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## World's schools teach U.S. a lesson

**To help US students compete in the global economy, educators seek a way to compare American schoolchildren with those abroad.**

**By Stacy Teicher Khadaroo** | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

Susan Zelman, head of Ohio's education department, has visited classrooms in China, India, and Japan. She's met young people with whom her students will potentially be competing – and collaborating – when they start careers. And she's impressed.

In Ohio, "our economy is in the tubes," she says, "so there's really an economic need to think about, How can we build the workforce?... How can we build a world-class learning system?"

In the quest to answer that, Ohio is the first state to use an analysis of the best-performing nations as a benchmark for its own academic policies. But it's certainly not the only state or school district that's looking beyond domestic borders to gauge how well it's doing.

There's no universal agreement on the best way to compare vastly different education systems around the world – or on what lessons to draw from data available so far. But there's clearly an appetite for more information.

Despite such momentum, improvements in education in the United States aren't coming fast enough for some – particularly those in the business community. "As a nation, our ability to create intellectual property is pretty much fundamental to continue to drive our economy, and we don't want to see the US fall behind there," says William Swope, a vice president of Intel Corp., whose philanthropy helps train math and science teachers in the US and abroad. "The governments of the world that are serious about education are applying the best known methods for improving the quality of their graduates," he says.

For states interested in international benchmarking, a new report just added a piece to the puzzle. It takes data from each state's 8th-grade scores in math and science on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and links it to the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). The two tests were designed to be compatible, says Gary Phillips, chief scientist at American Institutes for Research (AIR, [www.air.org](http://www.air.org)), a nonprofit in Washington that released the data Nov. 13. Each state can see where it ranks on a scale with 45 industrialized and developing countries.

"Most [states] are doing as well as or better than most countries," Mr. Phillips says. But he's concerned because

"our best states are ... lower than the best countries – so even though we're in the race, we're not winning the race."

Another common concern: The number of bachelor's degrees in science and technology in the US, while still on the rise, has not kept pace with gains in other countries, the American Council on Education reports. Several nations now spend a higher portion of their gross domestic product on R&D than does the US.

India and China are not yet ranked in the most common international comparisons, but they are seen as competitors because of their sheer size and their fast development.

America's economic dominance emerged in a context that won't be repeated, notes Vivien Stewart, vice president for education at the nonprofit Asia Society in New York. After World War II, much of the world was rebuilding or was still undeveloped. The US invested heavily in education, becoming the first to approach universal high school attendance. More recently, the removal of Communist barriers and the emergence of world trade agreements have produced "a kind of a seismic shift," Ms. Stewart says. "The competition is going to get tougher for the US on every dimension. And therefore the state of our education system becomes more important than when we were the sole economic superpower."

Stewart has led state education officials on visits to China and India. In China, there are large gaps between rural and urban education levels, "but the rate of progress is extraordinary," she says. At the best high schools, 15-year-olds talked to the visitors in English about academic work equal to or above what's common at the best schools in the US. Visitors found that Chinese students know a great deal about the US and world history. What pervades is "the intensity of commitment to education, not only on the part of government but also the students," Stewart says.

Ms. Zelman of Ohio took note on her visit that some of China's elite high schools are partnerships among businesses, universities, and the K-12 system. Ohio is working to create such partnerships, she says, but "quite frankly, we don't have anything comparable."

Some voices are pushing back against the growing sense of competition with China and other nations. There's too much of a cold-war mentality, says Yong Zhao, a professor and director of the US-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence at Michigan State University. He believes some international tests have been misinterpreted as spelling doom for America's economy.

"I think the tests are biased to reflect the talents that other cultures emphasize more," says Mr. Zhao. Asian countries tend to score higher on science and math tests because that's what they focus on narrowly, but in the US, "we have many more possible outlets for talents, and that's actually much more important," he says. Chinese educators look to US education for the creativity and entrepreneurship it sparks. "Americans should be more American – not more Chinese or Japanese or Singaporean – in our education," Zhao says.

One downside in China, where he attended school himself, is that after so much focus on doing well on tests to advance, many "lose the internal motivation to learn" and slack off in college.

To be prepared for future jobs, what Americans really need, Zhao says, is "the ability to manage across different cultures."

Zelman agrees that the issue shouldn't just be framed as one of competition. "We can be part of an international community where we can learn from each other."

To foster cross-cultural understanding, Ohio has recently received a federal grant to promote education in "critical" languages such as Chinese.

International benchmarking is perhaps a natural extension of the work many states are already doing to improve high school students' preparation for college or the US job market. Thirty states have joined the American Diploma Project Network, organized by Achieve Inc., a nonprofit in Washington. Achieve president Michael Cohen says that in Ohio, Arizona, Delaware, and several other states, "governors and chief state school officers ... basically have said, 'Well, it's great that you want us to align our expectations with the real world kids will face domestically ... but that's not enough; we need to know what our expectations ought to be in order for our kids to succeed [globally].' "

Earlier this year, Ohio received a report it commissioned from Achieve and the McKinsey & Company consulting group. It drew in part on research by Sir Michael Barber, head of the Education Interest Group at McKinsey. Sir Michael analyzed top-performing school systems, as well as systems that are improving rapidly (including a number of US urban districts). He found three elements they shared:

- The top nations recruit teachers from among the best graduates (the top 30 percent in Singapore and top 5 percent in South Korea).
- They focus on developing teacher recruits into effective instructors. (Boston, for instance, has teacher apprenticeships and instructional coaches to assist teachers.)
- They set high expectations, monitor achievement, and intervene with children who are falling behind.

Ohio's Zelman, taking such comparisons to heart, plans to recommend legislation to revise state standards, have Ohio participate in international comparisons, and improve teacher and principal development. "We feel we've made some good progress in Ohio, but we know we still have incredible achievement gaps.... [We want] to make sure that our children will be able to compete and reap the benefits of a global economy."

## Comparing US, China, India

"You can see the future of a country in the aspirations of its first-graders," entrepreneur and venture capitalist Robert Compton told an audience of Harvard graduate students Nov. 2. In visits to India, he's met young children who wanted to be doctors, engineers, or scientists of some sort. He wants more Americans to get a glimpse of their future competition.

Working with filmmakers and Teach for America vets Chad Heeter and Adam Raney, Mr. Compton produced "[Two Million Minutes](#)," a documentary about how three pairs of top students – in China, India, and the United States – spent their time in high school (four years add up to roughly 2 million minutes).

The Indian and Chinese students and their families show a single-minded focus on academics, partly because competition for university slots is so fierce. A Chinese mom and dad tell how their son used to make up his own tests because he loved them so much. The American students enjoy being well-rounded, with part-time jobs, Friday night football games, and study nights in front of the TV. College applications may be stressful for some, but one of the pair has already been offered a full merit scholarship early in his senior year.

After watching the film, some students took issue with the implication that Americans should be more like the Chinese and Indians – more driven to score high on science and math tests, perhaps at the expense of other strengths. A student from a South Korean family pointed out that many Asian students just party once they hit college because they're so burned out.

Compton responded that he didn't mean the film to be prescriptive. But he stressed that if Americans don't pay more attention to advances in education around the world – the way a sports team studies top competitors – they're in danger of being left behind.

Harvard law student Neil Shah said he could see both sides, but agreed with the basic premise: "We should learn from other systems, take what's working, and incorporate it into our own."

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