

Bob Wise
Governor of West Virginia, 2001-2005



November 20, 2007

The Honorable Margaret Spellings, Secretary
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20202

The Honorable Grover J. Whitehurst, Director
Institute of Education Sciences
555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20208

Dear Madame Secretary and Director Whitehurst:

The announcement yesterday that the reading test results of U.S. students on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) international exam must be thrown out because of a contractor's printing error is both understandable and distressing. I am writing to request that the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences work together to re-administer the reading section so that 15-year-old U.S. students' reading performance can truly be compared to their counterparts' around the world.

I do not make this request simply to have the United States engage in an international competitive exercise, nor because I think this situation is in any way the fault or the intent of the Department or the Institute. During normal times, policymakers and educators at every level need access to this type of valuable information, but it is particularly critical at this juncture. President Bush has tirelessly alerted our nation to the challenges of global competition. With major education legislation pending in the U.S. Congress this year, having the most current international data about whether America's educational systems are adequate to allow the students of today and tomorrow to compete with their peers across the globe is essential.

The last PISA, administered in 2003 and released in 2004, ranked U.S. students fifteenth of twenty-nine of the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) countries in reading literacy, twenty-fourth in mathematics literacy, and nineteenth in scientific literacy. Since this international examination is administered only once every three years, new PISA data about how U.S. students are faring internationally in reading will not be available until 2010 at the earliest (following the administration of the test in 2009), unless a means is found to administer the most recent test again.

Having the most recent PISA reading performance data would permit policymakers and educators to evaluate efforts in the United States and in countries throughout the world much more thoroughly to determine what is, and is not, working to improve reading performance. This

has major implications for U.S. efforts to improve the literacy levels of its middle and high school students. With 70 percent of our 8th graders reading below a proficient level, according to the federal benchmark (the National Assessment of Education Progress), the ability to measure results internationally greatly assists your significant efforts to improve literacy at all grade levels.

As you know, the Alliance for Excellent Education has been a long-time advocate for President Bush's Striving Readers Initiative, which provides support for effective literacy interventions for struggling readers in the middle and high school grades. But to-date, Congress has funded the Striving Readers program at a maximum of less than 4 percent of what the federal government provides to reading instruction in grades K-3. Congress needs to understand that a significantly larger investment in our older students is not only important to each individual's ability to succeed in college, work, and life. It is imperative to keeping America's workforce competitive and the economy strong. The PISA reading results provide an important piece of the information solution.

The United States is currently the only federal system in the OECD comparison that does not administer the PISA in local jurisdictions; as a result, no state is able to measure its students' performance against the world. At least the national comparison provides some measurement of the international ratings of our overall student population. Without the most current PISA reading performance data, policymakers and researchers will be forced to rely on several-year-old data to make very important decisions for the future.

When the OECD, the Department, and the Institute release this year's results in early December, we will learn how our students are doing in math and get an in-depth analysis of their ability in science. This is valuable information, and because of PISA's emphasis on science *literacy* – as opposed to merely knowledge of scientific facts and concepts – we can probably make some judgments about students' ability to comprehend text and apply it.

But we also know that reading literacy itself is a critical skill. Employers and the higher educational system tell us that too many of today's students have not adequately mastered the ability to read and write when they leave our high schools. Without the reading results, our understanding of the nation's ability to remain economically competitive in an increasingly global economy will be considerably diminished.

The contractor, RTI International, has apologized for its printing error, which apparently occurred after the OECD and U.S. agencies had already signed off on the tests. As a result, officials did not become aware of the error until after the assessment had been printed, distributed, and administered to students. With OECD, the Department, and the Institute concurring that the results had been compromised, the decision to exclude them from the report is certainly understandable.

Now the issue seems to be whether it is possible to administer the reading section of the test to a different sample of students so that the U.S. can rejoin the OECD comparison in the reading performance category. The U.S. sampling of students that participated in the full PISA exam numbered less than 6,000. It would seem that a contractor that fully acknowledges committing

the error should be willing to develop a new sample and re-administer the reading section of the test.

I greatly appreciate the many efforts that you and the Administration have made to bring accountability and sound measurements to the education process. I urge you to explore every avenue to see whether this important international measurement of our middle and high school students' reading performance can be accomplished.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Very truly yours,

Bob Wise
President, Alliance for Excellent Education