

American Teens Trail Global Peers in Math Scores

But U.S. Students Show Progress in Science

By LAUREN ETTER

American teenagers made modest progress on an international exam, but still performed below average in mathematics compared with their peers in other industrialized countries, according to results released Tuesday by the U.S. Department of Education.

The test, called the Program for International Student Assessment, has been given every three years since 2000 to 15-year-old students. Last year, when the test was administered, 60 countries participated. It's coordinated worldwide by the Paris-based Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development.



Associated Press - A ninth-grade algebra class at Richmond High in Indiana last week.

The results for American students drew a lukewarm response from U.S. education officials as they seek to boost test scores among high-school and college students. "We're in the middle of the pack; that's not where we want to be," said Stuart Kerachsky, deputy commissioner at the National Center for Education Statistics, an arm of the Department of Education that administers the PISA test in the U.S.

Last year, President Barack Obama launched an education initiative aimed at boosting high school and college graduation rates. During his presidential campaign Mr. Obama said he would try to boost college readiness by increasing the number of students taking advance-placement courses in high school.

The test is designed to assess how prepared teenagers are in three key categories—mathematics, science and reading—versus their peers in other countries.

The schools and students taking the test are randomly selected, said an official with the Department of Education. The test is translated into the language of each participating country, and each country may review the questions beforehand to check they are asked in the proper context and not biased, the official said. In almost all the countries, a minimum of 4,500 students are tested, with exceptions for very small countries.

While the test is administered to 60 countries, the U.S. is generally compared with the other 33 mostly industrialized member countries, including Japan, Germany and South Korea, that constitute the OECD. China provided test scores from only selected educational systems.

Of the three categories tested, U.S. students recorded the most progress in science, boosting their average score to 502, not measurably different from the 501 average score among the other OECD

nations, according to the report. That's up from a U.S. science score of 489 in 2006, which was below average that year. Twelve other industrialized countries had higher average science scores compared with the U.S., including Finland, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Slovenia.

In reading literacy, American students posted an average score of 500, not measurably different from previous years or the OECD average score of 493. Six other OECD countries had higher average reading scores—South Korea, Finland, Canada, New Zealand, Japan and Australia.

Also in the reading category, 18% of U.S. students failed to reach the test's "proficiency level 2," a point considered to be where "students can complete low-level reading tasks," according to the report.

Mathematics was the category where the U.S. lagged most, performing below average compared with students in other nations. U.S. students had an average score of 487, while the OECD average score was 496. The U.S. math score in 2006 was 474 compared with an average that year of 498. Seventeen other industrialized countries performed better on average. About 23% of U.S. students scored below the "level 2" benchmark.

Mr. Kerachsky, of the National Center for Education Statistics, said there were some bright spots. In mathematics, he said, "no countries moved ahead of the U.S." Also, he said the U.S. had caught up with nine other countries that previously had higher scores in math. American students, he said, were "inching in the right direction."

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2009 Program for International Student Assessment Scores

Results from the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) show U.S. teenagers made modest progress on the international exam but continued to post scores that were only average or below average compared to peers in other industrialized countries in science, math and reading. See average scores for reading, mathematics, and science literacy, by country. Click on column headers to sort.

Country	Mathematics	Country	Science
Shanghai-China	600	Shanghai-China	575
Singapore	562	Finland	554
Hong Kong-China	555	Hong Kong-China	549
Korea, Republic of	546	Singapore	542
Chinese Taipei	543	Japan	539
Finland	541	Korea, Republic of	538
Liechtenstein	536	New Zealand	532
Switzerland	534	Canada	529
Japan	529	Estonia	528
Canada	527	Australia	527
Netherlands	526	Netherlands	522
Macao-China	525	Liechtenstein	520
New Zealand	519	Germany	520
Belgium	515	Chinese Taipei	520
Australia	514	Switzerland	517
Germany	513	United Kingdom	514
Estonia	512	Slovenia	512
Iceland	507	Macao-China	511
Denmark	503	Poland	508
Slovenia	501	Ireland	508
Norway	498	Belgium	507
Slovak Republic	497	Hungary	503
France	497	United States	502
OECD average	496	OECD average	501
Austria	496	Norway	500
Poland	495	Czech Republic	500
Sweden	494	Denmark	499
Czech Republic	493	France	498
United Kingdom	492	Iceland	496
Hungary	490	Sweden	495
Luxembourg	489	Latvia	494
United States	487	Austria	494
Portugal	487	Portugal	493
Ireland	487	Lithuania	491
Spain	483	Slovak Republic	490
Italy	483	Italy	489
Latvia	482	Spain	488
Lithuania	477	Croatia	486
Russian Federation	468	Luxembourg	484
Greece	466	Russian Federation	478
Croatia	460	Greece	470
Dubai-UAE	453	Dubai-UAE	466
Israel	447	Israel	455
Turkey	445	Turkey	454
Serbia, Republic of	442	Chile	447
Azerbaijan	431	Serbia, Republic of	443
Bulgaria	428	Bulgaria	439
Uruguay	427	Romania	428
Romania	427	Uruguay	427
Chile	421	Thailand	425
Thailand	419	Mexico	416
Mexico	419	Jordan	415
Trinidad and Tobago	414	Trinidad and Tobago	410

Country	Mathematics	Country	Science
Kazakhstan	405	Brazil	405
Montenegro, Republic of	403	Colombia	402
Argentina	388	Tunisia	401
Jordan	387	Montenegro, Republic of	401
Brazil	386	Argentina	401
Colombia	381	Kazakhstan	400
Albania	377	Albania	391
Tunisia	371	Indonesia	383
Indonesia	371	Qatar	379
Qatar	368	Panama	376
Peru	365	Azerbaijan	373
Panama	360	Peru	369
Kyrgyz Republic	331	Kyrgyz Republic	330

Source: National Center for Education Statistics