

Teaching for a Shared Future: Think Global

By Michael H. Levine & Esther Wojcicki

American students' lack of knowledge about the world is unsettling. According to surveys by the National Geographic Society and the Asia Society, young Americans are next to last in their knowledge of geography and current affairs compared with peers in eight other countries, and an overwhelming majority of college-bound seniors cannot find Afghanistan, Iraq, or Israel on a world map. Fewer than half our high school students study a foreign language, and while a million U.S. students may study French, a language spoken by some 80 million people worldwide, fewer than 75,000 study Chinese, a language spoken by some 1.3 billion.

Minority students especially lack access to the global topics taught in higher-performing schools, from foreign languages and world economics, to arts and cultural activities in other countries. The typical teacher or supervisor is not prepared to address this gap: Most educators have not taken any international courses themselves, and comparatively few participate in study-abroad programs.

Our concern, simply stated, is this: America's leadership position in the world depends on preparing students to be savvy citizens with the specific competencies needed to compete and cooperate in a global age. While debates over constructing Islamic cultural centers and tightening restrictions on illegal immigrants have made headlines over the past few months, we've noticed that nary a word of the dialogue has focused on what is being taught to children about the connections between educational success and the value of cultural and global knowledge to a productive, shared future.

As educators, we rarely delve into the sensitive issues of race, religion, and culture—they are so charged. But as forward-looking parents and citizens, we realize that solving the nation's most pressing problems—from cooperative-security concerns in the Middle East, to the cleanup of the Gulf of Mexico region, to the imperative to develop environmentally safe, renewable energy sources—depends on intercultural work teams that practice the values of openness and respect.

In the 21st century, young people who understand the dynamics of global economic and intercultural relations will have a distinct advantage in securing good jobs. Those with knowledge of world history, languages, global health concerns, and international affairs will be able to make informed decisions as voters about domestic issues influenced by global circumstances.

It is time, then, to pivot from the wedge politics of the summer to reflect on the educational implications of current issues. While it is a point of strength and pride that we have every part of the world represented in our communities, we must ask ourselves: Have we successfully put the world into our classrooms? And how can teaching about the world help us guide students to a more rigorous intellectual foundation for learning, one that will promote the distinctly American values of tolerance and respect?

Here are three ways to add global competency to school reform, so that the next generation keeps the country

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Let's propel U.S. schools out of their time warp while taking advantage of young people's natural interests in other nations' people, culture, music, and technology.

strong while defending its fundamental freedoms.

First, let's train at least 100,000 teachers in international subjects and foreign languages. During the Cold War era, the country made an admirable commitment to science and math education by creating the National Science Foundation and pouring money into an array of related educational programs. The initiatives helped us reach the moon.

Today, President Barack Obama's efforts and those of the private sector aimed at re-energizing science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM, education for the current generation are of vital significance. But the emphasis will fall short if the importance of international knowledge and skills is overlooked. To "educate to innovate," as national leaders desire, will require a new cadre of highly qualified teachers in critical languages such as Arabic and Chinese, and in promoting understanding of the international dimensions of subject content in many fields. We must prepare those teachers.

A new public-private partnership initiative could draw from successful models created by the Peace Corps, City Year, and Teach For America, all of which have prepared thousands of intellectually curious young leaders committed to education, positive youth development, and global success.

Second, every district, state, and school should examine its learning standards and integrate global benchmarks covering the international dimensions of subjects into curricula, assessments, and professional-development programs. Resources to map out global competencies are available from the Asia Society's [International Studies Schools](#) and [Global Partnership for Learning initiatives](#).

The new common-core standards also offer an opportunity to reduce the number of state-level assessments and increase our focus on internationally benchmarked standards that colleges and university's value.

Finally, let's propel U.S. schools out of their time warp while taking advantage of young people's natural interests in other nations' people, culture, music, and technology. Recent studies indicate that most teenagers are bored with conventional school offerings, which leads many to lower performance or dropping out. One solution: Unpack the home-grown technological tools that are the envy of the world to re-engage digital and global kids. Take off the Internet filters, reward excellent virtual teaching wherever it takes place, lift the bans on mobile and game-based media, and open up educational resources to the globe's intellectual resources.

An immediate step would be to use existing infrastructure by adding support to design and deliver international courses to the growing network of state-run virtual schools, such as those modeled on the Florida Virtual School's pioneering work. Many universities that are part of the Open Educational Resources movement, such as MIT, through its [OpenCourseWare](#) initiative, have already made online language instruction of world-class quality available, but K-12 schools are not yet able to participate at critical mass.

Also, with the digital-game and mobile revolution, we now have largely untapped but fabulous global education and classroom collaboration resources such as [epals](#) and [iEarn](#) to help children and teachers connect via virtual communications and exchanges, and games such as [Peacemaker](#), and [Ayiti: The Cost of Life](#), which teach children mutual respect and the need to solve global problems together.

The current economic crisis has swayed too many Americans to look inward. Political demagogues have used discontent to marginalize critics and coalesce supporters in the name of freedom and democracy. As educators, we cannot be sidetracked from a stark reality—the future of our leadership as the world's model for innovation. Keeping and strengthening that position will require difficult but necessary long-term steps to prepare our children for a diverse and interconnected global age.

The "new foundation" for America's promise begins this fall in every school. By teaching about the world beyond our borders, we will discover new ideas and advance the relentless quest for a more perfect union that makes the United States truly exceptional.

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