

# South Korea, #1, but Seeing Much Need for Improvement

John Merrifield  
April 23, 2015

The South Koreans see much need for improvement, even though they hold the [top spot](#) in the international rankings based on the 2012 PISA exam given to 15-year-olds (#1 in math and reading; #3 in science). [Education Week](#)'s, "Education in the Republic of Korea: National Treasure or National Headache," attributes this quote to former South Korean Ed Minister Byong-man Ahn: "within Korea, that same [world #1] education system has been called the nation's biggest problem."

How can the world's top-performing system be seen as a country's biggest problem? The main reason is that schooling is centrally planned everywhere, and even at its best, central planning will always deliver poor results. The other major reason is the [unpleasant way](#) South Korea, Japan, and some other countries maximize performance, with relentless pressure on schoolchildren. Because it is normal to believe that being #1 requires excellence, I thought I'd better remind you that in schooling, we need to improve a lot more than the [standard](#) set by our international competitors, and by methods that yield happy, engaged-in-learning children, rather than the unhappiness reported in South Korea and Japan. Now we have it straight from the top horse's mouth. Until this direct confirmation from South Korea, it may have seemed like just my opinion. But similar rumblings of dis-satisfaction and need for improvement have arisen, periodically, from other top-ranked countries, most notably Finland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Canada.