

Running in Place

Americans are learning more but are not catching up to the rest of the world



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

“The United States’ failure to educate its students leaves them unprepared to compete and threatens the country’s ability to thrive in a global economy,” claims a task force sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations chaired by former New York City schools chancellor Joel I. Klein and former U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice.

Not true, says Yu Xie, a leading professor of sociology and statistics affiliated with the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of Michigan. The press release summarizing the message of his book, *Is American Science in Decline?*, penned with Alexandra Killwald, declares that “American high school students are doing more coursework and performing better in mathematics and science than in the past.” “All current signs indicate that American science can remain a leader of world science for many years to come,” the authors declare.

So who is right? Are Klein and Rice scaremongers? Or is Xie whistling in the dark?

It is well documented that the math performance of even advanced students in the United States trails that of some 30 other countries (see “Teaching Math to the Talented,” *features*, Winter 2011). And only 32 percent of U.S. students achieve proficiency by 8th grade, a percentage that places the United States at the 32nd level among countries whose performance has been surveyed (“Are U.S. Students Ready to Compete?” *features*, Fall 2011).

But is the United States now beginning to catch up, as Xie suggests?

In a paper I prepared with coauthors Eric Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann (“Is the U.S. Catching Up?” *features*, page 24), we answer this question by tracking gains in test performance between the early 1990s and 2011 in 49 countries. Noticeable gains in math, science, and reading have been achieved by U.S. students in 4th and 8th grade on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). But students in the other countries are, on average, making the same rate of

gain. Indeed, the rate of improvement in the United States is no better than the median rate for 49 industrialized and developing countries.

Students in three countries—Latvia, Chile, and Brazil—are improving at an annual rate nearly three times that of the United States, and students in another eight countries—Portugal, Hong Kong, Germany, Poland, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Colombia, and Lithuania—are making gains at twice the rate of students in the United States.

Furthermore, the upward shift in the United States is concentrated among 4th graders. Gains among 8th graders are only about two-thirds those of the younger kids, implying serious slippage in the middle years of schooling.

Even worse, trend data from international tests reveal only one-third as large a gain in the United States as that identified by NAEP.

It is not clear which tests—NAEP or the international exams—are providing the most accurate information on progress over time. But by any measure, U.S. performance is mediocre, not stellar.

Yet Xie and his colleague tell us not to worry. “American universities have been producing new graduates in science at the bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral levels in increasingly large quantities.” It is a minor matter that “the number of science degrees awarded to native born men has been stable” while that of U.S. visitors is climbing rapidly.

Yes, U.S. universities can still attract and educate talent from abroad as long as this is a prosperous, stable democracy. But when a country’s elementary and high schools can no longer educate its own young people up to the highest international standards, then its security is endangered—just as Klein, Rice, and their task force have said.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
