

# Chinese students' high scores in international tests come at a cost

**Teens are under great pressure to do well on exams, with no time for friends or sports. Educators fear the students will become expert test-takers lacking creativity and imagination.**

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Reporting from Shanghai — Chinese adolescence is known as a time of scant whimsy: Students rise at dawn, disappear into school until dinnertime and toil into the late night over homework in preparation for university entrance exams that can make or break their future.

So it came as little surprise when international education assessors announced last month that students in Shanghai had outperformed the rest of the industrialized world in standardized exams in math, reading and science.

But even as some parents in the West wrung their hands, fretting over an education gap, Chinese commentators reacted to the results with a bout of soul-searching and even an undertone of embarrassment rarely seen in a country that generally delights in its victories on the international stage.

"I carry a strong feeling of bitterness," Chen Weihua, an editor at the state-run China Daily, wrote in a first-person editorial. "The making of superb test-takers comes at a high cost, often killing much of, if not all, the joy of childhood."

In a sense, this is the underbelly of a rising China: the fear that schools are churning out generations of unimaginative worker bees who do well on tests. The government has laid out an ambitious set of plans for education reform by 2020, but so far it's not clear how complete or wide-ranging the changes will be — or whether they will ease the immense pressure on teens in families hungry for a place in the upper or middle class.

"We have seen the advantages and the disadvantages of our education system, and our students' abilities are still weak," said Xiong Bingqi, an education expert at Shanghai's Jiao Tong University. "They do very well in those subjects the teacher assigns them. They have huge vocabularies and they do math well. However, the level of their creativity and imagination is low."

"In the long run, for us to become a strong country, we need talent and great creativity," Xiong said. "And right now, our educational system cannot accomplish this."

Maybe so, said Zhang Minxuan, an education expert who oversaw the Program for International Student Assessment testing in Shanghai. But he argued against despair. After all, he said, Chinese officials are clear-eyed about their weaknesses.

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