

Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Secretary-General; in conversation with Kathryn Baron, Thoughts on Public Education.

Part 1

KB: I want to get into PISA right away. One major initiative of OECD, the organization, is the exam known as [PISA](#), Programme for International Student Assessment. And it started it 2000. Right? Every three years a random sample of 15-year olds are tested in reading, math and science.

AS: Problem solving as well, digital literacy.

KB: What's included in it now?

AS: We're now working currently on an assessment of collaborative skills, collaborative problem-solving, that's in development. We hope to have it ready by 2015. We try to embrace a broader set of competencies, those skills that matter for the success of young people today.

KB: What's been the impact of PISA on countries' educational programs, since they've been seeing their results, what kinds of changes have their been?

AS: It actually varies a lot across countries, I mean in most countries PISA had an impact in the sense that countries for the first time could see themselves in the mirror of what is possible in education.

And I think what PISA has achieved is that countries were seeing themselves through the lens of other kinds of paradigms, perspectives, and it has led to some very significant changes. My own country, Germany, is a great example where people were quite surprised, shocked by the results because German came out just so-so on the performance. There are also large social disparities whereas people had believed schools get the same money, teachers get the same salaries, so things should be similar, wasn't like this; immigrant students doing quite badly.

And that led to quite a number of reforms, I mean the federal government increased investment in education by 40% within a year. That was on the financial side. But in terms of substance, teachers agreed to work, increase their working hours. So everybody made a part and if you look at the results in 2009, they were a lot better.

Japan is an interesting case, you know, they scored really well on PISA 2000, one of the top performers, but they were not happy with the kind of picture they saw. They were good at learning tasks, not so good at tasks that required students to construct responses and so on. They put effort in this and ten years later they did a lot better on that as well. So you can see, but it's not true everywhere. There were some countries where PISA has a very little, limited impact.

KB: What about the United States? What kind of impact here?

AS: I don't think there was really much of an impact in the year 2000 when the results came first. The big impact came in the year 2006. And I don't know why this happened that year, but it got a lot of attention at that point and led to initiatives among governors, the Common Core Standards Initiative was inspired by this kind of international benchmarking. The National Governor's Association issued a brief on international benchmarking, so I think it started in 2006 with quite a debate on this. I think you can see that today, I mean, there's more and more interest in the United States in other education systems, other perspectives.

KB: But in 2009 we didn't do measurably better.

AS: In science there was a little bit of progress, but no, that's quite true, overall the United States' performance has mainly been unchanged, and that also explains to some extent why the United States now relatively does worse on many indicators in OECD because in a fair number of countries there have been real improvements in outcomes.

KB: You had said in one of the discussions that I've heard you in, that's it's not so much that the United States has fallen, but all these other countries have learned from us and from PISA and they're doing better. And so when you put it in that perspective we don't look like we're doing so well. Is that...

AS: Yeah, absolutely, I mean, the world has changed. Skilled demands are rising and in many countries education is a lot more important now than it was in the past. Sort of countries realizing that their success and success of individuals and nations increasingly depends on their education performance and, so there's been a lot of effort and investment made in education in many countries really. Particularly in Asia, but not just, I think this is a general trend that systems are improving.

You can look, I mean, Brazil is an extreme case. You know in 2000 they were at the bottom of the league, really, way behind everybody else and uh, but they didn't accept those results. And they had only 50% of their 15-year-old population in school at that point. And, sort of even people having no education at all. And that has really quite significantly changed, they got more people into school, raising quality and equity, so quite a....

KB: I'm guessing that you visit a lot of classrooms around the world when you're traveling and I was wondering if you could describe what are some of the differences in classes in the top performing nations and in those that are more the middle of the road?

AS: Even that varies a lot. If you go to a class in Finland you find a very wide instruction, you find teachers really capable of seeing how different students learn differently and tailoring their instruction to individual students' needs, sort of this idea of personalization in education, you really that in a country like Finland.

If you go to Japan, you are struck by how much initiative is with students in terms of collaborative learning, opportunities for people to, for students to work together in groups in different forms of learning.

If you go to Shanghai in China, you find, I mean enormous commitment made by individual students. You really see how much attention there is, there's not a minute lost, not a second lost in instruction.

So in different, uh, what I do think is in common is that student-teacher relationships are very strong and you can see that as an outsider, sort of teachers engaging with students beyond sort of just delivering instruction. High level of interaction, a lot of initiative with the students. I think those are some of the features that you'll see across cultures, but then there are a lot of issues that are really specific still to cultures.

KB: When you were talking about that the United States hasn't really progressed that much on PISA. I know you said that there have been things like Common Core and the National Governor's Association taking this on, at the same time, at the federal level we have had Race to the Top and a lot of push toward assessment and high-stakes testing and using that to evaluate teachers. Where does that fit in with what the top performing nations are doing? Is that sort of still going in the old direction?

AS: Well I think the Common Core standards hold a lot of promise. I wouldn't underrate the potential impact they can have eventually on what happens in classrooms. You know giving, teachers giving, students giving, principals giving, parents, a clear aspiration of what good performance really looks like and it's quite well benchmarked against what high performing systems do, in terms of the ambition. I think the challenge is to translate that into instructional practices, and clearly when you compare the U.S. with high performing nations, high performing nations put perhaps less emphasis on vertical systems of accountability information management and more emphasis on lateral accountability, basically trying to enable teachers to learn from teachers, schools to learn from schools, sort of building stronger networks to share innovation.

But, I mean, Race to the Top, teacher evaluation is a very important part in many countries, not just to the U.S. I think, again, it's a matter of the methods being used, the United States putting a lot of emphasis on student learning outcomes, tests, trying to tie teacher performance to student tests. That's not what you see in many high performing nations, but teacher evaluation is also important and often pursued in other means. There's a lot more emphasis on judgment, greater trust in the profession as well, sort of greater peer learning. So, it's not that teacher evaluation is less of a topic there, but it's the kind of means those countries use that often is quite different from what you typically see here.

KB: Can you talk about trust?

AS: Yeah, you know trust is hard to build, easy to destroy. We all know that. But it's one of the striking features particularly of an education system like Finland where you do have trust among teachers in the profession, trust between government and education in delivery and they achieve this with a high level of transparency in the system. Classrooms are open, teachers watch what other teachers are doing. Information is available to parents. Sort of, trust is built through a very high level of openness and transparency in the system, but that's very hard to emulate.

But it's true I don't think just in the teaching profession, I think in any kind of knowledge based profession. You can't manage people on an assembly line, you have to rely on a profession, that's sort of obviously much harder to achieve. But, a great example, I think the Nordic countries in Europe are really very very strong on that. Some of the Asian systems, I think, are doing very well. I don't think you can, I mean, it's going to be very hard to replace trust with systems of control, no?

KB: Right. Well, where would you rank the United States in trust, particularly when it comes to teachers?

AS: Yeah, that's hard to say. I mean the mechanisms that are being used in the United States of accountability are largely one of external accountability. You don't see sort of evaluation playing the kind of role it plays in classrooms and schools that you see in some of the high performing nations, but maybe that's a reflection on the teaching force, the kind of teaching and learning, I can't judge that. But, I think, if you look at the instruments that are being used they don't reflect as much trust as sort of issues of external accountability often.

KB: What is it that gains the respect for teachers, that makes them want to go into the profession in the other countries?

AS: Well, I think, first of all, one needs to explore that with teachers themselves. I think teachers probably know what attracts them to the profession. Pay is certainly one aspect. Pay in the United States is comparatively low, it's also comparatively undifferentiated, and it's not necessarily sort of performance related pay, but the fact that there is career diversity, that there are opportunities for career progression in there, sort of that maybe result in better, more money. But, you know, take Finland again. They don't get paid that much, but they have a profession where they can engage with others, they learn from other teachers, they have a significant amount of working time that is non teaching time, sort of professional collaboration, professional development. And those things probably count as much as the money part for the attractiveness of the profession.

I basically think it's a transition from what I call industrial environment in which you work, you know, where you have someone who thinks what should be taught, someone else is delivering that, and so on, to a professional environment where those who are in the front line are owning the profession. And those things probably matter more in terms of the attractiveness than the money part. At least that's what we get from teacher surveys. The financial parts are, when you ask teachers, they usually rank sort of in the middle, but at the top end are the attributes of the work environment, support career perspectives.

If you tell a person who's 25 years old, you are in school, you are going to be a math teacher, and 25 years from now you're still going to be in that school a math teacher, you're telling young people that there is no future for them and that's very different in many of the high performing nations where you do progress and also the progression doesn't just lead into bureaucracy, you know you become a school principal, an administrator, but it is a true professional progression.

KB: In Singapore I followed someone...

AS Yeah, Singapore is a great example for those things, no?

KB: And it was interesting because they specifically talked about these three career paths so if you didn't want to go into administration you could become a master teacher or you could go into curriculum development. And so it did open up a lot more avenues within teaching that weren't just the principal's office. Is that the kind of thing that you see?

AS: Absolutely. You know, I think if you tell people that you're a teacher and then you become a bureaucrat, you're telling them that their profession itself isn't valued really, I think if you build a career path where it's in the profession, you know, you can become a teacher, a better teacher, you can become a teacher of other teachers, you can become a curriculum developer and so on, then you give a very different aspiration of the value that you place upon a profession. And, you'll retain your best teachers in the profession.

KB: Andreas Schleicher, thank you very much for speaking with us today. I'm Kathryn Baron and this is Thoughts on Public Education.