

FACT CHECK: ARE US STUDENTS REALLY THAT BAD?

“Here is a look at recent statements about the standing of the U.S. educational system and how they square with the facts”

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By Libby Quaid

Washington -- America's moms and dads are getting a good scolding: Your kids are lagging behind students all around the world.

The White House says so, with concern bordering on alarm. So do institutions such as the Gates Foundation, citing performance tests, graduation rates and other benchmarks.

But don't measure for dunce caps just yet.

While they're not in first place, U.S. students generally hold their own on international tests. They spend more time in school than the Obama administration would have you believe. And their college graduation rates stack up better than reported.

That is not to say the critics are totally wet, that the U.S. can't do better.

Only about one-third of U.S. students could read and do math at current grade levels on national tests in 2007, the most recent figures available. That means millions of kids are a long way from reaching the ambitious goal of former President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind law — that every student read and do math on grade level by 2014.

And the high school dropout rate is dismal — 1 in 4 kids.

But it's all made to look worse than it is by international comparisons, which at best tend to be misleading and at worst are deeply flawed.

The United States has a much bigger and faster-growing population than the other countries that participate in global assessments; China and India do not take part at all. Unlike many global competitors, the U.S. is growing ever more diverse, with a large share of children who are learning English.

Educational trash talk is not new. It is typical at both ends of the political spectrum. Liberals use poor performance to justify school spending. Conservatives use it to make the case for private-school vouchers and tax credits.

Already, Obama is responsible for the biggest increase in federal education spending because of his economic stimulus law.

Here is a look at recent statements about the standing of the U.S. educational system and how they square with the facts.

TEST SCORES

Obama says the rest of the developed world is passing America by. "Our schools continue to trail other developed countries and, in some cases, developing countries," he told the National Academy of Sciences on April 27. "Our students are outperformed in math and science by their peers in Singapore, Japan, England, the Netherlands, Hong Kong and Korea, among others."

That is not the whole story.

The U.S. does trail the most high-achieving countries, mostly developed nations in Asia such as Singapore, Taiwan and Japan.

But the U.S. holds its own in the group that comes next, a group of developed countries that, depending on the test, includes England, Germany and Russia.

In fact, the U.S. has gained on some of its toughest competitors since 1995, making bigger strides in math than Singapore and Japan, and in science than Japan.

That is according to the most recent international tests, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, or TIMSS, the study Obama was citing. A lead TIMSS researcher took issue with the idea the U.S. is trailing.

"Certainly, our results do not show the United States trailing the developed world by any stretch of the imagination," said Ina V.S. Mullis, a Boston College research professor and co-director of the study.

"The Asian countries are way ahead of the rest of developed countries, but mostly the developed countries are relatively similar," Mullis said. "And the United States might be one of the leaders of that group, depending on whether you're talking about math or science in the fourth-or the eighth-grade."

MORE TEST SCORES

Obama also delivered this dismal news: "Another assessment shows American 15-year-olds ranked 25th in math and 21st in science when compared to nations around the world."

Bill Gates Sr., co-chairman and trustee of his son's Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, used similar figures in a National Public Radio interview last month when he said, "The condition of our public education is very, very poor."

At issue is the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, which is given to 15-year-olds in 30 developed countries.

Obama's numbers are correct, but perhaps misleading. PISA is not designed to measure what children have learned in school. Instead, it measures how well kids apply math to real-world problems, which could be learned in school, but also at home or elsewhere.

In contrast, the other test Obama cited, TIMSS, is designed to measure how much math children have learned in school.

Because of that difference — a big one in the world of educational research — experts including the Brookings Institution's Tom Loveless have cautioned against lumping PISA results together with other test scores. Loveless serves on the U.S. advisory board for PISA and is a representative to the group that administers TIMSS.

SCHOOL TIME

Obama's education secretary, Arne Duncan, says American kids don't spend enough time in school.

"Our children are competing for jobs against children in India and China today, and those children are going to school 25, 30 percent more than us," Duncan said at Brookings this past week.

Obama himself said in March: "Our children spend over a month less in school than children in South Korea every year. If they can do that in South Korea, we can do it right here in the United States of America."

The president is in luck: The U.S. already is doing it.

South Koreans do have a longer school year, measured in days. But Americans actually spend more time in school. The average U.S. eighth-grader has 1,146 instructional hours a year, compared with 923 hours a year in South Korea.

In fact, the U.S. has more instructional hours than many better-performing countries, though that raises a separate question about how well American schools spend classroom time.

A longer school year would shorten summer vacation and perhaps minimize the summer learning loss that hurts struggling students. Duncan is urging school districts to consider a longer year.

The school-time data come from the Education Department, which relied on information from the group that administers TIMSS.

As for Duncan's comparison, the department says there isn't reliable data on how much time Chinese or Indian children spend in school.

GRADUATION RATES

Helping more students finish college is a priority among the many philanthropies that work on education issues. In a December speech at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., the

younger Gates said the U.S. problem is acute.

"In the case of college education, we were No. 1 in the world 20 years ago in the percentage of young adults with a postsecondary credential. Now we're number 10 and dropping," Gates said.

Obama said this in March: "In just a single generation, America has fallen from second place to 11th place in the portion of students completing college. That is unfortunate, but it's by no means irreversible."

The college figures come from various tables provided by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which runs the PISA test of 15-year-olds.

But those figures are misleading for several reasons, said Cliff Adelman, a former Education Department researcher now at the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

- They are based on entire populations, not on what actually happens to students who enter college in a given year. Graduation rates in a large, growing country such as the U.S. will not look as good as those of a smaller country whose population is declining.
- Countries have different definitions for who is counted; for example, some exclude noncitizens, while the U.S. includes them.
- Since 2000, many European countries have switched to three-year degrees from four-to-six year degrees, making their rates look better than before.

What about high school? There again, international comparisons present similar problems. Other countries have more complex systems with many different types of high schools and can limit who is admitted.

No one disputes that the U.S. high school dropout rate, 1 in 4 kids and worse among minorities, is awful.

But as with other international comparisons, measuring the U.S. against the rest of the world is like comparing apples and oranges.

One clarification from Monty Neill, executive director of Fair Test (www.fairtest.org): the NAEP tests do not provide "grade level." So it is not true that only one third of US students reach "grade level." NAEP created arbitrary cut-offs to define "basic" (which is about average for U.S. students), "proficient" (which is what one third of U.S. students reach) and "advanced." In international comparison studies, in only a couple of countries do even a few groups of students have even half their students reach the "proficient" level. One is the tiny city-state of Singapore.