

When pigs



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Why American students lag behind

By **Mike Honda**, Special to CNN

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Mike Honda: International Student Assessment report shows equity in education matters
- U.S. students lag because nation not committed to high-quality education for all, he says
- Honda: High-ranked nations help disadvantaged students, expect high performance
- Honda: All U.S. schools need equal financing, well-qualified teachers, adequate resources

Editor's note: Rep. Mike Honda, D-California, serves on the Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies, and is a former teacher, school principal and school board member.

(CNN) -- One of the greatest lessons to be learned from the Program for International Student Assessment report released this month is that equity matters.

Others might argue that economic competitiveness is the real issue here, considering that assessments of American 15-year-olds' capabilities in reading, math and science rank low among the 34 nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which performed the study.

America's performance reveals an "average" showing, with dangerous disparities: The 113-point gap in math literacy between the United States and No. 1 spot-holder Shanghai-China is the equivalent of more than two school years of schooling, a statistic sure to ruffle America's economically competitive feathers.

There's more to the PISA results, however, than mere number or rank. The real lesson is less about economic competitiveness and more about a country's commitment to an equity-centered education.

While school systems across the globe are challenged with meeting the needs of students from disadvantaged backgrounds -- be it low socio-economic status, single parent households, or foreign-born parents -- the top PISA performers managed to still provide an equal, high-quality education to each child attending their schools. Whether it was Canada's commitment to meet the needs of their immigrant students or China's policy shift to a more inclusive school system, the best-performing countries demonstrated the power of setting high expectations for all students and investing in resources, teachers, and leaders to help students meet these high expectations, regardless of their family background or geographic location.

PISA revealed that for too many students, their socio-economic background can predict their success. Top performing countries, like Korea and Hong Kong-China, were able to break away from this international trend, doubling the average for the number of disadvantaged students excelling at school.

The evidence presented by PISA is compelling. The commitment by the top-ranking countries to serve each child's needs translated not only into a fair and accessible education system, but one that clearly prepares its citizens with competitive 21st century knowledge and skills. Given equal educational opportunities to learn and achieve -- regardless of race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic level -- students in these top-performing countries were able to overcome barriers to achievement and excel at much higher rates.

We must do the same here in America. PISA measures of educational equity showed that impoverished and racially isolated schools in the United States simply did not measure up to essential conditions of equity.

Children attending such schools did not receive equal financing, equal access to qualified teachers, or adequate instructional resources. In fact, of the 34 OCED nations, America is one of only four countries that gives the advantage of access to more teachers to higher-income schools.

These facets of inequity in America's public schools have robbed students of their right to an equal, quality education. As a result, there is a disparity in academic performance that falls along economic and racial lines. For too many students in America, education is not the great

equalizer, as it is purported to be.

These lessons regarding equity, provided by PISA's top performers, reflect a paradigm shift, not unlike the one I called for in the National Commission on Equity and Excellence, to be launched by the U.S. Department of Education in January 2011. Creating equity, and thus excellence, in our education system requires a plan of action that challenges our perception of who is capable of achieving at high levels, evaluates the individual needs of the students and their schools, and responds with strategic investment that ensures every child in America has access to qualified teachers, rigorous curriculum, tools and resources to meet high expectations, and more.

The takeaway is this: Prioritize equity in education. Our students deserve it. Our nation needs it. Our future depends on it.

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