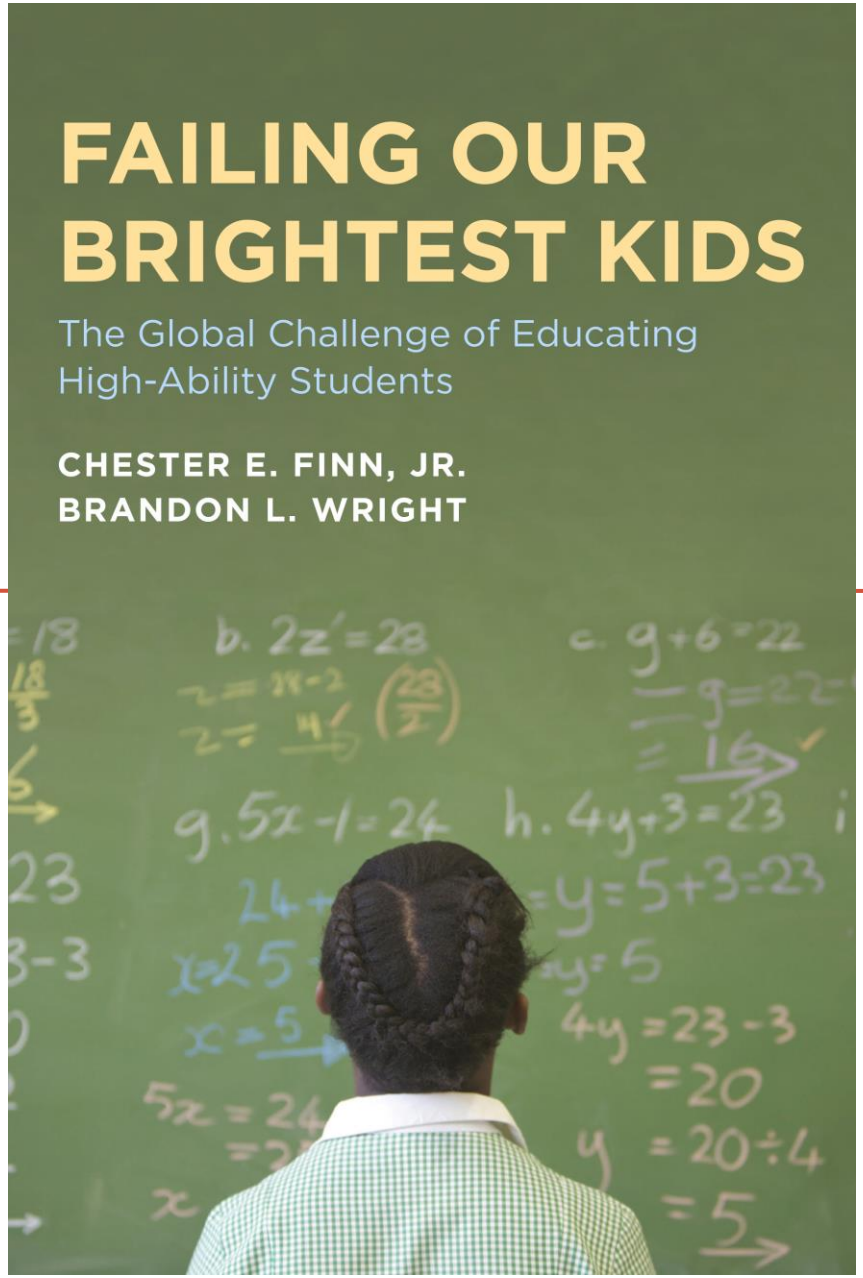
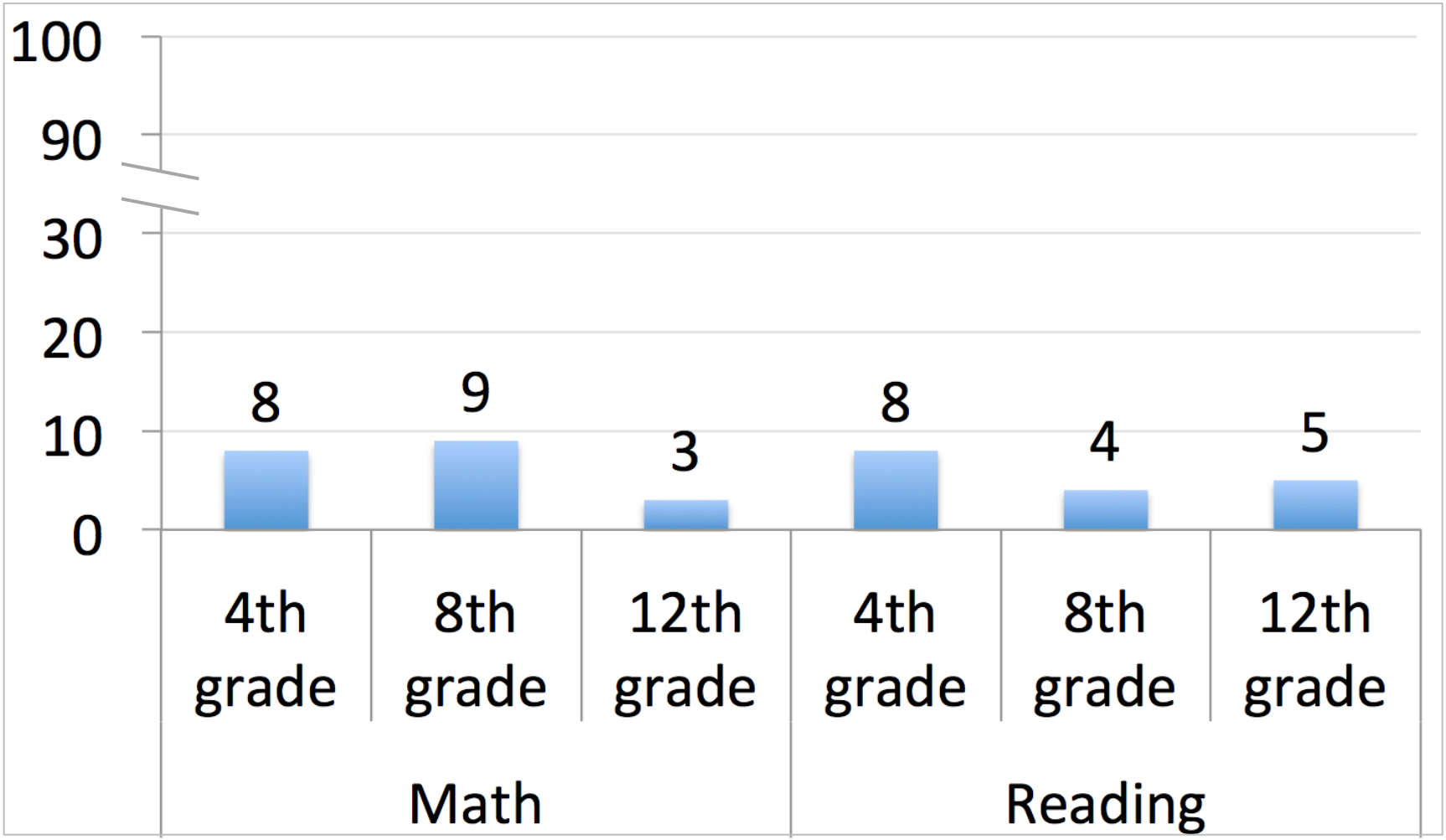

FAILING OUR BRIGHTEST KIDS
The Global Challenge of Educating High-Ability Students
CHESTER E. FINN, JR.
BRANDON L. WRIGHT

The U.S. is doing poorly domestically

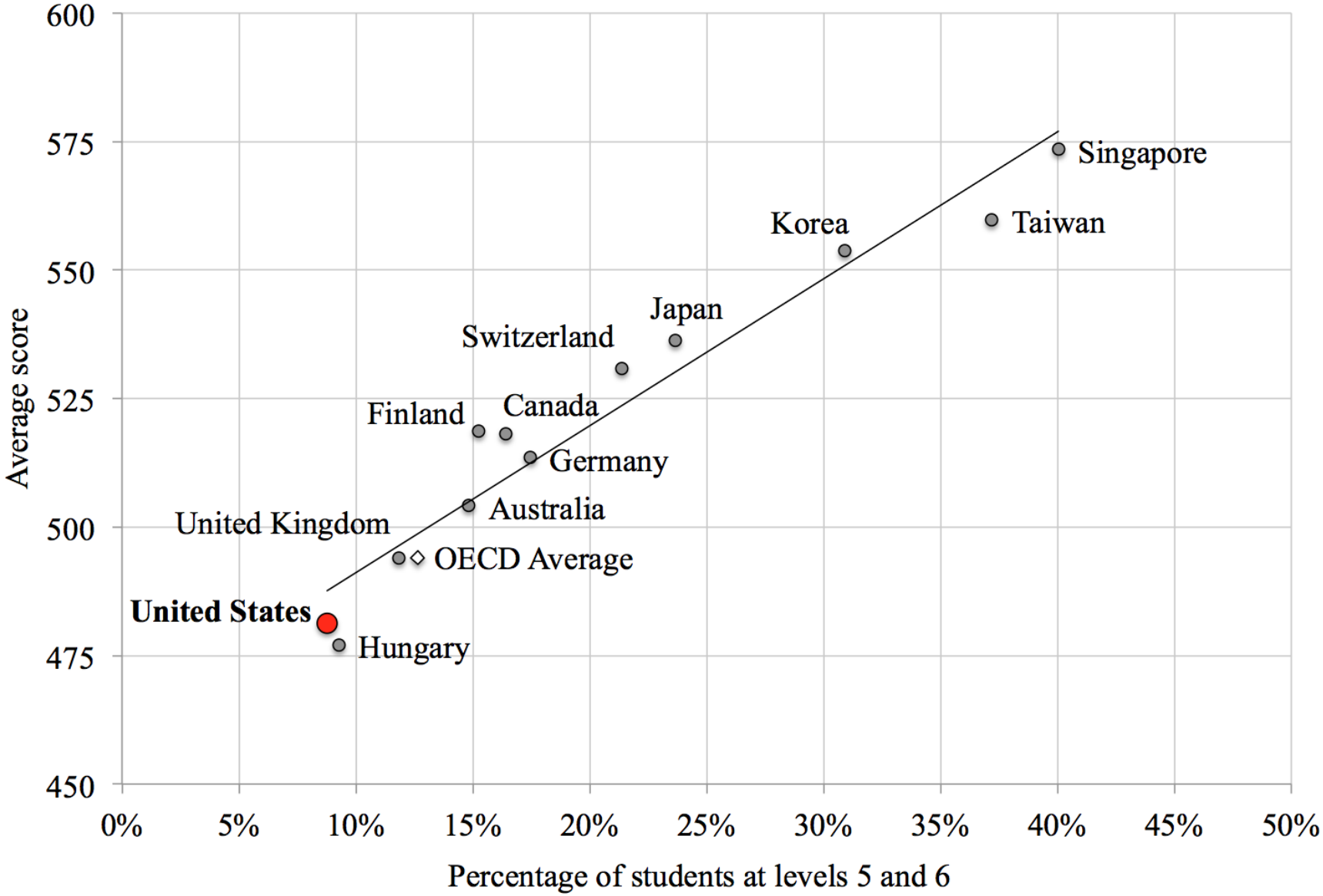
Percentage of students at/above NAEP Advanced level, by grade and subject, 2013



The U.S. is also doing poorly internationally

- U.S. high-end achievement is far weaker than many other countries.
  - On PISA:
    - 27 of 34 OECD countries get more students into the top ranks in math
    - In science, 20 of 34 countries beat us
    - In reading, 18 of 34
  - On TIMSS:
    - 7 of 15 test-taking OECD countries produce more high scorers in 8th grade math
    - 6 of 14 do this in 8th grade science

Average PISA math score and percentage of high scorers, 2012

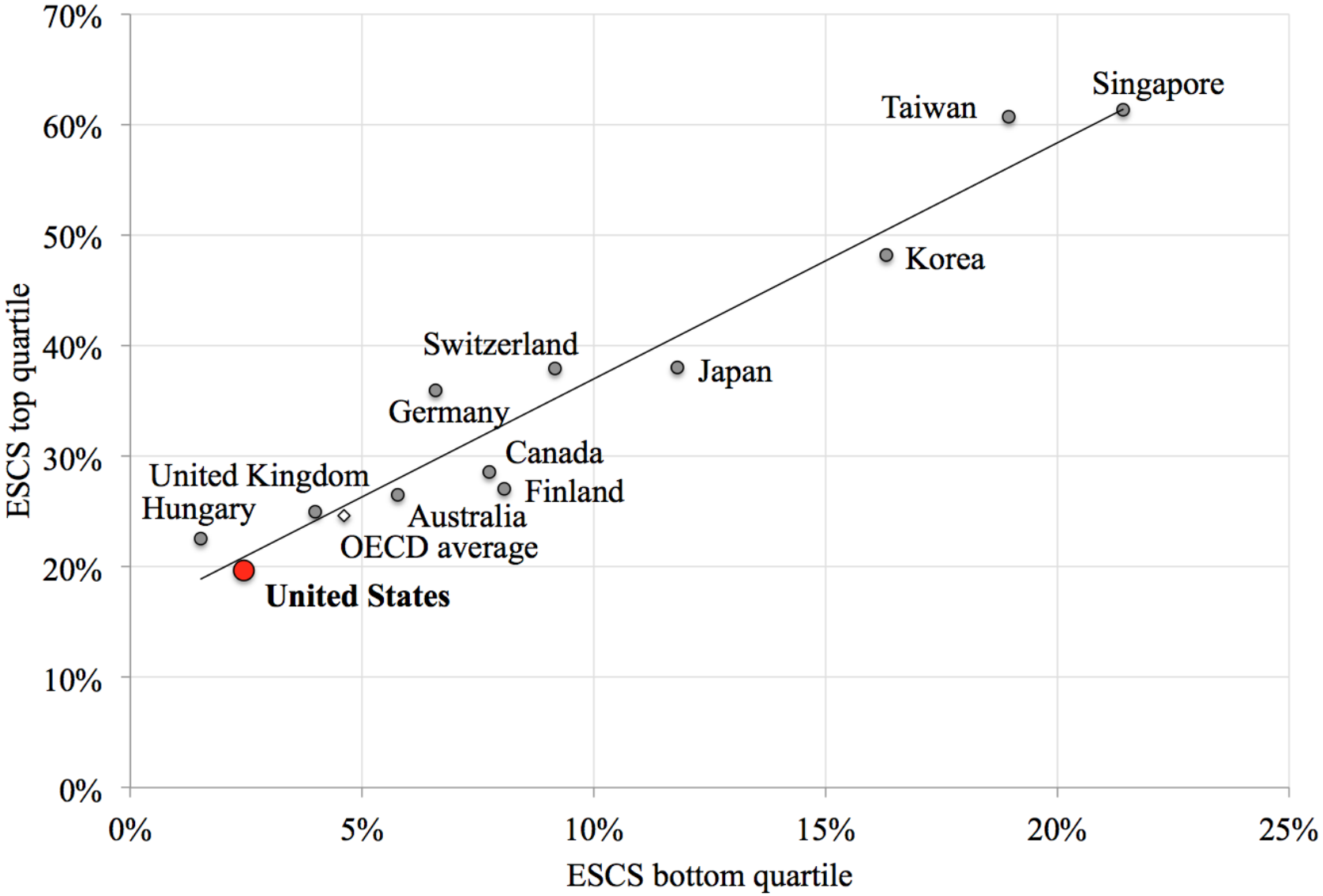


The U.S. does even worse at getting low SES kids into the high-scoring ranks

Percentage of eighth-grade students at/above NAEP advanced level in math, by race, parents' education, and FRPL eligibility, 2013

Parents' education level	Race	Eligible for FRPL (%)	Not eligible for FRPL (%)
Graduated college	Asian	15	40
	White	6	18
	Hispanic	3	9
	Black	1	5
Some college	Asian	12	12
	White	5	9
	Hispanic	3	5
	Black	2	2
Graduated high school	Asian	15	15
	White	2	4
	Hispanic	1	2
	Black	0	0
Did not finish high school	Asian	10	7
	White	1	3
	Hispanic	1	2
	Black	1	0

Percentage of students at levels 5 or 6, ESCS top and bottom quartiles, PISA math, 2012



How other countries do it: Some examples

- Japan
  - Selective high schools with exam-based admissions
- Singapore
  - Universal screening in 3rd grade
  - Separate, full-time gifted classrooms in middle grades
- Western Australia
  - Universal screening in 4th grade
  - Gifted sections of some high schools—and two gifted-only high schools
- Germany
  - Special sections in some “gymnasia” for high-ability students
- Ontario
  - Gifted education part of special education, with all the benefits and drawbacks of SpEd identification, IEPs, etc.

Toward the future: Easy moves the U.S. should make:

1. Place topic on policy agenda and revive debate about a society that pursues both excellence and equity
2. Stronger data and better research and evaluation
3. NCLB reauthorization: judge schools for gains across the achievement spectrum

Toward the future: Harder moves the U.S. should make:

4. Universal screening via achievement tests plus teacher recommendations; aim for 10 percent of students
5. School progress based on mastery, with acceleration encouraged
6. Flexible ability grouping, multiage/grade groupings, and blended learning
7. More supplemental learning opportunities outside class.

Toward the future: Harder moves the U.S. should make (continued):

8. Start young
9. Philanthropists and governments should support curricular and pedagogical innovation
10. Have some staff in every school be versed in educating smart kids