

**Embargoed until 12:01 a.m. on January 20, 2015**

School Performance  
in Context:

# The Iceberg Effect

An International Look at Often-Overlooked Education Indicators

January 2015

Horace Mann League of the U.S.A.  
National Superintendents Roundtable

Information in this document is derived from *School Performance in Context*.

© January 2015, The Horace Mann League of the U.S.A., and the National Superintendents Roundtable

### The Horace Mann League

The Horace Mann League of the U.S.A.  
560 Rainier Lane  
Port Ludlow, WA 98368



National Superintendents Roundtable  
9425 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue, NE, Suite E  
Seattle, WA 98115

The leaders of the HML and the NSR hold the copyright of this summary and the full report. We urge you to share both documents with your colleagues and with those outside the education community to create a national dialogue on how to overcome some of the issues raised in this document. We just ask that you attribute HML and NSR when doing so. For copies of this summary or the full report, go to:

[www.hmleague.org](http://www.hmleague.org) or [www.superintendentsforum.org](http://www.superintendentsforum.org).

*Note of special thanks:* To the **National School Public Relations Association** ([www.nspr.org](http://www.nspr.org)) and the **Center for Clear Communication, Inc.** ([www.centerforclearcommunication.com](http://www.centerforclearcommunication.com)) for their pro bono editorial, graphic, and production services for this publication. The Horace Mann League and the National Superintendents Roundtable are deeply indebted to **Rich Bagin, APR**, Executive Director of NSPRA and **Carolyn Boccella Bagin**, President, Center for Clear Communication, for their invaluable contribution to this work.

# Adding Sunshine to the Iceberg Effect of Performance Indicators

People often say, “Numbers don’t lie,” when they paint a negative picture of the U.S. education system in international comparisons. But numbers also “tell the truth” when you look at some other startling international indicators that compare factors of *social stress* and *economic equity* of U.S. students and families with 8 other major countries studied in the report, *School Performance in Context*.

International assessment results are generally presented as scores, ratings, or rankings, creating what might be called a *scoreboard mentality*. But thoughtful private and public leaders know instinctively that a range of social, economic, and cultural conditions affect those numbers. For example, a country with the highest average GDP per person might also have an extraordinarily high level of economic inequity and social stresses that have profound implications for students and their achievement in school.

Some countries are homogeneous, while others are highly diverse, adding to both richness and complexity. The level of support for young families and early education can vary wildly, and so can the collection of life experiences — from enlightening to threatening — that children bring with them to school.

In some cases, reported national outcomes are measured broadly. In others, assessments may reflect only a selected portion of one city. The numbers may not be as simple as they seem.

When we look at the big picture of international comparisons, **the international academic results are truly just the tip of the iceberg**. International assessments are a hot topic, but are reductive and loaded with what could be considered inappropriate comparisons. We must judge schools on performance, but we also must understand them in the social and economic context in which they function.

**It is a mistake to believe that one number can tell us all we need to know.**

**Both the public and policymakers must understand what is going on beneath the waterline.** Only after looking at the entire picture, can they then draw their own conclusions and take appropriate action within the sphere of their influence.

This extensive study provides another way to look at comparative performance by examining school achievement within the economic and social context of 9 prominent nations: Canada, China, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Our hope is that this unique study will help motivate those who live in several nations, including the U.S., to better

## Comparing 9 nations

Canada	
China	
Finland	
France	
Germany	
Italy	
Japan	
United Kingdom	
United States	



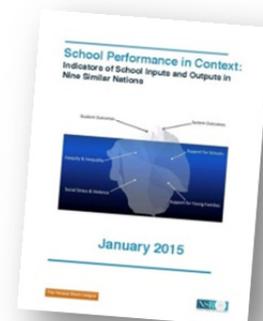
grasp and carry on more constructive conversations about the need for members of a society to come together to educate every child to the fullest rather than dwell on summative box scores.

Our work was not designed to suggest that the United States is the most successful or unsuccessful of these nations. The study examined the American school system in comparison to systems in nations that are somewhat similar or are often compared with the United States. We explored many of the factors involved in educating today's young people.

Without drawing attention to one indicator at the expense of others, the authors ask readers to consider them all before drawing conclusions about system performance. In particular, we ask readers to consider school outcomes in the context of the levels of economic inequity, childhood poverty, and violence apparent in many American communities. These indicators suggest that a policy response unrelated to schools is essential to increased opportunity and hope and to improved education in the United States.

## About This Summary

▲ This summary is itself just the tip of the iceberg of the full 52-page report published by the Horace Mann League (HML) and the National Superintendents Roundtable (NSR) on January 20, 2015. The overall results and the process of tabulating the findings with all references can be found in the full report. International comparisons are drawn from a number of well-established and respected international agencies and organizations. The full report has major research findings, recommendations, and references, along with the “unpacking” of all of the indicators. We urge you to share both documents with your colleagues and with those outside the education community to create a national dialogue on how to overcome some of the issues that need attention. We just ask that you attribute HML and NSR when doing so. For a copy of the full report or this summary, go to [www.hmleague.org](http://www.hmleague.org) or [www.superintendentsforum.org](http://www.superintendentsforum.org).



▲ The study and this summary grew from a collaboration among the Horace Mann League of the U.S.A. and the National Superintendents Roundtable, with assistance from the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). All are nonprofit organizations. HML is an honorary organization devoted to principles of Horace Mann, the founder of public education. The Roundtable is a professional learning community of school superintendents from some 30 states. NSPRA's main mission is to build more support for education through responsible communication.

▲ **Primary members of the Indicators Team:** **James Harvey**, Executive Director, National Superintendents Roundtable (*principal researcher and writer*) and board member, HML; **Charles Fowler**, respected longtime superintendent, Executive Director, Suburban School Superintendents, President, School Leadership, and HML President-Elect; **Jack McKay**, Executive Director, HML; and **Gary Marx**, President, Center for Public Outreach, 2014 President of HML, and author of *Twenty-One Trends for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.



## Highlights of the Results

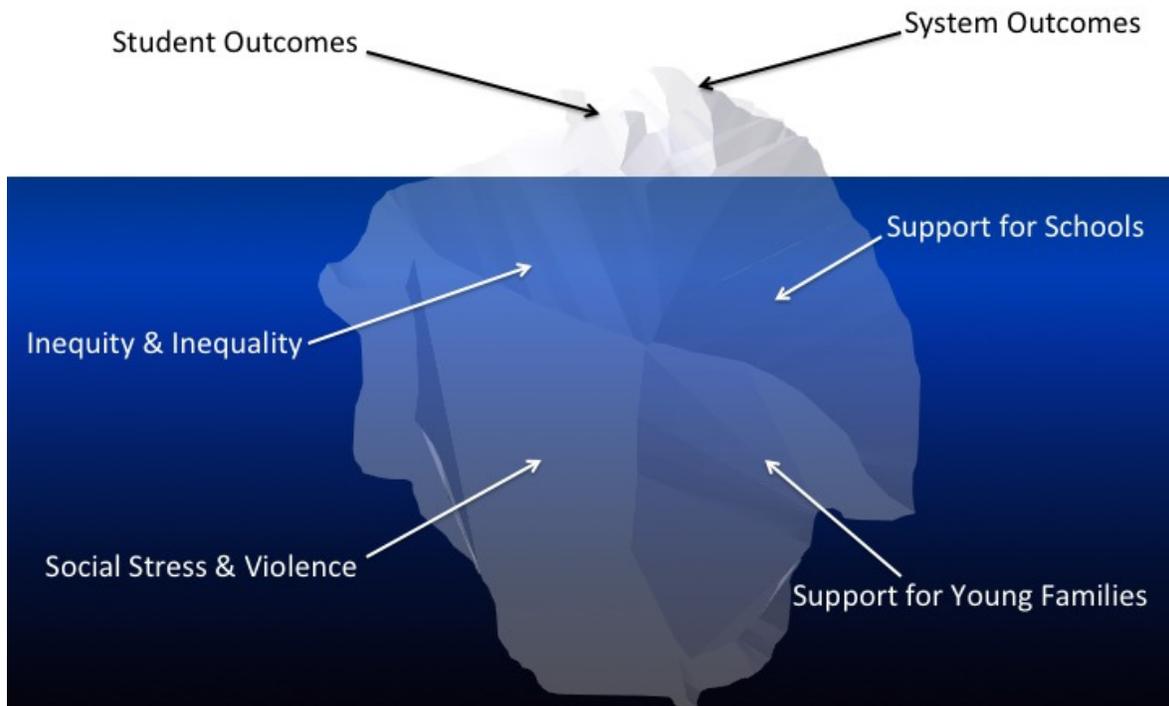
Six major dimensions studied included *economic equity, social stress, support for young families, support for schools, student outcomes* and *system outcomes*. A total of 24 indicators were used in developing the 6 dimensions.

What follows is a brief summary of the overall results and then the “unpacking” of each of the 6 dimensions. Remember that the full report contains all of the detailed information not included in this summary. Download both at [www.hmleague.org](http://www.hmleague.org) or [www.superintendentsforum.org](http://www.superintendentsforum.org).

### Dimensions

- 1 Economic Equity**
- 2 Social Stress**
- 3 Support for Young Families**
- 4 Support for Schools**
- 5 Student Outcomes**
- 6 System Outcomes**

## Understanding School Outcomes



## Some Observations

- ▲ **Finland** is a nation characterized by high levels of *economic equity*, *support for families*, and *support for schools*, combined with lower levels of *social stress*. Of the 9 nations, it also has the most visible and most promising results in terms of *student outcomes*.
- ▲ Noted for its aspirations of education for all, the **United States** has a more dubious distinction with regard to *economic inequity*, *social stress*, and *support for young families* — all correlated with school performance. The results leave a great deal to be desired.
- ▲ **China** stands out because it is the only one of the 9 nations in which it is impossible to draw any conclusions in 3 of the 6 dimensions: *support for families*, *support for schools*, and *student outcomes*. In the broadest sense, based on the information available, China seems to be the most inequitable of the 9 nations with the poorest *system outcomes*.
- ▲ **Canada** can take great pride in its performance relative to the other 8 nations on *school support*, *student outcomes*, and *system outcomes*.
- ▲ While committed to education, **France**, by contrast, seems to lag on 2 of these dimensions — *student outcomes* and *system outcomes*.
- ▲ **Italy** does well in terms of low levels of *social stress*, but its standing on *student* and *system outcomes* is a work in progress.
- ▲ **Germany** seems to be in the middle of these 9 nations on several dimensions, but generally performs very well on indicators of *economic equity* and *student outcomes*.
- ▲ Despite what appear to be lower levels of school support in **Japan**, it produces exemplary results in terms of low levels of *social stress* and very high *student outcomes*.
- ▲ The **United Kingdom** displays a pattern similar to the United States: high levels of *economic inequity* and *social stress*, combined with commendable indicators in 3 areas: *support for families*, *support for schools*, and *system outcomes*.



# Highlighting the Results

## Summarizing the Results by Dimension

1	2	3	4	5	6
Economic Equity	Less Social Stress	Support for Families	Support for Schools	Student Outcomes	System Outcomes
 37	 39	 35	 34	 36	 40
 33	 31	 34	 30	 34	 31
 31	 28	 32	 29	 29	 30
 26	 28	 28	 28	 29	 29
 25	 24	 27	 27	 25	 29
 24	 24	 21	 24	 22	 25
 21	 18	 18	 19	 19	 20
 14	 15	 13	 18	 17	 13
 8	 11	 8	 18	 17	 8

Note: Higher numbers indicate positive results for each dimension.

### The key

Canada		Italy	
China		Japan	
Finland		United Kingdom	
France		United States	
Germany			





## Economic Equity

The *economic equity* index is built on 4 components:

- ▲ *Income inequality* — Gini Index of Inequality,
- ▲ *Children's poverty* — Children in families with less than 50% of median income,
- ▲ *Infant mortality* — Deaths per 1,000 live births, and
- ▲ *Intergenerational mobility* — Income elasticity.

Excellence — however imperfectly defined and measured — is just one view of a nation's school system. Equity is another. But a system that produced superior results by tolerating systematic inequities throughout society or by weeding low-income students out of the schools would be neither excellent nor equitable. Dimension 1 looks at indicators of inequity in the larger society.

### Main findings

- ▲ Finland is an avatar of economic equity. It demonstrates what seems to be exemplary performance across the 4 indicators, followed reasonably closely by Germany and France.
- ▲ Japan, Canada, and Italy perform in the middle third and are closely bunched together when the 4 indicators are combined.
- ▲ The U.S. and China appear to have the greatest levels of inequity among the 9 nations.
- ▲ The indicators suggest the United Kingdom is in the lower third of the rankings, but it is numerically closer to Japan, Canada, and Italy than it is to the U.S. and China.

### Summary

The United States, with the highest GDP and GDP per capita among the 9 nations, is clearly in a very precarious position on each of the 4 indicators outlined under Dimension 1: *income inequality, rates of childhood poverty, infant mortality, and intergenerational mobility.*

On the other hand, Finland consistently reports encouraging data on all 4 dimensions, with France and Germany following closely on dimensions of *economic equity* and Japan leading the way in terms of minimizing *infant mortality.*

### Economic Equity

	37
	33
	31
	26
	25
	24
	21
	14
	8



## 2

# Social Stress

This dimension examines 4 indicators of *social stress*:

- ▲ *Death from violence* — Violent deaths per 100,000 population,
- ▲ *Death from drugs* — Drug deaths per 100,000 population,
- ▲ *Immigration* — Percentage of population that is foreign born, and
- ▲ *Births to teenage women* — Births to 15-19-year-old women per 1,000.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network reports that acute traumatic events such as shootings or gang-related violence can cause overwhelming feelings of terror or hopelessness in children and youth. Often, they can't cope with what they have experienced, leading to withdrawal, depression, anxiety, or difficulty sleeping — and frequently increased risk of poor academic performance. One study of children in low-income U.S. communities reported that in many neighborhoods chronic violence, including shootings, beatings, and knife fights, is endemic. Children witnessed shootings and beatings as if they were ordinary, everyday events.

Sustained levels of trauma, including family violence, can lead to “toxic stress” that affects the architecture of the developing brain, according to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. Children living in high-stress situations, including persistent poverty and threatening neighborhoods, run the risk of enduring effects on brain development, according to the council. These risks undermine school readiness and academic achievement, and threaten serious long-term mental health.

### Main findings

- ▲ On the combination of the 4 issues in this dimension, Japan appears to be in the most strong position.
- ▲ Non-English-speaking European nations (Finland, Germany, Italy, and France) are grouped quite closely together.
- ▲ Results for the United Kingdom and the two North American nations have high levels of *social stress*.
- ▲ The U.S. shows significant need on these measures of community stress and dysfunction, with high rates of death from violence and from drugs and births to adolescent women.

At first blush, findings for Japan are surprising. Suicide rates in Japan are high, especially among men. School stress is also thought to be extremely high, particularly around the time of “examination hell,” the national examination periods that govern high school and university entrance. But World Health Organization data for 2005 suggest that suicide rates among teens are higher in Canada, Finland, and the United States than they are in Japan.

### Less Social Stress

	39
	31
	28
	28
	24
	24
	18
	15
	11



## Summary

Once again on the dimension of *social stress*, the data reveal that, American teachers, administrators, parents, and students in many communities face complicated challenges in terms of deaths from violence and drugs, homicide rates among young males, complex language needs of students from many parts of the world, and extremely high rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing.

Common sense indicates that giving birth to a child, while still a child unprepared for adult responsibilities, is a stressful event. Nor can any responsible adult in good conscience contemplate a child witnessing a shooting, knifing, or violent beating without reflecting on the trauma the child experiences. Yet such experiences are reported as “ordinary, everyday events” for many American children.

These issues call for carefully considered community, state, and even national policy responses that extend far beyond school policy.



# 3

## Support for Families

Dimension 3 examines *support for families* which includes:

- ▲ *Family benefits* — Social expenditures as % of GDP,
- ▲ *Benefits for young families* — Expenditures on families with 2 children,
- ▲ *Access to preschool* — 3–6-year-olds in preschool, and
- ▲ *Child neglect* — Children’s deaths from abuse or neglect.

Some years ago, the Annie E. Casey Foundation advanced a *Making Connections* effort built on the concept that children do well when their families do well and families do better in supportive and safe communities. Dimension 3 examines social *support for families*, especially families with children. National accounts of social expenditures include public money spent on pensions, healthcare, income support, in-kind contributions including food and housing support, and tax credits to encourage certain socially beneficial outcomes (such as the earned income tax credit in the U.S.). Because of the large size of the age group of older citizens and the cost of their care, much of this funding goes toward pensions and healthcare.

This dimension, which might be thought of as the “safety net,” examines *support for families* with children across the target nations in terms of social expenditures generally, social expenditures on families with children, the availability of preschool programs, and the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

### Main findings

- ▲ Most European nations appear to be far more generous in *support of families* than Japan, Canada, and the United States.

---

- ▲ The United Kingdom is in a very strong position on *support for families*, principally due to providing access to preschool programs and to addressing childhood deaths from abuse and neglect.

---

- ▲ China, with only limited data available, appears to provide the least *support for families*.

---

- ▲ U.S. performance on this dimension is the weakest of the remaining 8 nations (G-7 countries plus Finland).

### Summary

In this dimension, this third set of indicators is grim across the board for the United States. The U.S. lags in terms of social expenditures as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product, expenditures to support families with children, access to preschool programs for children aged 3 to 6, and an important measure of caregivers’ negligence — children’s deaths from abuse and neglect.

### Support for Families

	<b>35</b>
	<b>34</b>
	<b>32</b>
	<b>28</b>
	<b>27</b>
	<b>21</b>
	<b>18</b>
	<b>13</b>
	



# 4

## Support for Schools

This dimension looks at:

- ▲ *Expenditures on schools* — Annual expenditures per pupil,
- ▲ *Expenditure effort* — Expenditures as percent of GDP,
- ▲ *Class size* — Average class size in lower secondary school, and
- ▲ *Teacher workload* — Annual hours spent teaching.

Dimension 4 arrives at what is often the first point of consideration in many assessments of American schools. It is sometimes pointed out that Americans spend more on their schools than many nations that perform better on international assessments. A plausible assertion on the surface, it's not clear that it would stand up under forensic examination.

### Main findings

- ▲ The United Kingdom and the United States perform very well on this dimension, principally due to their strong performance on expenditure effort and expenditures per pupil.
- ▲ The U.S. standing on teacher workload is disappointing.
- ▲ Finland and Japan spend the lowest amounts per-pupil in this 9-nation world.
- ▲ For China, of the 4 data series, only an estimate of class size is available. Therefore, it is impossible to reach an overall conclusion about China with regard to school support since estimates of expenditure effort, expenditures per pupil, and teacher workload are unavailable.

### Summary

Of the dimensions considered so far, the 4 indicators considered in Dimension 4 provide the most encouraging results for the U. S. While debates may occur about what is included in expenditure comparisons, Americans seem to be willing to spend more on education than citizens in comparison nations and, as a proportion of GDP, expenditures are in the upper third of the nations examined in this study. Meanwhile class sizes are not greatly out of line with the major comparison nations.

Support for U.S. teachers is a weak spot in this dimension. Teachers in the U.S. spend 1,085 hours in the classroom; on average, teachers in Finland and the G-7 nations spend just 664.

### Support for Schools

	34
	30
	29
	28
	27
	24
	19
	18



# 5

## Student Outcomes

Dimension 5 studies:

- ▲ *Elementary school reading* — PIRLS 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading results,
- ▲ *Secondary school reading* — PISA 15-year-old reading results,
- ▲ *School completion rates* — Completion, on time + 2 years, and
- ▲ *Achievement gap* — PISA 15-year-old reading gap.

One of the principal purposes of schools is to impart to students the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed as citizens, parents, employers, employees, and as members of their local communities and of a civil society. One way to assess the success of schools in achieving that purpose is to measure learning outcomes by assessing student achievement. Assessments can provide a valuable way to maintain educational accountability and, properly conducted, provide one indicator of school success. Even for the 9 nations, it is difficult to find evidence of student performance in reading, mathematics, or science at the end of all levels of schooling: elementary, middle, and secondary:

- ▲ China as a nation did not participate in PIRLS, PISA, or TIMMS.
- ▲ Japan did not participate in the PIRLS 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading assessment.
- ▲ Canada and France did not participate in TIMSS at either the 4<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade levels.
- ▲ Germany participated in PIRLS and TIMSS at the 4<sup>th</sup> grade level, but did not participate in TIMSS at the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level.

### Main findings

- ▲ Finland displays the lowest achievement gap.
- ▲ Japan performs at a top level on indicators of high school completion, 15-year-old reading, and 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading (an imputed score based on the 15-year-old results).
- ▲ The United States, as it has for decades, produces commendable results in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading and solid school completion rates, but is less impressive on assessments of 15-year-old reading.
- ▲ An achievement gap along socio-economic lines exists in each of the 8 nations participating in PISA.
- ▲ China's only indicator in *student outcomes*, school completion rates, places it last among the 9 nations.

### Student Outcomes

	36
	34
	29
	29
	25
	22
	19
	17
	



## Summary

Overall, in terms of student learning outcomes, these indicators find the United States in the middle of this group of 9 nations. Is that sufficient? Or insufficient? That depends on perceptions, but it is worth noting that this middle position is among nations chosen to be as similar as possible to the United States.

Still the picture is mixed. American 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading scores look generally favorable, but the picture at age of 15 in reading is less attractive, with the U.S. just marginally below the PISA mean, but some 40 points in arrears of the leader, Japan.

School completion rates for the U.S. look fairly promising on the benchmark of “on time + 2 years.” Meanwhile, the American achievement gap in reading is considerable, but is 11 points more favorable than the gap in Japan and nearly 30 points more positive than the gap in France.



# 6

## System Outcomes

Dimension 6, *System Outcomes*, analyzes:

- ▲ *Years of education completed* — Average years of schooling for adults,
- ▲ *Possession of secondary diploma* — Percentage of adults with high school diploma,
- ▲ *Possession of bachelor’s degree* — Percentage of adults with bachelor’s degree, and
- ▲ *Global share of high-achieving science students* — Global share of PISA high achievers in science.

Commentaries on education systems throughout Europe and other Western nations tend to focus on system performance today. While appropriate, many educational systems have decades, often more than a century, behind them. But how well have they performed over time? Dimension 6 asks how well education systems have historically produced educated citizens and skilled workers. It is, for example, appropriate for policymakers in Western nations to express concern about the apparent superior success of Chinese schools today (based almost entirely on PISA scores from Shanghai)? But in comparing the U.S. and China, one is comparing a system in which the adults in the U.S. average an educational attainment level of more than 13 years of education, while the adults in China average about 7.

### Main findings

- ▲ The U.S. appears to have the most highly educated workforce in terms of years of schooling completed, the proportion of adults with a high school diploma and bachelor’s degrees, and the proportion of the world’s high-performing 15-year-old science students.
- ▲ In the 3 indicators on China — *years of schooling completed, proportion of adults with a high school diploma or a bachelor’s degree* — China appears to do least well.
- ▲ Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Finland form a closely packed group behind the U.S.
- ▲ The results for France and particularly Italy are disappointing on the combination of indicators included in Dimension 6.

### Summary

The historic performance of American schools in producing adults prepared to take their place in the world is unmatched by any of the 8 nations. The U.S. leads in years of schooling that adults completed, in the proportion of adults with a high school diploma, and in the proportion with a bachelor’s degree. When examining assessments of 15-year-olds in science, Americans represent one quarter of the high-performing secondary students in the global talent pool. That could all change quickly if educational, community, and political leaders do not effectively address emerging challenges and the new demographics entering American schools. The nation and its schools must work hard to stay ahead of the curve, especially facing fierce and determined economic rivals. *To make a very simple point:* In terms of educational levels, the adult population does not put the U.S. at risk in any way.

### System Outcomes

	40
	31
	30
	29
	29
	25
	20
	13
	8



## Conclusions and Implications

Often, reports on international assessments encourage national leaders to consider education to be a “horse race” in which nations compete with one another around educational outcomes. We believe several conclusions can be drawn from the analyses presented in the full report, along with some significant implications for policymakers and the general public.

Based on the indicators included in this study, it seems clear that the United States has the most highly educated workforce among these 9 nations. At the same time, American society reveals the greatest economic inequities among the advanced nations in this analysis, combined with the highest levels of *social stress*, and the lowest levels of *support for young families*.

---

**The U.S. has the most highly educated workforce among these 9 nations, but also has the greatest economic inequities, highest levels of social stress, and lowest levels of support for young families.**

---

- ▲ Elementary school performance seems to be strong and middle school performance can undoubtedly be improved. No end-of-school data exist from any assessment that permits us to compare U.S. 12<sup>th</sup> graders with end-of-school students elsewhere.
- ▲ Historically, the U.S. system has performed well, as revealed by indicators of the number of years of schooling completed, the proportion of the adult population with high school diplomas and bachelor’s degrees, and the U.S. share of high-performing students in science.
- ▲ The United States remains the land of the second chance. Enrollment of students over the age of 25 in institutions of higher education rose 42% between 2000 and 2011.
- ▲ Education life in the United States does not end at the age of 15 or even 25. It is not unusual at commencement ceremonies to find adults aged 30, 40, 50, 60, and even 70 smiling as they pick up their undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees.

This is not to imply that all is well in American schools or that change is unnecessary in a fast-changing and confusing world. School leaders can certainly improve quality. And we have the enormous challenge of the achievement gap to deal with.

---

**The success of the larger education mission depends on society finding ways to ameliorate the situations in which these young people and their families find themselves.**

---

But if that challenge is to be fully met, as this analysis suggests, the larger society must also put its shoulder to the wheel. Many of the students showing up at our doors are dealing with significant stresses and traumas in their lives. The success of the larger education mission depends on society finding ways to ameliorate the situations in which these young people and their families find themselves. Educators stand ready to help, but they cannot solve these problems or address these challenges alone.



## Recommendations Moving Forward

Educators understand the importance of assessments and accountability. However, most express concern that any assessment should help them improve education for the students in their classrooms. Simply developing a scoreboard without identifying the societal factors that influence results does not help the education system become more legitimately accountable to those it serves.

### What to do next

#### For Educators

- ▶ Use the findings to help colleagues and communities better understand that formative forces in society profoundly affect summative scores.
- ▶ Team with the leadership in your community to identify your school or district's formative data so you can then address the needs of the whole child.

#### For Communities

- ▶ Broaden your understanding of the need to address *economic inequality, social stress, support for young families, support for schools, student outcomes, and system outcomes.*
- ▶ Understand that schools can't do it alone.

#### For Policymakers

- ▶ Celebrate the success of schools.
- ▶ Help address some the out-of-school issues that challenge educators, communities, and young people every day.
- ▶ Enact constructive laws and policies that constantly support people on the front lines.
- ▶ Encourage rather than withhold funds for research in the social, behavioral, and economic sciences to advance the well-being of the nation's people.
- ▶ Treat education as a ticket to an even better future, not as a political football.
- ▶ At the federal level, remember that we have a national interest in education, which brings with it a challenge of providing equal opportunity for all.

#### For International Assessment Organizations

- ▶ Avoid the temptation to compare cities, provinces, and states with entire nations. Few realize that rankings for one large nation are frequently based on testing of students in one city, specifically leaving out those who have moved there from the countryside.
- ▶ To provide greater depth and insight into what scores represent, sponsoring organizations of international assessments, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) — home of the PISA test, and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) — home of TIMSS and PIRLS, should release international large-scale assessment (ILSA) scores in the context of indicators such as those outlined in this document.



## Other Implications

### Research

Several issues surfaced during this research that deserve additional research:

- ▲ With which nations is it appropriate to compare the United States?
- ▲ Is it appropriate to compare cities, provinces, or states with entire nations?
- ▲ Can a more comprehensive set of outcome measures be developed to adequately assess system performance at the elementary, middle, and high school levels?

### International Large-Scale Assessment Administration

This analysis suggests several recommendations for ILSA administrators such as the Organization for Economic Collaboration and Development (OECD) and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA):

- ▲ Acknowledge that the founders of your discipline rejected horse-race comparisons.
- ▲ Report outcome indicators in context, not as a competition.
- ▲ Convene an international panel of independent experts to promote transparency in developing ILSA assessments and to examine their science and validity.

### Public Policy

The report also supports several recommendations to policymakers in the United States and elsewhere.

- ▲ Minimize alarmist rhetoric around schools. Despite warnings, no country in the West collapsed when the Soviet Union won the initial race into space in 1957. Nor did the rest of the G-7 founder amidst alarms about Japan's "rising sun" in the 1970s. On the contrary, the Soviet Union disintegrated and Japan entered the economic doldrums for 30 years.
- ▲ We ask American politicians to leave science to the scientists. Withholding funds for research on the social, behavioral, and economic sciences does not advance the well-being of the American people.
- ▲ Renew the federal government's historic interest in school-finance equalization in the United States.

---

**Minimize alarmist rhetoric  
around schools.**

---



## A Final Word

In many ways, American policymakers and the American people must ask themselves some difficult questions.:

- ▲ How do we reconcile being, on average, the wealthiest nation on earth while demonstrating remarkably high levels of infant mortality, children living in poverty, and families living without support amidst great social stress?
- ▲ How do we reconcile being so wealthy while having the lowest levels of support for the non-educational needs of children and their families?
- ▲ And how can we, as adults, who have reaped such enormous benefits from American schools, live with the disappointing results we see from PISA results for today's students at the age of 15?

The levels of economic inequity, childhood poverty, and violence in American communities outlined in *School Performance in Context* will probably shock the American people. These are direct and immediate assaults on individual's quality of life and on life itself, not just potential threats that might undermine the American economy at some point in the future.

These indicators suggest that a policy response unrelated to schools is essential. And the Horace Mann League and the National Superintendents Roundtable are confident that well-developed responses will have a profound impact on schools and on this nation's future.

Too often, as the president of the Horace Mann League argued recently, we narrow our focus to a few things that are easily tested. We become captives of the results and our goal becomes raising test scores rather than raising fully educated people. To avoid that mentality, we want to emphasize the power of a consistent and comprehensive framework that looks at all the measures involved in shaping our future citizens and the future of our nation.

In that effort, the United States has its task cut out for it. Our communities and our leaders need help understanding the limitations of our schools and the challenges facing children and families, both in and out of school.

- ▲ We have to close the achievement gaps that are too apparent among our students.
- ▲ We have to improve on-time graduation rates.

---

**Nobody understands the challenges and shortcomings of American schools better than the people who have dedicated their lives to teaching young people.**

**Our work as educators lies in helping students achieve their full potential. We understand that learning doesn't have a finish line, that education is always a work in progress.**

---

---

**We ask American politicians to leave science to the scientists. Withholding funds for research on the social, behavioral, and economic sciences does not advance the well-being of the American people.**

**Educators stand ready to help, but they cannot solve these problems or address these challenges alone.**

---



- ▲ We must make sure that young men and young women are progressing equally within our schools.
- ▲ We should work for greater funding equity in the system.
- ▲ We must do what is necessary to provide a first-rate teacher in every classroom.
- ▲ And we have to draw attention to the social challenges battering our students.

Nobody understands the challenges and shortcomings of American schools better than the people who have dedicated their lives to teaching young people. Our work as educators lies in helping students achieve their full potential. Our work as educational leaders lies in making sure that the system of public education in the United States meets its full potential.

We understand that learning doesn't have a finish line, that education is always a work in progress. But the view of the Horace Mann League and the National Superintendents Roundtable is unshakable. We believe American schools are among this nation's greatest strengths and most powerful forces for good.

Every hour of every day, the work of educators touches the future.

And because it does, this nation can be confident that just as the United States has always succeeded before, so it will again.

## What leaders have said about this study:

"This report does what has been missing in international assessments like PISA and TIMSS...It provides a broader context to understand how education systems perform...simply an eye-opening reading experience!"

**Pasi Sahlberg, Harvard University, Author of *Finnish Lessons***

"This is a significant piece of work. I think it has real potential for furthering the conversation about where we really are in education in the United States."

**Karen Woodward, Superintendent, Lexington Schools, South Carolina**

"Globalization means we have to be internationally engaged, economically and culturally. Future-focused leaders will benefit greatly from immersing themselves in the realistic international comparisons contained in this report."

**Joe A. Hairston, Co-Director, AASA-Howard University Urban Superintendents Academy**

"The information in this report is far more informative than test scores alone. We can learn much from *School Performance in Context* about meaningful ways to help all children succeed in school."

**Diane Ravitch, New York University, Author of *Reign of Error***

"The most striking thing from the data — and something that all policymakers should be concerned about — is that here we sit as the wealthiest nation in the world and we have the highest percentage of children in our schools living in poverty."

**Charles Fowler, President, Lead Schools**

"A fascinating report that highlights the importance of context and the...often deeply misleading nature of test scores taken in isolation. Even readers who think they know about context will learn many new and surprising things."

**Alison Wolf, Sir Roy Griffiths Professor, King's College, London, Education Advisor, Government of Prime Minister David Cameron**

