

Test confirms crisis in US education

Walter Gilberti
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The poor performance of US students in a recent international study of math and science literacy raises important questions about the state of cultural and intellectual life in the United States. It also casts a revealing light upon the motivation behind the clamor for education reform emanating from sections of big business and the Clinton administration.

The Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), involving twelfth graders from 23 countries, was the last of a three-part survey sponsored by the Amsterdam-based International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. The results of the first two segments of the study, which compared eighth and fourth graders, were released earlier. For reasons not explained, those Asian countries whose students traditionally excel in these areas, and which had participated in the earlier studies, did not take part in the twelfth grade segment.

In combined math and science literacy, US students could do no better than fourth from the bottom. Only Lithuania, Cyprus and South Africa scored lower. In advanced mathematics, only Austria scored lower than the US, and in physics US students stood dead last.

The abysmal showing of American students has once again prompted calls for national curriculum standards, teacher and administrator accountability, and the imposition of “free market” business practices. Some representatives of big business, intoxicated by the apparent strength of the US economy, are calling for the same kind of ruthless competition in education that occurs in the business world.

In an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, Louis V. Gerstner, commenting on the results of the study, wrote: “US businesses were faced with a stark choice: change or close. They changed.... They invested capital to adapt methods used by the most successful companies, no matter what the geography. And it worked. The clearest evidence of that success is the

state of the US economy and the virtual elimination of the federal budget deficit. Our schools are oddly insulated from marketplace forces and the discipline that drives constant adaptation, self-renewal and a relentless push for excellence.”

Gerstner’s remarks are revealing because what made possible the eradication of the federal deficit was the destruction of the social safety net for millions of people. He is advancing the perspective of Wall Street and a significant section of the capitalist class who view the vast numbers of working class and poor students as so much dead weight. Subjecting education to the same market forces that have created the present level of economic polarization in American society at large means widening the already substantial disparity between wealthy school districts and their poorer working class and inner city counterparts.

Sections of the ruling class are both shocked and embarrassed by the TIMSS results and, consequently, will step up their attack on public education. They recognize that the maintenance of the United States as the world leader in advanced computer and communications technology is jeopardized by the tangible decline in intellectual and cultural life.

However, the defenders of capitalism and the profit system are caught in a contradiction of their own creation. They have cultivated the notion that the individual accumulation of wealth is the highest human endeavor, while denigrating the intellectual development of society as a whole. Meanwhile, millions of working class children attend dilapidated schools that are starved for funds.

It should be noted that the TIMSS scores were accompanied by a note explaining that several countries, including the United States, did not satisfy all of the requirements for either sample participation rates or classroom sampling procedures. Since the test scores used in the comparison were averages, it can be

concluded that every attempt was made to achieve the highest possible average scores. That this did not occur speaks to the enormous weight of the decline in the level of education among the general population.

Education is a profoundly social practice. In the process of constructing what educational theorists call “communities of learners” in the schools, teachers are confronted with the enormous social problems endemic to American society today-increasing poverty and illiteracy, the reemergence of once curable diseases, and the general level of cultural backwardness. To these problems, the quick-fix schemes of the Clinton administration and big business offer no solutions.



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