



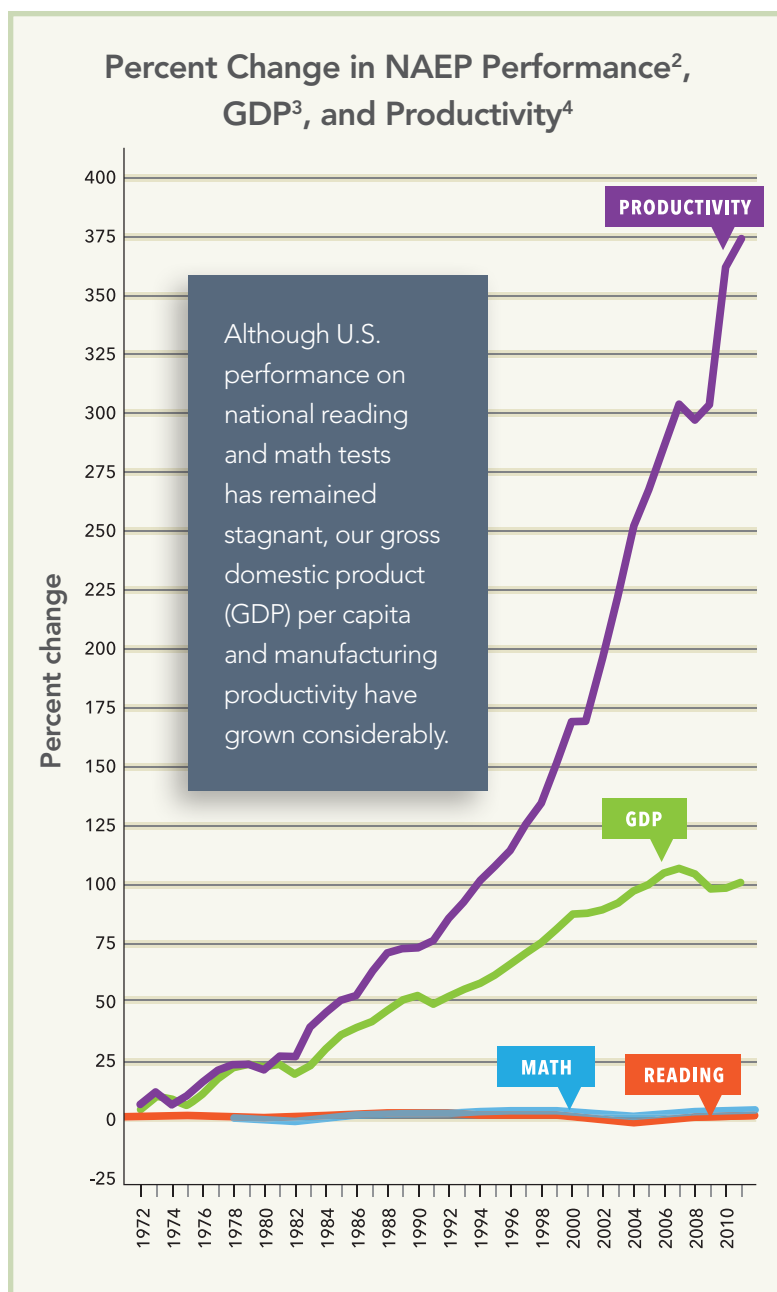
# Policy Points

## TEST SCORES ≠ ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Each time new national and international assessment results show that U.S. students are performing at mediocre levels, dozens of education pundits make dire claims about the nation's education system and economic competitiveness. In their view, the stagnant assessment scores foretell an impending economic decline and threaten the nation's global competitiveness. A closer look at assessment and economic data, however, show that this is simply not the case.

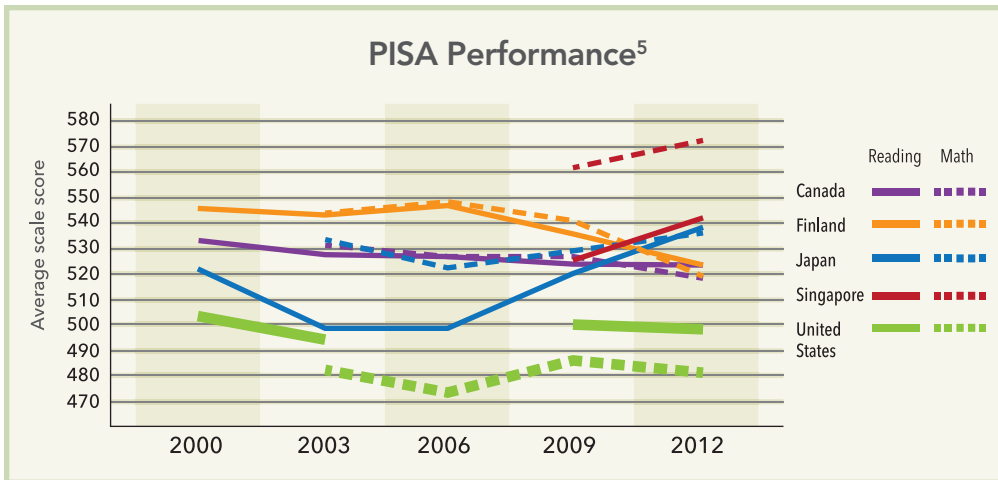
For example, the average scores of 17-year-old students taking the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) long-term trend reading and math tests have remained within a 10-point span since the tests were first administered in 1971 and 1978, respectively, yet the nation's productivity and gross domestic product (GDP) have steadily increased over the same period. Internationally, U.S. students rank below the top-scoring countries on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) in reading and math. But international comparisons of economic data indicate that the United States remains an economic leader.

The United States can learn from other countries' education systems, but making a direct connection between assessment results and economic strength is grossly misleading. As international scholar and ASCD author Yong Zhao points out, such tests assess cognitive skills but fail to fully capture the knowledge and traits that are crucial to creativity and entrepreneurship. "Confidence, resilience, grit, mind-set, personality traits, social skills, and motivation have been found to be at least as important as cognitive skills in the workplace," Zhao explains.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, an overreliance on international test rankings ignores the multitude of cultural, political, and societal factors that also influence economic performance.

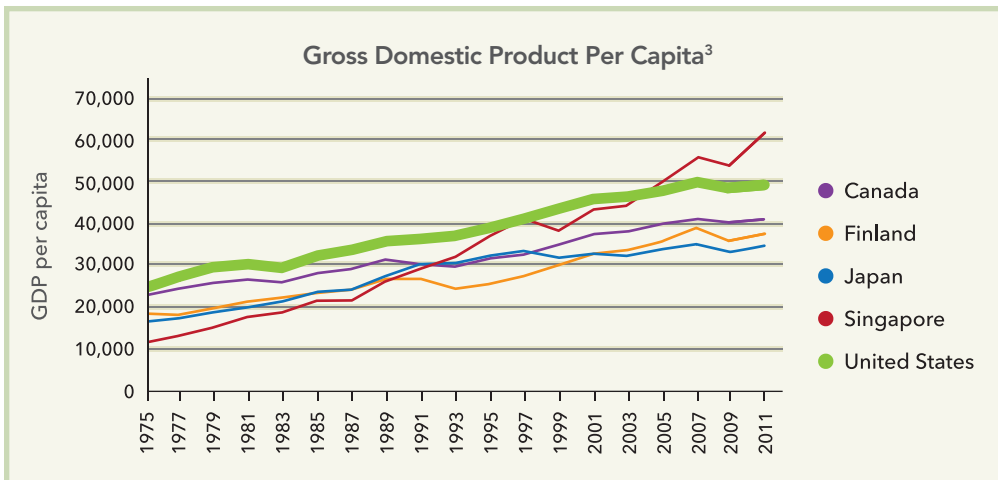


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These charts compare the U.S.'s PISA results and economic performance to four geographically diverse countries that are among the top 15 performing nations on the PISA in both reading and math. The United States, in contrast, ranks 24th in reading and 36th in math.



Although each country's average scale scores fluctuate slightly over time, U.S. scores consistently fall below these top-performing countries; the United States also ranks below the overall average of the 34 developed countries participating in the exam.



The U.S.'s lead in GDP over these top-performing PISA countries has increased, with the exception of Singapore.



Productivity data (which measures workforce efficiency) show that the United States has improved greatly over the past decade, establishing the country as a top performer.

## SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> Zhao, Yong. (2014, March 16). *How does PISA put the world at risk (part 2): Glorifying Educational Authoritarianism* [blog post]. Retrieved from <http://zhaolearning.com/2014/03/16/how-does-pisa-put-the-world-at-risk-part-2-glorifying-educational-authoritarianism/>

<sup>2</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *NAEP Data Explorer*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved June 10, 2014 from <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/ltddata/>

<sup>3</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013, April 29). *International Labor Comparisons, GDP per capita and per hour*. United States Department of Labor. Retrieved June 10, 2014 from <http://www.bls.gov/ilc/dashboards.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2013, April 29). *International Labor Comparisons, Productivity and unit labor costs*. United States Department of Labor. Retrieved June 10, 2014 from <http://www.bls.gov/ilc/dashboards.htm>

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *PISA Data Explorer*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved June 10, 2014 from <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/pisa/idepisa/>