



Doc H's Blog

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Four big myths about top-performing school systems

I came across an interesting article recently on results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The PISA evaluates education systems worldwide by testing 15-year-olds in key subjects.

The man in charge of the PISA tests, Andreas Schleicher, the Director of education and skills with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), says the evidence from around the world reveals some big myths about what makes for a successful education system. Due to space, I have provided only four of the seven myths.

While you may or may not agree with the author's interpretation of the results, the findings should certainly encourage additional discussion regarding the U.S. education system.

1. Disadvantaged pupils are doomed to do badly in school

Teachers all around the world struggle with how to make up for social disadvantage in their classrooms. Some believe that deprivation is destiny. And yet, results from PISA tests show that the 10 percent most disadvantaged 15-year-olds in Shanghai have better math skills than the 10 percent most privileged students in the United States and several European countries.

[Children from similar social backgrounds can show very different performance levels](#), depending on the school they go to or the country they live in. Education systems where disadvantaged students succeed are able to moderate social inequalities. They tend to attract the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms and the most capable school leaders to the most disadvantaged schools, thus challenging all students with high standards and excellent teaching.

Some American critics of international educational comparisons argue that the value of these comparisons is limited because the United States has some unique socio-economic divisions. But the United States is wealthier than most countries and spends more money on education than most of them; its parents have a higher level of education than in most countries; and the share of socio-economically disadvantaged students is just around the OECD average. What the comparisons do show is that socio-economic disadvantage has a particularly strong impact on student performance in the United States. In other words, in the United States two students from different socio-economic backgrounds vary much more in their learning outcomes than is typically the case in OECD countries.

2. Immigrants lower results

Integrating students with an immigrant background can be challenging. And yet, results from PISA tests show [no relationship between the share of students with an immigrant background in a country and the overall performance of students in that country](#). Even students with the same migration history and background show very different performance levels across countries, suggesting that where students go to schools makes much more of a difference than where they come from.

3. It's all about money

South Korea, the highest-performing OECD country in mathematics, spends well below the average per student. The world is no longer divided between rich and well-educated countries and poor and badly-educated ones. Success in education systems is [no longer about how much money is spent, but about how money is spent](#). Countries need to invest in improving education and skills if they are going to compete in an increasingly knowledge-based global economy. And yet, educational expenditure per student explains less than 20 percent of the variation in student performance across OECD countries.

For example, students in the Slovak Republic, which spends around \$53,000 (£35,000) per student between the age of 6 and 15, perform on average at the same level at age 15 as the United States which spends over \$115,000 (£76,000) per student.

4. Smaller class sizes raise standards

Everywhere, teachers, parents and policy-makers favor small classes as the key to better and more personalized education. Reductions in class size have also been the main reason behind the significant increases in expenditure per student in most countries over the last decade. And yet, PISA results show [no relationship between class size and learning outcomes](#), neither within nor across countries. More interestingly, the highest performing education systems in PISA tend to systematically prioritize the quality of teachers over the size of classes. Wherever they have to make a choice between a smaller class and a better teacher, they go for the latter. Rather than putting money into small classes, they invest in competitive teacher salaries, ongoing professional development and a balance in working time.

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