

# Our American States | An NCSL Podcast



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## Education: No Time to Lose | Episode 2 | 1/18/2017

### Podcast Transcription

Gene Rose: News from the nation’s state capitals, insights to critical public policy issues that affect your daily lives. This is “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. I’m your host Gene Rose.

Historically citizens have held high expectations for education in the United States. Over the course of the last several years, although the delivery of that education has become more politically challenged, there is still a strong belief that American students should compare favorably with their counterparts across the globe.

In today’s edition of “Our American States,” we are going to talk with experts in international and U.S. education and talk to a state legislator whose state rates highly when compared to other countries.

Our story today starts with the release in December of results of a study by the Programme for International Student Assessment, commonly known as PISA. We talked with the Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary General at the

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Andreas Schleicher, who spoke to us from Paris.

Andreas, tell us about the PISA test and what it looks at.

Andreas Schleicher:

You know, PISA is carried out every three years. It's the largest and most comprehensive assessment, international assessment of learning outcomes, sort of looking at in this case over 70 countries, and basically it's key subjects like mathematics, science and reading. But we also are exploring new areas such as problem solving and every three years sort of we look first of course at how countries are progressing. You know, you can see some countries -- Portugal is a good example that went from below average and was able to rise above the average.

You have some traditionally high-performing countries that continue to advance like Singapore, some countries that are doing very poorly still, but catching up, like Columbia and Peru. There's a lot of movement across the entire performance spectrum in terms of systems sort of keeping getting better.

The United States is interesting. We have not seen any overall change in performance, but no country has made more progress than the United States in closing the achievement gap in terms of the performance differences that we observed between socially better placed and less well-placed students. So there's movement at different parts of the spectrum and also different aspects of education, whether you look at the quality of outcomes in equity or opportunities, or simply value for money.

Gene: Are there some commonalities with countries that do well in this study?

Andreas:

I think this is actually one of the most interesting findings from these, that, you know, we look at systems under very different economic and cultural contexts and you do see things that they do have in common. I mean, the first thing we always notice is the high value that is placed on education and that is typically mirrored in very rigorous, focused and coherent school standards, sort of high expectations, universal expectations is one thing, the capacity those education systems fill, attracting great people into the teaching profession, giving them the kind of work organization that lets them kind of deploy their skills.

Singapore, again, is a very impressive example. You would ask your teachers to engage in over a hundred hours of professional development every year, and that's not, you know, somewhere in the university, but that takes place with your colleagues -- you'd observe somebody else's classroom every week -- huge investment in professionalism. Shanghai, China, very similar kind of effort. This is the kind of capacity issue.

And then, last but not least, virtually every high-performing education system has become very good at deploying resources where they can make most of the difference: attracting the most talented teachers into the most challenging classroom; making sure that every child benefits from excellent teaching, sort of the magic.

We don't see much of a relationship between the volume of money that is spent on education and the quality of an education system, but the way in which resources get deployed – you know, also the spending choices that high-performing systems make typically that have larger classes but put more money into the quality of teaching, the quality of teachers, professional engagement. Very deliberate spending choices.

And on balance there is a lot of commonality in high-performing systems in very different cultural and economic contexts.

Gene: What advice would you have for state legislators in this country to make the United States more competitive in education?

Andreas:

Well, you know, actually I think there have been many promising developments over the last few years alone – the fact that the United States engaged much more systematically in the articulation of school standards when you think about the Common Core discussions. I think this is very much in line with high-performing education systems, being very clear about what good education really looks like and sort of putting a premium on rigor, on cognitive demand, on focus, teaching a few things at great depth, and as coherent – making sure that school standards are embedded in meaningful learning progressions. I've seen really a lot of interesting development in the United States happening on this.

A second layer – perhaps more sort of demanding really the capacity issues, you know, the quality of education will never exceed the quality of teachers, school leaders and so on, and to invest more in building more class capacity is I think really, really important to reach better outcomes. You almost cannot improve outcomes significantly without addressing the kind of capacity shortages.

And I talk less about equipment challenges, number, than about professionalization – building a work organization that offers more interesting career perspectives that actually make teaching not just financially more attractive; I think that's also an important issue in the United States; but most importantly that make teaching intellectually more attractive, that build more opportunities for teachers to collaborate, to compete, to connect with other teachers, to really work in a more kind of integrated environment. And you can see that happening in many high-performing education systems. That's I think sort of a second layer where probably state legislators have a lot of work.

Gene: And what about the students? What kind of observations can you make about them in this report?

Andreas:

You know, one thing that I find quite encouraging is that many 15-year-olds in the United States look at the future very positively. For example, when we looked at science competencies, you have about 40 percent of American 15-year-olds who see some science in their future career, so this is not just about they had knowledge acquired in schools, but students have a lot of attachment and engagement in those issues

But at the time, you know, what is also clear from the PISA results is that many of those students will not be able to realize their dreams because the foundations are too weak, you know, their fundamental capacities in math and science and reading are insufficient actually to live up to their own aspirations. So on the one hand, American students have that kind of free drive and interest and see the value that education will have for their future, but clearly they deserve more and more attention to make sure that they can actually realize those.

Gene:

Thank you Andreas. We're continuing our deep look into how U.S. students compare to students in other countries. In this segment, the President and CEO of the National Center of Education and the Economy, Marc Tucker, expands on the PISA test results and gives us specifics on how our policies and philosophies affect our students, teachers and our economy.

Marc Tucker: What we find in the top-performing countries is that the expectations for kids are pretty much the same, whether they come from a wealthy community or a poor one, whether they come from the population that's in the majority or they come from a minority population, and so on. And this business of having the same expectations, same high expectations for all kids, just turns out to be crucially important, very different from the United States.

And not least important and probably in some ways most important, these countries have all put an enormous effort into getting the highest quality teachers they can possibly get. This really does distinguish them from what goes on almost everywhere in the United States.

We are mostly recruiting our teachers from the bottom half of the spectrum of kids leaving our high schools and going to college, and they are recruiting their kids from the top half of the kids coming out of their high schools and going into college, some of them the top 20 percent, some the top 15 percent. There are a couple of countries that are recruiting from the top 5 percent. In a couple of countries there are ten applicants for every opening in their teachers colleges.

So they're getting very high-quality high school graduates going into teaching. They do this by structuring compensation so that the compensation is attractive, but even more important is they have restructured the teaching profession, the occupation, the work that is done in schools so that they've created a really attractive occupation for kids who could, if they wanted to, go on to be doctors, architects, engineers, accountants. It's very different. They've just constructed a different kind of workplace.

So in those countries you find that whereas in the United States, we expect our teachers to be working more or less alone in their classrooms all day long facing kids, in the top-performing countries it's much more likely that you'll see about 40 percent of the time of the teacher put into working with other teachers on designing a better curriculum, improving the way they do instruction, writing better lessons, developing better assessment methods. They're working with each other in teams to constantly improve the way the school functions and the achievement of the kids. Very different from the United States.

Gene: What tends to be the role of government in these highly performing countries?

Marc: What you find in these other countries is that there is more trust in the professionals. They have systems in which there's clearly a place where the buck stops. Usually in these countries it's

their Ministry of Education. Most of the countries that we've studied, most of the top-performing countries, are actually the size of American states, and in those countries what you see is something very different from what you see in a state the same size as those countries here in the United States.

You see a Ministry of Education which has responsibility for all of the things that relate to what we call elementary and secondary education, and they have a good deal more authority than our state departments of education do. A responsibility for governing education is very fractionated in the United States. It's distributed widely among a variety of state agencies and much more is delegated to the local levels than is the case in most of these top-performing countries. And, as I say, you're talking about populations that are often roughly the same size as American states.

Gene: Marc, you worked with a study group at the National Conference of State Legislatures that produced a report, "No Time to Lose." What was the value of this report and what advice do you have for policymakers in the United States?

Marc: If we think we're going to wait until the country as a whole figures out what to do about education, we're going to wait a long, long time in my view. That's not how we decided to do education in the United States anyway. It's up to the states. And what you could see happening among this group of legislators was they were saying to themselves: it's up to us. We can do this.

The group was enormously energized I think by this experience, but not only were they really daunted when they understood how far ahead these other countries were and what the consequences would be for the United States if we didn't catch up... that was very daunting... but at the same time they said: there's no reason we can't do this. There's no reason we can't do this at least as well as they have done it.

One of the things I would tell these legislators is: you really need to get into this data. You need to understand what a number of these other countries have done. You need to understand that there is no one country to copy. Some countries have done some things much better than others. None of them have done everything better than anyone else. So you need to spend some time studying this.

Second, I think the countries that have done really well on education, almost all of them, ended up being able to make really big leaps toward much better functioning education systems because they were able to get the ordinary voters in their countries to understand what the issues were. They didn't just go into a hall and create a new bill and ram it through their legislature. They had what in our country would be a discussion in the whole state that went on for a while, so people really understood what the consequences were of not changing their education system for their kids, for their kids' kids, and for their grandchildren.

That part, that discussion, that creating of a common vision that goes beyond party and age and race and ethnicity, getting the state together so you're on the same page, makes all the difference when it comes to actually figuring out what needs to be done in detail to build the kind of education system you've seen all over the world that functions at a high level.

Gene:

We've heard from two highly respected education analysts and now we are going to find out how one state made the transition to where, when compared alone as a state, ranks favorably with top-performing countries in the PISA test.

Massachusetts State Representative, Anne Peish, is the Chair of the House Education Committee and served on the National Conference of State Legislatures study group that released an international report, "No Time to Lose: how to Build a World-Class Education System State by State."

Representative Peisch, how did your state get such an impressive program in place?

Anne Peish: Well, I think it really goes back to the Education Reform Act of 1993 that the state enacted then and it was a comprehensive piece of legislation that required a number of years to implement, and over the course of the next really 20 years with different administrations, the state really stuck to the plan and the legislation required that the state establish standards and assessments that were aligned with those standards, improve teacher quality.

And I would say that it was a comprehensive plan that has proven to be effective. Now that doesn't mean that there is not still room to improve, but overall I would say that, particularly if you look at both the PISA and the NAEP (National Assessment of Education Progress) results, it appears that what we have done has achieved the original goal of improving student outcomes significantly.

In addition to the state standards and the assessments, there was also a change in teacher qualifications. The licensure was beefed up I would say. And the governance structure was changed to the extent that school committees here, which is the term we use for school boards, they were very involved in the day-to-day operations of the schools, set to improve hiring and tenure decisions and things of that nature. And they were changed to more of a policymaking board, so the only hiring that the school boards do here now is the superintendent, and the superintendent is now responsible for principals and teachers.

Gene: And what was the reaction of the local school districts in the state?

Anne: It really required the state at the state level to stick to the implementation required by the legislation, despite a lot of backlash from the districts. Clearly people were happy about state funding, but giving up the ability to make the hiring and firing decisions by the school boards I think was a very controversial piece of the legislation, and the testing was enormously controversial. The graduation requirement did not go into effect for ten years and there were many efforts at repealing that requirement. But the legislative leadership and the executive really stood firm on that.

And one of the key recommendations of the report is that this isn't something that you can quickly implement and that it's not one single thing; it's a systemic change. So if you look at Massachusetts, it wasn't just the standards, or just the tests, or just the teacher improvement, or just funding. It was all of those components together.

It took 10 years from the time the legislation was enacted until that first class graduated that needed to pass, that was required to pass the tests. So this is not something you can turn around overnight.

Gene: And not just something that you can throw money at?

Anne: Here in Massachusetts I do think the reason that the legislation was able to get through and have the support for the length of time it did was it was a, it was sort of a grand bargain and, in exchange for the districts having to meet certain state requirements, the state was going to be providing funding. Now that was a novel concept, the standards, back in 1993, so the funding was not tied to specific programs; it went sort of without strings to the district.

As time goes on we continue to have districts that do not perform very well. Overall the state does quite well, but we have pockets of poor performance and, not surprisingly, most of them are in communities where we have high percentages of low-income students. While those students perform favorably in comparison to other low-income students across the country, the gap between our low- and high-performers here is quite large.

Gene: And was the business community supportive?

Anne: They were a critical component of the coalition that came together initially in 1993. The business community was very concerned at that point about the quality of the pool of employees that they were seeing. And they continue, I would say in Massachusetts, to pay attention to how our education system is doing and to encourage ongoing improvements.

Gene: What other benefits are there to be globally competitive with education?

Anne: I think it requires a certain level of education to become appropriately engaged in civic life and, at the end of the day, it is the decisions that are made at both our local, state and federal levels that have a tremendous impact on the daily lives of every one of us. So I think it behooves all of us, both for economic reasons and for quality of life, to see that future generations of students have access to very high-quality public education.

Gene: What did you learn working with other legislators across the country on this issue?

Anne: My experience with that group, which was bipartisan, was it was very difficult to tell sitting around the room discussing these issue who was a Democrat and who was a Republican. I think when you look across the country, for the most part, the people that are chairing the education committees and state legislatures are all committed to improving access to the highest quality public education that they can, and I think there's a recognition that high standards are important, that improving teacher preparation is important, and that a certain minimal level of funding is required.

Gene: Our thanks to our guests on this critical issue today. A reminder that the NCSL Education Program tracks legislative action on a variety of issues including K-12 education, college and career readiness, higher education, and adult learning.

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