



NO TIME TO LOSE

How to Build a World-Class Education System State by State

Key Messages

There are key lessons for states that come from studying what the high performing countries have done:

- Improving education outcomes is central to building a strong economy. All of these countries linked improving education outcomes to improving and strengthening the economy and global competitiveness.
- There is a clear set of education goals and standards articulated at the central government level
- There is flexibility at the local level to design strategies for the actual delivery of education
- Schools and districts with the most need and have the poorest performance receive the most resources
- There is a system-wide approach to accomplishing reform. This consists of a clear articulation of overall goals and a set of strategies that are linked together.

On making comparisons between US performance and other countries:

- Our comparison should not be between the US and these other countries but about states. The US does not look much like these other countries in terms of size or education governance. However, the states do look much more like these countries.
- This is particularly relevant given that education in our country is primarily a state responsibility.
- Other countries have similar issues of diversity and poverty as do our states. These countries have been able to increase achievement of all students and lower achievement gaps.

Specific strategies used in these countries include:

- A commitment to the preparation of students to enter school ready to learn.
- A commitment to a high quality teaching profession
- Strong leaders/principals in all schools
- Clear and high standards for all students, set centrally, with flexible implementation at the local level.
- A few key well targeted and relevant assessments
- Clear pathways to both college and careers with no dead ends for students
- A systemic approach to implementation where all of these components are strategically linked.

The NCSL Study Group and the Role of State Legislators

- The Study Group was a bipartisan group of experienced state legislators and senior legislative staff. Philosophical differences provided great perspective for our thoughtful discussions. In the end, the politically diverse group came together on key principles and strategies.
- States have primary responsibility for education, especially under ESSA – so this needs to be a state conversation.

- State legislators are at the center of defining education reform policy and strategy, especially under ESSA. They alone allocate the state budget to education and other areas; and they are able to represent diverse state interests and incorporate those views into state policy.
- The NCSL International Education Study Group is comprised of 28 very experienced and savvy legislators – 12 Democrats and 12 Republicans, along with 6 senior legislative staff who work on education issues. 26 states are represented on the group. The group has heard from some of the most renowned experts in the field of international education, as well as reform designers and implementers in Singapore, Finland, and Toronto.
- The Group didn't just learn from other countries but from high performing states as well who have embarked on system-wide reform, including Delaware and Massachusetts.

On moving forward with this information:

- States should pay attention to what other countries are doing. There are obvious differences in our culture and structure. But there are lessons to be found in their strategies and their approaches.
- States should bring a broad group of policymakers, educators and stakeholders together to study, as the NCSL Study Group did, the lessons from these countries. This study will make clear the urgency of improving education outcomes in the states and illuminate steps that states might take.
- While there is urgency in addressing our stagnant results, there are no quick fixes or silver bullets. Rather, states will need to identify long term goals and begin to prioritize specific action and policies to pursue.
- Good data and benchmarking state policies to top of the world standards can help illuminate specific gaps and needs.
- This is a process that is best approached state by state.

PISA as a rigorous and appropriate comparison for these purposes:

- By analyzing the educational policies of top-performing countries, the United States can identify ways to improve its own education system.
- The Programme for International Student Assessment is a survey of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) evaluates education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15 year old students in more than 65 economies.
- The assessment is administered once every three years and rotates emphasis between the core subjects of reading, math and science. PISA aims to measure students' abilities to apply their knowledge to real-life situations.
- While PISA cannot measure the quality of an education system or identify causal relationships between the various factors and results of education, it does provide a platform to compare successes in educational systems and achievement across nations.
- Rigorous statistical methods are used all the time to make generalizations from samples. But the methodology must be of the highest quality. This is the case in the PISA studies.
- Comparing the US to other countries isn't a perfect comparison. High performing countries don't necessarily look like the United States, but they do look similar to states – with a centralized structure that sets broad education policy and local control.
- PISA shows that the US achievement has been stagnant for the last twelve years while other countries are improving their student achievement – for all groups of students while gaps in the US continue to get bigger.