

# The Unstudious American: Who's at Fault?

*Before they initiate drastic reforms to make American schools more competitive in the international community, educators should look at the effects parents have on students' academic standing.*

JOHN STILES

**H**and-wringers across the nation are decrying the state of our education system, blaming it for everything from crime to economic collapse. They have come up with a plethora of suggestions for reversing American students' poor academic standing in the international community, all with one goal in common: to overhaul the system. They talk about toughening standards or they stress the "back to basics" model. It is conventional chic to jump on this bandwagon and look longingly at Japanese or European schools as models.

But is the problem really in our schools or elsewhere in our culture? One of the problems with comparing American student achievement scores with those of non-Americans is that the school systems are quite different — each an extension of its nation's culture. Indeed, traditions, cultures, national goals, and perspectives very much influence curriculums and academic outcomes. Therefore, many critics contend that comparing Americans to, say, the Japanese or Swedes is, as Torsten Husén (1983) says, "an exercise in comparing the incomparable."

But what if it were possible to eliminate that very formidable barrier of different school systems, and to compare students of various nations studying not only under the same system, but under the same roof as well? If students took the same classes, had the same teachers and textbooks, and were given the same assignments and tests, how would the

results compare? Would Americans fare any better if academic standards and teaching behaviors were constant? Such a study might give a clearer picture of the causes for national discrepancies, if they do in fact exist.

## "International" Students' Test Scores

Finding such a school is easier than one might imagine. Scattered around the globe are hundreds of American-style "international" schools, populated by students from a large variety of nations. The students are children of expatriates living in virtually every

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major city of every country, and in many smaller cities as well. Normally, the curriculums are U.S.-based, with a majority of texts and teachers from the United States. Other schools exist

within the international community that offer specific national curriculums for students from a particular nation, but, by and large, the international community sends its children to American schools where instruction is in English, and where most students take the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, and also the SAT and ACT tests if they hope to attend a U.S. college or university.

In 1988, while working at the International School Bangkok, I noticed some differences in test scores among American, European, and Asian students in my biology classes. After I gave the first major test that year, I noticed that 75 percent of the *F*s went to American students, even though they made up only 33 percent of the school's population. As for the *A*s, Americans fared close to expectations, but garnered only 29 percent of the top mark. I was to discover this was no fluke: at the end of the quarter Americans received 76 percent of the *D*s and *F*s and only 25 percent of the *A*s.

I became curious: here, in an American-style school with classes conducted in English, the lowest grade averages went to those who were familiar with the system and the language. Intuitively, I felt that there must be some explanation other than intelligence to explain such a result. In fact, I knew of a comprehensive study by Stevenson and associates (1985) of intellectual abilities among children of American, Chinese, and Japanese children. Their results showed no significant differences in their academic capabilities.

#### **A Survey of Habits**

I decided to survey 85 of my students on some of their personal habits. I asked them to estimate the number of hours they spent per week (a) doing homework, (b) watching TV, videos,

or listening to music, (c) in extracurricular school-sponsored activities, (d) with friends, and (e) with their families socially (I explained that "socially" meant actually engaged in an activity with the family, not just "being with them" in the same room or house).

The geographical backgrounds of the students could be divided nearly equally among North America, Europe, and Asia. Only three of my biology students did not fall into one of those categories. Almost all of the students were in their mid-teens (sophomores), and nearly all were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Thus, it was rather easy to make comparisons.

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The results showed that Americans lagged behind the Asian students by 22 percent and behind the Europeans by 45 percent in time spent doing homework. The average time spent watching videos, TV, or listening to music was greater in each group than the time spent doing homework, but

the difference was greatest among the Americans.

Interestingly, I found that the Asian students spent more time in extracurricular activities than the American or European students. Time spent with friends did not vary significantly among the three groups; Americans ended up between the other two groups in this category.

The greatest discrepancy occurred in a telltale area: time spent socially with family. I had suspicions about this when I explained the survey: unlike the Asian and European students, the Americans had a tendency to roll their eyes or exclaim, "Who spends time with their family?" I found European and Asian students were virtually at a dead heat in this category, outdistancing the Americans by a little more than a two-to-one margin: they spent twice as much time with their families as Americans spent with theirs.

#### **The Family Is Key**

For years I had suspected it, and now, at least in my current crop of teens, it had been confirmed. Could this be a factor in why Americans academically lag behind students from other parts of the world? It may certainly be a more complicated issue than this, but I am willing to bet that we would see a dramatic improvement in the performance of American schools if we could change parent attitudes.

It seems to me that non-American students are, in general, more at ease around adults than American kids are. They tend to be kinder, more compassionate, and mature in their dealings with others. Most people would agree that happy, well-adjusted children exude a certain confidence. Additionally, trust in and love for a parent easily translates into a comfortable

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feeling toward people in general, and adults specifically. These students often have a good relationship with their teachers as well as with peers. Motivation comes easily to them and they face challenges eagerly.

Americans cannot embrace the

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deep-rooted cultural traditions of other nations, and I am not suggesting that they should. Indeed, I know of few American parents who would go as far as Japanese mothers, who totally immerse themselves in the academic success of their children, virtually giving up their own identities (Lawson 1990). Rather, I suggest that if Americans are truly interested in upgrading their schools, parents must begin by taking more (or at least *some*) responsibility for their children's success instead of expecting the schools to do it all.

### Paying the Price

Parents must encourage their children, show an interest in their work, and instill a sense of responsibility. To do this requires nurturing, caring, and trust. My survey results show evidence that many, if not most,

American children may be more isolated from their parents than children of other countries. The result, unfortunately, may often translate directly to apathy and low academic achievement.

Whether a change in parental attitude is something that teachers and administrators can hope for is difficult to say. As educators we must find ways for schools to counter the current trend of apathy. There are several well-funded programs currently being designed to offer a "home away from home" for students that could perhaps give them the boost in self-confidence they do not receive from their parents.

To foster a new commitment to education in local schools, educators must take the initiative. They must seek ways to better communicate with parents and other community members in order to bring about a positive atmosphere in their schools. What a pity that U.S. educational excellence may hinge upon the undertaking of huge reform movements costing billions of dollars. The irony is that it will be largely the tax-paying parents who pay the price. □

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