



Five Questions For ... Marc Tucker, President of the National Center on Education and the Economy, on Lessons From Shanghai, Teacher Training and American Innovation

Posted by [Emily Richmond](#) on March 28, 2012 at 2:10pm in [Education in the News](#)

Marc Tucker, president of the [National Center on Education and the Economy](#), spoke with EWA about why the United States fares so poorly on international comparisons, how fundamental changes are needed in how society views – and treats – teachers, and his belief that there doesn't have to be a choice between equity and quality when it comes to public schools.



1. Your new book is [“Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the...”](#) Given how different the United States is from other countries when it comes to the challenges facing its schools, how much can really be “imported” in terms of public education systems?

We deliberately selected countries from among the top performers that are as different from each other as countries can get. Although the policies and structures are different, the underlying principles of their education reform strategies are remarkably similar to each other – but not to the ones in the United States. If countries as dissimilar to each other as Japan and Canada can get very good results, there must be something in those similar educational principles that is worth exploring.

One of the strategies being used by the top-performing countries is that they typically put more money behind the kids who are harder to get to high standards than those who are relatively easy to get to high standards. The United States has never done that. Federal funds for low-income and minority students make up for some of the difference, but federal money represents less than 10 percent of all the money that's spent. So, when all sources of funds are taken into account, we spend much more on the education of wealthier students than those with less family income.

This is mainly because of our unique system of local funding of schools. Only the United States, among the top industrialized countries, allows wealthy people to create their own school districts. People in those districts have very low tax rates, but big tax yields, so students in those communities can afford the very best teachers, the best facilities, the best of everything. Taxpayers in low-income communities pay much higher tax rates, but get much lower yields, so they get the worst teachers and the worst facilities for their children. None of the top-performing countries do this. A student's socioeconomic background is a better predictor of academic success in the United States than in all but four other countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) database. We have a much higher proportion of children in poverty coming into our schools than other industrialized country. The fact that the top-performing countries are working hard to put more money behind the education of their hardest to educate students than their easiest to educate students is a crucially important factor in their success.

2. What are some of the more noticeable differences in curriculum and instruction in countries like China and Finland?

The most successful countries have a much more robust instructional system. They have a core curriculum that all students are required to take that includes their own language, foreign languages, mathematics, the sciences, world history, their own history and art and music. They have internationally benchmarked standards for these subjects and examinations that are based on the curriculum. When they place high stakes on these exams, they do so for the whole curriculum, not just their native language and mathematics, as we are doing here.

The closest we've come to that so far is the Common Core standards. We are an inch along in a journey that is at least a yard-stick long.

Their exams are typically very high quality. For the most part these countries do not use the kind of multiple choice, computer-scored tests used in the U.S. There is a much greater emphasis on written essays and problem solving. When you talk to people from the ministries of education in the top-10 performing countries, they rarely talk about the importance of students learning basic skills. They assume basic skills are being learned. They talk about assessing complex skills, innovation and creative capacity. These are skills that are going to be essential to individual success and national success in the 21st century.

3. There's been significant focus lately at the national level on teacher preparation programs, which U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan says need a significant overhaul. What lessons can we learn from other countries when it comes to recruiting, training and supporting teachers?

We have a low-quality teacher recruiting strategy. We recruit from the bottom achievers, we pay them much less, and we offer them a working environment that is nowhere near as attractive. In this country, we celebrate programs like Teach For America, which suggests you can learn how to teach in a matter of a few weeks or months.

In the top-performing countries, their teacher education programs look a lot more like our medical education programs. They recruit from the top third – and in some countries, the top 10 and even 5 percent – of their college students. They insist they master the subjects they are going to teach. Many of them have moved their teacher training programs to their major research universities, which gives them much higher status, and allows them to attract a higher caliber of professor. It also allows them to teach research skills. They rely on teachers to be the first source of analysis on how to improve education.

Once you are hired as a teacher, you don't get a full-time teaching role until you've been supervised under the mentorship of a master teacher. Perhaps most importantly, beginning teachers are typically paid what beginning engineers are paid, so they can attract the kind of people they want. And once they are hired, they are treated like real professionals.

4. A few years ago, when Shanghai outscored the rest of the world on the PISA exam, President Obama called it a "Sputnik moment" for U.S. education. How should the education community be responding?

If you look 100 years back in the United States, we had in this country the fastest expansion of mass production in the world. We had many relatively uneducated people coming from countries in southern Europe and from the south into our northern cities. We needed a way to provide an eighth grade level of education to the majority of young people in our country. We still have that system in place, but the world has changed. Now, a country that succeeds politically, culturally and economically going forward, is going to succeed only if provides the kind and quality of education to everybody that we used to think appropriate only for the elite, no more than 15 percent of the population, a hundred years ago.

But we are very far from that goal. Our students perform only at the average level among all the countries participating in the OECD PISA survey. Many of those countries are second world countries.

There are only four countries among all the countries that do worse than we do on the OECD measure of equity.

The last important dimension of national education performance is productivity—how much we get for the money we spend. Only Luxemburg spends more than U.S. on education. We are the biggest spender in the industrialized world on elementary and secondary education, and we are getting lousy results.

I think the issue here is not equity versus quality. Over the course of my lifetime, the U.S. has been going back and forth over which one to choose. That's a false choice. The countries that are succeeding are getting the highest levels of achievement in the world and their bottom performers are performing at levels very close to the levels at which their top performers are achieving. And they are doing all of that at per pupil costs far below ours.

5. The Council on Foreign Relations recently assembled a task force (led by former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein) [to evaluate the nation's education system](#). The determination was that the poor quality of public schools represents a threat to national security. What's your take?

The first half of the report says if you look at our national security requirements, the education system is failing us at every turn. We're not turning out enough engineers or developing students with foreign language competence. Our youth as a whole don't have enough of an understanding of the rest of the world. I think all the task force is doing is adding another voice to the many others who say this country isn't producing what our kids need.

Where I found the report amazingly lacking was in the recommendations for addressing those shortfalls. You would think the Council on Foreign Relations would be the first to look at the countries out-performing us for clues as to the path we should be following. This is an avowedly international organization – they've been fighting isolationism since they were founded. Instead, they looked wholly inside the United States for solutions. They emphasized choice (vouchers and charter schools) and a particularly heavy-handed form of accountability as the core of their policy prescriptions. Those are approaches that don't even exist in the top-performing countries, and there's no hard evidence that they work anywhere at a state or national scale.

To me, that's stunning. That is the last organization in this country I would have expected to offer up what amounts to an isolationist view of education. They looked for solutions inside a country that hasn't been able to find a way out of this box, instead of countries that are beating the pants off us on every measure of student success. Why not look to the top-performers for solutions?

People come to the United States from all over the world to look at our education systems. If our performance is so poor, why do they do that? The answer is we have pockets of excellence that people from other nations want to take home and incorporate to improve their system. Innovation is not our problem. We innovate better than anyone else. What we don't have is an effective system. When you try to fix our problem by using market methods, you're doing the opposite of building an effective system. We are tying our hands behind our back by asking the wrong questions.