

A New Majority for Our Schools, Our Solutions

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It has the feel of Groundhog Day: Another international education comparison, another round of hand-wringing and finger-pointing, and then right back to the same policies. You know what they say about the definition of insanity.

The latest results come from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The United States, once again, landed in the middle of the pack on reading and science, and below average in math. However, students in more-affluent schools in the United States where the poverty rate is less than 10 percent actually surpassed many of the highest-rated countries.

Poverty is important, as we see from the data from the three states that asked to have their PISA results broken out. Massachusetts, whose child-poverty rate is well below the national average, ranked with the world's best. Florida, where child poverty is above the national average, scored below the U.S. and OECD averages. But other factors matter too. Massachusetts also has a long history of standards-based reform and investing in teacher quality, whereas Florida has disinvested in education and has fixated on test-based accountability.

This raises the question: Are the dominant strategies in U.S. education today—hyper-testing and competition—the best approaches to help all children

succeed, particularly in light of profound austerity and inequity? This is especially important given that nearly half of public school students in America live in poverty—a crisis many officials in the United States choose to ignore. As Andreas Schleicher of the OECD explains: “The vast majority of OECD countries either invest equally into every student or disproportionately more into disadvantaged students. The U.S. is one of the few countries doing the opposite.”

If you look past the headlines to the lessons from PISA, there is a striking convergence between the strategies that top-performing countries utilize and the approaches people closest to students and schools here in the United States are calling for.

Parents, students, educators, unions and community members share a desire for great neighborhood public schools that are safe, welcoming and collaborative. They have banded together with our union to push for this, as well as for more voice and transparency in public education, and against inadequate and inequitable funding and resources and the relentless emphasis on testing over teaching and learning.

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This emerging movement struck a chord last week with grass-roots activities that were part of the National Day of Action to Reclaim the Promise of Public Education: Our Schools, Our Solutions. Diverse coalitions in more than 100 cities and towns called for a new direction for public education. This was the largest coordinated action in support of public education in recent memory.

In Corpus Christi, Texas, community and business partners joined AFT members and First Book to give a free book to every Head Start student.

Community partners in Cleveland pressed the Cleveland Clinic to pay its fair share of taxes to help fund schools and wraparound services for students.

A coalition in Newark, N.J., turned up the heat on Gov. Chris Christie and his hand-picked superintendent, calling on them to do the right thing regarding a fair funding formula, local control over decision-making, and racial and class equity.

In New York City, parents, students, educators, activists and elected officials packed a rally where they said “enough!” to agendas to defund and destabilize public education.

A broad community coalition in Nyack, N.Y., decried excessive standardized testing and the botched implementation of the Common Core State Standards in the state.

What if, instead of using international rankings to bash our students, schools and teachers, we learned from top-performing countries and applied their lessons for the benefit of all children? What if we rejected policies that don't move the needle in favor of community-supported solutions with proven track records, like early childhood education; safe and nurturing schools; supporting and valuing teachers; welcoming families; and providing students with engaging curriculum including art and music and with wraparound services to meet their social, emotional and health needs?

That's what reclaiming the promise of public education is about. These are our schools and they need our solutions. This is more than one day and one moment in time. It's a movement, and we are moving forward. We have a moral obligation to provide a great education to each and every child, and we must create a new majority to make this happen.



Weingarten with students at Nyack Middle School in Nyack, N.Y.

Photo: Bruce Gilbert

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