

The New Latin

AUTHOR

[David N. Plank](#) | Stanford University

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For more than 50 years education reformers have worried that American students were falling behind—successively—the Russians, Japanese, Chinese, Singaporeans, and Finns in their mastery of mathematics. The passage of the [National Defense Education Act](#) (NDEA) was spurred by the fear that the U.S. was falling behind in the space race, and the proposed remedy was improvement in math and science instruction.

Current reformers express similar fears. They worry about the numbers of engineers now being trained in China and India, and seek to increase the number of students prepared in the so-called [STEM](#) (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields as a strategy for maintaining the nation's competitive edge in the world economy. Performance in mathematics is increasingly accepted as a critical—if not the key—indicator of educational success, both for students and for the nation as a whole.

Why should this be so? Mathematics is certainly important for some prestigious occupations including engineering, economics, and derivatives trading, but it features far less prominently in most adult lives. Basic numeracy including some familiarity with probability and statistics is necessary for informed citizenship, but this hardly accounts for the overwhelming importance assigned to mathematics in curriculum and policy debates.

Two other attributes of mathematics help to explain policy-makers' focus on this subject at the expense of others. First, mathematics is easy to measure. Comparing performance in mathematics across countries is a relatively simple task, while comparing performance in other subjects (reading, history, science) is complicated by cross-national differences in language, culture, and curriculum. American students' math scores on international assessments offer a convenient and seemingly straightforward representation of their educational performance more generally, whether or not the portrayal is accurate.

Second, mathematics is hard to master, and student performance varies widely. As a result, mathematics is well suited to sorting students into different curricular pathways and thus determining the distribution of educational opportunities and rewards. Savvy parents make sure that their children are enrolled in advanced math courses, because they know that the rest of the course schedule is organized around these classes. Competitive colleges expect their entering students to have completed calculus, not because prospective history or psychology majors will need advanced mathematical knowledge but because it is a straightforward way to restrict the pool of eligible candidates for admission.

In Europe for more than 500 years fluency in Latin was the mark of an educated person, and a requirement for some important occupations including divinity and diplomacy. As in mathematics, proficiency in Latin was hard to acquire and easy to measure. Mathematics is in many key respects the new Latin, useful as a marker of educational attainment and social status. It is relevant to performance in some important occupations, but hardly central to the lives or job performance of most Americans. The obsessive concern with students' performance in mathematics in education policy debates is almost certainly misplaced.

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Stanford Graduate School of Education

520 Galvez Mall, Suite 444

Stanford, CA 94305

Phone: 650.576.8484

edpolicyinca.org

