



Insight

Where are the Medals for Academic Performance?

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This summer millions of people are watching the finest athletes in the world compete at the 30th Summer Olympic Games in London. Representing over 200 countries, these athletes will demonstrate their exceptional athletic abilities, their passion for competition, their joy in winning and their sorrow in defeat. The majority of them will not medal in a sport they have spent a lifetime perfecting but they are all Olympians proud to represent their country. To date, the United States is second only to China in the total number of medals won by our athletes.

Sadly, the United States is not winning any medals when it comes to academic performance in our schools. According to a report recently published by Harvard University's Program on Education Policy and Governance, the United States ranked 25th in math, 17th in science and 14th in reading on international exams based on data submitted from 48 countries. While the United States is not among the worst performing of developed nations and our scores have improved on international exams from 2006 to 2009, America's students are still far behind their foreign counterparts in academic achievement. According to the report:

"Schools in Maryland, Florida, Delaware and Massachusetts showed the most progress, but most states posted gains at half the rate of those in the top echelon. Had all students throughout the country made the same average gains as those in the four leading states, the United States would have been making progress roughly comparable to the rate of improvement in Germany and the United Kingdom, bringing the United States reasonably close to the top-performing countries in the world."

The report also found that the amount of per-pupil spending had little impact on student performance stating "on average, an additional \$1000 per-pupil spending is associated with a trivial annual gain in achievement of one-tenth of one percent."

Perhaps, incorporating a high degree of competition and a demand for excellence into our nation's K-12 education system similar to what is required of our U.S. Olympic athletes could make a difference in how the United States performs on international exams. Competition and entrepreneurship have always been a unique attribute to the economic success of our country. Yet, only recently has competition in the form of charter schools and, in some isolated places, private school choice, been allowed in the U.S. education sector. While such competition has been strongly resisted by the education establishment, particularly teacher unions, children attending such schools are showing significant academic gains.

According to a recent Wall Street Journal editorial by Joel Klein, the former chancellor of New York City's public schools, children attending New York City's charter schools "outperformed the traditional schools by 12 points in math and five points in reading" this year. That is a dramatic increase. Mr. Klein also pointed out that "the charter schools slightly outperformed the entire state of New York." New York City's charter schools serve some of the most disadvantaged students in the city with the poverty rate averaging more than 75 percent.

The Opportunity Scholarship Program in Washington, DC has also seen similar success. The Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences says that 91 percent of students who received an opportunity scholarship graduated from high school compared to just 70 percent of those who graduate from D.C. public schools. These students also come from low-income families with an average income of less than \$24,000 and more than 92 percent of students who participate in the program would otherwise be attending a public school in need of improvement.

Is it any wonder that with such success, parents in these communities are trying desperately to have their children attend these schools? In New York City, 67,000 children applied to charter schools with only 15,000 openings. Only 1,615 students received D.C. Opportunity Scholarships last year after a controversial battle in Congress succeeded in keeping the program alive. Parents are also turning to "parental triggers" to force public schools to reform by restructuring their school and hiring new teachers and principals that will increase student performance. While only seven states currently have parent trigger laws in place, it is expected that many more will adopt them particularly after the movie, "Won't Back Down" premieres this fall.

Contrary to education choice skeptics, such policies are working to reform America's public schools and should be allowed to continue and grow. Our educators should not be afraid to embrace competition as a means to dramatically increase student performance so that American students can compete at the top international level in academics as successfully

as American athletes do in international sports at the Olympics. Creating more opportunities for parents to see their children achieve to their maximum potential is the first step toward reforming our schools and increasing academic achievement for all of our students.