

# The Latest PISA Reality Check

John Merrifield

First posted: December 5, 2013

The *Wall Street Journal*'s "[U.S. High-School Students Slip in Global Rankings](#)" (12/3) noted a widening gap between the U.S. and other countries, and it's not because we improved more slowly than the countries with better test scores. Every three years, the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests a sample of 15-year-olds from countries that contain eighty percent of the world's economy. Among the international tests, this is the most useful measure because it tests the oldest children; the closest to the school system's final product.

It's worth noting that limiting the y-axis of the *Wall Street Journal* graph to the relatively narrow range of 450-550 for the vast majority of countries' scores exaggerates the appearance of change from the 2009 PISA to 2012 PISA test scores. Indeed, the U.S. decline was actually tiny. Nearly all of the countries saw virtually no statistically significant change from 2009 to 2012. What is more noteworthy is that the best 2012 country average PISA scores were barely over half of the 1000 points possible. On the tests I give, a score of barely over half yields a 'D' or an 'F'. Especially noteworthy is that the widest gap between the U.S. average and the best country averages is on the math test where South Korea topped the 2012 U.S. 15-year-olds math score by 15.5% and Japan bested the U.S. score by 11.1%. Lionized Finland is only eight percent better than the U.S. As I have [noted previously](#), the upshot of such score clustering at around 50% is that the world's best school systems are still pretty bad. The potential to improve the U.S. school system outcomes is much greater than 11-15%. The world's school systems share many [sources of low-performance](#); weak, perverse incentives, one-size-fits-all, and pricelessness in particular.

[Update: later PISA results show tighter clustering; smaller differences between best and ‘Nation at Risk’ low performance levels.]

I’m stunned that I agree with the cited diagnoses of persistently low performance by our school system. U.S. Education Secretary [Arne Duncan](#) called the results a "picture of educational stagnation." Indeed, they show that putting more pressure on a broken system is not helpful. Our de facto policy of increasing the appearance of top down accountability with increased testing and higher standards – our basic reform strategy for the last 30 years – has not been effective, and is probably not capable of being more effective than what we see in the world’s slightly higher performing school systems. Indeed, quoting teacher union President Dennis Van Roekel, we are on the “wrong path,” though I’m quite certain I don’t share Mr. Roekel’s vision of the right path. He says, "There is a road map out there, but we are not following it." Indeed; we are not following his map, or mine.

In, “[Teachers Union Blame Game](#),” Randi Weingarten of the American Federation of Teachers said that America's PISA performance shows that "this kind of top-down, testing, testing, testing, [and] choice and competition actually hasn't moved the needle." Yes, putting more pressure on a broken system is not helpful. I’m certain that Ms. Weingarten believes that “choice and competition” won’t work, or she is attacking something that is almost non-existent in U.S. school systems because she’s afraid that it will work, in part, by making teacher unions obsolete. I’ve argued that her assessment of past performance of “choice and competition” is correct because we haven’t tried it yet. Even in the few places that have implemented tuition vouchers, tuition tax credits, education savings accounts, or chartered public schools, there are so many restrictions, including especially non-universal eligibility and [pricelessness](#) in most cases, that the effects barely amount to weak rivalry; certainly not the full-blown market accountability

that exists in most U.S. industries. U.S. school systems certainly don't contain enough "choice and competition" for it to yield measurable effects at the national level.