



U.S. Test Scores Continue to Slump – Are There Political Answers?

November and December was accountability time for America's public schools. In November, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also referred to as the Nation's Report Card, was released. And in December the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) published results for the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). PISA compares academic results in reading, mathematics and science for 15-year-olds from 37 Nations and 47 other school systems across the globe. The results for the United States on both examinations were not encouraging.

The NAEP results are often used to compare states, so if you want to know if your state performed better or worse than the nation as a whole you can check out the [National Assessment Governing Board's State Profiles](#). However, the big story is that the national results are stagnant since 2017. As this [summary of results](#) indicates, the only area of improvement over the past two years was fourth grade mathematics where scores went up by one point. For eighth grade mathematics the scores declined by one point, 4th grade reading scores also dropped by one point, and in eighth grade reading the scores plummeted by an alarming 3 points. Because this test measures thousands of students across the nation, averages change very slowly and rarely do they vary by more than one point every two years. So, the three-point drop in eighth grade mathematics was shocking.

The results for the United States on the PISA international exams were also [characterized as stagnant](#). The reading assessment shows no significant improvement over the 18 years that this exam has been administered and similarly no improvement in mathematics scores over the 15-year life of that exam. Of more concern is that the United States has been unable to close the achievement gap based on the

socioeconomic status of our students. PISA revealed that most of this disparity exists within schools, not between individual schools from different neighborhoods. Andreas Schleicher of OECD said of the US results, "It's not so easy to pinpoint a few schools and say, 'that's where all of the problems come from.'"

With these results in mind, I listened attentively to a Presidential candidate forum hosted by MSNBC on Saturday, December 14 to learn what I could about suggested political solutions. The online forum was focused solely on public education. Each of the seven Democrat candidates who chose to participate were given 30 minutes to make an opening statement and respond to questions from moderators and the audience.

As expected, all the candidates thought that additional funding was essential to school improvement, but **Senator Elizabeth Warren (MA)** was particularly strident in her advocacy for more money for schools. In response to most questions she said that the 2 percent "wealth tax" she wants to levy only on the richest Americans would solve all education ills. It remains to be seen if this new Federal tax would pass constitutional muster.

Senator Bernie Sanders (VT) argued that the key to improving public education is labor law reform. He pledged, if elected, to enact, "the most sweeping collective bargaining measure in the history of the nation." He proposed that if a union receives support from 50% plus 1 of the school employees, the employer would be forced to negotiate with the union and have the right to strike. He also said he would repeal provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act which allow states to pass right to work laws that prohibit unions from collecting agency fees from individuals who do not wish to join the union. I was surprised that **Senator Klobuchar (MN)** also wants to see stronger labor unions in the schools. She would support legislation proposed by Senator Mazie Hirono (HI) to reverse the impact of the recent Janus Supreme Court decision prohibiting teachers and other state employees from being compelled to join the union or pay an "agency fee," by making public employee bargaining legal in all states.

Mayor Pete Buttigieg from South Bend Indiana thinks that while we need to make it affordable to go to college, we also need to make it "more affordable to not go to college." He advocated a tuition tax credit to cover 50% of the costs of businesses hiring interns which could be a helpful new idea.

Former Vice President Joe Biden spent a good portion of his time letting the audience know that he had been instrumental in supporting much of the legislation that defines our current Federal education policy. Going forward he wants to make

community college for everyone free and is a strong advocate of quality preschool. He said that, “if he had \$10 to spend on education, he would spend \$7 on preschool.”

California Billionaire Tom Steyer framed his advocacy for increased school funding by talking about education funding not as an expense, but as a way to save societal costs in the long run. He also suggested that increasing funding for Historically Black Colleges and Universities would go far to eliminate social disparities which I thought made sense. **Senator Michael Bennet (CO)** also scored some points, at least with me, by talking about how ending childhood poverty was essential to improving education opportunities for all children, as well as by suggesting that it would be good for students—particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds—to attend school six days a week.

Bennet’s suggestion to lengthen the school week on an optional basis resonated with me because I know that learning is hard work. And it is very hard work for students who are starting out with disadvantages. We should make every effort to provide additional opportunities to learn, including extending the week for students who are willing to put in extra effort.

But teaching is also very hard work. As we approach the time when we celebrate that the Lord sent his Son into the world to rescue us from our sins, I pray that you will be able to relax and find this Christmas a time of great blessing, and that you will be refreshed to resume your calling to serve students in 2020.

Please share your thoughts on this column that you would like other readers to see by entering them in the form below. Personal comments can be sent to JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, D.C. Area Director for Christian Educators Association International. Washington Watch is published by CEAI, but opinions expressed are those of the author.

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