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September 27, 2011

Study Shows That Wealthy Suburban School Districts Are Only Mediocre by International Standards

Sixty-eight percent of all U.S. districts have average math achievement below the 50th percentile when compared to achievement in 25 developed nations

CAMBRIDGE, MA – The first ever comparison of math performance in virtually every school district in the United States finds that even the most elite suburban school districts produce results that are mediocre when compared to those of international peers. According to the study, entitled “When the Best is Mediocre,” the math achievement of the average student in Beverly Hills, California, is at the 53rd percentile relative to the international comparison group. White Plains, New York, is at the 39th percentile; Evanston, Illinois is at the 48th percentile; Montgomery County, Maryland is at the 50th percentile; and Fairfax, Virginia is at the 49th percentile.

State accountability systems emphasize in-state comparisons between suburban and urban districts, which give impressions of relatively high achievement in more affluent suburban districts. However, Jay P. Greene and Josh B. McGee, authors of the study, note that this is “false reassurance,” as “America’s elite suburban students are increasingly competing with students outside the U.S. for economic opportunities,” making meaningful global comparisons essential. Even wealthy communities “are barely keeping pace with the typical student in the average developed country.”

The study’s findings rest on an index developed by the authors called the “Global Report Card” (GRC), which builds on state accountability test results for every district for which the American Institutes for Research (AIR) collected achievement data between 2004 and 2007. The GRC links performance on state tests to the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), which then allows for a linkage to PISA, international tests conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The GRC compares academic achievement in math and reading across all grades of student performance on state tests with average achievement in a set of 25 other countries with developed economies that might be considered economic peers of the U.S. A percentile ranking of 60, for example, indicates that the average student in a district performed better than 59.9 percent of students in the global comparison group.
Of the top 20 U.S. school districts in math achievement, 7 are charter schools (which are treated as separate public school districts in some states). Most of the 13 other school districts in the top 20 are in rural communities. In four states -- Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and West Virginia -- there is not a single traditional school district with average student achievement in math above the 50th percentile. In 17 states, not a single district has average achievement in the upper third relative to the global comparison group. In over half of the states, there are no more than three districts that reach average achievement levels in the upper third.

The scholars find some pockets of excellence across the U.S. For example, the average student in the Pelham, Massachusetts district (home to Amherst College) is at the 95th percentile in math relative to the international comparison group. Students in Spring Lake, New Jersey, achieve on average at the 91st percentile relative to the international group, and Waconda, Kansas, a small rural community, also is at the 91st percentile. At the other end of the scale, the average student in the Washington, D.C. public school district is at the 11th percentile in math; in Detroit, the 12th percentile; in Los Angeles, the 20th percentile; and in Chicago, the 21st percentile.

To be included in this comparison group, countries had to have a 2007 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of at least $24,000 and a population of at least 2 million, not be a member of OPEC, and have test results from PISA. Of the 25 countries that met these criteria (among them Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Korea, Spain, Taiwan, and United Kingdom) 23 had per-capita GDPs that significantly trailed the $45,597 of the U.S.

The study, “When the Best is Mediocre,” will appear as an article in the Winter, 2012, issue of Education Next, and is currently available at www.educationnext.org. The GRC ranking in math and reading of students in 13,636 of the nearly 14,000 school districts in the U.S. is posted at www.globalreportcard.org on the website of the George W. Bush Institute.

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Education Next is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, part of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

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