



ONE EARTH. ONE FAMILY.  
LIVE BETTER. BE PART OF IT. ©

Receive *livebetter* eMagazine for free

HOME

ABOUT US

*livebetter*  
MAGAZINE  
NO 9, Mar/Apr 2011  
NO 8, Jan/Feb 2011  
NO 7, Nov/Dec 2010  
NO 6, Sep/Oct 2010  
BACK ISSUES  
2011 MEDIA KIT

REPORTS &  
STUDIES

WORTH  
CONSIDERING

WORTH  
KNOWING

GREEN FEDERAL  
SOLICITATIONS  
& GRANTS

SUSTAINABLE  
JOBS

SUSTAINABLE  
SCHOLARSHIPS

professional perspective

## America's Grade of Shame

*By Darlene R. Ketten, Ph.D.  
Asst. Clinical Professor, Harvard Medical School  
Sr. Scientist, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution*



© iStockphoto.com/LawrenceSawyer

**M**y comments on education in America are based on having taught at the primary, secondary and college level and on interactions with undergraduate and graduate students at reputedly elite universities in the USA. In the primary and secondary schools, there is an increasing insistence on inclusiveness and a diminishing appreciation of achievement. While I agree that a student should not be denigrated if incapable of some level of learning, I disagree strongly that all levels of accomplishment must be viewed as adequate to be awarded a degree. A degree, at all educational levels, should be a clear indicator of accomplishment and

**BUILDING HOPE FOR HUMANITY**



25,000 Members in  
111 Posts throughout  
the U.S. and in  
14 Countries

Society of  
**SAME**  
American Military Engineers

Be a leader. Make a difference.  
Join SAME today. [www.same.org](http://www.same.org)

### a "badge of knowledge" for the grades and program completed.

Too often, lately, a diploma is more likely to be awarded simply as recognition of enrollment and attendance rather than a mark of competence. The majority of high school students today are not capable of coherent, grammatical writing, have poor reading comprehension and lack basic mathematical skills. These disabilities carry through to advanced levels with far too many students needing remedial training in their first year of college and, in too many cases, being passed through their college courses despite their lack of fundamental skills in English, math and history.



© iStockphoto.com/AdShooter

Frequently, this is the first point in their education at which they have received any indication that whatever they did was not completely acceptable. Those who are mathematically adept often cannot write intelligibly and are unable to communicate their data or conclusions. This is to be expected, of course, since they were funneled through schools that will leave no child behind, whether they learned the necessary material or not. They are surrounded by poor grammar and mispronunciation; they are allowed to use texting abbreviations and slang in formal essays; and they are encouraged to rely on gadgets and e-access rather than on their own eyes and ears for input and their built-in memory banks and processor for output.

### Assessing Expectations & Realities

Essentially, we have become a country with an inability to say "no" and an expectation that all are equal in competence rather than equal in opportunity. It is the norm to attend college rather than a privilege extended to those with both the desire and facility for learning. One effect of this expectation that all must attend is that university education remains a private cost rather than being fully government supported as it is in countries that provide advanced education to those who compete keenly for the right to attend. Under our system, we waste funds and manpower. Fewer than half of those who begin college programs complete them. The tuition paid was a waste, as were the hours spent in the classroom by those who ultimately had to leave.

Concomitantly, costs for education are rising and, at every level, corners are being cut in the form of part-time teaching posts and loss of security and benefits for faculty. Adjunct, single course appointments are becoming the norm (and constitute more than 50 percent of all college appointments). In most schools, the remuneration for part-time faculty is

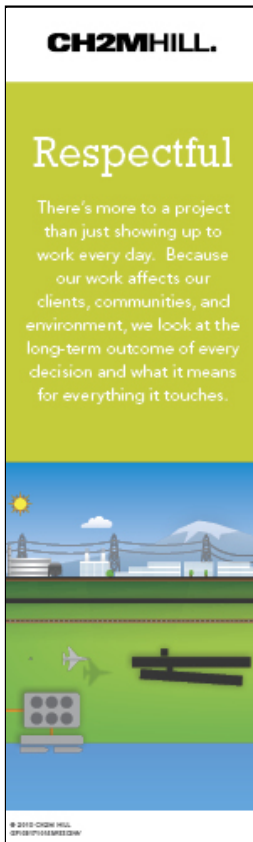


© iStockphoto.com/arekmalang

**CH2MHILL.**

## Respectful

There's more to a project than just showing up to work every day. Because our work affects our clients, communities, and environment, we look at the long-term outcome of every decision and what it means for everything it touches.



© 2010 CH2M HILL  
05181711100300W

approximately one-fifth that of a full salary position for equivalent effort. At secondary and primary levels, apprentices and substitutes are increasingly employed in long-term positions. The wages for all teachers are scandalously low. Rather than showing our appreciation and admiration by paying teachers well, we demean them with nine-month salaries that are far below that of any other profession or craft with equivalent training requirements.



© iStockphoto.com/peterspiro

the "class." I do not think our population is becoming less intelligent, only less well educated. It is not our people that are becoming stupid, only our policies. 🍌

Topping all this is grade inflation. Fear of lawsuits, fear of poor evaluations and fear of faculty cuts have led to passing students who could not do the work and, worse, to giving them progressively higher grades for these "efforts." It is a dirty little secret of our higher education that in many of the finest schools no one graduates without at least a *cum laude* on their diploma, regardless of their true educational achievements.

The statistics bear this out and are our real grade of shame. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [Programme for International Student Assessment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programme_for_International_Student_Assessment), the United States had the following ranks amongst other countries polled for student abilities in reading (15/27), mathematics (24/29) and science (21/30) ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programme\\_for\\_International\\_Student\\_Assessment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Programme_for_International_Student_Assessment)). See below. In essence, this is an achievement level below 50 percent and often in the lower one-third of





2000		2003		2006	
Reading literacy		Mathematics		Science	
1.  Finland	546	1.  Finland	544	1.  Finland	563
2.  Canada	534	2.  South Korea	542	2.  Canada	534
3.  New Zealand	529	3.  Netherlands	538	3.  Japan	531
4.  Australia	528	4.  Japan	534	4.  New Zealand	530
5.  Ireland	527	5.  Canada	532	5.  Australia	527
6.  South Korea	525	6.  Belgium	529	6.  Netherlands	525
7.  United Kingdom	523	7.  Switzerland	527	7.  South Korea	522
8.  Japan	522	8.  Australia	524	8.  Germany	516
9.  Sweden	516	9.  New Zealand	523	9.  United Kingdom	515
10.  Austria	507	10.  Czech Republic	516	10.  Czech Republic	513
11.  Belgium	507	11.  Iceland	515	11.  Switzerland	512
12.  Iceland	507	12.  Denmark	514	12.  Austria	511
13.  Norway	505	13.  France	511	13.  Belgium	510
14.  France	505	14.  Sweden	503	14.  Ireland	508
15.  United States	504	15.  Austria	506	15.  Hungary	504
16.  Denmark	497	16.  Germany	503	16.  Sweden	503
17.  Switzerland	494	17.  Ireland	503	17.  Poland	498
18.  Spain	493	18.  Slovakia	498	18.  Denmark	496
19.  Czech Republic	492	19.  Norway	495	19.  France	495
20.  Italy	487	20.  Luxembourg	493	20.  Iceland	491
21.  Germany	484	21.  Poland	490	21.  United States	489
22.  Hungary	480	22.  Hungary	490	22.  Slovakia	488
23.  Poland	479	23.  Spain	485	23.  Spain	488
24.  Greece	474	24.  United States	483	24.  Norway	487
25.  Portugal	470	25.  Italy	466	25.  Luxembourg	486
26.  Luxembourg	441	26.  Portugal	466	26.  Italy	475
27.  Mexico	422	27.  Greece	445	27.  Portugal	474
		28.  Turkey	423	28.  Greece	473
		29.  Mexico	385	29.  Turkey	424
				30.  Mexico	410

Watch the YouTube video, "A Vision of Students Today"

We welcome your comments and criticisms. Please let us know what you think about this article. Become a member; it's free. Be an advocate, and support sustainability.