

## **Introduction for *Education at a Glance*** **OECD Breakfast Series Release 9/11/09**

Thank you all for joining us for the release of this important report, *Education at a Glance 2009*, and thank you, Andreas, for coming all this way to present a summary of the findings, and thanks to the OECD for coordinating and producing the report and to our staff and others who assembled the U.S. data for the report . The annual production of *Education at a Glance* testifies to the volume of internationally comparative information on education that can be produced when countries come together and learn more about each other's education systems and translate the information into useful metrics for comparison. The report could also be a testament to how difficult that work is. Countries differ in almost every imaginable way in which they organize education: how the different levels of schooling are structured, the funding sources, how teachers are trained, what age children enter formal schooling, whether curriculum is centralized, what it means to be a public or private or independent school. I could go on. The OECD and the people working on *Education at a Glance* in the countries perform a tremendous feat in putting this volume together each year and in improving its accuracy and breadth with each edition.

And this is important information for the United States. Much of the attention in the United States about education at the international level has been on our standing in the international assessments such as TIMSS and PISA and PIRLS. *Education at a Glance* helps to fill in that picture with information on other education outcomes such as graduation rates and other measures of educational attainment. It rounds out the profile with labor market and other

economic benefits of education. *Education at a Glance* also provides cross-national information on spending on education at various education levels, from various funding sources, and for various education resources and services, as well as who participates in education and where, including the extent to which students cross national borders to study at the higher education level. Finally, *Education at a Glance* provides at least a peek inside schools and classrooms internationally. While it does not provide much insight into differences in what happens in schools and classrooms across countries and how those differences relate to student achievement and attainment, it offers a key set of features –such as the time students spend in classrooms and student-teacher ratios -- that set broad parameters for school systems.

I want to take a couple of minutes to highlight a couple of findings and make a call for continued development and refinement of measures. First, the results of *Education at a Glance* underscore the economic importance of high school graduation and, particularly college graduation in the United States. Economic gains accrue to individuals through enhanced earnings and to society in the form of increased tax revenues and reduced spending on welfare assistance. *Education at a Glance* points out that even given the relatively high costs of higher education in the United States, the returns both to individuals and the public are higher than on average across OECD countries.

Secondly *Education at a Glance* documents the size of education spending at all levels in the United States compared to that in other countries. Spending is expressed in relative terms as the share of the nation's Gross Domestic Product devoted to education from public and household sources. Spending on all education institutions in the United States, when calculated as a percentage of GDP, was among the highest in the world—representing 7.4 percent of GDP,

compared to the OECD average of 5.7 percent in 2006. This was driven mainly by the percentage of spending on postsecondary institutions, which was equivalent to 2.9 percent of GDP – twice as high as the OECD average of 1.4 percent and the highest percentage of any OECD country.

One finding defies conventional wisdom: The United States leads the OECD in average hours high school teachers spend in classrooms teaching. At what internationally is called the upper secondary level, which is our grades 10, 11, and 12, U.S. teachers spend an average of about 1,100 hours a year in the classroom, compared with an OECD average of about 650 hours. So, we average about 400 more hours per year in teaching time. However, the overall working time required of upper secondary level teachers in the United States – which includes the hours spent outside the classroom collaborating with colleagues, developing lesson plans and grading student work -- is not demonstrably different from the OECD average. Admittedly it is difficult to compare teachers' overall required time working, because schools in some countries, like the United States, typically require teachers to be at the school a certain number of hours and that is the number reported. In other countries, schools do not necessarily specify the number of hours teachers are required to be at the school, but specify the number of hours teachers are required to work regardless of location. In the U.S., upper secondary level teachers are required to be at school an average of about 1,370 hours a year , which is higher than the OECD average of about 1,160 hours but lower than the OECD average for total time teachers are required to work overall, which is about 1,660.

For example, in Japan and Korea, upper secondary level teachers average fewer than 500 hours per year actually teaching—less than half the U.S. average—but teachers in Japan, on average,

are required to work 1,960 hours and teachers in Korea about 1,550 hours—higher than the U.S. average teachers are required to be at school. So, the job of teacher appears to be very different in the United States compared with some other countries.

And finally I want to note that refinement of indicators is a continuous process. This year's edition shows we are making some progress in sorting out the differences to arrive at fuller measures. As an example, we can take college entry rates, which are calculated as the number of first-time entrants to college at a given age divided by the total number of people in the population of that age. These are simple ratios that turn out to be highly sensitive to the proportion of first-time college students who have entered from outside the country. In some countries, a significant number of students starting college are foreign students. All of these international students are counted as first-time college students if it is their first time entering college in that country, and these foreign students are not considered in the total country population of that age. So, countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Austria, Sweden, and Iceland, which have relatively high proportions of international college students, have substantially different college entry rates depending on whether they count foreign students. Australia's college entry rate is 21 points higher than the U.S. rate when counting international students and falls to 1 point below the U.S. rate when international students are not counted. A similar effect occurs when you look at college graduation rates. The college graduation rate is calculated similarly by counting numbers of first-time graduates and dividing by numbers in the total population. When foreign students are included, the college graduation rate in Australia is 61 percent; when they are excluded it drops to 46 percent. In this case, it remains higher than the U.S. rate at 35 percent, but excluding foreign students still results in a sizable difference.

These differences are spelled out in the report and I applaud the OECD and the contributors to the report from the United States and other countries who refine the measures so we can compare and understand better the performance and processes of education systems around the world. Next year's edition will continue to build on the process of refinement and development of more robust, meaningful indicators. And now I turn the floor over to...