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Foreign Teens Say Academics Given More Priority Back Home

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Peer Cultures

Foreign-exchange students living in the United States believe American teenagers spend less time on schoolwork and care less about academics than do students in the visitors' home countries, according to a study scheduled for release this week by the Brookings Institution's Brown Center on Education Policy.

Drawn from a survey of foreign-exchange students, the finding is part of an effort by the center for the second year in a row to provide a status report on American schooling.

The report, "How Well Are American Students Learning?," written by Tom Loveless, the director of the center, draws conclusions about schooling in the United States by delving into existing databases on education. But it also includes original information based on the survey the center conducted of students who came to this country under exchange programs.

Using the National Assessment of Educational Progress, for example, the report concludes that U.S. students have made "solid gains" in mathematics achievement in the 1990s but have not made progress in reading. The report also investigates what it calls the "enormous gap" between the United States and other nations in math in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study-Repeat, or TIMSS-R.

In addition, the report finds urban districts in the Sun Belt are serving poor children better—in comparison with all schools in their states—than urban districts in other regions, according to standardized-test data.

But what some education experts said last week they found particularly interesting were the exchange students' perceptions of American schooling.

"This is an undertalked-about topic," said John H. Bishop, a professor of economics at Cornell University who has compared education in various countries with

that of the United States. "American kids are not as oriented toward academics, and their peer cultures don't support it nearly as much as the peer cultures in Asia, and even some more relaxed countries with an egalitarian ethos, like the Netherlands or Sweden," he said.

Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University and a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, characterized the foreign students' views of American teenage culture as a "reality check."

"This is one way of seeing ourselves as others see us," she said.

Demanding More

The Brown Center surveyed a random sample of 500 out of 2,200 students who participated last school year in exchanges sponsored by AFS Intercultural Programs Inc. Seventy-three percent of the students responded.

The foreign students overwhelmingly viewed American classes as easier than those in their home countries. Fifty-six percent of the respondents described classes as "much easier," and 29 percent characterized them as "a little easier." More than half—56 percent—also said

U.S. students spend "much less" or "a little less" time on schoolwork than students in their homelands. Eighteen percent said teenagers in the United States and their own countries spend "about the same" amount of time on schoolwork. (See *Education Week*, Jan. 17, 2001.)

Exchange students also tended to say that American students don't place as much importance on academic subjects such as math as their peers back home do. At the same time, American students give more priority to sports, the foreign students said.

Responses to the survey also showed that more than 70 percent of exchange students had not held part-time jobs during the school week at home. The study cites other sources that indicate many American teenagers, by contrast, work part time.

Mr. Loveless acknowledges in the report that foreign-exchange students are not representative of all students in their countries. They tend to be wealthier and have better schooling opportunities than their counterparts at home do, as well as in comparison with many students in the United States. But at the same time, Mr. Loveless says, their views suggest that American students can work harder.

"Teachers can demand more. Schools can demand more," he said in an interview. He recommends that schools structure the

school day so that academics take priority over sports. Parents, he said, should have high academic expectations for teenagers and monitor their time to avoid needless distractions. In addition, he writes, businesses should refuse to employ high school students on weekdays.

Cornell's Mr. Bishop noted that it's not easy for adults to change adolescent culture. "Middle school and high school are societies that have a high amount of interaction with each other over a long period of time," he said.

"The cultures are very resistant to the outside world."

He has concluded from his comparative studies in education that American students would benefit from end-of-course external comprehensive exams like those used in many European and Asian countries.

"We should focus on giving students a realistic understanding on what they know and what they need to know," Ms. Ravitch added. "Our students tend to have more self-esteem than is apparently warranted."

FOLLOW-UP: The report can be found at www.brook.edu/browncenter/.