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Average Is Over, Part II

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A big mismatch exists today between how U.S. C.E.O.'s look at the world and how many American politicians and parents look at the world — and it may be preventing us from taking our education challenge as seriously as we must.

For many politicians, "outsourcing" is a four-letter word because it involves jobs leaving "here" and going "there." But for many C.E.O.'s, outsourcing is over. In today's seamlessly connected world, there is no "out" and no "in" anymore. There is only the "good," "better" and "best" places to get work done, and if they don't tap into the best, most cost-efficient venue wherever that is, their competition will.

For politicians, it's all about "made in America," but, for C.E.O.'s, it is increasingly about "made in the world" — a world where more and more products are now imagined everywhere. designed everywhere, manufactured everywhere in global supply chains and sold everywhere. American politicians are still citizens of our states and cities, while C.E.O.'s are increasingly citizens of the world, with mixed loyalties. For politicians, all their customers are here; for C.E.O.'s, 90 percent of their new customers are abroad. The credo of the politician today is: "Why are you not hiring more people here?" The credo of the C.E.O. today is: "You only hire someone — anywhere — if you absolutely have to," if a smarter machine, robot or computer program is not available.

Yes, this is a simplification, but the trend is accurate. The trend is that for more and more jobs, *average is over*. Thanks to the merger of, and advances in, globalization and the information technology revolution, every boss now has cheaper, easier access to more above-average software, automation, robotics, cheap labor and cheap genius than ever before. So just doing a job in an average way will not return an average lifestyle any longer. Yes, I know, that's what they said about the Japanese "threat" in the 1980s. But Japan, alas, challenged just two American industries — cars and consumer electronics — and just one American town, Detroit. Globalization and the Internet/telecom/computing revolution together challenge every town, worker and job. There is no good job today that does not require more and better education to get it, hold it or advance in it.

Which is why it is disturbing when more studies show that American K-12 schools continue to

lag behind other major industrialized countries on the international education tests. Like politicians, too many parents think if their kid's school is doing better than the one next door, they're fine.

Well, a dose of reality is on the way thanks to Andreas Schleicher and his team at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which coordinates the Program for International Student Assessment, known as the PISA test. Every three years, the O.E.C.D. has been giving the PISA test to a sample of 15-year-olds, now in 70 countries, to evaluate reading, math and science skills. The U.S. does not stand out. It's just average, but many parents are sure their kid is above average. With help from several foundations in the U.S., Schleicher has just finished a pilot study of 100 American schools to enable principals, teachers and parents to see not just how America stacks up against China, but how their own school stacks up against similar schools in the best-educated countries, like Finland and Singapore.

"The entry ticket to the middle class today is a postsecondary education of some kind," but too many kids are not coming out of K-12 prepared for that, and too many parents don't get it, says Jon Schnur, the chairman of America Achieves, which is partnering with the O.E.C.D. on this project as part of an effort to help every American understand the connection between educational attainment at their school — for all age groups — and what will be required to perform the jobs of the future.

"Imagine, in a few years, you could sign onto a Web site and see this is how my school compares with a similar school anywhere in the world," says Schleicher. "And then you take this information to your local superintendent and ask: 'Why are we not doing as well as schools in China or Finland?' "

Schleicher's team is assessing all their test results — and socioeconomic profiles of each school — to make sure they have a proper data set for making global comparisons. They hope to have the comparison platform available early next year.

Says Schleicher: "If parents do not know, they will not demand, as consumers, a high quality of educational service. They will just say the school my kids are going to is as good as the school I went to." If this comparison platform can be built at this micro scale, he says, it could "lead to empowerment at the really decisive level" of parents, principals and teachers demanding something better.

"This is not about threatening schools," he adds. It is about giving each of them "the levers to effect change" and a window into the pace of change that is possible when every stakeholder in a school has the data and can say: Look at those who have made dramatic improvements around the world. Why can't we?