POSITION STATEMENT: MEANINGFUL INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

PURPOSE

To affirm NASSP's support for a global community of educators, offer recommendations for improving the relevance and significance of international comparisons, and promote appropriate comparative analysis of the data from international assessments to aid in reaching valid conclusions regarding the performance of public schools in the United States of America.

ISSUE

International tests, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), compare achievement data from students in the United States with that of students in other countries. PISA is an international standardized test that was developed jointly by participating countries and is administered to 15 year-old students. TIMSS compares data on the mathematics and science achievement of fourth-and eighth-grade students in the United States with that of students in other countries. Recent test results have shown a decline in the performance and ranking of U.S. students relative to their overseas peers. But the United States has never fared well on international comparisons of student achievement in math or science, and in 1964 actually ranked 11th of 12 countries participating in the first major international study of student achievement in math (Loveless, 2011). Clearly, this ranking proved nothing about global economic competitiveness or future economic growth.

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Several issues related to assessment and reporting practices affect the results as do certain realities of U.S. society. Both PISA and TIMMS ask our students to do something that they are not taught to do: apply math and science concepts to real-world problems. No, state assessments have included that requirement until the adoption of new assessments tied to Common Core State Standards, which are only now being field tested. The results from both international assessments are reported as averages, which "is problematic for diverse nations like the US. Even though the US leads all nations in the number of top scorers, it has many students scoring at the lowest level" (Berliner, 2014).

The high rate of poverty in the United States impacts international comparisons. The U.S. poverty rate exceeds 20%, which is considerably higher than Finland, the highest ranked country, at 5% poverty. In the United States, if we looked only at students who attend schools where child poverty rates are under 10%, we would rank as the number one country in the world, outscoring countries like Finland, Japan, and Korea (Berliner, 2014; Riddile, 2010).

Such results have led to a fierce debate within the United States about the purpose, fairness, and significance of international comparisons. Supporters of international comparisons, including business groups and policy centers, argue that international assessments provide accurate, objective data about the performance of U.S. students and offer valuable insights into the quality of U.S. public schools. They believe that when, as has been the case in recent years, U.S. students lose ground on those tests, an inference can be made that schools are not providing the quality education that is required to successfully compete in a global economy. They dismiss claims that international comparisons compare disparate groups across international lines. Supporters also claim that many countries ranking at the top also have large immigrant and low-income student populations. Furthermore, the media and policymakers, for the most part, embrace this view uncritically and condemn schools for their poor performance.

Critics of international comparisons, including many practitioners and a number of researchers, argue that it is impossible to accurately compare US students' performance against that of their international peers because the students selected by their respective countries vary widely in their demographic makeup (not all countries include language learners and students with disabilities in their samples) and the sample size of students from various socioeconomic groups can vary widely. The tests are better suited to nations that have uniform and centralized education systems, critics argue, unlike the United States where some students might not yet have been exposed to the materials the tests are covering. In addition, scores are often reported as ranks, giving the illusion of great differences when in fact, the country ranked number one and country ranked number 10 might be separated by only a fraction of a point. Thus, critics claim that, international comparisons are exploited to portray a negative image of all public schools. But, the experiences of states like Massachusetts and Minnesota, which have adopted rigorous, internationally benchmarked standards, proves that U.S. students can achieve at high levels. For example, the mean TIMSS scores for African-American students in Massachusetts were higher than the mean score for Finnish students (Berliner, 2014).

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The appropriate use of comparative international assessments can be summed up best by Angel Gurría, Secretary-General of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). He stated, that by "identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems \[international assessments such as PISA\] allow governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts" (OCED, 2013). Our nation's students are no longer competing for jobs with just their classmates, but rather with students all over the world. Our education system must prepare students for life in a global and interconnected society. Using meaningful international comparisons to help support increased student achievement, grow a professional and high-quality educator workforce, and use appropriate accountability mechanisms should be reasons for participating in and evaluating the results of comparative international assessments. We must view our educational system in the context of a global society while also recognizing our unique cultural characteristics as we seek to improve educational opportunities for each student and grow our nation's economy.

NASSP GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- NASSP believes that the value of large-scale assessments is in the information they provide to help schools analyze and improve the performance of each student and to close the achievement gap within U.S. schools.
- NASSP believes that the United States should take steps to prepare its students to become effective and active citizens of the world. NASSP supports common standards and rigorous formative and summative assessments that are aligned to those college and career-ready standards as a key step in preparing each student for success in a global society.
- NASSP considers education to be the most important and reliable investment our nation can make in its own future by preparing students to live in and thrive in a global economy.
- NASSP recognizes the power of technology to engage each student in a relevant and challenging curriculum and foster exchanges among U.S. schools, students, educators, and their counterparts overseas.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Federal, state, and local policymakers should:

- Cease to use international comparisons as an indictment of public education, but rather collaborate with all educators and stakeholders to analyze and use comparative international results to examine current policy and practices to ensure that the U.S. is implementing research-based best practices.
- Critically examine international test results to determine both their value and their limitations in informing policy. Policymakers should carefully examine results from international assessments by disaggregating results by socioeconomic status within the U.S. and to similar socioeconomic groups in other countries.

Further, before changing or implementing new educational policies, policymakers should also review score trends by socioeconomic status over time within the United States and among similarly situated nations to assess and determine what actions and/or policies support student growth in various subgroups.

- Set realistic and measurable goals to achieve desired student growth and improved educator quality on the basis of careful examination of comparative international assessments.
- Provide all educators with an appropriate understanding on the use, purpose, and context of measuring student performance through international assessments.
- Support the responsible implementation of common, internationally benchmarked, college- and career-readiness standards that prepare each student to succeed in post-secondary education and training. Policymakers should provide schools with the effective resources to implement those standards, including funding, research on best practices, and continual professional development for teachers and principals.
- Address financial and social inequities that affect resources available to high-need schools and students, which can impact student performance.
- Provide educators with the resources, including relevant professional development, necessary to internationalize their schools and become active participants in a global community of practitioners.
- Ensure that practitioners have a voice when international tests that measure students' performance are developed and interpreted.

School districts should:

- Provide relevant and factual information on the use and interpretation of comparative international assessments to parents, students and educators.
- Lead conversations with school leaders about international tests, such as PISA and TIMSS, and the implications of results for improving policies and practices where applicable.
- Encourage and promote international exchange opportunities among schools, educators, and students, including participation in the Fulbright Teaching Program.

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School leaders should:

- Participate in discussions with school leaders in other countries to address common issues and exchange best practices.
- Lead efforts to offer world languages; encourage participation in international exchanges; and promote the use of technology to give students and faculty members access to programs, discussions, and conferences with their international peers in their schools.
- Advocate for the investment of resources to address the needs of high-need students and to help close funding inequities.

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