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Why Other Countries Teach Better

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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Millions of laid-off American factory workers were the first to realize that they were competing against job seekers around the globe with comparable skills but far smaller paychecks. But a similar fate also awaits workers who aspire to high-skilled, high-paying jobs in engineering and technical fields unless this country learns to prepare them to compete for the challenging work that the new global economy requires.

The American work force has some of the weakest mathematical and problem-solving skills in the developed world. In a recent survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, adults in the United States scored far below average and better than only two of 12 other developed comparison countries, Italy and Spain.

Though it dropped several rankings in last year's tests, Finland has for years been in the highest global ranks in literacy and mathematical skills. The reason dates to the postwar period, when Finns first began to consider creating comprehensive schools that would provide a quality, high-level education for poor and wealthy alike. These schools stand out in several ways, providing daily hot meals; health and dental services; psychological counseling; and an array of services for families and children in need. None of the services are means tested. Moreover, all high school students must take one of the most rigorous required curriculums in the world, including physics, chemistry, biology, philosophy, music and at least two foreign languages.

But the most important effort has been in the training of teachers, where the country leads most of the world, including the United States, thanks to a national decision made in 1979. The country decided to move preparation out of teachers' colleges and into the universities, where it became more rigorous. By professionalizing the teacher corps and raising its value in society, the Finns have made teaching the country's most popular occupation for the young. Canada also has a more rigorous and selective teacher preparation system than the United States, but the most striking difference between the countries is how they pay for their schools.

American school districts rely far too heavily on property taxes, which means districts in wealthy areas bring in more money than those in poor ones. State tax money to make up the

gap usually falls far short of the need in districts where poverty and other challenges are greatest.

Americans tend to see such inequalities as the natural order of things. Canadians do not. In recent decades, for example, three of Canada's largest and best-performing provinces — Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario — have each addressed the inequity issue by moving to province-level funding formulas. As a recent report by the Center for American Progress notes, these formulas allow the provinces to determine how much money each district will receive, based on each district's size and needs. The systems even out the tax base and help ensure that resources are distributed equitably, not clustered in wealthy districts.

These were not boutique experiments. The Ontario system has more than two million public school students — more than in 45 American states and the District of Columbia. But the contrast to the American system could not be more clear. Ontario, for example, strives to eliminate or at least minimize the funding inequality that would otherwise exist between poor and wealthy districts. In most American states, however, the wealthiest, highest-spending districts spend about twice as much per pupil as the lowest-spending districts, according to a federal advisory commission report. In some states, including California, the ratio is more than three to one. This has left 40 percent of American public school students in districts of “concentrated student poverty,” the commission's report said.

America's stature as an economic power is being threatened by societies above us and below us on the achievement scale. Wealthy nations with high-performing schools are consolidating their advantages and working hard to improve. At the same time, less-wealthy countries like Chile, Brazil, Indonesia and Peru, have made what the O.E.C.D. describes as “impressive gains catching up from very low levels of performance.” In other words, if things remain as they are, countries that lag behind us will one day overtake us.

The United States can either learn from its competitors abroad — and finally summon the will to make necessary policy changes — or fall further and further behind. The good news is that this country has an impressive history of school improvement, as reflected in the early-20th-century compulsory school movement and the postwar expansion, which broadened access to college. Similar levels of focus and effort will be needed to move forward again.