

U.S. Drops Out of Global Math Test

The United States has quietly withdrawn from an international study comparing math and science students.

WEB EXCLUSIVE

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Aug. 9, 2007 - Americans took note when Bill Gates said last spring that American schools needed to beef up science and math standards if the country was going to maintain a competitive edge in the new century. So did Congress, which last week approved legislation called the America COMPETES (Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education and Science) Act, which carves out a whopping \$43.6 billion for science education and research.

So why did the federal government quietly decide last year to drop out of an international study that would compare U.S. high-school students who take advanced science and math courses with their international counterparts?

The study, called TIMSS (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study) Advanced 2008, measures how high-school seniors are doing in algebra, geometry, calculus and physics with students taking similar subjects around the globe. In the past, the American results have been shockingly poor. In the last survey, taken in 1995, students from only two countries—Cyprus and South Africa—scored lower than U.S. school kids.

Conspiracy theorists suggest that the U.S. government withdrew from the study without making any announcement because it anticipated another poor showing. "Maybe they don't want to hear more bad news," says John Ewing, executive director of the American Mathematical Society.

Federal officials deny the charge. Mark S. Schneider, the commissioner for the Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, says the decision was made after a number of other countries—Australia, Germany and Finland—also decided not to participate. That left Armenia, Iran, Italy, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Slovenia and Sweden in the study. "We looked at the countries who are participating, our scarce resources and our overextended staff," says Schneider, "and we decided to give it a pass."

The test, which would have been administered to about 4,000 high-school seniors, would have cost the federal government between \$3 million and \$10 million, Ewing says. The National Science Foundation, which is independent but funded by the government, declined to fund the exam as well.

Advocates for math and science education say they're dismayed. 'It's pennywise and pound foolish,' says Ewing. "It is crucial that we know what our most talented students can do and how we are serving them. I can't think of anything more important than having data on how you are training your future mathematicians and scientists."

Advocates for the study are looking for private funders to step in and pay for the test. Patsy Wang-Iverson, who works for the Gabriella and Paul Rosenbaum Foundation in Stockton, N.J., a nonprofit organization that supports math advancement, has been approaching other foundations for money to sponsor the two-and-half-hour test. "We need this money in the next month so that Educational Testing Services [which administers it] can begin the crucial work needed to get the test off the ground." If she can come up with the money, schools in individual states and consortiums of states will be approached to participate in the study. Are you listening Bill Gates?