Despite decades of education reform and public debate, a singular question still remains up for debate: what is the goal of a public school education? Some believe schools exist to equip students for the workforce, teaching practical skills that serve well in any career. Others say the institution exists to create engaged citizens, ready to participate in public life. More insist that its role is to prepare students academically, creating long-lasting skills in how to learn and think. Yet from all these different interpretations a common theme emerges: growth. Growth in civic responsibilities, professional preparedness, and physical/mental development for all students, encouraging everyone towards excellence. According to our legislation, however, public schools should aim for something else entirely: mediocrity. Due to its preoccupation with proficiency - the minimum standards for meeting passing grades and test scores - the American education system is failing to encourage academic excellence, creating dire consequences for national academic performance and student engagement.

The consequences I am referring to lies with the United State's lagging academic achievement compared with other countries. As published by the Pew Research Center, in the 2015 Program for International Student Assessment the U.S. scored significantly lower in science, mathematics, and reading as compared to other developed nations (Fig 1). This divide was especially prevalent in the area of mathematics where America's score of 470 was 20 points lower than the world average of 490. Despite being one of the most advanced nations on Earth, our reading scores are lower than that of Lithuania, Vietnam, Estonia, Hungary, and more. And as of 2024, the U.S. still lags behind its peers.

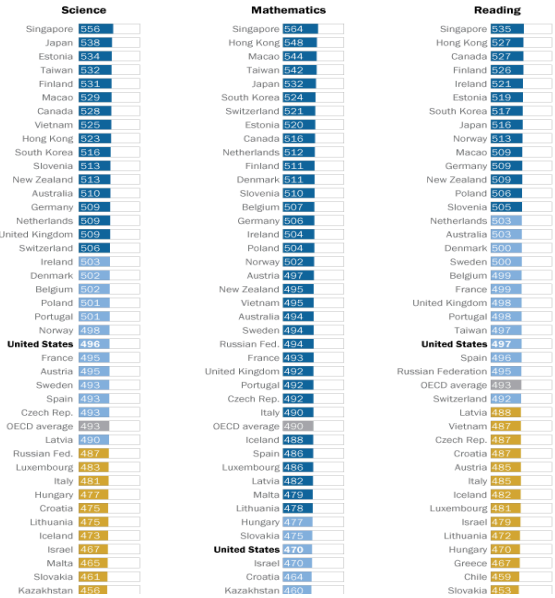

Fig 1

Some may argue that poverty has a role to play in this as well, and this is definitely a plausible explanation. Poverty is clearly related to poor academic performance, and reducing the former would absolutely alleviate the latter. But in a report by Education Next, the claim that poverty is the major factor behind America's lackluster academic achievement was put into serious question. To determine this, they studied whether U.S. students from low-income families underperformed compared to international peers of similar economic status. They found that there was no evidence that "disadvantaged students in the United States are underperforming other countries' disadvantaged students". In fact, the study found that "it is the 'advantaged' U.S. students (those whose parents have a high level of education) who are falling short in international comparisons." So with socioeconomic factors accounted for, it is at last time to look at policy.

American education legislation truly began with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965, a sweeping legislation passed by President Lyndon B Johnson authorizing the government to equalize educational opportunities through federal dollars. The most important part of the bill is located in the first provision of the law. Named "Title I", it determines the types, amounts, and methods of funding given to public schools with disadvantaged students. The act provides said funding for a duration of five years, at which point it must be reauthorized. It's important to remember, however, that this money does not always come without strings attached. With every reauthorization, the federal government can choose to add requirements and mandates that must be complied with in order to receive grants. As the federal role in education increases with every iteration, such requirements inevitably appear. Should a state choose not to obey, they risk losing valuable Title I funding.

In January of 2002, after years of fearing that the American education system was no longer competitive, President George W. Bush signed into law the latest reauthorization of the ESEA – also known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The bill aimed to hold schools accountable for academic performance, and ensure that historically underperforming groups of students are not "left behind". NCLB requires that all students be brought to the "proficient level" on state tests by the 2013-2014 school year, allowing each state to determine how to test this and how to achieve it. Most importantly, NCLB tied these new mandates with Title I money, ensuring that virtually every public school will pursue increased proficiency.

For over ten years, that's exactly what they did. And for ten years, the flaws of NCLB were put on full display. The criticisms were many: its inability to enforce its own laws, ineffective policies for helping low-performing schools, chronic underfunding, and fears about too much federal control in education. The latter concern was one of the biggest critiques of NCLB, as states and school districts clamored for greater freedom.

In contrast to general public opinion, federal overreach shouldn't be considered to be the bill's biggest mistake. That dubious honor should instead go to its treatment of Title I money, and how it tied public school funding solely to a school's proficiency rate. A letter written to the U.S. Department of Education and signed by dozens of researchers, educators, and business professionals, expresses this opinion through succinct descriptions of the consequences of "reporting performance in terms of the percentage above proficient." One such consequence is that schools are incentivized to only commit their focus on the students around the proficiency cutoff point. In doing so, resources are diverted from "students who are at lower or higher points in the achievement distribution, some of whom may need as much or more support than students just around the proficiency cut score (Schwartz, Hamilton, Stecher, & Steele, 2011)." Struggling students are left wallowing behind their peers, the cost of supporting them too great for schools looking to maximize proficiency rates. High-flying students, meanwhile, are left neglected by educational institutions who are given no financial reason to invest further in them.

Teachers too are affected by such policies. Pressured by the school to increase proficiency percentages, they are encouraged to "focus on bringing students to a minimum level of proficiency rather than continuing to advance student learning to higher levels of performance beyond proficiency." Educators who wish to nurture their students beyond what is necessary must do so without the incentive of pay. Though many do regardless, upholding student passion despite financial headwinds, the mere presence of legislation which brings teachers to such a position warrants significant concern. But students and teachers are not the only victims; schools themselves can suffer under proficiency mandates. The reason for this is rooted in America's unique method of funding public schools. Money is collected from the property taxes of the surrounding area, tying the wealth (and quality) of the school to the socioeconomic status of the location it is in. Percent proficiency measurements do not help with this predicament. It "penalizes schools that serve larger proportions of low-achieving students (Kober & Riddle, 2012) as schools are not given credit for improvements in performance other than the move to proficiency from not-proficient."

When successes are ignored and failures penalized, mediocre performance and academic stagnation are all but guaranteed. Fortunately there was hope. Support for NCLB had waned and a new bill was on the horizon. Known as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), it sought to update and improve upon No Child Left Behind, creating better education standards. Lawmakers finally had the chance to reform proficiency percentage rules and ditch the system's obsession with bare minimum performance.

Unfortunately, this was not successful. The letter mentioned previously, the one written to the Department of Education, was not made in response to NCLB. Written in 2016, it instead addressed the Every Student Succeeds Act and argued "that the Department of Education should not mandate the use of proficiency rates as a metric of school performance under ESSA."

Such a change has not, unfortunately, been made. The ESSA focused primarily on rolling back federal influence granted by NCLB, and gives states more freedom to determine their education guidelines. Despite positive reforms such as encouragement to get rid of unnecessary testing, more holistic accountability metrics, and a lack of self-defeating penalties for federal schools, the funding by proficiency model has not been struck down. Its problems still remain, only now in more local hands.

But what if states could raise their standards, and fight mediocrity by pushing students towards higher achievement? Enough agreed with this rationale, that a more rigorous curriculum would be enough, to give birth to the Common Core standards. Common Core operated on the principle"that creating one set of challenging academic expectations for all students would improve achievement and college readiness." Eschewing crude numeric grades in favor of broad outlines of learning expectations (allowing educators and districts more flexibility in teaching), Common Core standards were initially adopted almost nationwide in 2009.

Unfortunately, this too was not successful. In 2019 the Center on Standards, Alignment, Instruction, and Learning (C-SAIL) conducted a study analyzing the effect Common Core had on student performance. Using scores from the National Assessment on Educational Progress (NAEP) from 2010 and 2017, researchers found no statistically significant improvements in student performance. Combined with intense backlash and controversy from educators and states-rights activists alike, it's safe to say that Common Core did not fix the problem it set out to solve.

Perhaps this is because the policy didn't remove the core of the problem: proficiency mandates. Raising standards and making them more flexible does not remove the fact that said standards are often the largest, if not only, metric by which schools receive funding. As long as there remains a dominant financial incentive to pursue the largest rates of baseline passing as possible, American education will remain unable to be anything but mediocre on the world stage.

Education is not about standards of proficiency. Education is learning, and learning is growth. To stop "growing" once an arbitrary threshold gets met is to forget the point of schooling in the first place. Our legislation needs to encourage this mentality by diversifying Title I spending and providing financial incentives for schools whose students go beyond the passing mark. Until then, playing around with standards will do no good. We need to break our obsession with proficiency, and remember what it means to learn.

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