

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 2

KB: What role does the union play in places like Germany or Finland?

AS: I think we have systems where our unions are actually protagonists of reform. I think it varies a lot across countries. In a sense you could say every education system gets the union it deserves. I think the way the unions work is often a reflection of the way an education system in structures.

If you have an industrial work environment you get unions that defend industrial interests. If you have a professional environment the union has to work a lot harder to support their profession. Unions are paid by their members and their members are a lot more demanding in a work environment.

You spoke about performance based pay, you know, Sweden is a country where the unions have worked with the government is on a system of individual pay, performance related. So this can be done with the unions, it's just a matter of how to do them and I think Part of the issue is that high performing countries usually involved the unions, not just in implementation of reforms, but in the design of reforms. So they're part of the picture from the beginning. That doesn't mean necessarily a cozy relationship, there's always confrontation, but it means that everybody knows what's the objective and what they are trying to do.

Canada, the province of Ontario is a really good example that has turned around that relationship between government and unions in a very short time, into one that is really collaborative, constructive.

I think it varies a lot across countries. I think the worst situations are countries like Mexico, where there is just no dialogue, no interaction, and then you get very negative attitudes on both parts.

KB: Where do we fit in in the United States?

AS: I think there is a lot of variability, the U.S. is quite varied. Clearly, I think most countries can learn a lot in how to improve that work relationship, and unions as well, to become sort of true owners of a profession other than just of the small slice that is related to salaries and working hours and things like this.

KB: I want to get into the diversity issues and how that relates to PISA scores, because that has been one area where PISA has been criticized a lot, particularly with regard to the United States. We're a very heterogeneous population in terms of socio-economic backgrounds, language and urban/rural, people come from a lot of different cultural backgrounds. We have one of the poorest, in terms of proportion; we have one of the poorest student populations. And I'm wondering, is it fair to not really look at that when you're ranking states, countries based on PISA?

AS: Actually, we do look at that quite intensely when we compare countries. You spoke of Singapore, Singapore's a lot more diverse on most of the dimensions that you outlined; on wealth, on religion, on ethnic background, on linguistic background. But what that country succeeds with is moderating that diversity.

You're quite right that the context of an education system is a challenge, but the test of truth for an education system is how it moderates that context. And you go to Sweden, they have a high proportion of immigrants and many of these immigrants, for much more sort of challenging backgrounds than in the United States, linguistically, socio-economically, they take on a lot of refugees that have no place to go. But Sweden succeeds in integrating those people very quickly.

So I think that it's true countries have their different challenges. I wouldn't rate the United States as having that much of a challenge compared to many other nations, but still, I think it's important to reflect it. But, we need to measure the success of systems to cope with it and to moderate diversity and what you have to conclude when you look at those data is that there are a lot of countries that are a lot more successful than the United States in moderating socio-economic diversity, that is students from different backgrounds come out more equal rather than in the United States where they come out more unequal, they grow in the system. It's not only the United States, my country Germany has very much the same kinds of problems, but I think we need to recognize that there are some systems doing a lot better.

And again, that shows what is possible. The interesting issue of international comparisons is not to rank countries on any dimension but to show really what you can achieve. Look toward Singapore, look toward China, all countries with huge social challenges and still they succeed to get, to sort of capitalize on the talent of different people. They see diversity not as the problem of the education system, but in a sense the potential of good learning, good instruction.

KB: Of course those are smaller countries. For instance Finland, the entire population is smaller than the student population of California. So you have that. And some of those countries you mentioned, even in Shanghai and in Singapore have a very powerful central government, and in this country it's really the states and further down into the local districts that determine a lot of what happens. So, is there an example of a place, a country, or even a state within a country where you can say here's what they did on a smaller scale, here's someone who learned from PISA and has started to make those changes?

AS: In the United States I think there are a lot of states who are really working very hard to, not just from PISA, but they have looked at PISA and they looked at what high performing nations do. I've been to Delaware; they've been very intensively looking at it. But I think that a lot of states now that are actually trying to do that.

Yeah, you know the size of systems, there are a lot of aspects in which countries differ but, you know, if all countries would be the same we couldn't learn anything from each other. I think that diversity is exactly where I think the wealth of the information is, and you can see on any of the dimensions in which the United States is challenged, you mentioned immigration, you mentioned social rank and poverty, you'll find countries that

are a lot worse off. And then if you find some among them that do a better job that's opening up possibilities to look at, you know.

I would actually argue, I mean if you look at this seriously, you find that overall the United States is really well positioned. The United States is one of the richest countries in the world, the United States has one of the best educated adult populations, which means that parents are better educated in the United States than they are in other countries, and that surely is a big asset for the education of your children. You find that poverty in the United States is a problem but it's actually much less of a problem than in many industrialized countries.

But again, you know, looking at how different systems, it's not just looking at the challenges that's important, but more interesting is how different systems deal with the challenges.

KB In other countries is there much of a debate about what students should be learning? In the United States we have still a lot of debate over whether we should be teaching religion in schools and religious beliefs. Is that very far behind where other countries are right now?

AS: I think the struggle in finding, you know, what are the kind of competencies, the knowledge, skills, attitudes that are important in life, that are important in school, that is a debate that every country has. It's a continual debate because the demand for skills is changing everyday in life, in work and so on and so there's a lot of curriculum reform and standards reform going on in a lot of countries. And it's not just whether to teach math or science, it's how to teach those things. Those fields evolve a lot. Science, environmental science probably was much less important in the past than it is today. Countries are paying a lot more attention to those aspects. Collaborative skills; we know that in today's world you no longer work by yourself, innovation is no longer about you having a great idea but about how you can collaborate, share, develop jointly ideas and so on.

I think there is a lot of discussion in many countries about this. Also there's a lot of controversy. Who should decide? Is it something that academics should decide, as in some countries. Is it something that people from all fields of life and work should decide? Very very important debates.

KB: What's the big question that schools or education systems should ask in order to start developing a better system? Where do you begin?

AS: You mean in terms of curriculum development?

KB: Let's take the United States, what would be the first three things that we should start to do in order to bring ourselves back up to that top of the pack?

AS: Yeah, I think that first step is what the United States has done, is develop a set of clear aspirations of what good performance looks like, like the Common Core standards. I think that's a very very important starting point and it's again, quite well benchmarked against what happens internationally.

The second step then, is a harder one, and that is basically building that capacity for delivering those Common Core standards at the frontline, and that's about attracting the best people into the teaching profession, developing those into really great teachers, building the kind of support for continuous professional development and so on. That's the big challenge, I think, that is in front of the United States, sort of, to build really a high quality teaching profession. Otherwise these Common Core standards remain an aspiration.

And the third aspect for the United States is probably even more difficult, but it's about finding a more equitable approach to resourcing, finding ways to attract the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms to get the best principals into the most difficult schools, to ensure that spending is no longer regressive as it is currently. But that basically the money gets there where the challenges are greatest and where money can make most of the difference.

KB: So one final question. In a country like this with 50 states and thousands and thousands of school districts, that each have a measure of autonomy, how do we get to the frontlines, how do we get those resources and the conversation happening?

AS: I think the governance issue always difficult, but in most high performing systems schools have greater autonomy than they have in the United States. Autonomy doesn't have to be in conflict with strong governance systems.

I don't believe that if you had a central government that could decide on all these things there would be any necessarily anything better. Canada is a federal country that's really very successful. Again, countries have strong sets of school autonomy. I think the question is to build greater coherence in this, to build greater articulation and you know, having sort of the Common Core standards, are states really figuring what education should be achieving, but then building a lot more capacity at the front line to actually implement this. What should I teach to my students today in this setting? I think that's the challenge. I don't really think that the governance architecture in the United States should stand in the way of improvement.

And it's not so, I think the only area where the United States is really different from any high performing systems is the high level of discretion that is with districts. I would actually think that the United States has a lot of power at the district level, but actually quite less power than many other countries at the school level, from our data at least. And I think that teachers, schools do have the means they need to address their own learning environment.

I don't think that's so negative. I don't think that's the governance structures necessarily stand in the way of improvement.

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