primary drivers of reform rather than capacity-building and strategic investments. If this remains the primary frame for federal and state policy, it is unlikely that we will rebuild good schools in every community.

To meet twenty-first-century demands, the United States needs to move beyond a collection of disparate and shifting reform initiatives to a thoughtful, well-organized and well-supported set of policies that will enable young people to thrive in the new world they are entering. We must also finally make good on the American promise to make education available to all on equal terms, so that every member of this society can realize a productive life and contribute to the greater welfare. This is the challenge that Obama pledged to take on, and the one we should hope he will vigorously pursue.

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