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Brian Lamb

C-Span

Wash. D.C.

Dear Mr. Lamb,

Here is a suggestion for your book program. Harold

Stevenson is a psychologist at the Univ. of Michigan, and has written a book "The Learning Gap" with James Stigler. The subject is elementary school education, which they have studied by comparing schools in the U.S.A. with those in Japan, Taiwan and China. A comment on this book is enclosed. It is Albert Shanker's weekly piece in the New York Times from last Sunday. Stevenson's work was mentioned on C-Span by Secretary Alexander in Detroit at one of the C-Span programs on education last fall.

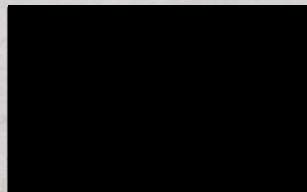
I heard Stevenson give a talk at the winter meeting of the Mathematical Association of America in January. He is very articulate. He and coworkers have studied mathematics instruction, but their findings and recommendations for how to restructure our schools deal with general questions, not those specifically related to

mathematics. He has a video of classroom scenes which is well worth watching. It is "The Polished Stones", and can be obtained from his secretary or from The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics in Reston, VA.

You have probably heard that Asian classes are much larger than ours. What is usually not said is that the teachers teach many fewer hours, so they have more time to plan lessons, to discuss teaching points with other teachers, and to work with individual children outside of class. Education in our country is a serious problem, and we need to look everywhere for ideas which work. C-Span could help by sharing this important work with your viewers.

I enjoy your show and hope it continues.

Sincerely,



WHERE WE STAND



By Albert Shanker, President
American Federation of Teachers



A First Grader's Day in Sendai

More Time to Have Fun

When people reach for quick and easy ways to fix what's wrong with our schools, they often talk about extending the school day and the school year so kids will learn more. They point to the superior performance of students in Japan, for example, where the school year is 12 weeks longer than ours, and where kids go to school for eight hours a day. How could being in school that much longer *not* make a big difference in learning?

But a new book, *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education* (New York: Summit Books, 1992), by Harold W. Stevenson and James W. Stigler, reminds us that you can't just pick up a piece from another system without understanding how it works there.

Stevenson and Stigler are psychologists who have been studying first and fifth graders in Minneapolis; Chicago; Sendai, Japan; Taipei, Taiwan; and Beijing since the mid 1970s. They agree that spending more time in schools contributes to the success of Japanese and Chinese students, but not for the reasons supporters of this idea think. Japanese and Chinese schools don't use the longer school day to cram more into students' heads, Stevenson and Stigler tell us; they use it to give children more time to play and engage in non-academic activities.

The differences between the amount of time Asian and American children spend in school are impressive. By the time the children Stevenson and Stigler studied have reached sixth grade, they've had the equivalent of one to two more years of school than their American counterparts. But little if any of this extra time is spent in the classroom. The Asian first and fifth graders Stevenson and Stigler observed had a 15-minute recess after every academic class period. Their school day also included generous lunch breaks and time for extra-curricular activities. Elementary school students in Beijing, for example, had 50 minutes a day for recess, an hour and a half for lunch and one hour for an after-school program. Stevenson and Stigler contrast this with the American kids they observed, who had one or two recesses, a lunch period of an hour or less and no after-school programs.

What does this mean? Can goofing off on the playground really contribute to the academic success of Asian students? Stevenson and Stigler believe that there is a direct link: "During these recess periods, children go outside for vigorous play at Ping-Pong, hopscotch, badminton, jump rope, basketball, and other games. Children are noisy, active, energetic, and interactive." And allowing kids to run and play may make it easier for them to settle down when they are in class: "Western visitors to Asian classrooms often comment on the children's rapt attention. Their ability to focus so closely on academic activities may be due partly to their frequent opportunities during recesses to relax, socialize, and escape from the demands of the classroom."

It's ironic that our stereotype of Asian school children is of passive, repressed kids who are glued to their desks, when, as Stevenson and Stigler point out, it's American kids who have to sit at their desks for hours on end: "Only after school is over do they have time to play and thereby to reduce the tensions created by sitting in the classroom." This is something we don't even expect of adults—at least not in a decent workplace. And Stevenson and Stigler wonder how much this strait-jacket approach to schooling has to do with some of our kids' problems: "Complaints about hyperactivity and irrelevant activity among American children offer clear cues that we are asking children to sit still for too many hours every day.... One wonders how often the currently popular biological explanations of behavior disorders result in diagnoses of minimal brain damage in children who simply need to have more opportunities for physical exercise and release of tension."

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The differences between the amount of time Asian and American children spend in school are impressive. By the time the children Stevenson and Stigler studied have reached sixth grade, they've had the equivalent of one to two more years of school than their American counterparts. But little if any of this extra time is spent in the classroom. The Asian first and fifth graders Stevenson and Stigler observed had a 15-minute recess after every academic class period. Their school day also included generous lunch breaks and time for extra-curricular activities. Elementary school students in Beijing, for example, had 50 minutes a day for recess, an hour and a half for lunch and one hour for an after-school program. Stevenson and Stigler contrast this with the American kids they observed, who had one or two recesses, a lunch period of an hour or less and no after-school programs.

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Allowing kids too little time to run around and play with other kids at school intensifies another problem Stevenson and Stigler see in American schools: isolation. We like to think of ourselves as a gregarious people. But when we compare American school children with Asian, we see that our kids are likely to have a solitary and rather lonely time in school. Many come from a distance and go right back home after school. If they don't have friends from their neighborhood at school, a 15-minute recess won't give them a chance to make any. And the way our classes are typically structured ensures that students are isolated in the classroom, too. Unlike classes in Japanese and Chinese schools, where students most often solve problems together, either as a whole class or in small groups, our students tend to work by themselves. This might mean listening to the teacher and answering the teacher's questions or doing desk work, with or without the teacher's help. In any case, our system does not offer kids much chance to meet, mingle, interact and work with other kids, in class or out.

Unlike some of the people who recommend the extended school day and school year, Stevenson and Stigler are not claiming that changing the amount of time kids spend in school would put an end to our problems. Their discussion of this subject is a tiny part of *The Learning Gap*, in which they also talk about teachers and teaching, curriculum and the role of parents. Anyway, Stevenson and Stigler are not interested in presenting Asian schools as models to be copied; they want to show us how these schools work so we can look back at our own schools and see them more clearly. But I'll have more to say about their fascinating and useful book in a future column.

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