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U.S. Teens Trail Peers Around World on Math-Science Test

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The disappointing performance of U.S. teenagers in math and science on an international exam, in scores released yesterday, has sparked calls for improvement in public schools to help the country keep pace in the global economy.

The scores from the 2006 Program for International Student Assessment showed that U.S. 15-year-olds trailed their peers from many industrialized countries. The average science score of U.S. students lagged behind those in 16 of 30 countries in the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#), a Paris-based group that represents the world's richest countries. The U.S. students were further behind in math, trailing counterparts in 23 countries.

"How are our children going to be able to compete with the children of the world? The answer is not well," said former [Colorado](#) governor Roy Romer, chairman of Strong American Schools, a nonpartisan group seeking to make education prominent in the 2008 presidential election.

The PISA test, given every three years, measures the ability of 15-year-olds to apply math and science knowledge in real-life contexts. About 400,000 students, including 5,600 in the United States, took the 2006 exam. There is also a reading portion, but results for U.S. students were thrown out because the tests were printed incorrectly.

Students in [Finland](#) received the top scores in science and math. [Mexico](#) was at the bottom.

The PISA results underscore concerns that too few U.S. students are prepared to become engineers, scientists and physicians, and that the country might lose ground to competitors. An expert panel appointed last year by [President Bush](#) is preparing to recommend ways to improve public school math instruction, with a focus on algebra.

Former [West Virginia](#) governor Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a group seeking to improve high schools, said the scores show a need for more training and support for math and science teachers. He also said the federal government should encourage states to agree on common education standards so that all students are working toward the same targets.

"This, to me, is the Olympics of academics," Wise said, "and we need to respond to it."

PISA, first administered in 2000, covers reading, math and science. But each time the test is given, it focuses in depth on one subject. Last year's exam spotlighted science, covering concepts in physics, chemistry, biology and earth and space science.

Mark S. Schneider, commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics in the Education Department, said the exam isn't designed to measure a student's recall of facts. Instead, he said, it tests a student's ability to apply knowledge using "more sophisticated concepts and deeper reasoning skills."

On the science portion, U.S. students, most of them 10th-graders, received an average score of 489 on a 1,000-point scale, 11 points below the average of the 30 countries. [Canada](#), [Japan](#) and Korea were among the countries in which students outperformed U.S. counterparts. U.S. students were on par with peers in eight countries and outperformed those from five others.

In math, only four countries had average scores lower than the United States. Students in 23 countries had a higher average score, and those in two countries did about the same as the Americans.

The ranking of U.S. students in math and science is about the same as it was in 2003.

Education Secretary [Margaret Spellings](#) said that the results were disappointing but that the National Math Advisory Panel and other initiatives are in motion to bolster math and science education. The ranking "speaks to what President Bush has long been advocating for: more rigor in our nation's high schools; additional resources for advanced courses to prepare students for college-level studies; and stronger math and science education," she said in a statement.

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