Learning from Other School Systems to Improve Education in the United States

Maureen McLaughlin,
Senior Advisor to the Secretary and Director of International Affairs

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I welcome this opportunity to talk about what the United States has learned from other nations with high-performing and rapidly improving education systems. The truth is, reflecting on those lessons is a big part of my job. And I thank David Ellwood and Paul Peterson for having invited me here today to discuss this with so many scholars and experts who share a keen interest in the subject.

The latest report by Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann, the centerpiece of this conference and today’s discussion, focuses on improvement in educational systems nationally and internationally. Their report, Achievement Growth, shows, in a nutshell, that the U.S. is not improving nearly fast enough educationally—and it suggests that we have much to learn from other nations that are out-performing us.

As I’ll get to in a minute, the lessons we’ve learned from other countries have had a profound influence on the U.S. Department of Education’s agenda.

Sharing policies and practices with other countries about how to improve teaching and learning—and applying these lessons in the United States, where appropriate—is critical to the Department’s efforts to facilitate a world-class education for all.

As we’ve heard today, even the experts differ about what the United States can and cannot learn, and can and cannot adopt or adapt from other nations’ education systems. But before I discuss some of the department’s takeaway lessons in this arena, I want to say that there is really very little debate that cross-national learning and international benchmarking of education has taken on unprecedented importance under Secretary Duncan.

During the last four years, a series of firsts have given international benchmarking of high-performing and rapidly improving education systems an entirely new prominence. I have been in this field a long time. At the World Bank, we certainly encouraged countries to learn from the experiences of other, more advanced education systems. But it’s fair to say that, in the past,
these questions were often treated as a back-burner issue in education reform, especially in the United States.

Today, that’s no longer the case. Since Secretary Duncan took office, he personally participated in the release of the 2009 PISA results at a press conference in Washington D.C. with OECD Secretary General Angel Gurria. At that same press conference, the OECD released a major study, *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers*. Secretary Duncan asked OECD to conduct that novel study—precisely for the purpose of learning more about what the United States could learn from top-performing nations and rapidly improving ones.

In recent years, the Department has had a number of other, important firsts. In March 2011, the Department co-sponsored, with OECD and Educational International, the first-ever International Summit on the Teaching Profession. That summit brought together ministers of education and union leaders from high-performing and rapidly improving countries and regions.

Think about that for a minute—how telling is that an international summit on the teaching profession had never taken place until last year? That summit proved such a success, and there was such a hunger for learning from colleagues in other nations, that the U.S. co-sponsored, by request, a second international summit this past March.

And now, I’m pleased to say, the Department has a new—and the first-ever—fully-articulated international strategy. A key goal of the strategy is to learn from other education systems, and apply the lessons learned to improve policy and practice at the federal, state and local levels.

Now, I’ve had the good fortune to work in many parts the world. I’ve relished those opportunities. I understand, as does Secretary Duncan, that America in many respects is an exceptional nation, with an education system that has some unique characteristics.

But Secretary Duncan and I would also be the first to say that American exceptionalism should not prevent us from strengthening our education system and adapting lessons from top-performing nations where they fit with American traditions and needs. As Secretary Duncan has said, he approaches this work and the study of high-performing systems with great humility.

I want to turn now to talking about some of the lessons that we’ve learned and adapted from our study of and dialogue with other high-performing and rapidly improving systems. Those lessons loosely fall into three areas.
First, some of the lessons from international benchmarking fall into the category of giving us a clearer, comparative sense of the state of American students in a knowledge-based, global economy. As the series of studies by Hanushek, Peterson, and Woessmann helps quantify, it is imperative for our economic growth and prosperity that we know how the college and career-readiness of U.S. students compares with those of students in other nations.

Second, and perhaps even more important, a number of the lessons we have learned from cross-national comparisons have had a tangible impact on U.S. policy.

And finally, some the lessons learned through international dialogue are really myth-debunking lessons. They are lessons that counter lingering misunderstandings about how the U.S. compares with other high-performing nations. This last category of lessons helps illuminate the road we shouldn’t travel, based on mistaken assumptions.

To turn first to international benchmarking and cross-national comparisons of student performance, one needn’t look far to understand why Secretary Duncan approaches this subject with such humility and a sense of urgency.

As you are aware, the United States participates in a number of international assessments, including PISA—which is fast becoming the measuring rod by which countries track trends in national performance and assess college and career-readiness of students. The United States has participated in PISA since 2000, with the most recent results for 2009.

Unfortunately, the PISA results show that the United States needs to dramatically accelerate student learning to remain competitive in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. The United States is not among the top-performing OECD nations in any subject assessed by PISA. And with the exception of some improvement in science from 2006 to 2009, U.S. performance on PISA has been largely stagnant.

The United States plainly has a long way to go before it lives up to the American Dream and the promise of education as the great equalizer. Enormous achievement gaps among black and Hispanic students portend even more trouble for the United States in the years ahead. In 2009, McKinsey & Company released an economic analysis which concluded that America's failure to close achievement gaps had imposed—and here I quote—"the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession." The PISA results show not only that a host of developed nations are out-educating us but they are doing so with smaller gaps between low-achieving and high-achieving students.
The hard truth is that other high-performing nations have passed us by during the last two decades. And, as the Achievement Growth study suggests, U.S. improvement over time has been middling at best, with widely divergent rates of progress by the states. This new analysis suggests that other countries are far out-pacing the United States with respect to growth in student learning. Considering that we were not top-performers to begin with, falling behind in the educational race is deeply troubling.

Extending international benchmarking to the state level would enable states to see how their performance compares with high-performing and rapidly-improving countries using the same performance metric. I am very encouraged by the fact that the series of reports by Hanushek, Peterson and Woessmann, first published by Harvard in 2010, has helped jump start a conversation about how states compare to other countries. That conversation has even made its way into the popular press and discussion among the public, as evidenced by Joel Klein’s piece in TIME Magazine last week.

The Department of Education wants to take this conversation a step further and provide states with the opportunity to participate in PISA—so that they can, in turn, get actual PISA data to benchmark to other countries. This will enable states to dig deeper into the performance of their own education systems. States will be able to see how they compare with high-performing education systems. They will be able to look, for example, at the distribution of student performance at all proficiency levels and for different subdomains, as well as contextual data, for their own state.

Other countries with federal systems of education, such as Canada and Australia, have participated in PISA at the provincial or state level as well as the national level for many years. And they have used the data to effectively motivate and measure reform at the provincial level. We heard about one of the shining examples, Ontario, in Michael Fullan’s presentation today.

The Department has included a proposal in its 2013 budget for a pilot program for state participation in PISA. While we are not likely to have a final budget for a few months, the proposal has passed the first hurdle and is included in the Senate appropriations bill. We are cautiously optimistic it will remain in the final 2013 budget. Yet even without this proposal, three states—Massachusetts, Florida, and Connecticut—are already participating in PISA in 2012. Two of those states, Massachusetts and Florida, have shown the biggest gains in achievement in the last two decades, according to the Achievement Growth report.
At the federal level, the Department’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is also trying to extend international benchmarking to the state level. They are conducting studies to statistically link TIMSS and NAEP in mathematics and science at grade 8 and are in the planning stages for a study to link PISA and NAEP in mathematics.

If the TIMSS-NAEP linking study is successful, estimates of grade 8 performance on the most recent TIMSS will be available for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. At the very least, TIMSS results will be available in December 2012 for nine states, including Florida and Massachusetts, in which TIMSS was administered to validate the TIMSS-NAEP link. And, because a number of these nine states have participated in earlier rounds of TIMSS, trends in performance for these states will be available too.

Benchmarking performance is essential in today’s knowledge economy. But it is really just the first step in learning from other countries. Benchmarking helps us to see where we should delve more deeply to examine what works in other countries and how innovative practices could be applied in the United States.

I want to add a cautionary note here. Every nation has unique characteristics of its teaching profession, culture, and education system, which may not be directly analogous to the United States. U.S. policymakers can’t just presume they can automatically or successfully copy the best practices of high-performing education systems.

But with that important caveat, to the extent that the United States can copy or adapt successful practices from other nations, we should do so. And we have. Let me talk about a few examples of how the Department is learning through international engagement and dialogue.

I mentioned earlier the OECD study, *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers*, which Secretary Duncan commissioned to pair with the release of the PISA 2009 results. The OECD’s study showed that top performing nations not only were doing a better job of accelerating achievement and attainment nationwide than the United States, they also were doing a better job of closing achievement gaps among minority and disadvantaged students.

In Finland, for example, there are consistent, strong, and predictable educational outcomes for children regardless of where they go to school. In the United States there are many pockets of excellence in the K-12 system. But our schools are not doing nearly as much as they could to close achievement gaps.
The underperformance of U.S. students is not due to a lack of education funding. The United States spends more per student than any OECD nation except Luxembourg. But higher performing countries tend to invest differently from us. Many prioritize higher teacher salaries over small class sizes. More broadly, they professionalize the teaching profession.

Most countries invest money where the educational challenges are greatest, and they put in place incentives and support systems that attract the most talented teachers to the most difficult classrooms. And finally, almost all high-performing education systems set rigorous, shared academic standards for student success.

As the OECD report pointed out, the United States today is in fact embracing a number of core elements of high-performing nations. State and local leaders crafted the Common Core State Standards, which means that, for the first time, most U.S. students will be working to meet rigorous, internationally benchmarked standards for college- and career-readiness. The Common Core State Standards have now been adopted by 45 states and DC.

The OECD report stated that a "pillar of reform" in high-performing countries, "the development of internationally benchmarked educational standards by states, is [now] well advanced [in the United States] for the fields of language and mathematics." It also concluded that virtually every high-performer in its study mirrored Race to the Top’s “efforts to support the recruitment, development, rewarding, and retaining of effective teachers and principals.”

The states' development and adoption of the Common Core State Standards, which Race to the Top helped incentivize, is a profound shift in American education. Almost none of the education experts assembled in this room, or anywhere else in the United States, anticipated back in 2009 that states would support, formulate, and adopt the Common Core State Standards. And their adoption marks a real sea-change in K-12 education.

Under the Race to the Top program, states, for the first time, are deeply engaged in coherent, coordinated, and comprehensive reform. And have set a higher, shared standard for success that shows whether students are college- and career-ready. Even states that did not win Race to the Top awards now have a comprehensive roadmap for reform—and many of them are continuing to move forward with real urgency and courage.

So, yes, our policies are moving us in the right direction. But the practices of high-performing countries show clearly that America in particular has to do much more to elevate the teaching
profession—from the recruitment and training of teachers, to their evaluation and professional development.

I want to talk briefly about what we learned from the two international summits on the teaching profession and their impact on U.S. policy. I have to give a special shout-out to the Asia Society, which has completed a report on each of the two summits on behalf of the summit co-sponsors. The reports are available on the Department’s web site as well as the Asia Society’s. The Asia Society’s second report concludes, and I quote: “If international meetings can be described as game changers, then this [the first summit] was surely one.”

Virtually every education minister and union leader who spoke at the summits affirmed the singular and urgent importance of elevating and strengthening the teaching profession in a knowledge economy. Throughout the globe, education is now recognized as the new catalyst that drives economic growth and social change. And it is great teachers who help build the higher-order skills that students need to succeed in the 21st century.

Several education ministers and union leaders at the summit amended the familiar thought that a nation’s education system can only be as good as the quality of its teachers. They added that the quality of a country's teachers can only be as good as the system that recruits, prepares, provides professional development, and compensates teachers.

Most high-performing nations establish a number of common principles and cornerstones to build a strong education system and high-quality teaching profession. Compared to the United States, high-performing countries provide more professional autonomy and accountability, more collaboration, and more high-quality preparation and professional development for teachers.

They do a better job of recruiting talented teachers and school leaders. And they do a better job of preparing, supporting, and retaining them in the classroom. Unlike the United States, high-performing countries typically pay teacher salaries that are much more competitive with other professions requiring a college degree and advanced certifications.

And unlike the United States, high-performing systems offer teachers career ladders and opportunities for professional growth that do not require them to leave or abandon the classroom—the work they love most and do best. Teachers themselves have a real role in informing policy to drive better student outcomes.

Last, but not least, high-performers pursue all these practices in a deliberate, systematic way over a period of years—not through piecemeal policy changes in separate silos. Contrary to popular
wisdom, a top-notch teaching force does not just naturally bloom out of traditions of cultural respect and reverence for teachers. Instead, success stems from coherent, deliberate policy choices, carefully implemented over a period of years.

What we learned from the first International Summit directly shaped a new program designed to strengthen and elevate the teaching profession in America. With teaching morale low, and with a real need to recruit about one million more teachers into the profession over the next four to six years, we must take a challenging manpower situation and use it as an opportunity to drive transformational change.

The administration proposed a new program, RESPECT, in early 2012, to provide grants to states and districts that commit to pursuing bold reforms at every stage of the teaching profession. The acronym stands for Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence, and Collaborative Teaching.

Educational Success is all about improving student outcomes.

Professional Excellence means that we will promote continuously improving practice—and recognize, reward, and, most importantly, learn from great teachers and school leaders.

And Collaborative Teaching means that we will concentrate on shared responsibility. Successful collaboration means creating schools where principals and teachers work and learn together in communities of practice, hold each other accountable, and lift each other to new levels of skill and competence.

Let me emphasize that teachers themselves have had—and will continue to have—a major voice in shaping RESPECT. Our development of RESPECT has benefitted enormously from the input of the AFT and NEA as well as the groundbreaking work of the NEA's Commission on Effective Teachers and Teaching.

At the second International Summit this past March, the U.S. participants agreed to take the commitment to strengthening and elevating the teaching profession even further by articulating a shared vision for the future of the teaching profession. And they did. On May 23, 2012, Secretary Duncan, the Presidents of AFT and NEA, the Executive Director of CCSSO, and four other education leaders signed a shared vision statement, “Transforming the Teaching Profession”, at the Labor Management Conference in Cincinnati. The shared vision statement is closely aligned with the elements of the RESPECT program and the experiences of high-performing educational systems.
To my knowledge, ambitious efforts like RESPECT and the shared vision statement, both with the goal of fundamentally elevating the teaching profession, have never been tried before in the United States. It is imperative that we accelerate student learning and reduce achievement gaps. But those ambitious goals require major change, not tinkering at the margins or incremental change. That, too, is a lesson that emerges from our study of high-performing nations.

Finally, we have learned from studying top-performing countries that some of the purported impediments to reform in the U.S. are not necessarily barriers but often are myths that can stifle reform. In the category of things people think are true but aren’t, I mentioned earlier that top-notch teaching forces don’t necessarily just naturally bloom out of cultural traditions of respect and reverence for teachers. Policy matters--and policy in the U.S. like the RESPECT initiative--can help to elevate the teaching profession here.

Another myth is that strong teacher unions will stonewall reform. In fact, many high-performing nations have strong teacher unions. Their role in the education system is not entirely the same as in the U.S., where unions have traditionally concentrated on bread-and-butter issues. Still, strong labor unions work together with administrators and school leaders in most high-performing countries--and that is a model that our two labor-management conferences have sought to emulate and learn from.

Nor is it true that the U.S. is unlike high-performing countries because we are test-crazed. Many top-performing nations have high-stakes assessments, especially at key gateways, like the entrance to post-secondary education. In fact, a number of high-performing countries have assessments with much higher-stakes for students than ours, including the use of exams that can determine a young person’s future educational and job opportunities.

In closing, I want to point out that while we have spoken today about the lessons the U.S. can learn from high-performing countries, we shouldn’t ignore the flip side of that question. And that is this: What, if anything, can the U.S. experience teach other nations?

The U.S. has been an innovator and leader in a number of areas, such as the use of data to improve instruction and drive continuous improvement. When we meet with policy makers around the world, they talk about the peaks of excellence in the United States and they visit to learn more about those peaks.

Most experts also say that we still have the best system of higher education in the world. When Secretary Duncan met the Singaporean Minister of Education in Washington several years ago,
he asked what Singapore could learn from the United States. The Minister responded that he came to look at the best schools, colleges and universities, to observe and take the lessons back home. What lessons might we learn from that?

Perhaps that is a discussion for another conference. For now, I want to again thank Harvard’s Program for Education Policy and Governance for inviting me to speak today and for organizing this timely conference.

We cannot be complacent and allow our students to be further surpassed by their international peers. As Secretary Duncan says, children only get one chance at an education. With the benefit of lessons learned from high-performing and rapidly improving education systems, let us move forward together with a sense of urgency to accelerate educational progress in the United States. Thank you.