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Highs hitting a low – US students flunking the global test

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By Melissa Klein

More Americans are graduating from high school this year than ever before - but our grads are failing to make the grade compared to their foreign counterparts, according to a slew of new reports.

As students in China and India are attacking calculus and physics, Americans are focused on football games and Facebook, experts say - and test scores prove it.

* The United States' high-school graduation rate was No. 1 among developed countries in the 1960s; it dropped to 21st out of 27 in 2005.

* American 15-year-olds ranked 25th in math literacy and 21st in science in the most recent comparison of developed countries.

* They fell near the bottom in problem-solving skills.

* Almost 60 percent of Ph.D.s in engineering awarded in the United States every year go to foreign students.

"It's not that our educational system is getting worse," said Bob Wise, author of "Raising the Grade: How High School Reform Can Save Our Youth and Our Nation."

"It's that a lot of others are concentrating and focusing and working harder and faster and stronger."

Wise, a former West Virginia governor who is president of the Alliance for Excellent Education, said the United States now has to worry about high-paying, high-skilled jobs going overseas, not just low-paying ones.

"If education abilities and educational outcomes are rising in other nations as fast or faster than ours, then that, over a number of years, spells real problems," he said.

Mark Bauerlein, an Emory University English professor, said students have migrated from reading books to reading text messages. He documents the effect in his new book,

"The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future."

Professors complain it's harder to assign students novels over 200 pages, Bauerlein said.

"They just don't have the rhythm in their lives to sit down in a chair and read uninterrupted for two hours," he said. "The cellphone buzzes; the BlackBerry dings an e-mail coming through."

The disparity in the preparedness of foreign and American students is highlighted in the new documentary "Two Million Minutes."

Teens in India and China are seen clocking nine-hour school days or attending tutoring sessions and classes on Saturdays, while students at a highly regarded Indiana high school have plenty of time for TV, part-time jobs and goofing off.