

## **Comparative Education**

**Understanding Why the United States Underperforms in International Test Scores:**

**Learning From China, Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom**

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## Introduction

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”, these are the words of the late Nelson Mandela. Education is a weapon; one that enhances, changes, and creates endless possibilities for a future that humans at times do not have the capacity to understand. Education is progress, it is hope. Education is the foundation of the global society that we have grown to know today. Every nation in the world is a product of the access to knowledge and education that birthed profound innovation. We are not the human race without education. Given that education holds such a prominent role in our society, whether acknowledged or not, in order for a nation to be successful they must care for the quality of their educational system. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, in 2017 85% of the American public agreed that the United States either “stood above all other all countries in the world” or that it is “one of the greatest countries, along with some others”. Understanding the self proclaimed greatness of the United States, the nation’s stature in the world, and the understanding that education is a powerful tool, one would assume that the United States were among the highest achieving nations in education. In the event that a notion or a belief in that regard were held, it would surely be mistaken and easily refutable. After the release of the 2018 international test score statistics, the National Center On Education And The Economy released a list of the world's top education performing nations. The United States of America was nowhere to be found. The United States generally has a seat at any other global measure such as the economy or the military and in many instances it is ranked number one, but not in education. The current dichotomy in the United State’s ability to perform in education as compared to its standing in other measures creates a problem for the nation moving forward. If education is as

powerful a weapon as we have come to understand it, then the United States has found itself in a situation that gravely calls for its attention. This research seeks to understand what the United States can gain from looking at the systems that exist in other countries and the factors that affect their education.

The fact of the matter is that the United States does not perform well on international tests. Each year, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) collects data for their Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures the reading, science, and math skills of students in participating countries. A thorough report is then published with details of the scores and an assessment of what shifts took place and how those shifts differ from previous years. These test scores are intended to help schools and policy makers in countries adjust and perform at higher education standards. According to the “PISA Insights and Interpretations”, in 2018 the United States stood 13th in reading, 37th in mathematics, and 18th in science. Countries like China, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Canada all out perform the United States in at least two of the three subjects. The question for American to understand is, “Why should we care?”

Again, education is power. In an article by Ruth Irwin titled “Rethinking Economics and Education: Exponential Growth and Post-Growth Strategies”, we come to understand that there is a direct correlation between a growing, successful education system and the economy of a country. Although the United States currently has the highest GDP out of the 5 countries mentioned, according to data from the World Bank, China is beginning to close the gap. Education also directly affects a country's ability to be innovative. Andreas Schleicher, writer of “Seeing the United States Education System through the Prism of International Comparison”, expresses that along with the United States low test scores will soon come a decline in the

nation's ability to keep up in a technologically advancing world. The article continues on by explaining the growth that countries like South Korea have seen by taking their national education more seriously. Researcher Morten Frederiken also explains that in the international world, education can express a sense of trust amongst nations. This is beneficial for the United States when it comes to all types of international commerce and peace building. Education is not only an economic and power interest, it also affects the social interaction within a country. Education plays a role in the health of a society, the care of children, the environment, and crime (Nevzer Stacey). All of these things are key to advancing a modern society. The United States is a global giant but if education continues in the trends it has, the knowledge that students carry will by no means be the only thing affected.

## **Methodology**

If you take a step back and analyze the presence that the United States has in the world, to be faced with understanding how it could fall from glory can be difficult to wrap one's mind around. The question we have to bring our attention to as a comparative society is, "Why are other countries doing substantially better in education than the United States?" Education is multifaceted and because of that, no one thing can definitively make one country's approach better than others. The world that we have created tends to assess the success of one nation and attempt to implement it in other countries without understanding cultural, societal, and historical implications and differences that might cause what is beneficial in one nation to be detrimental in another. That is not the objective of this research. The objective is to understand what the United States can gain from looking at the similarities and differences in government structures, social

issues, and economies of China, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Canada as they pertain to education, in an attempt to improve the overall approach to the U.S's education policy. A comparison that seeks to improve, not replicate.

An analysis of political ideologies and government functions, social issues, and economies of each nation will allow an understanding of each individual nation to be given and why they have more success than the United States. At the conclusion of each section will be an explanation of what the United States can take away from the comparison. Finally, an analysis of current U.S. Educational Policy will be looked at and suggestions for further development will be given.

### **Political Ideologies and Government Structures**

The most apparent factor that shapes education is a country's government system and practicing political ideologies. The government dictates which part of the government is responsible for education and different ideologies place different emphasis on who has the ability to sway education in a country. A study by Per F. Laursen titled "Ideological Power In Education", explains that people tend to underestimate the role that ideologies play in the educational system. He states, "The basic form of power in education is the ideological power that can make learning seem reasonable to the students." Laursen also explained that the United States and many nations like it tend to not understand how much ideology plays a role in the way one country interacts with another. Hence why some countries have higher test scores than others. The article concludes by saying that, "educational development is not only the result of political and economic power but also of what seems reasonable to students, teachers, parents,

and public opinion. Ideology matters in education.” China is the most culturally, politically, and economically different from the United States. While the United States proudly waves its Democracy, the People’s Republic of China has been spearheaded by Communist ideologies since 1949 (CFR). Communism, as we see in China, means a rejection of privatization and a system greatly based on the central government’s control. The education system of China clearly reflects its Communist state. The OECD’s “Education In China A Snapshot” tells us that the country has the biggest education system and that the system is decentralized, having “little involvement of private providers in the school sector.” China’s education system actually parallels the U.S.’s system in that education is in the hands of the local government, in China they are referred to as counties. There are nearly 3,000 counties in China who arard of cultural excellence in China (OECD). Communist China, unlike the Democratic society in the United States, levels very little tasked with administering education that not only follows laws set by the central government, but that also reach the standle room for deviance. The ideological principles of the government have created a system that thrives in understanding that education is about creating a singular Chinese identity that will reinforce customs and morals defined by centuries of Chinese culture. The entire system is then overseen by a Minister of Education who ensures that laws are being kept, that money is being allocated, and that counties and provinces have the resources they need to succeed. Although China’s indoctrinating education system has placed them miles ahead of the United States in reading, math, and science; it does not come without a price. The Communist society that the People’s Republic of China has enacted in its country has caused it to receive a Freedom House “Global Freedom Score” of 10 out of 100. The United States most likely will not find itself converting to Communism anytime soon, and the diversity in our nation makes it difficult to achieve the cohesive unity that China has. What the U.S. can

understand and take from the government's role in affecting education is nationalism and patriotism. The Chinese have successfully made education a matter of national identity; the product of a unified culture and the understanding that the ideologies of the government dictate the standard of the educational system. In the United States there is no national pride in the system of education. In fact Americans only tend to rally in favor of American in times of great tragedy or triumph. The system of education does not hold any sense of pride for the citizens of the United States. In fact only about 51% of Americans in 2019 considered a college education to be very important (Gallup). The desire for education in the United States is dwindling and what the American government can learn and understand from the Chinese is a strategic combination of national identity and educational success.

Japan, Canada, and the United Kingdom all have systems considered to be Constitutional Monarchies. These systems usually have a constitution and a monarch of some sort who is either an active player in the politics and government of the country or more of a figurehead. Because Constitutional Monarchies can look very different, the way they affect education can also look different between different countries.

Japan's monarch is their emperor whose power has become pretty limited to just appointing a prime minister. The country's system heavily relies on the separation of power. Just like the United States, the government of Japan is broken up into three branches who work together for the nation. Education is controlled by the local government and is a staple for the growth that the nation of Japan has seen in the past decades (Britannica). Like the Chinese, the Japanese value their national identity, but where Japan differs is their emphasis on collaboration in their government and in their education system. The collaborative efforts that are evident in the separation of power in Japan's government are extremely visible in the system of education

that has brought the nation to be highly competitive in science and math. An article by Angela Wu titled, "The Japanese Education System: A Case Study Summary and Analysis", explains the very comprehensive system that Japan uses is deliberately contingent on students learning from one another. Wu addresses that in Japan there is a desire for students to be self motivated. The Japanese Minister of Education desires "well-rounded students" and the educational curriculum challenges to grow with one another and strengthen each other (pg.2). Students in Japan learn in "whole class instruction" style, this paces all students of all levels on the same track and pushes them to grow from one another in an interactive classroom (pg.5). The country's interactive policy makes it easy to see and understand why the country has students who retain information at such a high degree. The local government is meant to fulfil the standard that the Ministry of Education sets and in the same way that the government sharpens, corrects, and refines the nation of Japan, students are also challenged to do so. The United States carries the same government system that is driven by checks and balances but in education, we tend to see a more competitive nature. Standardized tests and performance driven standards steer the United States educational system while the Japanese are focused on a general and cohesive strengthening of each student. One Harvard professor referred to the performance focused educational system in the United States as a "charade". He expressed that programs like "No Child Left Behind", among others, create an educational system heavily focused on reading and math scores and a student's ability to retain in order to keep the schools funding (Chalkbeat). This brings added stress to students, teachers, and administrators. There seems to be a disconnect in the United States in what the federal government calls for and the ability of local schools to perform. The U.S. needs a more cohesive system, similar to that of the Japanese in which federal, state, and local governments are working together for the best interest of the students.



The United Kingdom and Canada who also have Constitutional Monarchies have an interesting connection. The monarch in the United Kingdom is technically the reigning monarch in Canada although the two nations are federally and legally independent of one another. Canada is generally considered to be most like the United States and while the country shares some structure with the United States, the very liberal ideals shape the nation's education system. According to a Study by David Waddington, Canada has had a decentralized education system since the nation came into existence. This means in Canada there is not necessarily a similar design in the curriculum across the country. The government system of Canada is very influenced by the ideology of Liberalism. The understanding of Liberalism in Canada is reliant on the individualism of people and their choice in a society. Waddington's research expresses that the nation "does not have a federal department or national system of education" (pg2), each of the provinces has its own Minister of Education who oversees the needs of his own province. Although it seems like Canada lacks cohesiveness, the ideologies that are present in the educational system allow Ministers to address the specific educational needs of their province. They do not have a central government directing the overall educational standards. What is significant about Canada is that they score higher than the United States in all three subject areas by very substantial margins even without a central educational head. The federal government in the United States plays a big role in the financial side of education and at times the desire to keep funding can cause schools to neglect what will truly educate its students. What the United States can learn from Canada is the approach that allows Canadian Ministers of Education the freedom to tailor funds and educational standards to the needs of the students. In the United States 43 states have adopted the "Common Core Standard", which attempted to set a national standard in math and english in every state (Vox). Standards are beneficial but what the United States has

implemented restricts states ability to assess and educate students in a way that is favorable to the degree of learning in that state.

Finally the United Kingdom's government system and ideologies are the most unusual out of the 4 comparing nations. The English Constitution is uncodified, meaning that it is only partially written and therefore a very loose and flexible standard for governing the country. This unconventional approach allows for the government to make changes as they see fit, and the same approach is given to the educational system. The United Kingdom, according to a study by Stephen Machin and Anna Vignoles titled "Education Policy in the UK", has adopted a very nationalized curriculum. This decision was not because the country is highly centralized and is heavily defined by centrality but rather it was a decision made because of the problems the nation had with attracting "high ability" teachers. The Department of Education in the United Kingdom is overseen by Parliament which is the main governing body in the country. The United Kingdom today is very clearly structured in its ability as a government to adapt and easily change law to fit the needs of the current society. The Republican, Democrat struggle in the United States government can make it very difficult to pass acts of legislation and at times the interest to refrain from passing acts of legislation is not the people. There is a certain level of understanding the problem and creating an effect and speedy solution that the U.K.'s government has allowed in their education system that the United States can learn from.

### **Social Issues (Race, Class, & Gender)**

Social differences also play a huge role in educational systems. The social issues that a country deals with can ultimately be very detrimental for groups of people, their education, and

the overall ability of a country's education system. A report in the Economic Policy Institute addresses the facts that one of the biggest defining factors in a child's education is the social identity that they carry. Social identity encompasses one's class, gender, and race. As Joseph Zajda and Kassie Freeman expressed that "race, ethnicity, and gender in education continue to act as profound barriers to quality education for all, equity and access globally. (pg.12)" The way that a society perceives you can very well impact your ability to learn and receive an education. Therefore, different countries have different experiences. The history of each nation impacts their social structures very differently. China, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Canada all struggle with at least one of the social identities on a large scale; the United States struggles with all three.

When we look at class, one of the major ways to understand a nation's class struggle is to look at the gap between the poor and the wealthy. According to a study done by USA Today, China, the United States, and the United Kingdom all rank among the top 15 nations that have the widest gap between the rich and poor. China ranked 2nd, the United States 9th, and the United Kingdom sits 13th. The class struggle in the United States is a problem for education because of the localized control of education. Since schools are funded in part by state and local taxes; areas that experience higher rates of poverty will also see general shortages in education.

When we look at gender, a study by the Business Insider that ranked 12 countries where men made significantly more money, the United Kingdom placed 7th, Canada and the U.S. placed 6th, and Japan held the 3rd spot.

Race is an interesting social construct because it is arguably where the Asian countries struggle the least, but where the U.S. struggles the most. Countries like Japan and China are extremely homogeneous and because of that they do not really promote immigration or

permanent residence to foreigners. Business Insider and Investopedia respectively named Japan and China amongst the hardest nations to gain citizenship to. Without the presence of vast numbers of races with very physical differences it makes it difficult to see the presence of inequality. The United States is very different from the two Asian countries mentioned because aside from the fact that almost 30% of the population is not white (U.S. Census), 48.2 million people in the United States are immigrants which comprises a little over 15% of the population (WEF). The U.S. has sold the “American Dream” to other nations and promoted the wealth and success that the nation can offer for outsiders. While Canada and the U.K. have very large immigrant populations, neither country has even 10 million immigrants (WEF) or demographics that mimic the diversity of the U.S. Regardless of the numbers, all of the countries have some sort of racial inequality but a quote by David Roediger in a Smithsonian article really helps to understand the U.S.’s problem. Roediger states, “The world got along without race for the overwhelming majority of its history. The U.S. has never been without it.” Racism has been a part of the history of the United States since its founding and the culmination of gender inequality, class inequality, and race inequality is not the ideal condition for a thriving educational system.

What the United States can learn from the understanding of social identity is that it calls for their attention. In the same Smithsonian article, an educator expresses their consideration and care for their students' social and racial identity and how that might affect their ability in a classroom. It is not enough to know that the country has inequality thriving. They need to address each aspect of the social identity in order to aid students' ability to perform well in classrooms. The system as a whole needs a sense of consciousness that breeds action.

## **The Economy**

Finally , the economies of each nation play a huge role in the ability that their educational system has to function on high international standards. Specifically, the amount of money and the allocation of that money is crucial to educational systems. The Albert Shanker Institute published a journal in 2012 that stated, “on average, aggregate measures of per pupil spending are positively associated with improved or higher student outcomes.” Money matters but more importantly what governing body controls that money is important. China spends 4.11% of its national GDP on education equating about 520 billion U.S. dollars (The State Council). Japan spends 3.6% of its GDP , the U.K. spends 5.5% (Insider), and Canada spends about 5.2% (Trading Economics). In 2015, the United States allocated 5% of its national GDP to education which equates to 700 billion dollars overall and about 12,800 perstudents (Insider). This is the second highest per students spending bill in the world and yet the country does not have the standing to back the funding pushed into the system.

If the United States is doing substantially better than every nation in terms of setting aside funding for education, then we understand the lack in education standing by how the U.S. chooses to spend the billions.

China, Japan, and Canada all have some sort of local governance as it pertains to education but in each of those countries there is a Minister of Education or leader who is responsible for allocating funds in larger regions of the countries. This allows for there to be a governing body between the federal and local governments who directs the funding for the countries. This does not exist in the United States. In the U.S. states there is no regional or provincial leader who can ensure that regardless of socio-economic standing that states receive

the funding they need to achieve their educational standards. Federal funding tends to be an incentive for schools to be higher achievers and neglects the need of schools. This becomes a huge problem when certain areas in a state do not have the incomes necessary for local and state taxes to be as impactful on their education as other states do. The unequal funding creates vastly different school buildings, teacher experiences, class sizes, and equipment that schools across the country have access to (ASCD). The ASCD's research states that the "reluctance to provide equal funds for U.S. public schools has also been fueled by claims from prominent researchers, reviewers, and others asserting that the level of funding for schools does not affect student achievement." Claims that we now understand to be false.

What the United States can learn and understand about other educational systems is the allocation of money in a way that suits the needs of individual schools and the overall performance of state and local entities. If the country wants educational scores to improve they need to close the gap between poorly funded schools and the top public educations that the nation offers. The United States very well has the capacity to ensure that schools have the things that they need but there is a huge focus on performance rather than education.

### **United States' Current Education Policy**

Once we understand the differences and similarities of each educational system, it is important to have a clear understanding of the current United States' educational system and what attributes of the 4 comparative nations can be implemented in the U.S. In recent years the United States has taken notice of the lack of education and has implemented. The recent dissolving of "No Child Left Behind" was a big step for the United States' Department of

Education, but was the replacement good enough? The current United States educational system is made up of the “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA) and “Common Core Standards” (CCS). ESSA does a great job at assisting students who may not be successful in traditional classrooms, pushes higher academic standards, and promotes an innovative approach that caters to individual community needs. The policy fails to address the issues that cause many educational inequalities, it does not address poverty, and in some ways limits the government's ability to intervene is necessary (Vittana). In addition to ESSA, 43 states have adopted Common Core and while there have been some success, many school systems disapprove. The idea behind Common Core is to make the “education system more comparable to the states”(DA). The issue with Common Core that states felt the need to shift and change the standards to better suit their desires which in turn defeats the purpose of having the system in the first place.

### **Policy Suggestions**

Given the information that we have gained from the comparison and the knowledge of the current policies, there are two major suggestions that would greatly benefit the U.S. education system.

Although the United States has a fully functional Department of Education, I believe it would greatly benefit from implementing regional educational leaders. Canada, which is the most similar to the United States, has Ministers of Education planted in each of the provinces and they have the power to attend to the different regions of the nation. It is evident that the United States desires a cohesive education system and we come to understand that through policy like Common Core. What the country neglects in its approach is the immense diversity

that causes success to look very different in various parts of the country. By placing people in larger regions of the country, the government could address inequality that ESSA does not. What has systematically taken place in the South has not been the overarching history of places like the Midwest and having a cohesive education system neglects the needs of people in historically disenfranchised areas. The job of the regional education directors would need to primarily focus on supplementing and aiding where state and local funding lacked. This would bring more focus to the schools that do have the resources necessary to provide a quality education to the students.

Secondly, the United States needs to be more flexible. The United Kingdom changes policies and adaptes so much quicker than the U.S. and that is evident in the over 10 years of complaints and no change in “No Child Left Behind”. The restraints of that policy pushes states to be so focused on performance that in 2011, reports from Georgia showed discrepancies in the test schools of the Atlanta Public School System (NPR). Had complaints been listened to, the pressure to keep funding would have not been so heavy on teachers. Even after the scandal, “No Child Left Behind” was still in place for 4 more years. If we give states the room to understand their problems and needs, as well as allow the flexibility for them to adapt as they see fit, the United States will flourish in its educational system. This ability needs to come without the fear of losing federal funding. So many poor decisions have been made in the educational system in the name of “keeping funding” and in order for the nation to grow it must cease. Of course the states will require some supervision but the aspect of fear in education needs to go. Just like students in Japan are encouraged to learn and grow from one another, the U.S. needs to cultivate a system that is based in analyzing past failures and bringing forth new and innovative ideas.



The combination of regional education directors and states ability to change policy without penalties will strengthen the foundation of the U.S. educational system and allow it to constantly assess its ability to probably function and adapt as states see fit.

## **Conclusion**

If the U.S. continues on the downward spiral that its educational system has found itself in, the innovative, economic giant will slowly but surely decline in power. There needs to be an effective and speedy change made to ensure that the United States that the American people know is statistically understood in every other part of the world. Education is the key and the U.S. has all the tools necessary to bring forth financial, economic, social, and historical breakthroughs that this world has otherwise never seen. We must not waste the opportunity that we have in education.

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