

My Little (Global) School

By **THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN**

There was a time when middle-class parents in America could be — and were — content to know that their kids' public schools were better than those in the next neighborhood over. As the world has shrunk, though, the next neighborhood over is now Shanghai or Helsinki. So, last August, I wrote a column quoting Andreas Schleicher — who runs the global exam that compares how 15-year-olds in public schools around the world do in applied reading, math and science skills — as saying imagine, in a few years, that you could sign on to a Web site and see how your school compares with a similar school anywhere in the world. And then you could take this information to your superintendent and ask: “Why are we not doing as well as schools in China or Finland?”

Well, that day has come, thanks to a successful pilot project involving 105 U.S. schools recently completed by Schleicher's team at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which coordinates the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA test, and Jon Schnur's team at America Achieves, which partnered with the O.E.C.D. Starting this fall, any high school in America will be able to benchmark itself against the world's best schools, using a new tool that schools can register for at www.americaachieves.org. It is comparable to PISA and measures how well students can apply their mastery of reading, math and science to real world problems.

The pilot study was described in an America Achieves report entitled “Middle Class or Middle of the Pack?” that is being released Wednesday. The report compares U.S. middle-class students to their global peers of similar socioeconomic status on the 2009 PISA exams.

The bad news is that U.S. middle-class students are badly lagging their peers globally. “Many assume that poverty in America is pulling down the overall U.S. scores,” the report said, “but when you divide each nation into socioeconomic quarters, you can see that even America's middle-class students are falling behind not only students of comparable advantage, but also more disadvantaged students in several other countries.”

American students in the second quarter of socioeconomic advantage — mostly higher middle class — were significantly outperformed by 24 countries in math and by 15 countries in science, the study found. In the third quarter of socioeconomic advantage — mostly lower middle class — U.S. students were significantly outperformed by peers in 31 countries or regions in math and 25 in science.

The good news, though, said Schnur, “is that, for the first time, we have documented that there are individual U.S. schools that are literally outperforming every country in the world.”

“BASIS Tucson North, a nonselective high school serving an economically modest middle-class student population in Arizona, outperformed the average of every country in the world in reading, math, and science,” the report said. “Three nonselective high schools in Fairfax, Va., outperformed the average of virtually every country in the world.” One of them, Woodson, outperformed every region in the world in reading, except Shanghai. But the pilot also exposed some self-deception. “One school, serving students similar to Woodson’s, lags behind 29 countries in math but received an A on its state’s accountability system based primarily on that state’s own test,” Schnur said.

Paul Bambrick-Santoyo is managing director of North Star Academies in Newark, an Uncommon Schools network of nine low-income charter schools that took part and cracked the world’s Top 10. “We have always had state tests and SATs,” he told me, “but we never had an international metric. This was a golden opportunity to see where we stand — if we have to prepare our kids to succeed not only in this country but in a global marketplace.” He said he was particularly motivated by the fact that Shanghai’s low-income kids “could outperform” most U.S. schools, because this gave his school a real international peer for a benchmark.

“We got 157 pages of feedback” from participating in the pilot, added Jack Dale, the superintendent of Fairfax County’s schools, which is so valuable because the PISA test exposes whether your high school students can apply their math, science and reading skills to 21st-century problems. “One of my principals said to me: ‘This is not your Virginia Standards of Learning Test.’ ”

So what’s the secret of the best-performing schools? It’s that there is no secret. The best schools, the study found, have strong fundamentals and cultures that believe anything is possible with any student: They “work hard to choose strong teachers with good content knowledge and dedication to continuous improvement.” They are “data-driven and transparent, not only around learning

outcomes, but also around soft skills like completing work on time, resilience, perseverance — and punctuality.” And they promote “the active engagement of our parents and families.”

“If you look at all the data,” concluded Schnur, it’s clear that educational performance in the U.S. has not gone down. We’ve actually gotten a little better. The challenge is that changes in the world economy keep raising the bar for what our kids need to do to succeed. Our modest improvements are not keeping pace with this rising bar. Those who say we have failed are wrong. Those who say we are doing fine are wrong.” The truth is, America has world-beating K-12 schools. We just don’t have nearly enough.
