The United States of America’s Education System Versus Japan, South Korea, and Finland’s Education Systems

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**Introduction**

The PISA results from 2009 indicate that the United States of America is ranked 31st out of 65 countries around the world in mathematics (OECD 7). Through this worldwide test we have found out that the United States of America is ranked six countries below the world average for the mathematics portion of the PISA test (OECD 7). The United States of America is falling behind foreign countries academically because of poor teacher quality, curriculum, and standardized testing. In the United States of America instead of requiring all fifty states to have a specific certification policy, twelve states have alternative option routes to become certified and a teacher (Darling-Hammond 45). Standardized testing and the curriculum format in the United States of America is causing students to suffer more than students in other countries who use performance testing. By comparing the United States of America to nations with highly successful school systems, we will demonstrate the benefit of aligning United States of America’s education policies related to testing and teacher preparation with similar policies at work in other countries, such as South Korea, Japan, and Finland.

**Methodology**

For our comparative analysis we are comparing the United States of America's educational system to those of South Korea, Japan, and Finland. We will focus on teacher quality, curriculum, and standardized testing while comparing these diverse educational systems. We chose these countries because their systems contrast the most compared to the United States of America, and because they are well-recognized educational systems that have made great educational gains in the last several years. We chose South Korea for teacher quality, curriculum, and standardized testing because they are ranked towards the top on worldwide assessments, thanks in large part to their new educational system that they have revised many times in recent years. We chose Japan to compare teacher quality because they have recently scored high on the PISA assessment and made reforms to their teacher certification policies and requirements. We chose Finland to compare curriculum and standardized testing because they have completely gotten rid of standardized testing and have moved from the bottom of the worldwide standings to the top in the last 40 years. By doing a comparative analysis we are able to observe how the United States of America could make reforms to rise to the top again.

**Comparative Analysis of Teacher Quality**

Studying the eleven highest educational systems in the world, Akiba and LeTendre (2009) found that three key characteristics of success included getting the right people to become teachers, developing them into effective instructors, and insuring that the system is able to deliver the best possible instruction for every child (Akiba 12). This study shows the importance of high quality teaching. It reminds us that teacher quality is one of the main reasons why the United States of America is falling behind in education.

**United States of America**

The United States of America’s only federally based act that mentions the standards for teaching quality is the No Child Left Behind Act. This act states that a teacher must be highly qualified in order to teach in the United States of America education system. To become highly qualified, a teacher must have a bachelor’s degree and demonstrate competence in subject knowledge and teaching (Akiba 29). These are ideal expectations for a highly qualified teacher in the United States of America; however, since these qualifications do not go into more detail, the states have created their own list of qualifications and rules for individuals wanting to become a certified teacher. Some states do not even include the qualifications listed in the No Child Left Behind Act created by Congress in their own certification policies.

The differences amongst state policies for teacher qualifications creates what Darling-Hammond (2010) would call a “Swiss cheese” effect, where there are pockets (or holes) where the low expectations for teacher qualifications can result in relatively lower teacher quality. This matters because it means some children will inevitably get a less-qualified teacher than others. For example, according to Akiba, the most significant predictor of mathematical achievement across forty-six nations is teacher certification: a major in mathematics, a major in mathematics education, and three years of teaching experience. One study in North Carolina showed that students’ gains were higher if they were taught by a teacher who was certified in the field that they were teaching, received high scores on their licensing exam, graduated from a competitive college, had at least two years of teaching experience, and had a national board certification. Furthermore when a teacher with these traits was compared to a teacher without these qualities, the effects were greater than race and parent education combined (Akiba 43).

Not only did the No Child Left Behind Act attempt to ensure that all students have access to highly qualified teachers, it also encouraged states to expand alternative certification programs and regulations, put in place by the United States of America’s Department of Education, that allowed candidates that have not yet completed such a program to be counted as highly qualified. This made it possible for parents of low-income, minority students taught by such teachers in California to sue the United States of America’s Department of Education. Parents claimed that the rule sanctioned inadequate teaching from their children and hid the fact that they were being underserved (Darling-Hammond 44). No Child Left Behind clearly stated that all children would have access to qualified teachers but also made alternative routes for those wanting to become teachers. This was a contradiction in itself, No Child Left Behind made it easy for anyone to become a teacher in the United States of America, but with these alternative routes came less qualified teachers, therefore allowing parents to sue the Department of Education on the false claims made by this act. The alternative programs created a pathway for mid-career entrants that have already earned a bachelors degree in another area other than education to become a teacher after one year under the supervision of an expert teacher. Other alternative certification programs caused high turnover rates and offered only a few weeks of training before the teacher taught the class on their own. The efforts to address shortages in underprivileged schools by reducing training and not increasing incentives actually caused staffing problems and undermined efforts to raise teacher quality, and ultimately, student achievement (Darling-Hammond 45-49).

In America there are twelve states that allow elementary teachers to enter alternative certification programs without completing the training. High-course programs cover all the same courses as traditional programs, but allow candidates to start teaching before they have completed the courses and sometimes without student teaching. Low-course programs skip student training and reduce the overall amount of training prospective teachers are exposed to by as much as two thirds. This limits the training teachers get in child development, classroom management, how to teach the subjects, and how to teach special education students or those learning English for the first time. These teachers usually didn’t practice under a veteran teacher and have little in-service training (Darling-Hammond 45-49).

Texas had the highest number of under qualified teachers because they had lowered the requirements a decade earlier and continued to lower them for the alternative routes (Darling-Hammond 45). According to Texas Teachers of Tomorrow (2013), an individual could become a certified teacher in just twelve weeks to a year with a bachelor’s degree in any major in Texas. An advisor is assigned to work with the aspiring teacher and helps them decide which subject will best match their skills. The advisors helps make a strategy plan that makes them more marketable and creates the best chances for employment. The training is either completely online or blended with both face-to-face and online courses. After the individual is hired through this program they teach for one year on a probationary certification and once a year is completed, become fully certified. The other option is to take the clinical teaching route where they are placed in a classroom to observe and eventually teach a structured program; by the end of the twelve weeks the individual becomes fully certified (Texas Teachers of Tomorrow[[1]](#footnote-1)).

When reading and math test scores of students taught by a traditionally certified teacher were compared to an alternatively certified teacher, a study found that the score of students taught by an alternatively certified teacher declined by almost two normal curve equivalent points, while the scores of students taught by the traditionally certified teacher decreased by a much smaller number. Although alternative certification has its downfalls, traditional certification certainly isn’t perfect either. In North Carolina, a study found that the largest negative factors for low test scores were inexperienced teachers and/or alternatively certified teachers. In addition, three large, well-controlled studies using longitudinal individual-level student data from New York City and Houston, Texas found that teachers who enter the field without full preparation were significantly less effective than fully prepared teachers, especially in reading (Darling-Hammond 47). Some studies confirm that negative effects of an unsuitable teacher continue into students’ future academic career by lowering students’ academic achievement and two or three years of having an under qualified teacher can cause a severe deficit; for example, a student taught by ineffective teachers three years in a row may achieve levels that are fifty percentile points lower than students who had a different highly qualified teacher each year for three years (Darling-Hammond 48). As the United States of America begins to use alternative certification more, Japan has worked on requiring a more thorough certification process to be completed by their teachers and it has paid off.

**Japan**

Akiba (2009) points out “During the past decade in Japan, teacher quality has gathered both media and policy attention as key to the improvement of student achievement…” (32). The big step Japan has taken towards ensuring that they will have high quality teachers was the Teacher Certification Renewal System that was established in 2007. This system was implemented in Japan in 2009 and is one of the main reasons that Japan’s education system has climbed to the top of the educational charts. This system states that all teachers must renew their certifications every 10 years, and with this, during the two years prior to the recertification all teachers must participate in 30 hours of “professional development activities, determined by the Ministry of Education” (Akiba 33). If teachers do not complete this requirement prior to their ten-year mark they lose their certificate for teaching (Akiba 33).

Along with this new law, the Education Civil Servant Law is implemented and requires the first-year teacher and the tenth-year teacher to complete three hundred hours for professional development and two hundred of those hours must be spent upon “out-of-school professional development offered by the Professional Development Centers” (Akiba 33). Along with these criteria, in order to increase the quality of the lesson plans that teachers create for their students, teachers participate in Lesson Study once a month. Lesson Study is when teachers plan, create, observe, and discuss lesson plans together; doing this gives other teachers the chance to improve the quality and creativity of their lesson plans. The Teacher Professional Graduate School System was also created to improve the quality of teaching. This system was created in 2006 and in 2008, 19 Teacher Professional Graduate Schools were already established among four private universities and fifteen national universities across Japan. In these graduate schools teachers are trained with strong teaching skills and are also trained to be leaders within the educational system (Akiba 32-33).

According to Akiba (2009), the point of the Teacher Certification Renewal System, the Education Civil Servant Law, and the Teacher Professional Graduate School System is to ensure that all teachers are looked upon as competent, respected, and knowledgeable and raises awareness in society as well that the teachers can be held accountable for what they are teaching. However, if requiring all these hours of requirements and high standards for teacher quality there also must be a change in the teachers’ working environment so that teachers have time to ensure they are meeting the standards of qualification that is expected of them (Akiba 33).

One part of these working conditions that needs to be managed so teachers have the time to become qualified is the assigned teaching time. Akiba (2009) found that in eleven highest achieving countries, the combined average time that teachers are assigned to teach is a total of 16.2 hours in one week. Comparing this specifically to Japan who had a total of 14.5 hours of just teaching classes per week. Japan’s idea in creating a lower number of teaching hours goes back to giving the teachers time to create high quality lesson plans. Akiba (2009) states that Japan’s teachers make sure to spend more time creating lesson plans than grading while in America it is vice versa. Studies that Japanese teaching practices have been based upon show, “extensive planning with improved lesson quality and instructional quality” (Akiba 74). While grading and assessing a student's knowledge is important, it is more important to ensure that the student is learning the proper knowledge; in order to do this, teachers must have time to create a proper lesson plan (Akiba 74).

Another area that Japan strives in when it comes to teacher quality is the salary that the teachers receive. Akiba (2009) states that Japan shows an increase of pay as the teachers continue to teach and that after fifteen years of teaching, there is a $10,000 dollar gap between the United States of America and Japan, using American money concerning teacher salary with Japanese pay being on the higher of the two ends. South Korea has had a similar history of improvement.

**South Korea**

South Korea has been working on improving their teaching force since the end of the Korean War. To improve the teaching force, South Korea had to expand the teaching force along with raising standards to become a teacher through preparation and certification (Darling-Hammond 175). Currently, the teachers in South Korea are highly qualified. To attain certification, 100% of the applicants had completed teacher education and a collection of performance and written tests. Applicants for elementary and secondary education certification went through a four-year undergraduate program in teacher education. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), the teacher education program in South Korea is geared toward focusing on subject matter, general and content-specific teaching methods, educational technology usage, curriculum and assessment study, and how to teach children in special education. In order for individuals studying to become a teacher to get a job, they must graduate with their teaching degree and pass a certification exam. The certification exam focuses on certain parts of what graduates learned through their undergraduate years; such as general teaching, content-specific teaching, and subject-matter content. The certification exam has two parts. One section consists of written parts. The other section focuses on the interview and performance in a classroom of the applicant (Darling-Hammond 179). Once the applicants have completed and passed all of the requirements to gain certification, they receive a lifetime certificate.

There is strong competition for teaching positions, especially within the cities (Darling-Hammond 180). One of the reasons for this job competition is because of how South Korea looks at its teachers and how their teachers are treated. Teachers are paid very well and are greatly respected in South Korea. They are ranked next to priests for being the most trusted members of society and their pay is below the amount doctors are paid, but above engineers’ pay (Darling-Hammond 179). South Korea has configured teaching salaries to be on a nationwide unitary scale. Each teacher’s salary is calculated by seniority, academic credentials, and teaching position. In South Korea, once a teacher is hired, they are automatically tenured until they retire. One reason as to why teaching quality is so complete in South Korea is the working conditions the teachers have. Around 35% of teachers’ entire working time is spent actually teaching their students. For 65% of the time, teachers work on grading their students’ work, they complete administrative work, teachers meet with students and parents, plan their classes in collaboration with other teachers, and part of the extra time is spent focusing on professional learning. Since the majority of the time teachers are not teaching, they rotate to different classrooms during the day when they teach and work in a shared office during their work time (Darling-Hammond 180).

Once teachers are hired and are in their first year of teaching, they begin a six-month induction program that provides supervision and guidance from veteran teachers. South Korean teachers are able to enroll in development courses during the school year and the education ministry pays the courses’ costs. As teachers reach the three-year mark in teaching, they can enroll in a 180-hour professional development program. Through this program teachers are able to receive an advanced certificate that includes an increase in pay and are eligible for promotion to vice principal and principal positions. Once South Korean teachers hit the fourth year of teaching, they have a requirement to complete: they must take ninety hours of professional development courses and they need to do this every three years after. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), there are more and more professional learning opportunities available online as well as in a school setting within South Korea. An example of online learning is Edunet. Edunet is an online teaching-learning center created in South Korea (Darling-Hammond 180). The South Korean promotional system in education is based on the length of a teacher’s service, their performance, and their research achievements. South Korean teachers who decide to teach in a low-income area earn bonus points towards promotion (Darling-Hammond 181).

South Korea and Japan have been working constantly on improving their policies on teacher certification, while the United States of America by comparison seems to be looking for shortcuts in the certification process. One way the United States of America has cut corners has been by creating the alternative teaching certification process. Through various studies, teaching quality has become apparent to be one of the most important factors for student achievement. As the United States of America’s achievement scores have gone down, Japan and South Korea has made improvements in their scores. The United States of America needs to look at Japan and South Korea’s teacher certification policies and implement some of them into a new teacher certification policy for new teachers to complete.

**Comparative Analysis of Standardized Testing and Curriculum**

According to Popham[[2]](#footnote-2) (2005), “For the last four decades, students' scores on standardized tests have increasingly been regarded as the most meaningful evidence for evaluating U.S. schools.” However, Popham (2005) suggests that using these scores as such importance in the school have negative outcomes. In hopes for high test scores teachers are drilling information that is similar to what is on the tests into the students’ heads, bypassing important information that is not on the test, or even adopting unethical grading in order to achieve the high scores that are expected of them (Popham). This is why the case will be made that the elimination of standardized tests within the educational system is beneficial.

**United States of America**

Since the passage of No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, most states have scaled back performance components and started using multiple-choice test frameworks to meet the requirements established by the United States of America’s Department of Education, which refuse to approve performance-based assessments. When used in high-stakes contexts, narrow tests, such as multiple-choice, exert a strong emphasis on reducing the curriculum to only look at proficiency scale ratings and encourage less focus on complex reasoning. Using this kind of assessment causes the teachers to focus more of their time on instruction and exercises that look similar to the test using worksheets filled with multiple-choice questions. This process causes the creative writing and computer use to be minimal throughout the school year. In the technology era that we live in, computers are an important aspect of everyday life. The reduced use of computers in schools can be harmful for a student's future in most career fields today. Standardized testing has taken over the school systems in the United States of America and has caused the schools’ own curricula to be overshadowed or quite narrowed. Nobody talks about the success of a school based on the implementation of its own curriculum. Schools lack the internal information systems needed for effective instructional management (Elford 26).

Not only is there less attention paid to the use of technology, but also 85% of teachers said that their school gives less attention to the subjects that are not covered on the test. A study done by the Center of Education found that almost half of all elementary schools reduced allotted time for science, social studies, art, music, and physical education because of the strong emphasis put upon the reading and math tests put in place by the No Child Left Behind Act (Darling-Hammond 71). “Teaching to the test” has dramatically changed the kind of instruction that is offered in American schools. Today teachers set aside their regular curriculum for days, weeks, and even months to devote their time to covering information found in these tests in hopes of raising their students’ test scores (Kohn 19). “The cram curriculum” has become the new technique used in and out of most schools to help prepare students for an upcoming test. A 1995-1996 survey showed that more than 30 percent of SAT test-takers engaged in some sort of test preparation activity. This curriculum can invade life outside of school by organizations that promise improvements on students’ test scores, as well as in the school by overriding the established curriculum. This type of curriculum focuses on the knowledge and skills needed for the test and disregards other valuable aspects found in the subject matter. The teaching agenda is dictated by the schedule of testing without regard of the curriculum, concentrating on materials only in the format that it is covered on the test. There is a larger emphasis put upon test-wiseness instead of knowledge of the material tested (Elford 29-30).

In the United States of America, schools that do not perform well on the standardized tests are punished. A labeling policy was designed to grade schools on how well they did on the standardized tests. However, this policy tends to hurt the already struggling schools. Teachers that are well qualified, have many options, and have no reason to take a job at, or stay in a school with little resources where they are sanctioned, threatened with getting fired, and ridiculed based on test scores. The teacher turnover rate increased greatly in the 1990’s, leaving low-ranked schools with no choice but to hire inexperienced underqualified teachers (Darling-Hammond 78). As mentioned before we now know that underqualified teachers do harm to students’ scholastic achievement, therefore the schools that are rated D or F have a harder time getting their schools’ test scores to rise due to the lack of qualified teachers. As stated in “Mismatch: Historical Perspectives on Schools and Students Who Don’t Fit Them”, the use of high-stakes testing or state standards helps reinforce social, racial, and ethnic inequalities (Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack 542). The state standards testing does not help students who are having difficulty in school; once a student falls behind, it becomes very hard for them to catch up. However, in countries, like Finland, that did away with standardized testing there has been a huge gain in worldwide educational assessment scores. They have been able to focus more on a well-rounded curriculum instead of “teaching to the test” like America has focused on since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act.

**Finland**

While America has been falling behind in PISA rankings, Finland has been moving towards the top. In fact, Finland has been at the top of education for quite some time now. According to OECD (2010), for the past decade Finland has been at the top of secondary education. The OECD (2010) also notes that no other country has been able to stay at the top of the PISA results consistently for as long as Finland has. Tung[[3]](#footnote-3) (2012) states that Finland has a 93% graduation rate from high school, a 17.5% difference from the United States of America. However, Finland has not always been on top, according to Tung (2012), it was formally thought of as one of the lowest scoring countries in Europe for education. They slowly have been making progress within the last 40 years. It was no short-term change but instead one that came through multiple changes and work in progresses (Tung). There are many standards and policies that are a part of educational system that vary from other countries educational system and many of these policies could be contributed to Finland’s success. One of the most recent variations in Finland is the use of very few standardized tests. In fact, it does not implement any standardized tests until the age of 16 and from then on, the quantity of standardized tests is very few (Tung).

Finland has recently almost fully eliminated standardized tests and instead is using sample-based tests (Tung). The reason for the elimination of standardized testing is to decrease the performance by competition theory. They use the sample-based tests not as means for comparing schools or students for competition, but instead to support learning and to give teachers information on how well the students are learning (Darling-Hammond 167). Many countries, such as the United States of America, motivate children, teachers, and schools to do well by comparing them to others and using competition. Finland tried to eliminate this by only handing out low-stakes tests. According to Sahlberg (2011), who wrote the book *Finnish Lesson* based upon Finland’s success, “One of the key messages of this book is that unlike many other contemporary systems of education, the Finnish system has not been infected by market-like competition and high-stake testing policies” (39). Darling-Hammond (2010) also found that Finland’s teachers are given broad guidelines about how to incorporate the curriculum into their classrooms. The national curriculum also gives recommended assessment ideas for the teachers (167). With these guidelines and recommendations the teachers are then able to create their own assessments and curriculum specific to their class. This allows for more creative teaching and less stressful learning (Darling-Hammond 167).

Sahlberg (2011) talks about the types of testing Finland does use by stating that, while Finland does not rely on standardized test accountability, it does rely on a three part assessment system. The first part of this assessment system is teacher-based assessments inside the classroom. Second, semi-annual comprehensive assessments of what the children have learned, based upon the teacher’s judgment. Third, a sample-based test nationally comparing students’ progress in math, reading, science and other subjects is given every three to four years (Sahlberg).

Darling-Hammond (2010) also states that the assessments that are given to the students throughout the middle of the school year are done so to give the students a chance to self-assess, see the progress that they have made, and to make goals towards the progress that they still need to make. Finland considers open-based questions more productive than standardized questions upon a test. Any of the tests that are given typically consist of open-based questions; many teachers use open-based questions in the classroom to engage their students’ attention and to obtain deeper thinking (169).

From these open-based assessments, students can evaluate their assessment scores and collaborate with the teacher to determine their own personal weekly goals to work on at their own pace. Darling-Hammond (2010) stresses in her book that teacher feedback is critical for the improvement of the Finnish students (170). She states that “the curricula are very much focused on critical thinking and problem solving, project-based learning, and learning to learn…There is a lot of collaboration in the classroom.” (170). Darling-Hammond (2010) quotes Sahlberg in her book, “A typical feature of teaching and learning in Finland is encouraging teachers and students to try new ideas and methods, learn about and through innovations, and cultivate creativity in schools…” (170). They implement these ideas and teaching strategies by having workshops, small group activities and independent activities going on all at the same time. Students rotate around these activities at their own pace and are also able to collaborate with the teacher whenever they need assistance.

These kinds of teaching implementations allow the students to actively learn on their own and at their own speed. Instead of using generalized standardized tests, Finnish curriculum empowers students to, “frame, tackle and solve problems; evaluate and improve their own work; and guide their learning process in productive ways” (Darling-Hammond 170). Darling-Hammond (2010) puts it succinctly by stating that the success of the elimination of standardized testing relies on what the students, teachers and schools are being asked to do (170).

**South Korea**

Similar to Finland, South Korea has started to move away from the standardized, multiple-choice examinations. The focus South Korea had on their curriculum progressed from memorization of facts to application of new knowledge to own life experiences. Before 1950, South Korea required every child to pass an examination to begin attending primary or elementary school and to move from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. Once South Korea was able to rebuild schools and begin focusing on its education after the Korean War, changes started to happen in the structure and curriculum of schools. During the 1950s, every child was allowed to begin elementary school without having to pass an examination. For a while longer, the only way to become enrolled in middle school and high school was through passing an entrance examination. In the months leading up to the entrance examination, children memorized and crammed information into their minds to be able to pass the examination. Families with children getting ready for the entrance examination called those last couple months “exam hell”. When a child is getting ready for an examination, there is always an amount of stress the child feels. Since the entrance examination determined if the child could go on to middle school or high school or, if they would stay in elementary school for another year; there was great stress placed on the child and any significant amount of stress is not good for any child. Teachers believed the entrance examinations for middle school and high school put too much emphasis on rote memorization and cramming. About 10 years after the abolishment of the elementary school entrance examination, the middle school entrance examination was finally thrown out in 1968. The high school entrance examination was abolished in 1974. This action was enacted upon under a “high school equalization policy” created around the same time (Darling-Hammond 173).

With the entrance examinations thrown out, students who were able to pass a basic qualification standard were permitted to move on to the next level of schooling. This type of education policy is similar to the way the United States of America moves children from one grade to the next. Since there was no “exam hell” for elementary school and middle school students, there was a change in focus from memorization of facts to application of items that were taught in school. “Exam hell” transferred over to the high schools, particularly for students who were getting ready to take college entrance examinations (Darling-Hammond 173). For a while there was a different examination for almost every college in South Korea. Then in 1980, South Korea declared that there would be only one nationwide entrance examination for colleges. It was a national examination called Scholastic Achievement Test, also known as the SAT. No separate college examinations were allowed (Darling-Hammond 174). This reform cut down on some of the stress and rote memorization promoted by the different college entrance examinations students had to take, but even just having to take one college entrance examination has some stress involved in the preparation stage.

After the reforms abolishing the elementary school, middle school, and high school entrance examinations were put into effect, the transition rates rose steadily. Darling-Hammond (2010) found that in 2006 there was a 99.9% transition rate from elementary school to junior high school and 99.7% was the transition rate for students moving from junior high school to high school. The transition rate from high school to college also increased to 82.1%. All three transition rates for South Korea are considerably higher than the United States of America’s educational transition rates (Darling-Hammond 174).

Within South Korea’s educational system, there are no individual external examinations given to students before the end of high school. The students are not required to take any standardized tests before they graduate. Unlike the United States of America, which requires students to take the EXPLORE examination during the eighth grade school year and the PLAN examination during the tenth grade school year, along with other state specific standardized assessments. There is a sample examination given to South Korean students that involves about 1% of students in the sixth grade and ninth grade and about 3% of students in the tenth grade. This sample examination is given as part of a curriculum evaluation that involves the subjects: Korean, science, mathematics, English, and social studies. This examination is primarily for the schools to see if the children understand what they are being taught and if the subject content is organized in a way that helps the students learn. Within the classroom, there are still paper-and-pencil examinations, but the questions on those examinations are starting to be more geared toward how can students apply new knowledge to their life and the answers are more open-based and are in essay form. Performance assessments have also been added to the evaluation part of classes (Darling-Hammond 177). Darling-Hammond (2010) has found that since the mid-1990s, testing in South Korea has gone towards an essay-based format and has increased the amount of performance assessments given (177).

Along with requiring more of an application of teaching to real life experiences, South Korea has changed their educational goals to focus on the development of the whole child and not just teach about the main subjects, such as math, science, social studies, etc. Their curriculum has been devoting a majority of teaching time to liberal arts subjects for every grade level. The liberal arts curriculum has been divided into three areas: disciplined life, intelligent life, and pleasant life as stated by Darling-Hammond. Instead of having a countrywide curriculum, South Korea gives teachers the power to create their own lessons and decide what supplies are needed. Teachers are given examples of what can be included in their curriculum by looking at the curriculum frameworks created at the regional level. There are national standards that guide the subjects taught in school, but teachers have a majority of the power as to what they believe students should be taught (Darling-Hammond 176). This way of thinking is similar to William Russell’s theory of how school administration should be divided. Russell (1929) believed that there should be an external division of school administration and an internal division of school administration. He proposed, “Internal has to do with what is taught…External deals with seeing that the pupils attend, providing suitable places for instruction…” (Russell 3). South Korea has given the power to the schools to decide what is taught; internal centralization of the school administration has been incorporated for a while.

After multiple wars, South Korea had to start from scratch with their education system. Rebuilding their schools and forming a cohesive school administration system has been a long time in the making. Every five to ten years, the education system goes through a few revisions. South Korean officials acknowledge and embrace the fact that as time goes by, the world is changing. An education system that was formed in the 1950s and has had no changes since then is not an effective education system in today’s society; with the progression of time, technology changes, ideas change, and people change. South Korea does not want to be stuck in the past teaching children nonessential information. They want the children of South Korea to be successful, progressive, and knowledgeable of many subjects. South Korea does not just focus on the facts any more; they work on helping their students think outside the box and apply teachings to real-life experiences. This progression to thinking abstractly certainly shows in the worldwide assessment scores of the 2009 PISA assessment. South Korea ranked second on the reading and mathematics sections and third on the science section. Their scores are certainly higher than the United States of America’s scores (OECD).

**Conclusion**

The United States of America is falling behind foreign countries academically because of standardized testing and poor teacher quality. By comparing the United States of America to nations with highly successful school systems, the case was made that aligning United States of America’s education policies with those policies of other countries such as South Korea, Japan, and Finland, could help improve education in the United States of America. According to Akiba and LeTendre (2009), a recent study observing factors that determine how students score on assessments found that one of the top three characteristics of high assessment scores was determined to be teacher quality.

The United States of America has created alternative paths to become a certified teacher, which plays a big role in the decline of the United States of America’s scores on worldwide educational assessments. Students’ educational gains are impacted by whether or not they were taught by a nationally certified teacher who had at least two years of classroom experience. Even with the alternative certifications routes created, most teachers do not stay in the teaching field for more than five years.

Japan has strived in teaching quality by passing reforms such as: Teacher Certification Renewal System, Education Civil Servant Law, Lesson Studies, and Teacher Professional Graduate Schools. These reforms require and implement teacher certification renewal, high numbers of professional development hours, strong teaching qualities, and high teacher collaboration of lesson plans and class studies. Through these requirements Japan has been able to develop their teachers to be looked upon as competent and accountable and are able to better teach their classrooms.

South Korea has worked extensively on preparing their teachers for the classroom even before they graduate with a teaching degree and certification. To keep up with the progressive world, teachers have to go back to college every few years to learn of the updates in the teaching field. South Korea works hard to retain as many teachers as possible. Good pay and being one of the most respected individuals in South Korea are just two of many incentives offered to future teachers.

A determining factor in how well students score on worldwide educational assessments is standardized testing or the lack thereof. Most of the countries that score the best on worldwide educational assessments do not incorporate standardized testing into their curriculum or have a limited amount of standardized testing. In the United States of America, standardized testing narrows schools’ curriculum by punishing schools and teachers for scoring low, therefore the teachers remove anything that is not related to the standardized tests to try to ensure higher scores.

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, the United States of America has focused on giving multiple-choice tests, avoiding open-ended questions, and has limited the need for critical thinking. This has had a negative impact on how students solve problems on assignments and assessments today. Standardized testing has limited schools’ and teachers’ ability to help the students learn and retain the materials taught, but instead has focused on test-wiseness.

Finland eliminated standardized testing as a means to eliminate the idea of competition between students, teachers, and schools. Finland now only uses sample-based tests and open-ended questions as a way to evaluate the progress of students and as a way to encourage students. These assessments allow the students to self-assess themselves, look at the growth they have made and develop a plan of growth, with the collaboration of their teacher, that they need to make in the future. Finland’s elimination of standardized testing goes hand in hand with their teaching curriculum as they focus “on critical thinking and problem solving, project-based learning, and learning to learn…There is a lot of collaboration in the classroom.” (Darling-Hammond 170).

With testing moving away from a multiple-choice form and towards an open-ended form, South Korean students have been scoring better on assessments. Students are learning more about how they can apply the curriculum taught to real-life experiences. South Korean students are becoming able to think more critically and are learning about more than just the core subjects.

As a result of having poor teacher quality and standardized testing in the United States of America, the worldwide educational assessment scores are below the worldwide average. South Korea, Finland, and Japan are ranked above the worldwide average on the PISA assessment; these countries have an excellent educational system framework for the United States of America to model its educational system after. Finland, Japan, and South Korea have put great emphasis on not just forming a high-achieving educational system and keeping it one way, but revising and strengthening the system when needed. If the United States of America looks at those educational systems and incorporates their ideals, the students could have a greater educational gain.

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Appendix: General Report of the Distribution of Labor

9-25-2013: Sydney, Alix, and Sara got together at the end of class and finalized the thesis and outline.

9-30-2013: Sydney, Alix, and Sara met at the library and selected books for sources and started taking notes for the paper.

10-2-2013: Sydney, Alix, and Sara met and worked on taking down notes for the paper and started writing the paper through collaboration.

10-8-2013: Sara started and worked on the rough draft presentation paper.

10-9-2013: Sara, Sydney, and Alix met and worked on the rough draft presentation paper.

10-13-2013: Sydney added more information to teaching quality in the USA section.

10-13-2013: Sara started writing about South Korea teaching quality.

10-14-2013: Alix, Sydney, and Sara got together and worked on teacher quality.

10-19-2013: Sara wrote a conclusion for teaching quality, added transitions from country to country, and added information to the introduction.

10-23-2013: Sydney, Alix, and Sara got together and worked on the introduction and getting rough draft ready for peer reviews.

11-11-2013: Alix worked on Finland’s curriculum and testing.

11-13-2013: Sydney, Alix, and Sara got together and worked on the curriculum and testing point and created a schedule for the final weeks.

11-14-2013: Sara started writing about South Korea’s curriculum and testing.

11-15-2013: Sara worked on South Korea’s curriculum and testing section.

11-16-2013: Sara worked on South Korea’s and USA’s curriculum and testing section.

11-17-2013: Sydney worked on USA’s standardized testing section.

11-17-2013: Alix worked on Finland’s curriculum and testing.

11-18-2013: Sydney, Sara, and Alix got together and worked on incorporating articles and writing the conclusion.

11-21-2013: Sara did some revisions on the paper.

11-25-2013: Sydney, Sara, and Alix worked together to finish revising the paper.

1. <http://www.texasteachers.org/how-it-works/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.edutopia.org/f-for-assessment> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2012/january/finnish-schools-reform-012012.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)