Learn All About the Soil

http://www.soil-net.com/

This is a website for students in Grades 1 to 4 to learn about soil, one of the three major natural resources along with water and air. Soil affects our everyday lives in terms of the food we eat, to the foundations of the houses we live in, and more. This website has information on soil functions, threats to soil, future concerns, and interactive learning modules based on grade level. There are case studies related to forestry, ecology, farming, and food production. Parents and teachers can find activity sheets, downloadable card games, and a photo library to help with soil education.

Factory Tours USA

http://factorytoursusa.com/

Planning a trip? Use this interactive site to click on the states that you will be passing through to see which cities offer a factory tour. See firsthand how ice cream is made, chocolate treats are formed, cars are assembled, paper bills are printed, and sculptures or oak furniture are made. Information on each tour's hours of operation, costs, description, and addresses are provided. Tours can be sorted by location or by industry. Industries include housing manufacturers, snack and soft drink manufacturers, stadiums/race tracks, farm equipment manufacturers, and more.

Notable

The National Student Clearinghouse (NSC; 2015) reported that 68% of the 2010 **Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID)** graduates enrolled in college in the fall semester immediately after high school. Although this figure is similar to the national rate of college enrollment for all U.S. high school graduates, the AVID population is largely comprised of students typically underrepresented

organizational arrangement. Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, and LeMahieu (2015) suggest that when a Networked Improvement Community (NIC) uses the foundational elements for improvement science to solve shared problems, school reforms will be sustained. NICs can be summarized by the following six improvement principles (Bryk et al., 2015):

1. Make the work problem-specific and user-centered.
2. Focus on variation in performance—what works, for whom, and under what set of conditions.
3. See the system that produces the current outcomes—what local conditions shape the work processes and resulting outcomes.
4. Measure outcomes, key drivers, and change ideas so you can continuously test the working theory and learn whether specific changes actually represent an improvement.
5. Use disciplined inquiry or protocols to drive improvement.
6. Accelerate learning through networked communities, breaking down silos of practice and research.

Common Core and High-Achieving Students

In a recent report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, Plucker (2015) described four challenges that the Common Core presents to high-achieving students. One of the cited challenges related to public misperceptions that the Common Core has sufficient rigor to address the needs of advanced students. For this reason, some schools are not providing gifted education services, which is not adequate for students who are performing well above grade level. The second cited challenge related to policies that hurt gifted students such as basing grade placement on age rather than readiness, capping students' progress, and prohibiting within-class ability grouping. The limited number of hours spent on professional development in the area of differentiation was the third cited challenge. Few teachers know how to differentiate based on students' abilities and/or achievement levels. The final cited challenge was related to schools' use of high-quality materials for adapting the Common Core for gifted and advanced students. Plucker emphasized the importance of including advanced achievement in policies and actions and helping teachers "meaningfully differentiate instruction" (p. 4). He recommended that educators use high-quality resources that have been developed to adapt the Core for gifted students in English language arts and mathematics (see the National Association for Gifted Children's Common Core resources at https://netforum.avectra.com/eweb/shopping/shopping.aspx?site=nagc&webcode=shopping&cart=0&shopsearch=common%20core).

Parents' Experience of Public School Choice

Choosing a school from an array of public school options is a difficult decision for parents. The Center for Reinventing Public Education (Jochim, DeArmond, Gross, & Lake, 2014) published a recent report on how parents experience public school choice in eight "high-choice" cities: Baltimore, Cleveland, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, New Orleans, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. They reported the following key findings (p. 1):

1. Parents were taking advantage of choice, but they wanted more good options. More than half the parents reported having no other good option beyond their current school, and one third struggled in finding a school that fit their child.

2. Parents experienced school choice differently in different cities. Some parents believed their systems were getting better and had a more positive outlook about public education, while others struggled to find a school that was good for their child or even to find which schools their child was eligible to attend. In some cities, parents had to prioritize safety and location over academic quality and struggled to find transportation.
3. Parents with less education, minority parents, and parents of special-needs children were more likely to report challenges navigating choice. Parents with a high school diploma or less were much less likely to act on school choice than parents with higher levels of education and were more likely to select a school based on safety and location.
4. Cities have made uneven investments in the systems that support parent choice. In cities where a single application was used for all charter and district schools, parents were less likely to report problems. While cities provided information about schools and their performance, parents indicated they were more likely to visit schools before making any final decisions.
5. All cities had work to do to ensure choice works for all families. They need to create more high-quality options, recognize the different needs that families have, guarantee free and safe transportation for students, and invest in information systems.

School Performance in Context

Given recent international education assessments and comparisons, the Horace Mann League (HML) and the National Superintendents Roundtable (NSR) examined other social, economic, and cultural factors that might influence the results (HML & NSR, 2015). They identified six major dimensions that may have implications for not only the well-being of children but also how well they perform in school: economic equity, social stress, support for young families, support for schools, student outcomes, and system outcomes. They focused on comparing the G-7 nations, seven of the largest economies in the world (i.e., Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States), and Finland and China because of their educational performance. They found that no other nation matches the United States in terms of wealth and the proportion of the population that has a high school diploma and bachelor's degree. However, the United States has the highest rate of deaths from violence and substance abuse and is 13 to 16 times more violence-prone than other nations in the study. Along with China, the United States also has the highest levels of economic inequity. Twenty-three percent of children (aged 0-17 years) in the United States live in poverty. In relation to the other nations, the United States provided the weakest support for families with children in terms of social expenditures such as availability of pre-school programs and health care. However, the United States provided support for schools, spending more per pupil than any other nation, student outcomes or school completion rates, and system outcomes such as a highly educated workforce. The researchers concluded,

> The success of the larger education mission depends on society finding ways to ameliorate the situations in which these young people and their families find themselves. Educators stand ready to help, but they cannot solve these problems or address these challenges alone. (p. 39)

in higher education. For more information regarding AVID's college enrollment, visit http://avid.org/_documents/NSC.pdf.

In analyzing 25 years of data on the **academic ability of teachers** in New York State, researchers have found an increase among individuals certified and those entering the teaching profession (Lankford, Loeb, McEachin, Miller, & Wyckoff, 2014). For example, entering teachers hired in 2010 have combined SAT scores that are more than 27% of a standard deviation higher than those hired in 1999. The gains result in a substantial narrowing of the differences in teacher academic ability between high- and low-poverty schools and between White and minority teachers.

While the number of students who took the **Advanced Placement computer science exam** increased by 26% since 2013, females and minority students remain underrepresented. Yettick (2015) reported that in some states, not a single Black or Hispanic student took the exam, and in one state—Montana—no female, African American, or Hispanic students participated. Girls make up just 20%, Hispanics only 9%, and African Americans only 4% of the total AP computer science test takers.

Although more girls are taking high school courses in **science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM),** their science and mathematics test results still lag behind those of boys (Cunningham, Hoyer, & Sparks, 2015). The data from the 2009 National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) and the NAEP High School Transcript Study suggest that the differences in overall performance may relate to lower interest in STEM on the part of female students. For the full report, visit http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015075.pdf/

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