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What the world's schools need is an outside and professional eye

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International comparisons of student achievement, most notably the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PISA), have proliferated in recent years, and their results have produced controversy even in countries where students perform relatively well.

Stephen Heyneman, a professor of international education policy at Vanderbilt University in Tennessee and a longtime education expert at the World Bank, has suggested that developed countries would benefit from the same sort of "outside perspective" that the World Bank has traditionally provided in developing countries. Heyneman recently discussed this idea with Edward B. Fiske for the International Herald Tribune.

Many Americans were distressed at how their students fared on the recent TIMSS study, but they seem to have lots of company. What's going on?

"Few nations seem satisfied with how their students do on international tests. A country's results may be perfectly satisfactory in one subject but deeply problematic in others. France may be high in math but not in adult literacy. Americans tend to emulate Japan for having high science scores, but the Japanese think of their system as poor at generating critical thinking and entrepreneurial behavior."

Are there educational problems common to all industrial democracies?

"Most countries are frustrated that student achievement seems to be stagnating even though the per-student costs of education are rising and most are dealing with what you might call "schooling fatigue." After World War II, when education was newly universal, the demand for access was comparatively uniform across rural and urban populations and desire to learn was generally high. Schooling was a welcome unifying experience for all children and youth, particularly in centralized systems such as France and Japan.

But we're now three or four generations beyond this initial stage. Not all young people are content to remain in school through their upper teenage years and not all of them submit quietly to this expectation. Incidences of violence against teachers or other students are on the rise and there are numerous stories in local media about dropouts, truants, use of illegal drugs, alcohol and sexual experimentation."

What about changes in the way students learn?

"The electronic revolution has affected schooling in many important ways - not all positive. Students today are often mesmerized by fast-moving games, quick-surfing channels and infinite choices of information on demand. Educators in Europe and in the United States report diminishing attention spans and the growing inability of students to distinguish a high-quality source of information from a trivial or biased one. Students are less able to read long books. Does this sound like Kansas? Well, it could be Berlin. Or Stockholm."

What about changing demographics?

"Most developed countries are experiencing an influx of noncitizens, including migrants who seek greater economic and social opportunities. Parents and politicians worry that the schools are becoming hotbeds for trouble and strife. The challenge for schools is how to maintain a sense of social cohesion which before was accepted as universal."

If there are problems that run through all countries, is there any international consensus on how to deal with them?

"There are some common categories that seem to appear at one time or another in every country. First there are the "supply-side" improvements like better curriculum, more

focused teacher training, more specialized services for students with special needs, better teaching equipment and the like. Then there are "demand-side" improvements, such as higher assessment standards, more choice on the part of students and families and opening up school services to competitive suppliers. Recommendations in Chicago are similar to those under discussion in Turin.

No country, though, has solved its educational problems through either of these categories. The only thing that seems to change is whether the ideas are drawn from the supply or the demand side of the equation."

So what's the alternative?

"Countries might benefit from having an outside perspective - not the view of the current World Bank (heaven forbid), but rather the view of professionals who come from outside and have at their disposal a significant offer of new incentives. They would need enough resources to get different factions to talk with one another and work out compromises."

What sort of resources are you talking about?

"The outside group might agree to lend a school district the equivalent of up to 25 percent of its annual recurrent budget for a period of up to five years - enough resources to provide an incentive to make "non-marginal" changes. If agreements can be reached with the lender on what is to be changed, the improvements in local education would be both tangible and visible."

What sort of changes might be sought in, say, the United States?

"Conditions of the loan might include the elimination of less-necessary programs, such as competitive school sports. Or they might include financial diversification in the form of new local taxes or quantum changes in efficiency, such as significant teacher rewards for high performance."

Would school districts have to compete for such funds?

"Yes. Districts would compete for the opportunity to participate and to fashion creative solutions."

Would the conditions vary across countries?

"One could go down the list of each nation - France, the Netherlands, Britain, Norway, Japan - and find a set of significant dilemmas to which a fresh view from the outside might very well be useful. School districts in the United States have substantial control of their own taxes and administrations, while those in Europe and Asia do not. But they have national governments that sometimes use competition as an incentive in higher education and scientific research. In this case, a national government could guarantee the necessary resources for an educational reform if the monies saved or re-purposed were of sufficient quantity.

I think it is important to not get overly involved in whether a specific solution is the answer, or whether a reform that works in one country is likely to be the answer elsewhere. Surely each solution has to be the idea of each local community."

What about the European Union?

"As long as the EU did not get involved in a country's curriculum objectives, it could treat education reform as it has treated higher and technical education innovation. It's important to recognize that the idea of having a "World Bank for education" is not a call for more money. It is really a call to have a fresh view. The key is to ask whether education is a continuing problem and whether a fresh view would be helpful. And if the "World Bank" analogy is not useful, then what would you suggest?"