

# Did U.S. Schools Just Use Poverty as an Excuse for Poor Performance?

When it comes to international education rankings, the U.S. ranks 17<sup>th</sup> in reading, 21<sup>st</sup> in science, and 26<sup>th</sup> in math. Unfortunately, the U.S. accounts for these abysmal scores by saying that our large number of poor and disadvantaged students are to blame.

But as a new study from the OECD (the organization responsible for the international PISA exam) suggests, the low performance of poor students isn't the scapegoat we have made it out to be. According to an [Atlantic](#) article on the subject, other nations – such as Vietnam, Shanghai, and South Korea – have large numbers of disadvantaged students too, yet only 5 percent of students in these nations perform below basic (the lowest level of proficiency).

By contrast, 12 percent of U.S. students score below basic in reading, math, and science. The *Atlantic* notes:

*“[T]he data show that [37 countries outperform the U.S.](#) in the degree to which socioeconomic status predicts low achievement. Both Vietnam and Latvia have far smaller percentages of low-performing students than the U.S. **If it is poverty that accounts for the U.S.’s high proportion of low-performing students, it is hard to explain how these two countries are doing better than the United States.** Vietnam’s average income, [adjusted for purchasing power](#), stands at just one-tenth of the U.S. average, Latvia’s at less than one half.”*

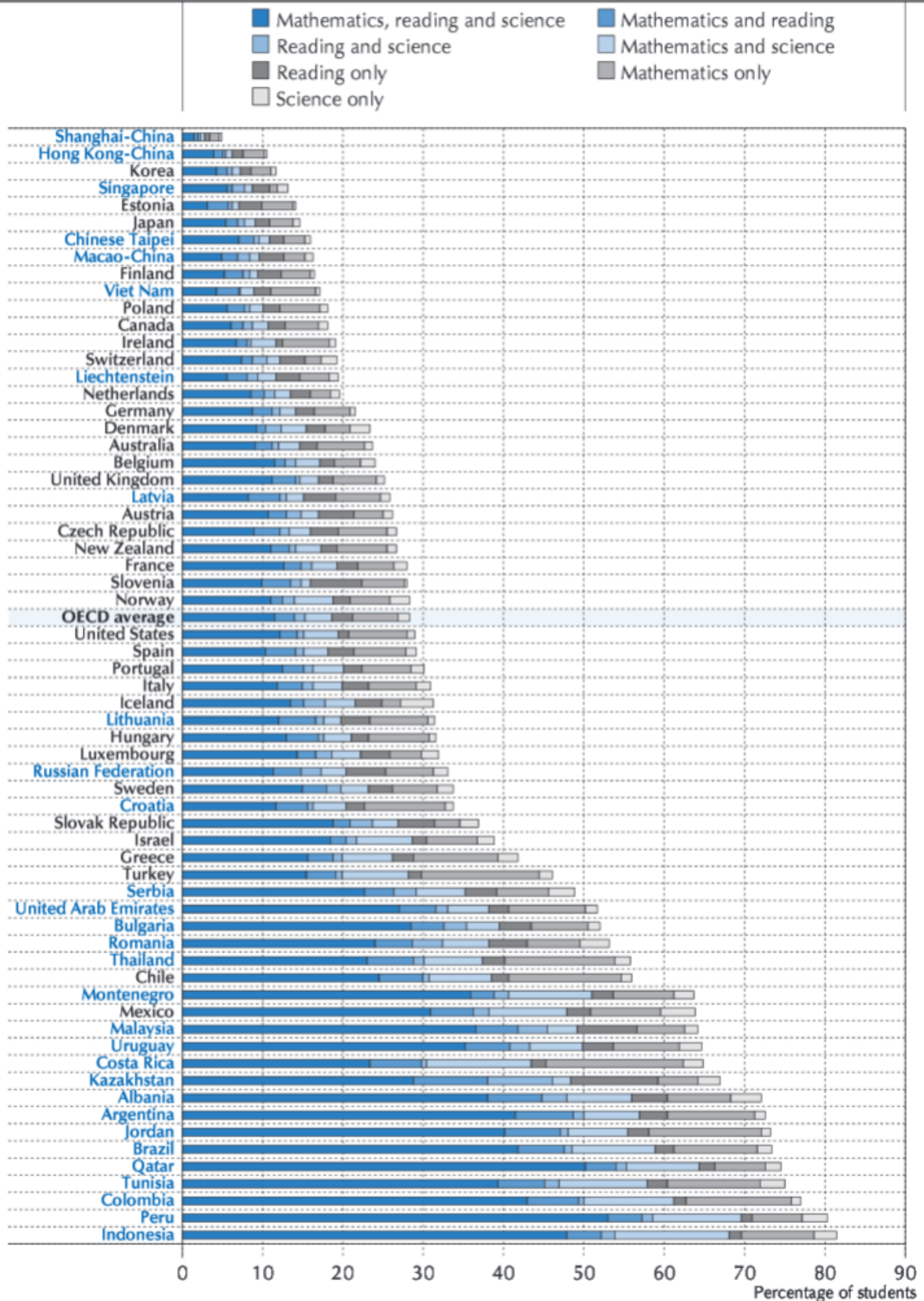
It’s a good – and painful – point. If even our worst students are being outperformed by kids in countries with far fewer

advantages than we have in the U.S., than is it time to stop placing the blame for poor academic outcomes at the feet of poverty?

Do we instead need to examine if our methods, curriculum, and other aspects of education are the culprits which are hindering us in the international academic race?

■ Figure 1.8 ■

### Overlap of low performers in mathematics, reading and science, by country/economy



Countries and economies are ranked in ascending order of the total percentage of students who are low performers in at least one subject.

Source: OECD, PISA 2012 Database, Table 1.3.

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*Image Credit: Yu Tung Brian Chan [bit.ly/1eBd9Ks](https://bit.ly/1eBd9Ks)*