



October 24, 2010

FALLING BEHIND

American students stagnate while international schools get smarter, better

BY NATASHA LINDSTROM, STAFF WRITER / DAILY PRESS

Note: This is the first of a twopart series. See Monday's Daily Press for part two.

In her home classroom in China, 16-year-old Zhao "Cindy" Yang attends class from 7:30 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Many nights she and her peers stay up until 2 or 3 a.m. studying, then wake up at 6:30 a.m. to get ready for school — even on Saturdays — to ensure they pass daily tests and defend their class rankings.

"If you get good grades, students like you, teachers like you," Yang said, "and if you get bad grades, they don't."

It's a starkly different routine than this year as she enrolls as a foreign exchange student at Summit Leadership Academy in Hesperia, where Yang's strong work ethic and advanced learning level serve as a glaring reminder that American students have tough international competition, Principal Phil Dotson said.

"We have a long way to go as a society if we're going to compete on a global level," Dotson said. "These students brought it home to us that we're really behind as a culture."

Parents, educators and policy makers nationwide are becoming increasingly concerned that American students are lagging behind their international peers academically — a trend that could stymie the future success of both individual students and the American economy.

International data tells a dismal story: the United States ranks 15th of 29 of the world's most developed countries in reading, 21st of 30 countries in science and 25th of 30 countries in math, based on Programme for International Student Assessment results released in 2004 and 2007, the most recent data available. Students from countries such as Finland, Canada, South Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand lead the pack.

The average scores of 15-year-old American students were below international averages in all three of those categories. They're also behind in problem solving — an area many Americans pride themselves in — at No. 24 of 29 countries.

"I don't think it's a case of the United States is educating worse; it's just a lot of other nations are catching up and they're working stronger and harder," Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education advocacy group and former West Virginia governor, said by phone Friday. "Other nations are very quick to adapt and look at what are the successful practices and how do you put them into overall policy."

Wise noted that some 50 years ago, other nations were looking to the United States for the best education practices to model and copy, and they've continued to advance while the United States has stagnated for the past three decades.

"We were too slow," he said. "We were relatively fat and happy for a while and not aware of what was happening around us in the world."

Despite the poor international rankings, much of the country and students don't seem worried about what Wise and others now refer to as a national educational crisis.

"They may be right at the bottom as far as all the academics, but they have the best self esteem of anywhere in the world," Rick Piercy, president of the Lewis Center for Educational Research in Apple Valley, said. "Our kids better understand and our parents better understand that if they don't catch up and get ahead again, we'll be a Third World nation and we'll be working for China."

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development estimates that if the United States' raises its PISA scores by 25 points over the next 20 years — a feat Poland achieved in less than six — the United States' Gross Domestic Product would grow by some \$40.6 trillion over the lifetimes of the generation born in 2010.

To get there, schools need to constantly update curriculum and standards based on data-proven strategies, and policy makers must quickly turn around low-performing schools, Wise said. Throwing more money at the problem isn't necessarily the answer — with several high performing countries spending less per student than the United States — but reallocating funds in the most efficient ways is crucial.

Locally, several schools have ramped up science and math programs, extra support for struggling students and project-based learning to make academics more relevant.

The Academy for Academic Excellence in Apple Valley has students producing groundbreaking research on the endangered Mojave tui chub fish with a pond at its site, Riverside Preparatory in Oro Grande has students dissecting and mummifying cats and building ziggurat models, and Columbia International Science, Math and Technology Magnet School in Adelanto is offering a robotics course and partnering with schools in Spain on NASA lessons.

“We use things like science textbooks to teach language arts standards,” Jesse Najera, principal of the Adelanto School Academy of Math and Science, said.

Yang and fellow exchange student Lee Chihyeon, 16, of South Korea, point out that they favor many aspects of their American school — such as being able to openly ask questions during class and having social time on weekends.

In a classroom of 77 students in China, “we sit and no talking, just writing, writing and listen, listen,” Yang said. “You don't have time to play.”

Chihyeon said math here is “easy,” but he's thankful his Hesperia teachers don't beat him with a tree branch when he forgets about his homework.

“In USA — very good teacher, kind,” he said.

U.S. schools should hang onto practices that are working, but constantly seek to improve, Piercy said. Above all, instilling in parents and students an urgency to excel academically is paramount.

“I think our children have grown up in such prosperity that they don't have a work ethic when it comes to the things that they don't necessarily enjoy doing, and a lot of times that's studying,” Piercy said. “The one thing other countries have is this hunger to gain knowledge so that they can get out of poverty and move to the top. They would love to take our place.”



JAMES QUIGG, DAILY PRESS

EXCHANGE: Zhao ‘Cindy’ Yang, of China sits in history class at Summit Leadership Academy in Hesperia. Yang is one of two foreign exchange students at the school.



JAMES QUIGG, DAILY PRESS

LEARNING GAP: Lee Chihyeon, center, an exchange student from South Korea attending Summit Leadership Academy makes his way from class to lunch with several classmates including Zhao 'Cindy' Yang, far right, an exchange student from China. The two students are learning firsthand the gap in education and work ethic between their home countries and the United States.