TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER
PRESIDENT, AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS
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U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

On behalf of the 750,000-members of the American Federation of Teachers, I appreciate the opportunity to appear before this distinguished committee to talk about how well prepared the United States is educationally to meet the economic challenges it will face in an increasingly competitive international arena.

One way to look at this question is through the joke about the three friends--an American, a Frenchman and a Japanese--who are captured by some natives while they are hunting in the South Seas.

The natives announce that they are going to execute the three hunters, but they will grant each one a final wish. The Frenchman says he would like to sing his national anthem one last time, and he's told that his wish will be granted. The Japanese wants to give his famous lecture on quality control one last time, and the natives say that will be fine. When it's the American's turn, he thinks for a few minutes and then says, "I wish you'd execute me first so I don't have to listen to that speech on quality control again!"

Many of us sympathize with the American. We're tired of hearing how the Japanese became world leaders and, we fear, left us behind in the dust. Unfortunately, though we hear a lot of talk about making America competitive again, we're still not ready--especially in the field of education--to do what it will take to restore our nation's competitive advantage.

As we try and solve our competitiveness problems, we are putting great pressure on our schools to improve. That's as it should be. But getting our schools to respond to these challenges is another matter entirely.

There are many aspects of education and learning that must be improved in order to provide our country with the workforce we need to remain competitive. Education technology is an area where much research and development has been done. But little of this information, and hardware, has actually made its way down to the school level.

Curriculum questions need to be addressed. Should we adopt a national test and press for the development of national standards and national curriculum frameworks? Or should we continue to rely on 15,000 independent school boards to make our curriculum decisions?

The need to attract and retain high-quality teachers is also an important factor in this equation. The movement for professional teaching standards must succeed if our educational system is to play a role in restoring our country's competitive edge.

It's also critical to support Chapter 1 and early childhood initiatives such as Head Start that will bring youngsters into the first grade ready to learn.

With all this in mind, I would like to focus my remarks on providing incentives for the professionals who work in our schools and for their students. There are changes that we can make in

education policy that can leverage needed change in the system: We can create incentives for individual schools to improve the quality of education offered to their students; we can create incentives for colleges and universities to tighten their entrance standards; and, finally, we can strengthen the connection between school and work.

Before we look at these three areas, let's take a look at the skill-levels of American students. It's no surprise that American businesses are having trouble finding capable workers when we look at how American students fare in comparisons with their peers in other countries. In a study released by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) that compares the math and science skills of 13-year-old students from the U.S. and other countries and Canadian provinces, the U.S. students not only didn't perform well, they were at rock bottom. Attached to my testimony you will find charts illustrating the results of these exams.

One note: These were not just basic skills tests. All the kids tested were able to add and subtract. (Ninety-seven percent of U.S. students could handle these simple problems.) The NAEP assessment is designed to determine what percentage of 13-year-olds could do problems that require thought and analytical skills. And once the NAEP exam moved beyond the basics, American students fell way behind.

Why is this happening? Why do our students continue doing so poorly despite the attention that educational improvement has received in the last ten years? What can be done to improve

things?

The first issue we need to address is finding ways to motivate the people who work in our schools--the teachers, paraprofessionals and administrators. Instead of instituting a school-choice plan without doing anything to actually change schools, let's say public schools were invited to participate in a competition. Participating schools would have to be free to try new ideas, and the terms of the competition and the methods of assessing the competitors would need careful thought. But whatever guidelines were used for this true "merit school" proposal, the winners would be the schools that had achieved the greatest improvement in student achievement relative to where they began.

The rewards for the staff of the winning schools would be monetary, as they are for successful individuals in other areas of our economy and society. And as schools in each district would reflect the professional decisions of their staffs, each participating school would be different--thus giving parents a <u>real</u> choice of schools. A traditional choice plan, as proposed by the president, would do nothing to change the way we educate students. Such a plan would simply test a school's ability to attract students. And a school's ability to attract students may be very different from its ability to improve educational achievement: Choice does not guarantee educational innovation; educational innovation should guarantee choice.

The second incentive we need to create is for students. We need to take a good look at how hard students are working. If we

do, it will not come as a surprise that our students are not working very hard at all. College-bound students know that doing well in school doesn't make much of a difference; some college or university out there will accept them as long as they have a high school diploma. And for students who enter the workforce instead of going on to college, there is no relationship between what they accomplished in high school and the job they obtain.

First, let's take a look at the standards used in our country to admit students to colleges and universities. Currently, more than half of our high school graduates go on to college. If we include the population of students that attend vocational schools, the percentage rises to two-thirds.

Many of these students do the minimum amount of work, just enough to get by. Teachers and parents keep telling them it's important to study and get good grades because their futures depend on it. But the kids know better. Doing well in school doesn't make much of a difference.

This wasn't always the case. When I went to high school, my parents kept after me to take the right courses. And they told me to work hard and get good grades so I could get into college. It used to be that getting into college was a serious, competitive business. Now that's only true for the tiny percentage of students who want to go to highly selective colleges. The rest of the students who want to go to college will be able to find schools willing to admit them no matter how poorly they've done. Lack of money--not achievement--is the only barrier.

Approximately two-fifths of all education funding is spent on higher education even though only one-fifth of all students are attending college. In F.Y. 1991, government grants and loans totaled $18.1 billion. That's a lot of federal aid, with much of it going to students who haven't been sufficiently prepared for a challenging college or university curriculum. In the end, these students pay the price for a lack of preparedness: More than half of them drop out, many saddled with hefty student loans. We want everyone to feel good about their kids getting into college, but what does it mean if their kids are unable to do college-level work?

Among our competitors, students in schools in Europe, Japan and Korea work hard in high school. They do so because they know it makes a difference. If they don't get good grades and take tough courses, they will not be prepared for the examination that will determine whether or not they attend college.

It would be great if American colleges and universities voluntarily tightened their entrance standards to meet those of other countries. But if they don't, the federal government can help by tying the federal aid available to the institution or student to national standards which would in turn be measured by a national examination. A student's performance on the exam would also determine his or her eligibility for student aid. Adopting such standards and tying them to federal aid could not be implemented right away; it would have to take place over a number of years. The formula for aid could also be changed, allowing

those students who met the standards to get all the federal aid they needed to attend the school of their choice.

The exam would not be one of the cheap multiple-choice tests on which we currently rely. We would need to develop tests that assessed student performance by asking students to do such things as carry out real science experiments, write essays, think and analyze problems.

If federal aid were tied to such an exam, students would know that studying hard in high school would pay off later. Gaining admission into college would no longer be automatic. And colleges and universities could move away from teaching remedial skills that most students should have mastered in high school.

Of course, this would not relieve us of providing further education to those students not ready for college. We would need to continue efforts to help those not eligible for college and university admissions. But this system of granting aid would assure us that students attending American colleges and universities had the skills they need to succeed. And the ripple effect created by from higher college-admission standards would improve high school education as well.

The second problem with American public education that I believe has a great impact on our ability to compete is the dysfunctional relationship that currently exists between school and work. A recent report from the National Center on Education and the Economy called "America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!" correctly asserts that our poorly educated workforce is leading us

to a future of low-wage jobs for workers and declining prosperity for the nation. This choice has been made by default; no one sat down and decided to make America a low-wage country. Yet our current educational direction makes this all but inevitable.

Although all our students (along with our economy) have suffered from the deficiencies of our education system, no group has been more consistently shortchanged than the students who go directly from high school to work. Most find it difficult to get anything more than a dead-end job paying minimum wage until they are well into their twenties. Kids graduating from high school and going right into the workforce face the same lack of incentives as their college-bound peers. There is no correlation between what they accomplish in school and the jobs they obtain.

Why not reward those high school students who have done well but are not going on to college? We should make it easy for businesses to compete for the better high school graduates and pay them higher wages. Public schools should make high school transcripts available to prospective employers, and employers should use these records to decide who gets the better entry-level jobs. Teacher evaluations of students should also be used. This way, kids would see a direct connection between how well they do in high school the job they are able to secure.

It should come as no surprise that things are different in other industrialized countries. After they finish their compulsory school at around age 16, most young people in Germany, Sweden and Denmark begin a two- to four-year program, paid for by the

government, to prepare them for their working lives. The programs provide training in a wide variety of occupations, and all involve extensive work experience. Students who complete programs have met standards set by the industries in question, so employers are glad to hire them. Rep. Gephardt (D-MO) and Senator Nunn (D-GA) have drafted a bill to offer apprenticeship-type training for high school students. Their efforts should be supported on this important issue.

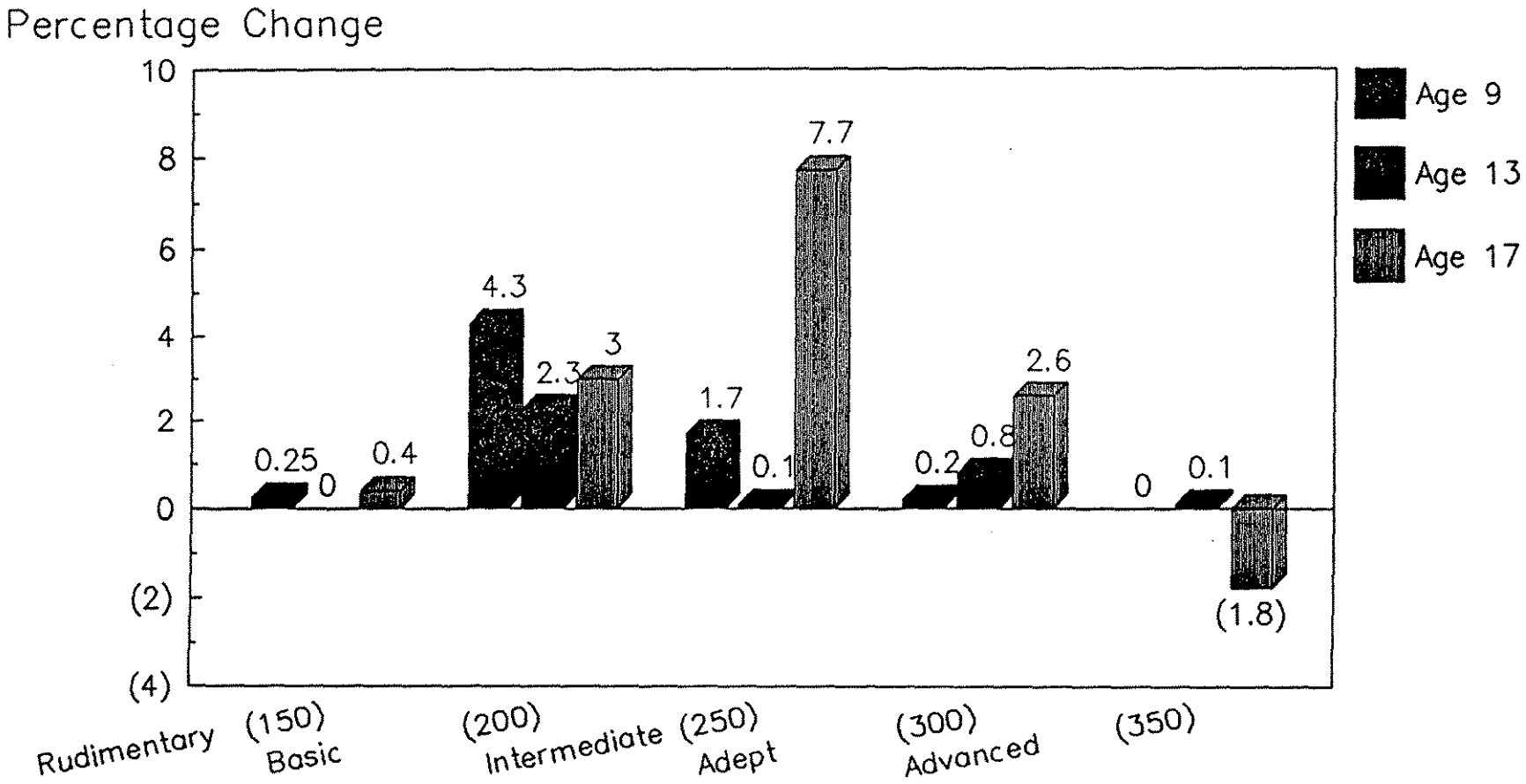
"America's Choice" rightly recommends adapting other countries' policies for connecting school and work. Some possibilities include creating a "Certificate of Initial Mastery" that would demonstrate a student's knowledge of the basic substance and skills needed to enter the workforce. The certificate would be based on rigorous national standards and would assure prospective employers that students can meet job requirements. The certificate would also serve as a goal for students. The federal government, along with businesses, could provide the resources necessary to develop these standards. They would go a long way toward improving the quality of our nation's workforce.

The ideas I have outlined here today, the development incentives for students, educational professionals and schools will not be cheap. They will require the collective efforts of the federal, state and local governments, the education and business communities and of course parents. But not tending to these problems now will only lead to a bigger problem in the future. The U.S. will not only be unable to compete--we'll be forced out of the game.

Change in Percentage of Students

Reaching Levels of Proficiency--Reading

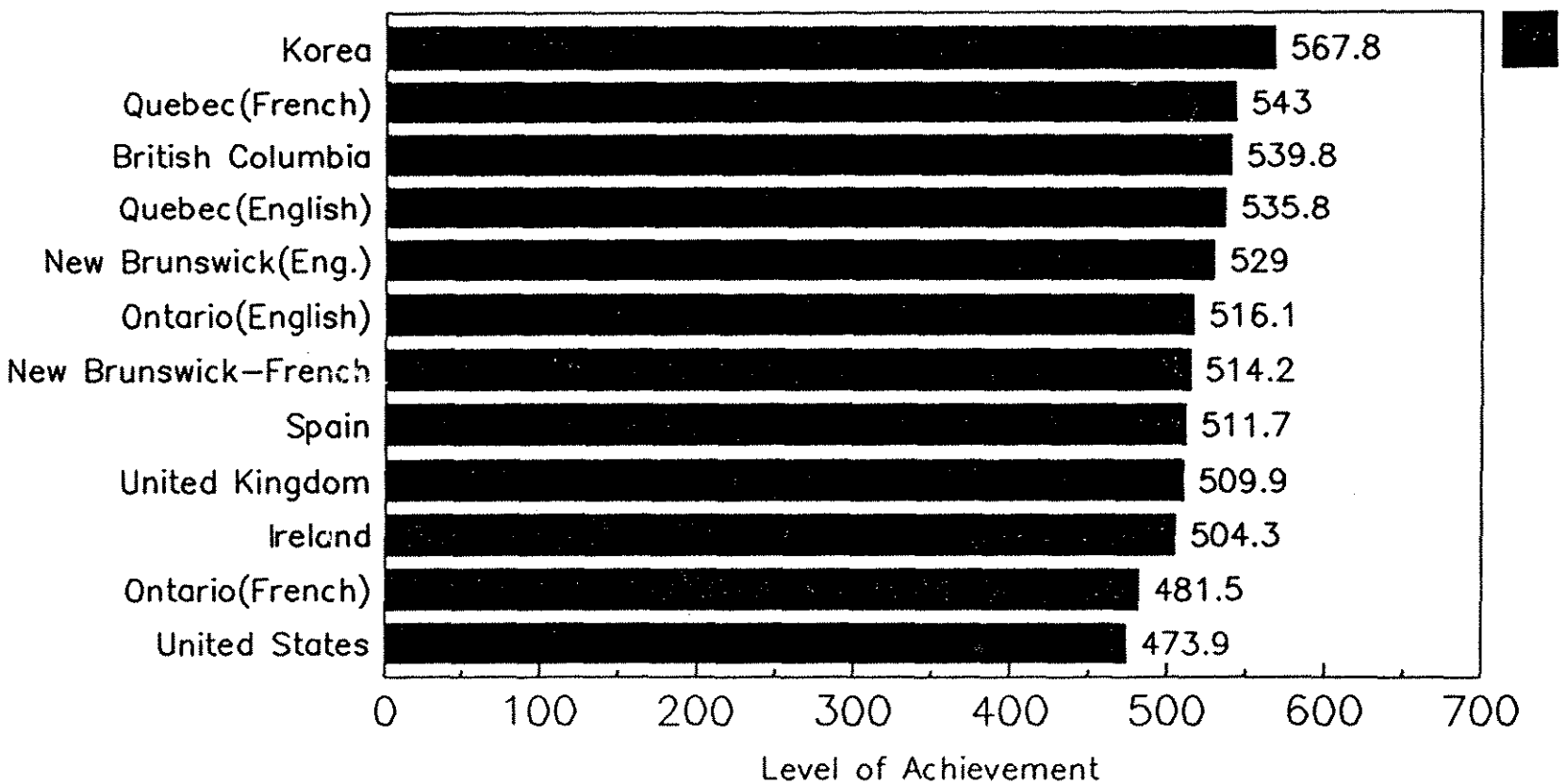
1971 to 1988



Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress

American Federation of Teachers

Avg. Math Proficiency Per Country/Age 13



Lev. 300: Perform Simple Addition & Sub.
Lev. 400: Basic Operation Skills/Simple Probs.
Lev. 500: Inter. Math Used for 2–step Probs.
Lev. 600: Understand Measurement + Geometry and Solve More Complex Problems
Lev. 700:Understand/Apply Advanced Math Concepts

TABLE 1.1

Percentages Performing At or Above Each Level of the Mathematics Scale, Age 13*

	Add and Subtract	Simple Problems	Two-Step Problems	Understand Concepts	Interpret Data
LEVEL ▸	300	400	500	600	700
Korea	100	95	78	40	5
Quebec (French)	100	97	73	22	2
British Columbia	100	95	69	24	2
Quebec (English)	100	97	67	20	1
New Brunswick (English)	100	95	65	18	1
Ontario (English)	99	92	58	16	1
New Brunswick (French)	100	95	58	12	<1
Spain	99	91	57	14	1
United Kingdom	98	87	55	18	2
Ireland	98	86	55	14	<1
Ontario (French)	99	85	40	7	0
United States	97	78	40	9	1

*Jackknifed standard errors for percentages range from less than .1 to 2.4 and are provided in the Data Appendix.

The Power of the Scale

Averages or means often hide important information. The availability of the five descriptive scale points permits a look at the percentages of students from each population that have acquired the knowledge and skills reflected by each of the defined levels (TABLE 4.1).

TABLE 4.1

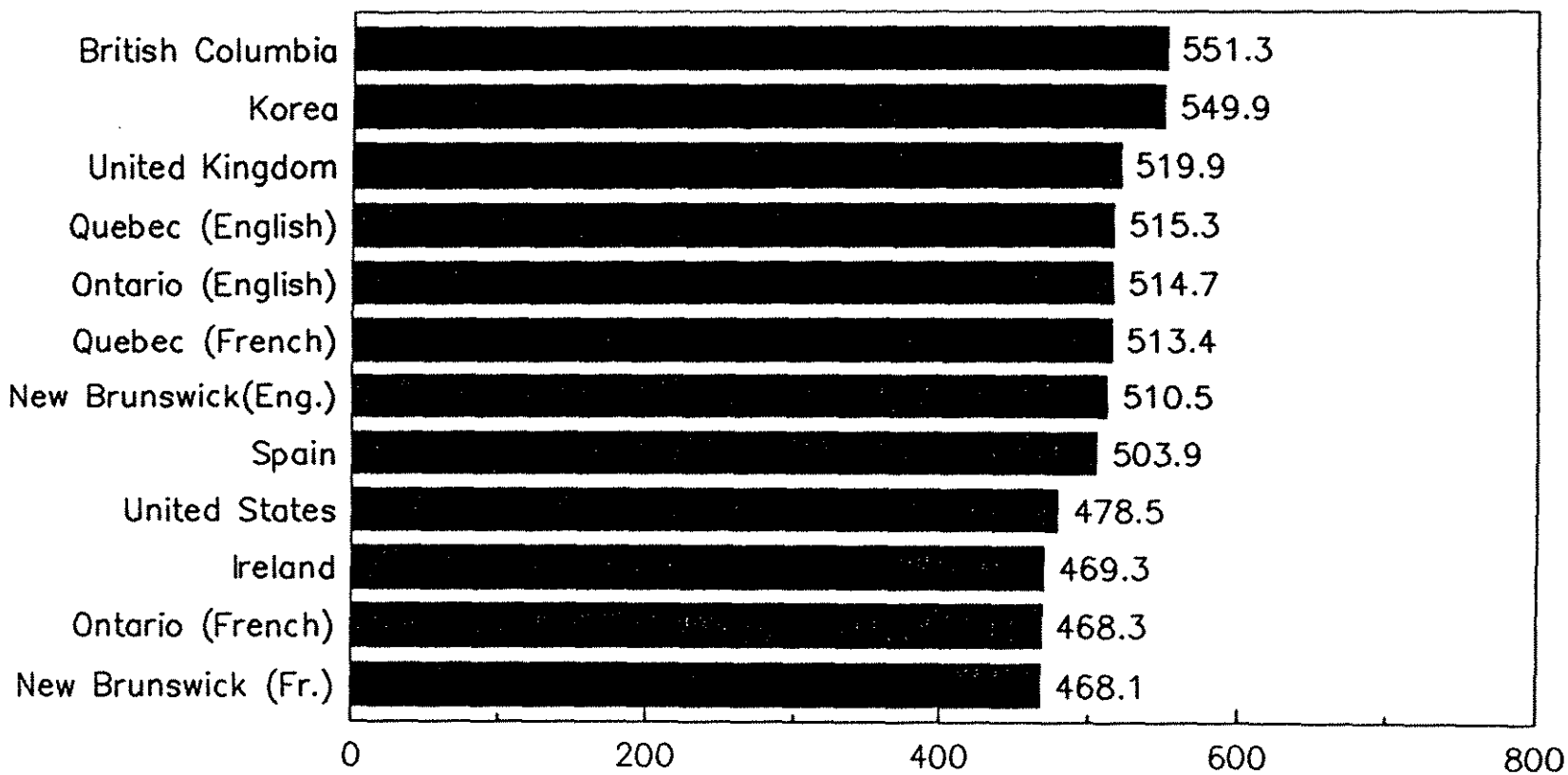
Percentages Performing At or Above Each Level of the Science Scale, Age 13*

IAEP '88

	Know Everyday Facts	Apply Simple Principles	Analyze Experiments	Apply Intermediate Principles	Integrate Experimental Evidence
LEVEL ▸	300	400	500	600	700
British Columbia	100	95	72	31	4
Korea	100	93	73	33	2
United Kingdom	98	89	59	21	2
Quebec (English)	99	92	57	15	1
Ontario (English)	99	91	56	17	2
Quebec (French)	100	91	56	15	1
New Brunswick (English)	99	90	55	15	1
Spain	99	88	53	12	1
United States	96	78	42	12	1
Ireland	96	76	37	9	1
Ontario (French)	98	79	35	6	<1
New Brunswick (French)	98	78	35	7	<1

*Jackknifed standard errors for percentages range from less than .1 to 2.6 and are provided in the Data Appendix.

AVERAGE SCIENCE PROFICIENCY/AGE 13



Lev. 300: Know Everyday Science Facts
Lev. 400: Understand/Appy Simple Science Prin.
Lev. 500: Use Scientific Proc./Analyze Data
Lev. 600: Understand/Apply Inter. Science Info.
Lev. 700: Integrate Scientific Info/Evidence