

OPEN LETTER TO ANDREAS SCHLEICHER, OECD, PARIS

Dear Dr. Schleicher:

We write to you in your capacity as OECD's director of the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA). Now in its 13th year, PISA is known around the world as an instrument to rank OECD and non-OECD countries (60+ at last count) according to a measure of academic achievement of 15 year old students in mathematics, science, and reading. Administered every three years, PISA results are anxiously awaited by governments, education ministers, and the editorial boards of newspapers, and are cited authoritatively in countless policy reports. They have begun to deeply influence educational practices in many countries. As a result of PISA, countries are overhauling their education systems in the hopes of improving their rankings. Lack of progress on PISA has led to declarations of crisis and "PISA shock" in many countries, followed by calls for resignations, and far-reaching reforms according to PISA precepts.

We are frankly concerned about the negative consequences of the PISA rankings. These are some of our concerns:

- -while standardized testing has been used in many nations for decades (despite serious reservations about its validity and reliability), PISA has contributed to an escalation in such testing and a dramatically increased reliance on quantitative measures. For example, in the United States, PISA has been invoked as a major justification for the recent "Race to the Top" program, which has increased the use of standardized testing for student-, teacher-, and administrator evaluations, which rank and label students, as well as teachers and administrators according to the results of tests widely known to be imperfect (see, for example, Finland's unexplained decline from the top of the PISA table);

- -in education policy, PISA, with its three-year assessment cycle, has caused a shift of attention to short-term fixes designed to help a country quickly climb the rankings, despite research showing that enduring changes in education practice take decades, not a few years to come to fruition. For example, we know that the status of teachers and the prestige of teaching as a profession has a strong influence on the quality of instruction, but that status varies strongly across cultures and is not easily influenced by short-term policy;
- -by emphasizing a narrow range of measurable aspects of education, PISA takes attention away from the less measurable or immeasurable educational objectives like physical, moral, civic, and artistic development, thereby dangerously narrowing our collective imagination regarding what education is and ought to be about;
- -as an organization of economic development, OECD is naturally biased in favor of the economic role of public schools. But preparing young men and women for gainful employment is not the only, and not even the main goal of public education, which has to prepare students for participation in democratic self-government, moral action, and a life of personal development, growth, and well-being;
- -unlike United Nations (UN) organizations such as UNESCO or UNICEF that have clear and legitimate mandates to improve education and the lives of children around the world, OECD has no such mandate. Nor are there, at present, mechanisms of effective democratic participation in its education decision-making process;
- -to carry out PISA and a host of follow-up services, OECD has embraced “public-private partnerships” and entered into alliances with multi-national for-profit companies, which stand to gain financially from any deficits—real or perceived—unearthed by PISA. Some of these companies provide educational services to American schools and school districts on a massive, for-profit basis, while also pursuing plans to develop for-profit elementary

education in Africa, where OECD is now planning to introduce the PISA program;

- -finally, and most importantly: the new PISA regime, with its continuous cycle of global testing, harms our children and impoverishes our classrooms, as it inevitably involves more and longer batteries of multiple-choice testing, more scripted “vendor”-made lessons, and less autonomy for our teachers. In this way PISA has further increased the already high stress-level in our schools, which endangers the well-being of our students and teachers.
- These developments are in overt conflict with widely accepted principles of good educational and democratic practice:
- -no reform of any consequence should be based on a single narrow measure of quality;
- -no reform of any consequence should ignore the important role of non-educational factors, among which a nation’s socio-economic inequality is paramount. In many countries, including the United States, inequality has dramatically increased over the past 15 years, explaining the widening educational gap between rich and poor which education reforms, no matter how sophisticated, are unlikely to redress;
- -an organization like OECD, as any organization that deeply affects the life of our communities, should be open to democratic accountability by members of those communities.
- We are writing not only to point out deficits and problems. We would also like to offer constructive ideas and suggestions that may help to alleviate the above mentioned concerns. While in no way complete, they illustrate how learning could be improved without the above mentioned negative effects:
- -develop alternatives to league tables: explore more meaningful and less easily sensationalized ways of reporting assessment outcomes. For example, comparing developing countries, where 15-year olds are regularly drafted into child labor, with first world countries makes neither educational

nor political sense and opens OECD up for charges of educational colonialism;

- -make room for participation by the full range of relevant constituents and scholarship: to date, the groups with greatest influence on what and how international learning is assessed are psychometricians, statisticians, and economists. They certainly deserve a seat at the table, but so do many other groups: parents, educators, administrators, community leaders, students, as well as scholars from disciplines like anthropology, sociology, history, philosophy, linguistics, as well as the arts and humanities. What and how we assess the education of 15 year old students should be subject to discussions involving all these groups at local, national, and international levels;
- -include national and international organizations in the formulation of assessment methods and standards whose mission goes beyond the economic aspect of public education and which are concerned with the health, human development, well-being and happiness of students and teachers. This would include the above mentioned United Nations organizations, as well as teacher, parent, and administrator associations, to name a few;
- -publish the direct and indirect costs of administering PISA so that taxpayers in member countries can gauge alternative uses of the millions of dollars spent on these tests and determine if they want to continue their participation in it;
- -welcome oversight by independent international monitoring teams which can observe the administration of PISA from the conception to the execution, so that questions about test format and statistical and scoring procedures can be weighed fairly against charges of bias or unfair comparisons;
- -provide detailed accounts regarding the role of private, for-profit companies in the preparation, execution, and follow-up to the tri-annual PISA assessments to avoid the appearance or reality of conflicts of interest;

- -slow down the testing juggernaut. To gain time to discuss the issues mentioned here at local, national, and international levels, consider skipping the next PISA cycle. This would give time to incorporate the collective learning that will result from the suggested deliberations in a new and improved assessment model.
- We assume that OECD's PISA experts are motivated by a sincere desire to improve education. But we fail to understand how your organization has become the global arbiter of the means and ends of education around the world. OECD's narrow focus on standardized testing risks turning learning into drudgery and killing the joy of learning. As PISA has led many governments into an international competition for higher test scores, OECD has assumed the power to shape education policy around the world, with no debate about the necessity or limitations of OECD's goals. We are deeply concerned that measuring a great diversity of educational traditions and cultures using a single, narrow, biased yardstick could, in the end, do irreparable harm to our schools and our students.

Sincerely,

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and

Katie Zahedi (Principal, Linden Ave Middle School, Red Hook, New York)

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