

# Foreword

Up to the end of the 1990s, OECD comparisons of education outcomes were mainly based on measures of years of schooling, which is not a reliable indicator of what people actually know and can do. With the Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, we tried to change this. The transformational idea behind PISA lay in testing the knowledge and skills of students directly, through a metric that was internationally agreed upon; linking that with data from students, teachers, schools and systems to understand performance differences; and then harnessing the power of collaboration to act on the data, both by creating shared points of reference and by leveraging peer pressure.

The aim with PISA was not to create another layer of top-down accountability, but to help schools and policy makers shift from looking upwards within the bureaucracy towards looking outwards to the next teacher, the next school, the next country. In essence, PISA counts what counts, and makes that information available to educators and policy makers so they can make more informed decisions.

The OECD countries that initiated PISA tried to make PISA different from traditional assessments in other ways too. In a world that rewards individuals increasingly not just for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know, PISA goes beyond assessing whether students can reproduce what they have learned in school. To do well in PISA, students have to be able to extrapolate from what they know, think across the boundaries of subject-matter disciplines, apply their knowledge creatively in novel situations and demonstrate effective learning strategies. If all we do is teach our children what we know, they might remember enough to follow in our footsteps; but if we teach them how to learn, they can go anywhere they want.

Some people argued that the PISA tests are unfair, because they confront students with problems they have not encountered in school. But life is unfair, because the real test in life is not whether we can remember what we learned at school yesterday, but whether we will be able to solve problems that we can't possibly anticipate today.

But the greatest strength of PISA lies in its working methods. Most assessments are centrally planned and then contracted to engineers who build them. That's how tests are created that are owned by a company – but not by the people who are needed to change education. PISA turned that on its head. The idea of PISA attracted the world's best thinkers and mobilised hundreds of experts, educators and scientists from the participating countries to build a global assessment. Today, we would call that crowdsourcing; but whatever we call it, it created the ownership that was critical for success.

In a nutshell, PISA owes its success to a collaborative effort between the participating countries, the national and international experts and institutions working within the framework of the PISA Consortium, and the OECD Secretariat. Subject-matter experts, practitioners and policy makers from the participating countries worked tirelessly to build agreement on which learning outcomes are important to measure and how to measure them best; to design and validate assessment tasks that can reflect those measures adequately and accurately across countries and cultures; and to find ways to compare the results meaningfully and reliably. The OECD Secretariat co-ordinated this effort and worked with countries to make sense of the results and compile this report.

Over the past two decades, PISA has become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity and efficiency of school systems, and an influential force for education reform. It has helped policy makers lower the cost of political action by backing difficult decisions with evidence – but it has also raised the political cost of inaction by exposing areas where policy and practice have been unsatisfactory. Today, PISA brings together more than 90 countries, representing 80% of the world economy, in a global conversation about education.

While measurement is the means, the purpose of PISA is to help countries look outwards and incorporate the results of that learning into policy and practice. That outward-looking perspective also seems to be a common trait of many high-performing education systems: they are open to the world and ready to learn from and with the world's education leaders; they do not feel threatened by alternative ways of thinking.

In the end, the laws of physics apply. If we stop pedalling, not only will we not move forward, our bicycles will stop moving at all and will fall over – and we will fall with them. Against strong headwinds, we need to push ourselves even harder. But in the face of challenges and opportunities as great as any that have gone before, human beings need not be passive or inert. We have agency, the ability to anticipate and the power to frame our actions with purpose. The best-performing PISA countries show

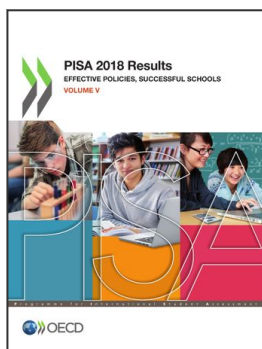
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us that high-quality and equitable education is an attainable goal, that it is within our means to deliver a future for millions of learners who currently do not have one, and that our task is not to make the impossible possible, but to make the possible attainable.



**Andreas Schleicher**

Director for Education and Skills  
Special Advisor on Education Policy  
to the Secretary-General



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