RESEARCH

It's the Same Old Song

BY GERALD W. BRACEY

In early December 2007, a reporter at a daily paper alerted me to a press conference to be jointly given by the Business Roundtable, the National Governors Association, ED in `08, the Asia Society, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the Alliance for Excellence in Education. The occasion was to be the release of the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the PISA overseeing agency, would be represented by Andreas Schleicher, its lead education official.

As it turned out, I didn’t attend, but later in the day I checked in with the reporter to see what I had missed. “I didn’t make the PISA event,” he said. “I’m getting tired of these hand-wringing sessions.” Me too. We’re coming up on the 25th anniversary of A Nation at Risk, but judging by the critics, the schools have not improved one iota. Still, the World Economic Forum (WEF) just ranked the U.S. first in the world in global competitiveness among 131 nations. The WEF had ranked the U.S. sixth for 2006-07, but when it recalculated the figures using its new methodology, the U.S. came in first then, too.

Nevertheless, there was much weeping and gnashing of teeth at the press conference. “Our students’ performance today is the best indicator of our competitiveness tomorrow,” said Raymond Scheppach, executive director of the National Governors Association, once again drawing that causal link for which there is no evidence. “This is the Olympics of academics,” said Bob Wise of the Alliance for Excellence in Education, formerly governor of West Virginia.

The reason for all the unhappiness? The U.S. finished behind 23 of 30 OECD countries in mathematics and behind 16 of 30 in science. The PISA reading scores were not available because the OECD discovered that the U.S. booklets had been misprinted and had badly misdirected the test-takers. The Washington Post seemed almost bored as it noted that “the ranking of U.S. students in math and science is about the same as it was in 2003.”

Let me remind readers that even two of the major persons whom Susan Ohanian labeled standardistas, Checker Finn and Diane Ravitch, declared fervently that all this emphasis on math and science and high-stakes, low-level testing is misguided. Bring back the liberal arts, they say. And so do I.

Reading scores for 9-year-olds did arrive in the form of the latest results from PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study). American students scored the same as they had on the previous administration in 2001: 540 this time; 542 then. “America Idles on International Reading Test” was a typical headline. This wasn’t good enough for Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings, who commented, “Clearly, as the world becomes flatter, it’s becoming more competitive. We need to do better than simply keep pace.” Thus Spellings placed the economic fate of the nation squarely on the backs of our fourth-graders.

Looking past the fictitious implications of the results for global competitiveness, the scores are still something of a problem for Spellings. With regard to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the secretary has been crowing for years that “over the last five years, our 9-year-olds have made more progress in reading than in the previous 28 combined.” She credited No Child Left Behind, of course, but overlooked the fact that, for much of that period, NCLB didn’t exist.

So the scores from PIRLS must be a terrible embarrassment. By 2006, we’d had years of NCLB and years of Reading First. The secretary issued a short press release noting that “the U.S. score has not changed measurably from 2001. While we’re seeing progress under No Child Left Behind, we can do better.” Spellings has never been known for her strong grip on reality, but this is evidence of denial. If we’ve seen more progress on the National Assessment of Educational Progress than ever, then shouldn’t we be seeing something in the way of an increase on PIRLS?

If the overall results are embarrassing, the scores disaggregated by ethnicity must be even more so. After all,
in addition to rendering all students “proficient” by the
year 2014, NCLB was supposed to reduce or eliminate the
gaps between ethnic groups. But those gaps remain
large. The PIRLS scores for 9-year-olds were: white stu-
dents, 560; black students, 503; Hispanic students, 518;
Asian students, 567; and American Indians, 468.

The top-ranked Russians scored 565. Hong Kong
placed second with 564. If we conduct a thought ex-
periment and imagine that the ethnic groups in the U.S.
constitute sovereign nations, then this is how they would
stack up against the rest of the world: Asian students,
first; white students, third; Hispanic students, 25th;
black students, 28th; and American Indians, 35th.

That’s right. Asian students first, white students third
among the 39 nations. One thing these rankings make
clear is that anyone who makes statements about “Amer-
ican schools” is speaking about an institution that doesn’t
actually exist.

For some reason, the U.S. Department of Education
abandoned its usual practice of reporting results in terms
of the poverty level of the schools. It reported a much
clumsier number based on whether none of the students
in a school received free or reduced-price lunch, some
did, or all did. The scores were 586, 543, and 493, re-
spectively. That the “some” figure is so close to the over-
all average reflects the fact that the category contains
the bulk of the schools.

Some of the PIRLS scores are suspect. Russian stu-
dents gained a remarkable 37 points in order to sit atop
the reading pyramid of the 39 nations. I don’t think so.
The official explanation is that Russia added a grade.
This was supposed to get Russian kids into school at
age 6, but it isn’t working. In 2001, half of the children
were using the expanded system and had been in school
four years when tested, but in 2006, most Russian par-
ents were still sending their children to school at age 7.
That could make a difference.

Can the U.S. use the results from other nations to
improve its performance? Spellings, as usual, was way
to far off the mark. In reference to PISA, she said, “We’re
brought up with research-based strategies and best practices into
our classrooms. By equipping educators with more data
to customize instruction, we’re laying the groundwork
to strengthen math and science education. It’s the right
course for our students and our work force.” Custom-
ized instruction? Anyone who has read Linda Perlstein’s
Tested or who has visited classrooms in the last few years
knows that exactly the reverse is happening. The fed-
eral government has now decided that in Florida, even
students with an I.Q. of 40 and below should be tested
with a version of the state’s test and their scores included
with those counted to determine adequate yearly progress.

But the results can be used, and other countries can
teach us a few things. In the October Kappan, W. Nor-
ton Grubb explored what we might learn from Finland
and how we might use that knowledge to reduce in-
equality. He comes up with small schools, small classes,
judicious allocation of resources, a focus on individual
children, and a multi-tiered, coherent structure for deal-
ing with students having difficulties. Two aspects of
Finnish education would be most difficult to replicate
here — a geographically stable student body and a highly
respected teaching profession, in which only one in
10 applicants to the field is accepted.

But first, we have to get those crying wolf to turn
away from test scores. This won’t be easy because fear-
mongering about test scores is the way the Romers,
Wises, and Scheppachs of the world earn their sal-
aries. But not only is the U.S. number one in global
competitiveness; it also, as Keith Baker observed in the
October Kappan, does better on some other indices of
quality of life than the test scores might lead you to
believe. Moreover, the country most often ranked as
the best place in the world to live, Norway, also scores
right at the median in international comparisons. Baker
summarized it this way:

The fixation on test scores has so dominated policy that
little attention has been paid to finding out what makes
America’s schools the best in the world with regard to in-
ternational economic competition. But a recent conver-
sation I had with a Swede now living in Los Angeles seems
to point in the right direction. He holds a high position
in a bioscience company and has lived in 10 different na-
tions. He told me, “There is no doubt that graduates of
European high schools know a lot more than American
grads, but I prefer my kids to go to school in America be-
cause Americans acquire a spirit that the other countries
lack.” Other anecdotal sources suggest this “spirit” involves
ambition, inquisitiveness, independence, and perhaps most
important, the absence of a fixation on testing and test
scores.

I included a section on this “spirit” in the 16th Bracey
Report (October 2006) and quoted the words of the
minister of education for Singapore, who referred to
it with admiration. I ended that section with a quote
from psychologist Robert Sternberg that our use of high-
stakes testing had become “one of the most effective
vehicles this country has created for suppressing cre-
ativity.” Certainly, the critics have been singing the
same old song about economic competitiveness for the
last quarter century. If test scores, which have not im-
proved over the years, were really related to competi-
tiveness, the nation would have collapsed shortly after
A Nation at Risk appeared in 1983.