



## Frequently Asked Questions

### ***Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education*** **December 19, 2008 -- Report Release Event**

#### **Overview**

Ensuring our students are prepared for the demands of the global marketplace is of great importance to our nation's governors, chief state school officers and business leaders. Already, the most creative workers are internationally mobile, and most major corporations are multinational. They can locate offices and plants anywhere in the world and will do so in the nation with the most innovative, educated and highly skilled labor force—and that will become the high-wage, high-income nation. No longer are students in Ohio competing only against those in Virginia, Texas, and Vermont. Today's students will now compete for jobs with students from Denmark, India and China.

The National Governors Association, Council of Chief State School Officers and Achieve developed *Benchmarking for Success: Ensuring U.S. Students Receive a World-Class Education* in response to our constituents' interest in making state education systems internationally competitive. The report, developed with the guidance of a top-level advisory group, offers actions state and federal policymakers can take to meet this goal. Our intent is not only to compare our states' educational outcomes to those with the best in the world but to identify and learn from the top performers and rapid improvers. By internationally benchmarking, we seek to understand what best practices can be adapted or adopted to improve our state systems in standards, assessments, human capital, curricula, and accountability.

#### **Questions & Answers**

##### **Why should states benchmark to other countries? Can't we find all the innovative and effective ideas we need here in the U.S.?**

States can certainly learn a lot by looking within the U.S. But there are two reasons why it is important to benchmark internationally as well:

First, our students will be competing in a global economy. It's no longer enough just to make sure their skills are competitive with the students in neighboring states.

Second, when it comes to policies and practices, you can learn a lot more by expanding your search to include more education systems—and that's what international benchmarking allows you to do. Think of it this way: If a teacher only looked within her own school for great instructional strategies, she might find a few. But what if she looked across the district, or across the state? When states benchmark their education systems globally, they learn a lot more than they can by just looking within their own region or within U.S. borders. It gives you a bigger and better set of policy options for improving education.

**The U.S. has been a long-time international economic and education leader. Why is international benchmarking necessary?**

The U.S. is an economic leader in part because of its leadership in education during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Our investment in mass high school and college education gave us a critical lead in human capital at a critical time when the “knowledge economy” was taking shape. But now other countries are working hard to expand and improve education, and we’ve lost our leading edge.

Four decades ago America had the best high school graduation rate in the world, but now it ranks 18<sup>th</sup> out of 24 industrialized countries. As recently as 1995 America was still tied for first in the proportion of young adults with a college degree, but by 2000 the U.S. had slipped to 9<sup>th</sup> and by 2006 to 14<sup>th</sup>—below the average of the industrialized world. And when it comes to student learning, American students perform only mediocre to below-average among industrialized countries.

That’s not good enough. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, human capital has become *even more* important: High wages follow high skills, and long-term economic growth increasingly depends on educational excellence. The U.S. simply cannot afford to rest on its past accomplishments while country after country passes us by. And pass us by they will if we miss the benchmarking bandwagon. Other countries are benchmarking with much more openness and eagerness than we are. They see the value in it and they’re pursuing it aggressively. (See pages 16-19 in the report).

**Other countries are different from ours in so many ways. Are you saying we can just copy what they do?**

No. Countries are different, and it would be wrong to think you can just “copy and paste” a policy that works somewhere else and get the same results here. But we can be *inspired* by effective policies and practices around the world, and many of those strategies can be *adapted and engineered* to improve education here. For more on “myths and realities about international comparisons” see pages 20-21 of the report.

**The U.S. made gains on the 2007 Trends in International Math and Science Study (TIMSS), and Massachusetts and Minnesota did quite well. Doesn’t this indicate that the U.S. is making necessary educational progress?**

Though we were not able to obtain the new 2007 TIMSS results to include in the report before it went to press, we are encouraged by these recent results. U.S. performance, though, shouldn’t be interpreted to suggest international benchmarking is not necessary.

1) *The U.S. scored above average on TIMSS.* However, a lot of developing countries participate in TIMSS, which pulls the average way down and makes the U.S. look much better. When you compare the U.S. only to the advanced economies that better represent our trading partners and our competitors, U.S. performance falls mostly in the middle of the pack. On PISA, where the average is based only on 30 industrialized nations, the U.S. performed below average in science and way below average in math in 2006.

2) *The U.S. showed gains in mathematics.* Those gains are good news because they show that large-scale improvement is possible. But they were only in math, not science, where our performance was flat. Also, while we made gains in math, we still scored very far behind the top-performing countries on TIMSS.

3) *Massachusetts and Minnesota performed very well on TIMSS.* But that only proves the value of raising standards and international benchmarking. Minnesota adopted internationally benchmarked standards after it first participated in TIMSS in 1995. Since then, Minnesota has

made gains on the TIMSS math test that are more than three times as big as the gains for the U.S. as a whole. Likewise, Massachusetts is known for setting some of the highest academic standards in the country.

### **With gloomy budget outlooks, how will states be able to accomplish these recommended actions?**

States *already* are working to improve education in each of the policy areas outlined in the report. They revise standards on a regular cycle, and they pass laws that impact educator recruitment and training, for example. International benchmarking simply provides an additional tool for making every state's existing education policy and improvement process more effective. State leaders can use benchmarking to augment their "database of policy options" by adding strategies suggested by international best practice to the range of ideas already under consideration. Indeed, international benchmarking should not be a stand-alone project, but rather should function as a critical and well-integrated component of the regular policy planning process.

Also, state leaders should understand that this is very, very a high-yield investment. In fact, the most recent economic research shows that creating a world-class education system will more than pay for itself over time. Stanford economist Eric Hanushek estimates that if the U.S. improved its students' performance on international tests to the level of top performing nations over a 20 year period, our GDP would be an additional five percent higher 32 years from now. That's more than enough *to entirely pay for K-12 education*. And it would be 36 percent higher in 75 years! Those are national numbers, but the same general fact applies to state economies too.

### **How did you decide on these five action steps?**

Working with experts, we devised a list of criteria for choosing policy areas:

- ✓ First, research has shown them to have a robust relationship to results.
- ✓ Second, policymakers at the state level can take action to change them.
- ✓ Third, they are not determined by or dependent upon unique aspects of national culture or ways of arranging education, that is, the lessons can be adapted to use in a U.S. context.
- ✓ Fourth, researchers have documented clear and significant differences in how high-performing nations or their states manage these functions compared with traditional approaches in most U.S. states.

Finally, we conducted an extensive review of published research and also interviewed a range of experts, some of whom served on the Advisory Committee for this project, in order to make the final choices.

### **Why "common standards" and not national standards?**

To many people, "national standards" means standards that are set through the federal government. This report calls for states to lead the way and work together to adopt a common core of standards across states. The common core will have a solid foundation in the American Diploma Project (ADP) benchmarks. Because of how they were originally developed, the ADP benchmarks already reflect the skills necessary to succeed in college and in well-paying jobs in today's labor market. Achieve is now working to further calibrate the framework to reflect international best practice. The internationally benchmarked common core of standards should not be seen as an addition to existing standards, but rather the foundation for states to establish rigorous standards, just like those in high-performing countries.

**How might assessments be changed or developed in light of these recommendations?**

The report does not make specific recommendations for changing assessments because more research needs to be done in this area. That’s why the report recommends, on page 37, that the federal government should convene a technical advisory committee on assessment to make recommendations for generating internationally benchmarked results by state without adding significantly to costs and testing time, among other things.

**Action 3 requires significant realignment of current teacher preparation programs. Are state leaders prepared to take on this challenge of reforming higher education preparation programs?**

We can’t help our students reach globally competitive standards unless we give them a globally competitive teaching force, and we must do everything possible to ensure that. Some states are already working on this. North Carolina and Mississippi recently realigned their pre-service curriculums. Now it’s time for all states to re-evaluate teacher preparation and work with higher education leaders to improve it. If countries like Great Britain can radically transform teacher training, then state leaders in the U.S. can find ways to work together to accomplish it, too.

**Action 4 for calls for holding schools accountable. What kind of additional accountability do you foresee given the current levels of accountability placed on schools and districts under No Child Left Behind (NCLB)?**

We’re already monitoring schools now, and implementing interventions; holding schools accountable for results is a fundamental tenet we all agree on. The goal of international benchmarking isn’t to add more accountability, but to look for the world’s best ideas for holding schools accountable and providing the kind of supports necessary to succeed.

**Are you advocating for more assessment in Action 5? Aren’t American students already some of the most tested in the world?**

We’re not advocating for “more” testing. We’re advocating for “better” assessment strategies that can tell us whether our students are achieving at world-class levels. The U.S. has a cumbersome, fragmented testing system in which the federal government, states, districts, and schools together administer many different assessments to meet a wide variety of purposes. We want to help states benchmark achievement internationally but at the same time also deal with the challenge of creating a more streamlined and cost-effective set of assessments for meeting a wide variety of testing needs.

In fact, that’s why we recommended that state leaders work with the National Assessment Governing Board to see if states can leverage an existing test—the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). We also recommended that the federal government convene a technical advisory committee of experts who can recommend streamlined, cost-effective assessment strategies.

**Why isn’t equity a formal action step? Are you just giving it lip service?**

We are not suggesting that equity is not as important. On the contrary, we’re saying that equity is *so important* that states must focus on it throughout the entire benchmarking process. After a lot of thought, we realized that equity is an “interdisciplinary” concern that states should address in the context of each action step. Standards, assessments, human capital, accountability and support—all have important equity dimensions and important consequences for achievement gaps. Therefore, our recommendation to state leaders was that they should approach equity as an overarching imperative as they tackle each of the five action areas.