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National Center on Education and the Economy calls for new U.S. education reform agenda based on strategies of the top-performing nations

WASHINGTON, D.C. – As the performance of students in one nation after another surpasses that of American students, and the states, in response, institute one reform after another, student performance remains stagnant. A new paper, released today by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE), *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: An American Agenda for Education Reform* explains why.

It turns out that the countries that are outperforming the United States have been pursuing strategies that the U.S. has not been pursuing, while the U.S. has embraced strategies that none of the best-performing countries have embraced. Reduced class size and more money for schools have long been advocated by American educators as solutions to poor student performance, but neither is correlated with high student performance in the best-performing countries.

But it is also true that some of the reforms dearest to the critics of the educators—school charters, support of entrepreneurs pursuing disruptive innovations, and firing teaches whose students perform poorly on standardized tests—are nowhere to be found in the arsenal of strategies used by the top-performing nations. Among the strategies now on the front burner in the United States, only the effort to develop internationally benchmarked student achievement standards and high quality examinations appears to have a parallel in the program of the nations with the best student performance.

According to NCEE President and CEO Marc Tucker, there is much for the U.S. to learn.

"In the late 1970's, Japan was eating the lunch of some of America's greatest corporations. Those that survived figured out how they were doing it and did it even better. The most effective way to greatly improve student performance in the United States is to figure out how the countries with top student performance are doing it, build on their achievements and then, by building on our unique strengths, figure out how to do it even better."

At a symposium being held today in Washington, D.C., U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and a who's who of educators and experts discussed the findings of the NCEE paper, which demonstrates how the U.S. has failed to follow the successful reform paths shared by Finland, Japan, Singapore, Canada, China and other top-performing nations. Among its key recommendations to American states are:

Build their strategies for improving student performance on the continuing study of the strategies employed by the top-performing countries. This is what most of the top performers have been doing for years. It keeps them at the top of their game.

Expand the work begun on the Common Core State Standards by expanding it to the rest of the core curriculum, and creating curriculum frameworks that specify what topics are to be taught in the core subjects, grade by grade. Don't use the new tests being built by the state consortia for grade-by-grade

accountability testing—not one top-performing country does that. Instead, pick one or two grade levels for accountability testing (often, in the top-performing countries, the end of middle school and/or the end of the sophomore year of high school) and make them "gateway tests," with standards that have to be met before moving on to the next stage of one's education or training for work.

Develop a world-class teaching force by greatly raising standards for entry to teacher education programs, moving teacher training from low-status higher education institutions to research universities. This means insisting that all teachers—including elementary teachers—have in-depth knowledge of the subjects they will teach, apprenticing new teachers to master teachers, raising teacher pay so it is comparable to that of the leading professions, and giving teachers substantial research skills so they can take the lead in improving teaching practice.

Move away from local control of school finance and toward state adoption of responsibility for financing schools. The top-performing nations have moved steadily toward systems of school finance that provide more resources to students who are harder to educate than to other students, an essential step in making sure that all students are able to reach internationally competitive standards.

Abandon the old industrial model of school and district management and move toward modern methods of managing professionals. The countries that have succeeded in attracting their best young people to teaching trust their teachers, listen to them when making policy, and put them in charge of improving practice. They are not locked in conflict with their unions. Some of the nations with the strongest student performance also have some of the strongest unions in the world. But the experience of those nations shows that, when schools are run on a high performance, professional model, the unions need to change, too, along with the management model, moving toward a very different labor relations model.

Spend our education budgets differently. Other countries are getting much more for their money by spending less on fancy school buildings, glossy textbooks, intramural sports and district administration and more on their teachers and their most disadvantaged students.

Make sure all elements of the education system are coherent and aligned. The top-performing countries have systems that make it look as though the parts and pieces of their policy systems and practices were designed to work smoothly together. In the U.S., we tend to add program after program, initiative after initiative, law after law, and regulation after regulation, all piled on what went before. Nothing else we do will matter very much unless we build an education system that makes sense.

For more information on the report and the National Center on Education and Economy, visit www.ncee.org.

About NCEE

The National Center on Education and the Economy was created in 1988 to analyze the implications of changes in the international economy for American education, formulate an agenda for American education based on that analysis and seek wherever possible to accomplish that agenda through policy change and development of the resources educators would need to carry it out.

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