

U.S. Schools: Not That Bad

America's educational system is easier than those in China and India—but it's still teaching valuable life lessons

Students have 2 million minutes—the time from the beginning of eighth grade to high school graduation—to build the intellectual foundation they'll need for professional success. That's the premise of a new documentary, *Two Million Minutes*, that's making waves in education and political circles.

The film tracks six students—two each in the U.S., India, and China—during their senior year of high school. The Indian and Chinese students work diligently on math and science, while the American students work hard but appear less focused and leave plenty of time for video games and social lives. The message is that because of our education system, we're getting left behind.

Two Million Minutes provides a provocative glimpse of the global competition now facing U.S. students. And the conclusion many are drawing is that to keep our edge, our children need to study more math and science and work harder. It is true that the U.S. education system should be improved; that's essential for economic success.

But the solution isn't for us to become just like our new competitors. We need to do what we do better.

YEARS AHEAD AND MILES APART

The documentary was produced by Bob Compton, a venture capitalist. Compton says that an increasing number of companies in his portfolio are moving research and development to India and China. To understand why, he traveled to India and visited their schools. He was stunned by the career aspirations of children as young as 5 and the advanced education that middle and high school students were receiving. Indian students in the same grade as his teenage daughters were two or three years ahead in math, physics, biology, and even subjects like world history and English literature. He left India wondering how his daughters, and American children in general, would be able to compete in the 21st century.

Two Million Minutes is the fruit of that wondering. One of the two U.S. students depicted is Brittany Brechbuhl, 17, who's in the top 3% of the graduating class of a highly ranked school in Carmel, Ind. She dreams of becoming a doctor but also wants to enjoy life. Neil Ahrendt, 18, is senior class president at Carmel and a National Merit semifinalist. But he isn't sure what career he wants to pursue.

The American students are compared with 17-year-olds Apoorva Uppala and Rohit Sridharan from Bangalore and Hu Xiaoyuan and Jin Ruizhang from Shanghai. All four know exactly what they want to be when they grow up. They labor on weekdays and weekends to prepare for entrance exams at top universities. They excel in math and science. Jin even competes in international math tournaments.

The film depicts the Indian and Chinese students as well-rounded and having much more parental support than the Americans. For example, Rohit sings in an American-style rock band, and Hu is learning the violin. Rohit's parents and sister routinely help him with his physics homework, and Hu's parents hired one of China's most prominent violinists to encourage their daughter to study music.

On the other hand, Neil talks about having coasted through most of his high school years and having lucked out by gaining a full scholarship to college. The former high school football team captain works part-time at a restaurant. Brittany watches *Grey's Anatomy* on TV while studying math and looks forward to joining a sorority and partying in college. Both are at the top of their classes, but they lack the ambition and focus of their Indian and Chinese counterparts.

SOCIAL SKILLS CAN PAY OFF

Being the parent of two American kids and having studied for a short time in India, I can personally relate to the documentary. (I also am interviewed in it.) Education in India can be greatly challenging and fiercely competitive. Children are brought up to believe that education is everything. It will make the difference between success and starvation. So from their early years, Indian children work long and hard. Most of their childhood is spent memorizing books on advanced subjects.

On the other hand, Neil and Brittany reminded me very much of my children. Life is a lot easier here.

But things aren't as dire for U.S. students as they might appear in the documentary. As an academic, I have been researching engineering education and have taught many graduates of Indian, Chinese, and American universities. It can take longer for Indians and Chinese to develop crucial real-world skills that come more easily for some Americans. Yes, U.S. teens work part-time, socialize, and party. But the independence and social skills they develop give them a big advantage when they join the workforce. They learn to experiment, challenge norms, and take risks.

A PUSH FOR IMPROVEMENT

The graduates of top Indian and Chinese engineering schools are usually brilliant. They are adept at math and science. Some Indian and Chinese parents invest their life savings to send their children to America because they know the education they receive there will best prepare them to be successful entrepreneurs and business leaders.

But the reality is that the vast majority of India and China's children don't receive quality schooling or make it to college. I estimate that Apoorva and Rohit represent at best 5% of the children in India.

Compton says his documentary doesn't prescribe solutions. But he hired math and science tutors for his daughters, even though they were at the top of their class at a premier private school. And this documentary has become a key part of a campaign, ED in '08, sponsored by backers such as Microsoft ([MSFT](#)) Chairman Bill Gates. They advocate a greater emphasis on math and science education and more study time.

There is no doubt that U.S. education can and should be improved. In the global economy, skills are going to provide the competitive edge. But it will take more than math and science. Our children also need to learn geography, literature, language, and culture. Creativity and innovation come from a broad education and independent thinking. We need sociologists and historians as well as mathematicians.

Moreover, we need to create the [excitement and demand that makes our children want to become engineers and scientists](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 10/26/07). There is no shortage of these skills in the U.S., but these professions just aren't cool. In India and China, engineers and scientists are regarded highly; here they are called nerds or worse.

UPGRADING THE CURRENT WORKFORCE

We also need to focus on the 120 million in the existing workforce. That is [where the entrepreneurs come from](#) (BusinessWeek.com, 4/30/08), and these are the people whose skills need to be upgraded most urgently. We've got to make them more competitive; we simply can't wait for the next generation.

And even though so few Indians and Chinese receive a high-quality education now, that will change with the emergence of a middle class in both nations. India's middle class now constitutes 350 million people—more than the entire population of the U.S. Both India and China are making massive investments in education. If India can become a technology superpower by providing good education to less than 5% of its population, what will happen when they reach 50%?

Bottom line: Our competitors are working very hard to be innovative and entrepreneurial like us. There are many things we need to fix—not just math and science education. We need to compete on our strengths, not theirs.

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