

LEARNING FROM High-Performers

Examining the education policies and practices of high-performing countries to build a world-class education system state by state

In August 2016, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) released a legislative study of international comparisons of high-performing education systems. The study examines other high-performing countries to learn which policies and practices were in place and what lessons the U.S. and individual states might learn from their success. The following article is excerpted from that study, “No Time to Lose: How to Build a World Class Education System State by State.”

We cannot ignore the reality that most state education systems are falling dangerously behind the world, leaving the United States overwhelmingly underprepared to succeed in the 21st century economy.

The U.S. workforce, widely acknowledged to be the best educated in the world half a century ago, is now among the least well educated, according to recent studies. At this pace, we will struggle to compete economically even against developing nations, and our children will struggle to find jobs in the global economy.

Despite their efforts,

U.S. states have found little success because recent reforms have underperformed. Meanwhile, high-performing countries implement policies and practices and build comprehensive systems that look drastically different from ours, leading them to the success that has eluded states. Pockets of improvement in a few districts or states are not enough to retain our country’s global competitiveness.

The good news is that we have the ability to turn things around. Much

higher-performing, yet less-developed countries — such as Poland and Singapore — have made significant progress developing their education systems in just a decade or two, and most of their innovations came from right here in the U.S.

But we must begin now. There’s no time to lose. We must directly face these challenges and begin immediately to reimagine and

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reengineer our own education system. We must implement meaningful and comprehensive changes that will produce real results for our students.

Each state can develop its own strategies for building a modern education system that is globally competitive, similar to the approach taken by other high-performing countries. These countries did not copy each other; instead they borrowed and adapted ideas, many from the U.S., and customized their approach for their own unique context.

■ **Top Performers: How They Became the Best in the World**

As the National Conference of State Legislatures' (NCSL) study group talked with experts from around the world and visited several top-performing countries, they confirmed what others had found — there are common elements that make up the design of world-class education systems. These elements are widely credited for their rapid rise in student achievement. Here is what they found.

Children come to school ready to learn, and extra support is given to struggling

students so that all have the opportunity to achieve high standards.

- Necessary resources ensure that all children enter the first grade with the cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed to master a first-grade curriculum set to high standards.
- Once students are in school, resources are distributed so that students who may find it harder to meet high standards will be given the extra resources — especially highly effective teachers — they need to succeed.

A world-class teaching profession supports a world-class instructional system, where every student has access to highly effective teachers and is expected to succeed.

- The highly professional teaching force is well-prepared, well-compensated and well-supported throughout their careers.
- Teachers support a well-designed instruction system that includes high standards for learning, a core curriculum created by world-class teachers, and high-quality assessments designed to measure complex

skills demanded by the standards and curriculum.

- All students are expected to be ready for college and career, and all educators are expected to get them there.

A highly effective, intellectually rigorous system of career and technical education is available to those preferring an applied education.

- A powerful, hands-on applied curriculum is built, requiring strong academic skills.
- The system has no “dead ends,” and pathways to university are clear and always available.
- Schools partner with employers to ensure that high standards are set for the students and provide on-the-job training and learning opportunities to enable them to reach those standards.

Individual reforms are connected and aligned as parts of a clearly planned and carefully designed comprehensive system.

- All policies and practices are developed to support the larger education system.
- The coherent system of education is designed to ensure that every student meets the same goal of college and career readiness.





Steps that States Can Take

Build an Inclusive Team and Set Priorities.

State legislators cannot do this work alone. They must assemble a broad and diverse group that brings state and local policymakers, teachers, principals, superintendents, unions, business, parents and students into an inclusive process to set a vision for reform and identify priorities.

State legislators know that it is very difficult to achieve agreement on reimagining and building a 21st century education system. But every person or group cannot get everything they want, so we recommend a different approach to achieving a collective and realistic vision: To build consensus, every stakeholder in the discussion is expected to put on the table a proposition giving them something they never thought they could get, in exchange for giving up something they never thought they would give up. In addition, it is unrealistic to expect that every

person, group or interest will be 100 percent in favor of every idea or strategy. So, it might be wise to establish a threshold for support to move forward. For example, the group might adopt a “70 percent rule”: An idea or decision is approved if 70 percent of the group is in favor.

Study and Learn From Top Performers. Every state should embark on a journey similar to that of the NCSL study group — a journey to discover the policies and practices of other high-performing countries. Reconsider much of what you think you know; abandon many ideas to which you have long been committed; and embrace new ideas, many which come from other countries but also those already implemented in many of our states. Study innovations in the states. Look hard at statewide data and be unafraid to compare your own state to other states and countries.

Create a Shared Statewide Vision. Developing a shared long-term vision and setting goals to guide the work will be critical to the

success of the effort. The vision becomes a guide for policymaking that transcends the shifts in politics or personalities. The vision becomes the North Star that continually guides the work. The journey will not be a short one, but a good roadmap — knowing where to go and developing the way there — means that policymakers will ultimately arrive at the desired destination.

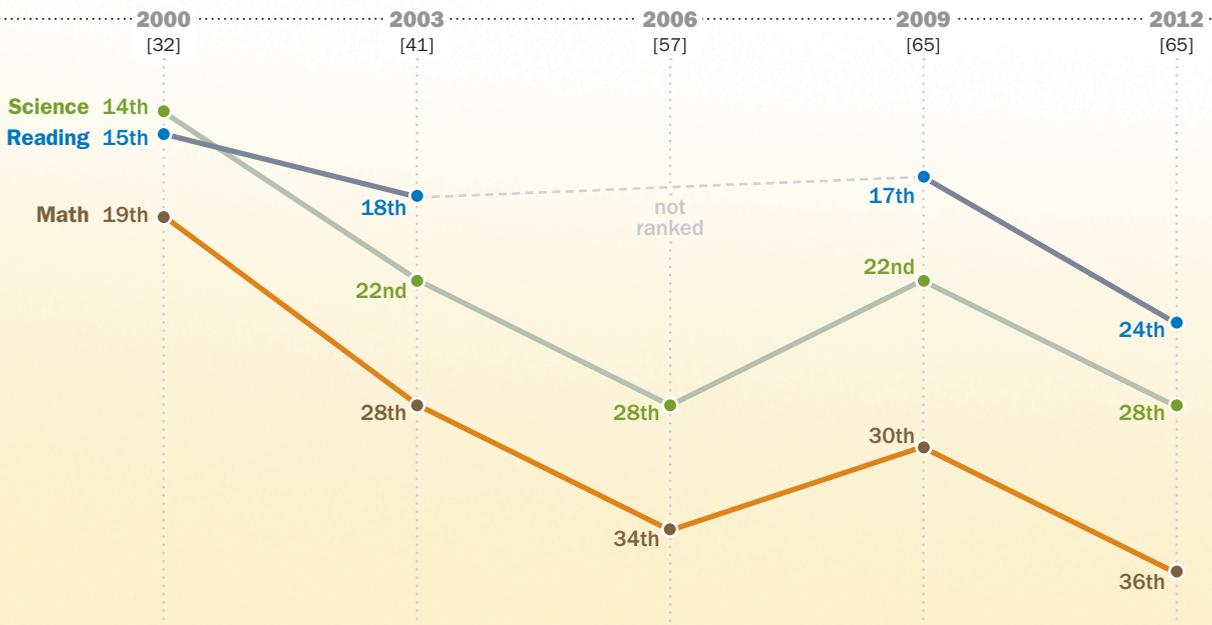
Benchmark Policies. After establishing a shared vision, the state should consider benchmarking its education policies, practices and outcomes against those of high-performing countries and high-performing states. This helps to identify specific policies and implementation strategies for necessary shifts in policy and practice. An ongoing benchmarking process also allows the state to continually monitor its results.

Get Started on One Piece. After creating a comprehensive strategic plan, states should get started right away on a priority area of reform. Building a cohesive system does not

U.S. Rankings on PISA

Number of countries tested shown in brackets below year.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a comparative study of 15-year-old students’ knowledge in key areas including math, reading and science.



mean states should wait to implement all pieces together, but rather understand and emphasize the connectedness of policy pieces. We urge states to move forward now to design and implement priority reform strategies, such as early literacy, teacher preparation, or college and career pathways. Identify an important early success that supports the state vision and the strategic plan, and use the success as momentum for continuous improvement.

Work Through “Messiness.” In both high-performing countries and in successful reform efforts here in the U.S., the process of designing system-wide reform is always difficult and messy. There is no one recipe for success. The top performers took at least one step backward for every two steps forward, but continued to keep their eye on the goal to stay the course.

Invest the Time. States embarking on this process will find that they cannot tackle everything at once and will need to prioritize their work. We urge states to define these priorities as part of an inclusive process that first identifies a state-wide vision and ensures that indi-

vidual strategies are all needed parts for achieving statewide goals. States will begin this process at different places and will design different pathways. Achieving system-wide change will take time and will begin and end in different places in different states.

State policymakers can take these first action steps to quickly begin to move their states from mediocrity to excellence.

But first policymakers must face and understand the facts — the unfortunate state of our current education system. Then policymakers must understand the common elements found in world-class education systems.

■ Conclusion

States must work together with local entities to design efforts that are practical and appropriate for each individual state. We will not be successful by allowing the federal government to set agendas and priorities.

The recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) moves federal

education policy away from the top-down, punitive approach that has been in place since 2002. States now have more flexibility to reimagine their accountability systems, design interventions to improve instruction, and use federal resources to support students and schools in more flexible ways. At the same time, states will continue to have the data needed to monitor the performance of student subgroups, ensuring a focus on a high-quality education for all children.

ESSA provides an opportunity for states to ensure that all students have the knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors to succeed in college and the workplace so that jobs stay in our states rather than going overseas. These changes represent both an opportunity and a challenge for states, and lessons from high-performing countries offer timely guidelines for states at this opportune time. ■

This article is excerpted from the National Conference of State Legislatures' study "No Time to Lose: How to Build a World Class Education System State by State." View the full report at NCSL.org. Reprinted with permission.

International Comparisons are Valid ...

When PISA results were first released in the 2000s, many countries enacted sweeping changes to improve their education systems and drive economic development. They realized that they needed to turn their education systems around to compete in a global economy. Some in the U.S., however, explained away the results by criticizing the PISA and methodology, denied that education results in other countries could be compared to those in this country, or argued that international comparisons are irrelevant. This criticism continues even today as the United States falls further and further behind.

The NCSL study group's conclusions were very different. They found that U.S. students' poor performance cannot easily be explained away. For example, critics assert that the U.S. educates all students while the other high-performing countries

educate only their elite. But graduation rates dispel this assertion. The OECD reports that the U.S. graduation rate is 80 percent, lower than most other high-performing countries.

Critics also assert that the U.S. is more diverse than other countries and, as a result, faces challenges that others do not. This may have been true in the past, but it is not the case today. Both Europe and Asia have experienced an upsurge in immigration over the past several decades. The same is true of Canada. A greater proportion of Canadian students was born outside Canada than the proportion of U.S. students born outside the U.S. Furthermore, Asian countries have significantly more cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity than many Americans often suppose. □