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## HOW CAN AMERICANS CATCH UP?

Experts offer solutions to cultivate globally competitive students

BY NATASHA LINDSTROM, STAFF WRITER / DAILY PRESS

As the world runs on an increasingly global economy, today's American children may enter the future workforce and find themselves competing against high-skilled applicants from Beijing, New Delhi, Sydney and Tokyo.

But with American students ranking in the bottom third of the world's most developed countries in math, science and problem-solving on international assessments, U.S. schools have a hard road ahead to prepare graduates for success.

**The Daily Press** asked **Rick Piercy**, president of **Lewis Center for Educational Research in Apple Valley**, and **Bob Wise**, president of the Washington, D.C.-based **Alliance for Excellent Education** advocacy organization, about some solutions that could boost the global competitiveness of American students.

Here are some of their ideas:

- Equip disadvantaged students.

The United States has one of the greatest performance gaps between the most- and least-proficient students of all developed nations, largely due to poor-performing minority and low income students. Wise said you can't dismiss those results because no other top countries have similar demographics — Canada is among the top performers — or blame it on the American immigration problem — at least five countries that have more immigrants than the United States outscore American students.

"It used to be we can let those children slip away and there wasn't a great cost," Wise said, such as when decent paying, blue-collar jobs were plentiful. "Today we need every one of those children functioning if they're going to succeed and if our overall economy is going to succeed."

Wise said it's important to hold all students to high expectations, but also to ensure they're all equipped with the resources it takes to achieve them. That could mean extra instruction time, tutoring, literacy training and more for students who aren't getting such support at home.

- Lengthen the school day and school year.

A majority of local public schools run 6.5 hours a day for 175 or 180 days a year. That's compared to up to 12 hours a day for more than 220 days a year in some Asian countries. Piercy's ideal school year would be at least 8 hours a day for 210 days a year.

Wise said a longer school year isn't necessarily the answer for all students, but he favors more flexible school schedules based on each student's progress — not locking in strict time requirements or awarding credits based on how long a student occupied a seat in the classroom.

"Most other nations aren't as bound by what I call the tyranny of time," Wise said. "The better thing to do is recognize that time is a variable and not a constant and that every student should receive the time they need."

- Trim unnecessary bureaucratic spending.

“I have not seen another country that has the extent of school government, the levels of school government that we have in this country,” Wise said, with 15,000 school districts, 50 state boards of education and then varying degrees of regional control in every state. California has 58 county offices of education.

Piercy oversees the Academy for Academic Excellence in Apple Valley, and he said California spends some \$2,000 per Academy student on bureaucratic layers before any money funnels into the classroom. He would prefer that local school districts contract out to county and state offices for specific services, rather than the current top-down approach.

- Reform testing.

“I think we test our kids in the most inefficient way ever,” Piercy said. “The (California) STAR test is fatally flawed evaluative tool. It doesn’t hold students accountable for anything.”

Piercy calls for testing that’s more frequent and thorough, such as electronic programs that map student progress daily. Wise said multiple choice tests aren’t helpful for determining a child’s skills and learning levels and calls for all schools’ developing strong evaluation methods.

- Quickly intervene to turnaround failing schools.

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, it can take five or more years before serious steps are taken to turnaround failing schools.

Wise said the country needs to develop a quick intervention process based on models that have produced the best results in other countries. It’s also important to provide meaningful professional development to teachers — who are often the most important influence in a child’s education, he said.

Among a few promising advancements on the federal level: The competitive Race to the Top initiative has incentivized schools nationwide to undergo major changes, the new national Common Core Standards look to hold all students to higher levels, and the Obama administration will soon tackle reforming the No Child Left Behind Act, Wise said.



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Students in America  
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education experts  
offer some possible  
solutions.