

THE BEST SCHOOLS IN THE WORLD

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THE RACE FOR A GOOD EDUCATION NO LONGER STOPS AT THE WATER'S EDGE. U.S. SCHOOLS HAVE STUMBLER. IF WE'RE TO CATCH UP, THERE ARE MODELS TO FOLLOW--FROM ALL AROUND THE GLOBE.

We all know the indictment: American education has fallen behind the rest of the industrialized world. And we all know the reasons: everything from the collapse of the family to the prevalence of television to the abject failure of national leadership has been blamed. What we don't know is how the rest of the world is managing to do a better job of teaching its children.

For this story, NEWSWEEK interviewed dozens of American and foreign experts in international education to find the best schools in the world. We started with the goals of the Bush administration's "America 2000" reform plan. That document calls for overhauling math and science instruction--and led President Bush to make the improbable vow that our students would lead the world by the year 2000. Also on the agenda are goals that include making sure every child starts school healthy and ready to learn and improving the literacy rate. To that list, we added some other crucial subject areas: foreign languages, job training, teacher education, the arts and higher education.

There are, it turns out, pockets of excellence across the globe, happily including two notable examples in the United States. Where we found excellence, it tended to be on a national level: New Zealand in reading, the Netherlands in math and foreign languages, Japan in science, Germany in high-school education and teacher training, and Sweden in adult education. Americans have the most successful system of higher education, especially postgraduate programs; the California Institute of Technology represents the best of that tradition. In a few cases, we chose cities that are in the forefront of innovation. For preschools, we picked Reggio Emilia, in Italy's Emilia-Romagna region, as an example of a grass-roots project that has become an international role model. In the arts, we focused on Pittsburgh, which is using the ideas of Harvard University psychologist Howard Gardner to foster creativity and critical thinking skills.

This is an optimistic story, for it demonstrates what nations can accomplish when they have the will. After World War II, Japan, Germany and the Netherlands rebuilt their school systems as they rebuilt their countries--often using American educational research. Today, students in those countries lead the world in advanced math, science and other technical subjects. During the same period, Americans turned into a nation of pedagogical groupies, following first one trend and then another without any sustained attempt to develop a coherent curriculum. Open classrooms were the rage in the 1960s and '70s, followed by back to basics in the '80s. The newest panacea is giving parents public money--usually in the form of vouchers--to choose their schools.

Consistency is a key to excellence overseas. Most industrialized countries have a national curriculum. Teachers get specific instructions. Our educational system has always reflected the American credo of independence. "We have so much autonomy," says University of Illinois professor Herbert Walberg, an expert on Asian schools. "Everyone does their own thing, to the point where a fifth-grade teacher can't count on a fourth-grade teacher having taught certain things."

Compared with youngsters overseas, American kids are long on leisure and short on learning. Japan's school year runs 240 days and Germany's 210. But most American kids are in class 180 days, with a long summer vacation. That's a holdover from the days when youngsters were needed to help on the farm. Dozens of American districts have begun trying to make their calendars reflect 1991 reality. In California, for example, 20 percent of the state's 5 million students are on an extended schedule, with long periods of school followed by shorter vacations.

Throwing piles of money into schools isn't necessarily the answer. Japan spends about 50 percent less per student than we do, and Japanese students consistently rank higher. In another measure of spending, the percentage of gross national product devoted to education, the United States is about average. Experts in international education say it's not the amount of money but the way it's spent that matters. We tend to spend more on buildings and administration and have relatively low teacher salaries. Other countries, especially Japan and Germany, spend more on teacher salaries and have modest buildings and fewer administrators. Not everything that works overseas can be successfully transplanted. Japan's schools, for example, don't have to worry about educating an ethnically diverse or domestically

troubled population. By contrast, Europeans share some of our social problems--a high divorce rate, a growing immigrant population--but few European nations even attempt to offer equal educational opportunity to all. "When it comes to equal opportunity, we have the best hearts," says former education secretary William Bennett. "The problem is our education system doesn't produce the best minds. "

There's also a greater reliance on formal academic tracking in Europe and Asia. Tests, not individual preferences, determine who goes to a university and who enters job training. While many countries offer free college tuition, the government may, in turn, restrict a student's choice of major, sometimes in order to meet a particular work-force need. Perhaps the most extreme example is Singapore. In that country, if there's a forecast of a shortage of electrical engineers, the government looks for talented students and grooms them to fill those spots.

Even countries recognized as the best have problems. "I don't think there's any industrialized country right now that's complacent about their educational system," says Chester Finn, professor of public policy and education at Vanderbilt University. "The Eastern-bloc countries are thinking about reform because of their recent escape from the Soviet system. England's problems are closer to ours--a faltering economy and anxiety about that ... Japan wants to win Nobel Prizes, not just produce others' inventions more efficiently."

International comparisons are not about to disappear. Several education organizations are jumping in with new methods of assessing our status in the world. And as we know more, the competition will heat up. "It's like the Olympics," Finn says. "It's not just about sportsmanship. It's about who wins." Winning will mean a profound shift in values. "The U.S., as a whole, has never put much value on learning," says Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. "Now we need to reinvent the public schools because our current system is an anachronism. And all this needs to happen in every community." Unfortunately, as a nation, we're happy to have a national Olympics team, but schools are left to the whim of each and every neighborhood. So when it comes to kids, think global, act local, and don't expect much from Washington.

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