



Schools in rich countries are making poor progress

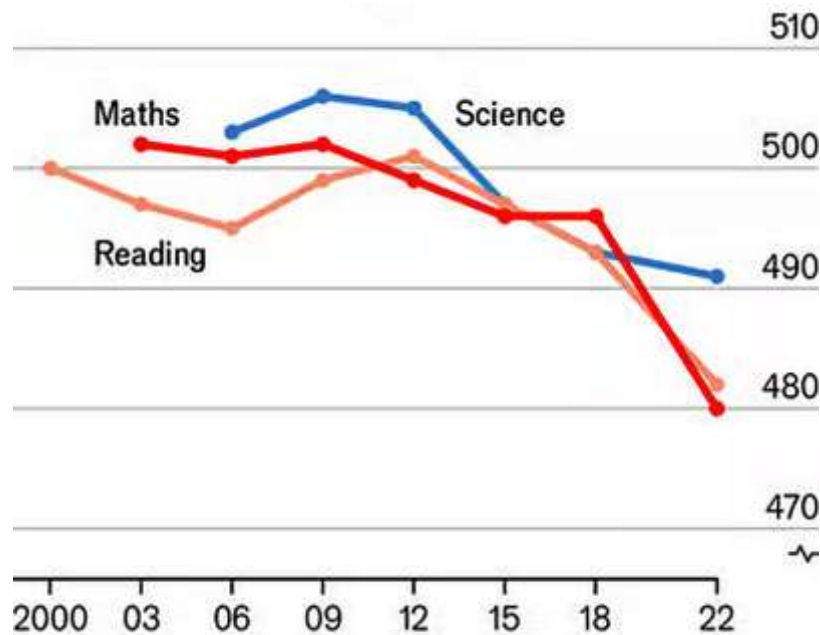
They need to get back to basics, argues Mark Johnson

[The Economist, Jul 7th 2024](#)

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic ejected millions of children from their classrooms, schools across America were stuck in a rut. For 50 years the country has tracked pupils' performance in **maths** and **reading** through its National Assessment of Educational Progress, a series of reference tests that are sometimes referred to as the "Nation's Report Card". For most of those five decades, scores kept improving. But they reached a plateau in the early 2010s. By 2020 test scores had started edging down.

The kids are not alright

OECD countries, average PISA test scores *



Source: OECD

*20 points is equivalent to one year of schooling

chart: the economist



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Test scores in many other rich countries (the focus of this special report) also show gloomy trends. For two decades analysts at the OECD, a club of mostly rich countries, have been asking 15-year-olds in dozens of places to sit comparable exams for what is known as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In 2018 these tests found that a typical 15-year-old in the OECD countries was no more adept at maths, reading or science than had been the case in the early and mid-2000s (see chart). In science and reading, scores had generally risen until 2009 and 2012 respectively, after which they fell back down. In maths they largely plateaued. This was the case even though spending per pupil had been going up.

PISA is not the only available source of international test data. Exams organised every few years by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, an outfit with its headquarters in the Netherlands, sometimes produce more positive results. They nonetheless show that a number of rich countries posted scores that were flat or falling in the years leading up to the pandemic. A dataset published last year by Nadir Altinok and Claude Diebolt, two economists, crunches results from a variety of international tests in an attempt to sketch out the path that national school systems have followed over time. **Their numbers imply that the quality of schooling in a batch of 20 rich places rose fairly swiftly in the 1980s and 1990s, but that progress has since tailed off.**

The problem is not that improvement has lately looked impossible. In recent years some of the world's best school systems have continued making gains. In Singapore—whose teenagers beat all others in the latest round of PISA tests, carried out in 2022—scores rose even during the pandemic. But such rising stars in Asia contrast with Western systems that are making little headway or, in some cases, are in perilous decline. Over the last decade few countries have seen their scores fall faster and harder than Finland, which was once a darling of reformers, but which now looks much more ordinary. Other OECD countries that appear to be going backwards include France, Germany, the Netherlands and New Zealand (see chart).

Efforts to explain poor progress fall roughly into two buckets. **The first holds that pupils are changing in ways that have made it harder for schools to keep yielding improvements.** By this thinking, a plateau in outcomes is a



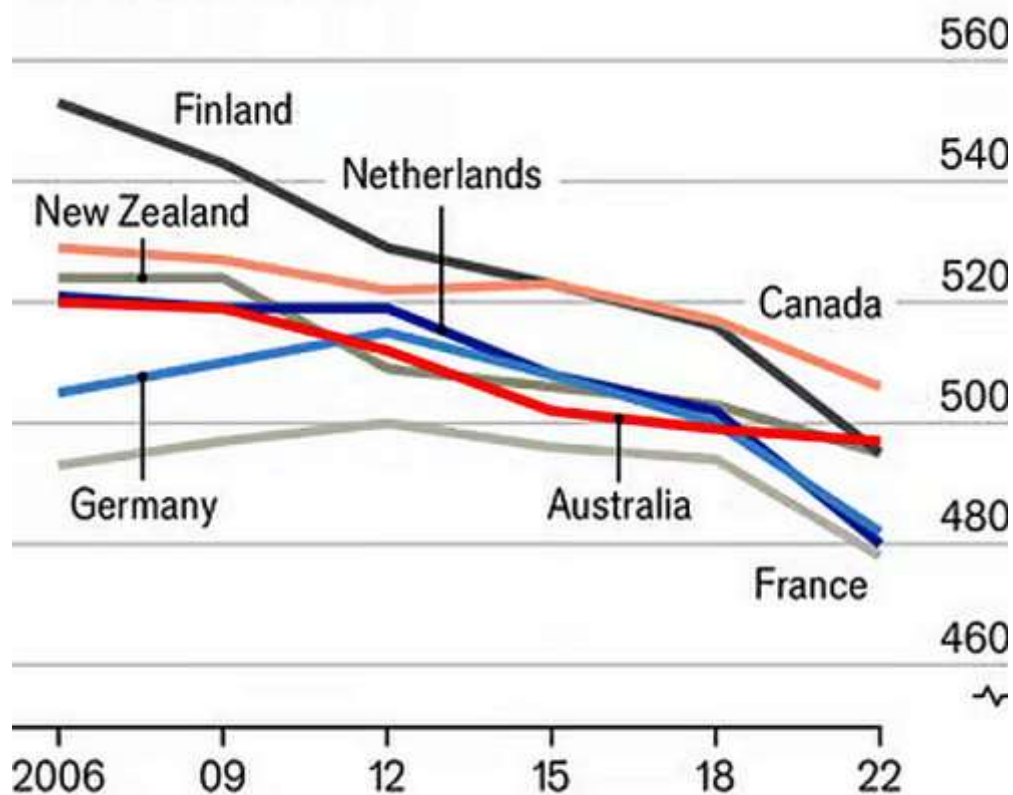
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reasonable achievement, because schools are having to run faster just to stand still.

Decline and Fall

PISA test scores, average of maths, reading and science



Source: OECD

chart: the economist

Rising migration may play an important role in this. In Germany the share of teenagers who are first- or second-generation immigrants doubled between 2012 and 2022, from 13% to 26%. There were also big increases in Britain, Austria and Switzerland. **Brand new arrivals are commonly poorer than their peers, and more likely to speak a foreign language at home.**

More broadly, this argument goes, the big economic shocks of the last two decades are weighing down learning. In the years after the great financial crisis, the share of children in relative poverty (those in households with less



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than half the median disposable income) increased in 20 of the 33 OECD-member countries where such data was available. By 2018 there were still 13 countries (of the 33) with poverty rates that were higher than ten years before. Children learn less if they are sick or hungry, or if chaotic homes prevent them from turning up to every lesson. Children who fall behind in school as a result of such hardships can fail to catch up even if their parents' finances improve.

Put away your phones please

Some also point to growing rates of anxiety and other mental-health issues among children. In 2022 about 18% of teenagers rated their life satisfaction at four or less out of ten, according to data from the OECD—up from 11% in 2015. **It has been popular to blame social media for this, but the data do not yet bear that out.** A stronger case can be made that screens are affecting their studies. **More than 60% of rich-world pupils say that their phone or tablet sometimes distracts them during school lessons.** Pupils who report spending a lot of time fiddling with devices in school score lower than others in international tests.

The second bucket of explanations accuses policy-makers of neglecting the fundamentals of education, or pursuing wrong-headed reforms.

Raising standards in schools is trickier than driving improvements in most other areas of public policy, says Montse Gomendio, a former education minister for Spain. Policy conflicts about schooling are more intense and “asymmetrical” than in other spheres of government. Pupils and their families are rarely organised; this makes it easier for **teachers' unions to resist changes to, say, teacher training and evaluation that could push up results.** Meanwhile leaders are asked to spend political capital on changes that might not bear fruit for years.

Such obstacles are less daunting when schooling rides high in the public's priorities. Yet across rich countries that no longer is as common as it once was. In the early 2000s Germany's poor performance in international tests led to a furore that drove changes; in the years that followed, test scores shot back up. For the last decade, though, they have declined again—only this time the public has taken much less interest, argues Ludger Woessmann, an economist of education at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.



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Developing brainiacs is the most reliable way to stoke economic growth. In some systems, grade-inflation may offer false reassurance. In 2019 the typical grade-point average of an American high-schooler was 3.11, up from 2.94 two decades earlier. A recent study by ACT, which makes college-admissions tests, shows that between 2010 and 2021 performance in its exams fell, even as the grades teachers were awarding ticked upwards. Schools grew more generous during the pandemic; that seems to have stuck. **In American classrooms pupils are getting about the same grades as they did in 2019—even though no one much doubts that, because of pandemic disruptions, they have fallen further behind.**

Slow progress in education is imposing big costs. To the extent that tests accurately gauge abilities in the most basic fundamental skills, stagnation in scores is a disaster. Around a quarter of 15-year-olds in OECD-member countries do not meet basic proficiency in maths, reading and science, according to standards set by PISA. That means 16m teenagers struggle with tasks involving numeracy or find it more difficult than they should to draw meaning from basic texts.

A mass of research shows that developing brainiacs is the most reliable and lasting way to stoke economic growth. A few years ago Professor Woessmann and Eric Hanushek, an economist at Stanford, modelled the benefits that might flow from pushing up maths and science skills in the workforce by an amount equivalent to around 25 points on PISA tests (roughly the gap that separates American teenagers' maths scores from those of their more numerate British peers). They found that this would increase annual GDP growth in rich countries by half a percentage point. They reckon that if a country were to start pumping out these smarter youngsters in 2030, it would finish the century with an economy about 30% larger than otherwise.

School systems need to get cracking. The longer they moulder, the harder they will be to revitalise. In America, a sense of fatigue towards education reform discourages foundations and philanthropists from investing in experiments that might help. People are growing ever more inclined to ignore bad news from assessments, or to convince themselves that the methods for gauging progress are biased against particular groups of kids. **Shiny reform ideas for which there is little evidence win support, while more boring**



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fixes go ignored. This report will explore debates that presently preoccupy school reformers, in search of ideas that might help bring schooling's stagnation to an end. ■

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