

Should America Be More Like Them? Cross-National High School Achievement and U.S. Policy

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International comparisons of American education have become so popular and widespread in the reform debates of the last several decades that many of the current centerpieces of the American reform movement were shaped through evidence and speculation on what other more educationally successful nations were doing that the U.S. was not. The current image of the American High School is one of a negative place, perhaps dangerous, certainly under-motivated and ineffective organization. Here the American High School is compared internationally across five areas of recent policy reform: 1) climates for learning in schools; 2) school management and accountability; 3) student motivation to learn; 4) mathematics and science curricula, and; 5) effective teaching and quality of instructional resources. Combining new analyses of the TIMSS data with a review of existing studies finds that in a number of surprising ways the average American school is not radically different from what is found in many other nations. For example, it is not a more violent or disruptive place than in other nations. Or, while its management spends less time on instructional issues, it is not the case that average American achievement suffers as a consequence. At the same time there are some troubling differences. For example, compared to other wealthy nations, the U.S. has more unequal distribution of basic instructional resources and this factor is related to national achievement levels. The paper then turns to the question: From an international perspective, how well does the American High School educate disadvantaged students? In comparison to other wealthy nations the U.S. does a dismal job in schooling its disadvantaged students and provides them with schools that are significantly under-resourced compared to schools serving similar students in other nations. Policy implications of these results for integrating educational and social policies are discussed.