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## 10th Period: Stanford Study: U.S. Has Smallest Achievement Gap of Any Similar Country

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For ages, it seems, this country has been obsessed with closing achievement gaps between demographic groups, whether by race, ethnicity or poverty. And we've seen some significant improvements in gaps, but they still exist, to the chagrin of many, including me.

However, a new study by Stanford of the United States' international testing performance (the overvaluation of which is an issue for another day) indicates that perhaps this achievement gap obsession is actually paying off.

The study found that the achievement here is smaller than any similar country.

Here are some of the findings:

- "There is an achievement gap between more and less disadvantaged students in every country; surprisingly, that gap is smaller in the United States than in similar post-industrial countries, and not much larger than in the very highest scoring countries.
- Achievement of U.S. disadvantaged students has been rising rapidly over time, while achievement of disadvantaged students in countries to which the United States is frequently unfavorably compared – Canada, Finland and Korea, for example – has been falling rapidly.
- But the highest social class students in United States do worse than their peers in other nations, and this gap widened from 2000 to 2009 on the PISA.
- U.S. PISA scores are depressed partly because of a sampling flaw resulting in a disproportionate number of students from high-poverty schools among the test-takers. About 40 percent of the PISA sample in the United States was drawn from schools where half or more of the students are eligible for the free lunch program, though only 32 percent of students nationwide attend such schools."

This result points out something pretty significant: all the efforts, including our more controversial shift to more test taking accountability over the last 30 years has worked to some

extent for our nation's neediest youth (yet, interestingly, it hasn't worked as well for our nation's highest performers).

So on this, our education reform efforts have had success. Now the bigger question is, does it matter? Time will likely tell the whole story. And was it worth it? Time, too, will tell that story. Is it worth giving 8 year olds test anxiety? Are the better results indicative of a better, more vibrant economy? Is the achievement gap improvement going to improve the lives of traditionally disadvantaged youth? Last I checked, the African-American unemployment rate of 16-24 year olds remained double that of their white countrymen, despite the improved achievement gap. And this brings me to my main point -- one that is espoused by [Yong Zhao](#) and others -- do these tests have any bearing on a country's health or future success? We've never scored well on international tests, yet we've been the world's dominant political and economic power for the better part of 8 decades. We have the world's best overall quality of life and most stable democracy. And this is with our kids scoring at or near the bottom of international tests.

Maybe we should fixate less on our achievement gaps on these tests that seem to have very little predictive impact on a country's future well being and figure out how to close our most troubling gap -- the employment gap. Education can play a roll. But if this data indicates anything, it's that closing education gaps can't fix our employment issues all by themselves. That requires more work.

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**BLOGGER**

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