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## EVENT BRIEF

### **PISA SCORES RELEASED AND US SCORES REMAIN STAGNANT: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR EDUCATION POLICY?**

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On December 7, the latest test scores were released from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an assessment developed by 65 developing nations that compares academic achievement in Reading, Mathematics and Science among 15-year-olds. The PISA results, released every three years, have gained significant international attention as countries acknowledge that an increasingly globalized economy requires more international economic competition.

PISA results historically have driven nations' education policies and can provide indicators of a country's ability to internationally compete. Tuesday sounded an alarm for the United States. The U.S. students who were assessed as part of this PISA ranked 26<sup>th</sup> out of the 65 participating countries. Specifically, they ranked 17th in Science, 14th in Reading, and 24th in Math\*. Countries ranking within the top ten in each academic area included Shanghai, Hong Kong, Finland, Korea, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and Canada. Several events marked the release of the PISA in Washington, D.C., including a briefing on Capitol Hill co-hosted by the Alliance for Excellent Education, the Asia Society, the Committee for Economic Development, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices featuring **Andreas Schleicher**, head of the indicators and analysis division for OECD's Directorate of Education. PBS also televised a town hall featuring U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan called "Education for Innovation: A Digital Town Hall," and hosted in partnership with the Aspen Institute, PBS NewsHour, Intel Corporation and The Information Technology & Innovation Foundation (ITIF).

At the briefing on Capitol Hill, OECD's Schleicher presented findings from the PISA, explaining that this revised assessment "measured if students can extrapolate from their knowledge base and creatively apply this knowledge." Schleicher explained that some countries are teaching this skill to their students more effectively than others, but identifying exactly how is difficult. "Being a rich country, therefore, no longer indicates you have a great educational system," Schleicher said. He outlined five points to provide a guide for countries to follow and begin reforms to increase academic achievements.

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First, how systems pay their teachers and how much attention the media and public pay to education makes a difference in outcomes. Secondly, a shared set of clear and ambitious standards must be adopted to obtain optimal student performance. Third, developing and retaining quality teachers and school leaders is critical to success. Creating a system of accountability is crucial as well, and lastly, there must be coherent policies and practices. According to Schleicher, all five of these components are prominent in the education systems of high achieving countries. One final point Schleicher highlighted was the need for parental involvement and the importance of early childhood education. Both elements are a top priority that fall outside of standard education systems' purview.

Sitting on a panel poised to respond to Schleicher's presentation was **Carmel Martin**, Assistant Secretary for Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development at the U.S. Department of Education, who stated that her biggest concern "was the stagnation" but welcomed results that "challenge conventional wisdoms that poverty is not an indicator of scholastic success." Additionally, Martin pointed out that many of the high performing nations have teacher unions and therefore the U.S. "can't use that as a scapegoat moving forward." **Gene Wilhoit**, Executive Director at the Council of Chief State School Officers, and **Dane Linn**, Director of the Education Division at the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, both commented on the renewed importance of the Common Core Standards Initiative and expressed hope that, in times of tight state budgets, the PISA news would provoke increased resourcefulness and an opportunity for more effective alignment of investments and programs.

The event "Education for Innovation: A Digital Town Hall" allowed **Secretary Duncan** to publicly discuss how this new international ranking might inform national policy. It also provided a platform to other experts such as Robert Atkinson, Founder and President of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, and Thomas Friedman, renowned *The World is Flat* author and columnist at the *New York Times*.

Providing introductory remarks at the town hall, **Angel Gurría**, Secretary-General of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which coordinates and develops the PISA evaluation, described the PISA's ability to capture the creative capabilities of students and the tremendous benchmarks such an assessment is able to provide other countries to develop better human capital systems. Gurría offered the US six recommendations based on the latest PISA results: 1) Make education a priority; 2) Set ambitious standards; 3) Pay teachers more and focus on recruiting and retaining talent; 4) Embrace the importance of autonomy; 5) Maintain equity in schools; and 6) Use the ability to adjust and innovate as necessary.

Gurría introduced Secretary Duncan who described these results as a "massive wake-up call" for the nation. High income nations can no longer live under the guise that their wealth will buy them the most competitive human capital system. "[C]learly we have a long way to go as a nation before education becomes the great equalizer it was meant to be." The most disturbing message in this report, according to Duncan, is the stagnation of the United States' progress while other countries show significant academic gains, an indirect result of No Child Left Behind which "dumbed-down standards." Secretary

Duncan recognized the small boost in U.S. science scores, but noted this small gain was overshadowed by stagnant reading and math scores as well as a disappointing achievement among minority students and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, the results suggest that each year American students spend in school they decline in academic achievement. “While we spend more than most countries on education we must invest more strategically.” Duncan spoke in favor of professionalizing and elevating the status of the teaching profession in this country, along with proposing a medical model for teacher training. Citing that 60-70 percent of teachers don’t feel adequately prepared to enter the classroom, Duncan suggested a stronger teaching residency component in teacher preparation programs might prevent such insecurities, replacing them with the skills and tools necessary for success. He also suggested that those teaching science and math should be paid more than their colleagues, as should highly successful teachers who choose to work in low-income communities.

He emphatically supported the adoption and implementation of the Common Core Standards, pointing out that the PISA results reveal that all high-performing nations have unified, rigorous standards. In addition, in order for the U.S. to improve, Duncan said schools need to offer more AP classes, dual enrollment classes, early college programs, wrap-around services for impoverished students, and foreign language classes. He also said young people should be exposed to global education and interaction with classrooms all over the world, and added, “We must pass the DREAM Act.” He pointed to the Race to the Top program as important to improving education in the country. The business community also has a role, according to Duncan. This community is responsible for developing relationships with community colleges to align skills with the jobs available and provide internships, and for helping to professionalize school boards. Sounding perplexed, Duncan referenced the extreme confidence American youth possess, which is a mismatch to their lack of academic skills. While this confidence spurs creativity in some instances, he noted, this confidence could be a result of undeserved praise and an indication of where the standards within the education system have been too low.

Although these results spark concern, Duncan hoped they would spawn a sense of urgency by showing that inaction “results in other countries outperforming us.” This will cause a national permanent recession and the continuation of jobs going overseas because the jobs of the future are “knowledge-based.”

**Robert Atkinson** followed the Secretary in another session of the Town Hall that discussed efficiencies and potential improvements in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education. Identifying students with a proclivity to STEM disciplines is essential, Atkinson explained. These students, once identified, should be nurtured and provided enriching, engaging experiences. Students from Olin College of Engineering were standing by during this session to provide introspective commentary from their experiences. They shared that a “culture of entrepreneurship” is essential for STEM students to foster economic outcomes. At Olin College, entrepreneurship is a strong part of the curriculum and 25 percent of the students start a business.

**Thomas Friedman** was the concluding commentator and provided general observations for future action. Friedman charged political leaders with “explaining to the public the world in which we live” that includes the shift from a manufacturing economy to an innovative economy. Accordingly, the workforce and education system should align with the vision set forth by national leaders. This “24-hour-innovative-manufacturing cycle” must include the liberal arts and abide “by two truths: 1) what will be will be; and 2) competition in this flat world is between you and your own imagination.”

## CONCLUSION

The results of the PISA were well covered by the national media and will likely spur a newly invigorated conversation about education reform and the state of math and science education in the U.S. STEM education advocates will point to results as evidence of the need for more investments in programs authorized by the America COMPETES Act, as well as the pressing need for addressing education reform in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

There are several resources of interest related to the announcement and the day’s events. For more information on the 2009 PISA Report, visit:

[http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en\\_32252351\\_32235731\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html).

For more information on “Education for Innovation: A Digital Town Hall” visit:

<http://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/2010/12/07/education-innovation-digital-town-hall>

For more information on the AEE briefing, visit: <http://www.all4ed.org/>

*\*Please note these rankings are when the U.S. is compared to the 64 other OECD countries, non-OECD countries, and other education systems. When the U.S. is only compared to the 33 other OECD countries only, it is ranked 18<sup>th</sup> in Math, 7<sup>th</sup> in Reading, and 13<sup>th</sup> in Science.*