

Interview with Dr. Andreas Schleicher

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Dr. Andreas Schleicher

Dr. Andreas Schleicher is Director for Education and Skills at the OECD. He initiated and oversees the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other international instruments that have created a global platform for policy-makers, researchers and educators across nations and cultures to innovate and transform educational policies and practices.

UTMJ: Could you tell us a bit about yourself and your work?

AS: I am the director for Education and Skills at the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). We pursue international comparisons by looking at the experiences of global education systems and their successes. Our most well-known effort is the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) where every three years we assess the quality of learning among students. We know how long students spend in classrooms and how much money is spent, but we know little about how students can apply their knowledge creatively. We're not only interested in cognitive skills, but also social and emotional development. These are often hard to measure with traditional tools, so at the OECD we design and develop new tools to conduct these comparisons.

UTMJ: Is it reasonable to say that COVID-19 has created an educational crisis worldwide?

AS: I think so. Young people are least vulnerable to the virus itself, but conversely, they suffered among the most from public policy responses. About 1.5 billion students are locked out of schools. School closures not only impact learning, but also social interaction, engagement with an organized environment, and connection with teachers. At the OECD, we're trying to determine how we can reconcile this health situation with education. There are no clear-cut answers nor precedence, so we try to help countries learn from each other.

UTMJ: Which groups are most impacted by this crisis?

AS: Well, remote learning works well for high school students, but it's difficult for early years and primary grades. Early childhood education is all about social-emotional development, and a tablet can't help much there. Second, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially those without access to digital resources or home support, have suffered greatly. These kinds of social disparities exist both within and between countries.

UTMJ: Where should we focus our efforts to target specifically these populations?

AS: I think the first step is to re-establish education, and this is a prerequisite to rebuilding and restructuring learning. The crisis has taught us that we need to rethink what we focus on in school. What matters most now is your capacity to be resilient and work together despite differences. We must think harder about what knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values education needs to provide to make people fit for the future. The second thing is doubling our efforts toward disadvantaged students. Some countries have responded well by planning for students to learn during holidays and receive additional support, but more needs to happen. From experience, disparities that exist in school only grow wider throughout life, and public policy can make a difference. We also need to be smarter about integrating technology and learning. Learning is not a place, it's an activity, and we need to capitalize on development of, for example, augmented reality, learning analytics, and big data.

UTMJ: What are some of the other short-term impacts of school closures?

AS: Violence at home for children has been an issue. As a teacher, when you see a student with bruises on their face you can call social workers and parents. Similarly, child obesity is increasing with decreased activity and there are many other issues around the child well-being. Some of these are hard to measure and generalize, but there are many reports of this nature.

UTMJ: What are some of the long-term impacts of school closures?

AS: Well, if you learn less in school, you will be a less productive worker. We think that Canadians affected by this CO-

COVID-19 school generation will see approximately 3% less lifetime earnings. This translates to hundreds of billions of dollars lost due to less opportunity. It's a large price to pay, and it's very inequitably distributed. This is not even mentioning the social costs. What about students who have lost their connection to learning? Maybe you didn't like school before and during COVID-19 you turned elsewhere. Are we going to get those people back? I don't know.

UTMJ: Noting all the negative impacts of school closures, how do we reconcile the health situation with education?

AS: I think the biggest question is how we make trade-offs between the present and future. As an individual, you think about how much spend today and how much to invest in the future. As a country, you make the same decisions. Education means you invest in people today to have a more cohesive and productive environment for tomorrow. In a way, your schools today will be your society tomorrow.

This link is most notable in East Asian countries, who have been very successful in improving their education systems because they're willing to invest their last resources, effort and finances on them. In the western world, we've already spent those resources on ourselves. I think it's a very difficult trade-off that greatly impacts our future.

UTMJ: In the Western world, what are some of the issues with our education system?

AS: One of the biggest challenges I've seen in the last 10-15 years is a growing trend of commodification of education. Students became consumers, schools became passive, teachers became service providers, and parents became clients. This has created a distance that isn't conducive to education. Learning is not some service industry, it's a society-wide project. COVID-19 has helped with this. I think parents are paying more attention to the education of their children and teachers are paying more attention to how individual students learn differently, especially in the online environment.

I also believe the education industry needs to draw on other experts and professions. This is not the time for instructors, rather coaches, mentors, facilitators, and evaluators. I think a lot of people with different skills can come together. This is also the time for public to work with private, instead of competing. Especially with technological solutions, there are many synergies we can build with these partnerships.

UTMJ: This seems like an educational revolution.

AS: I think you have revolutions in many different places, but whether they will scale up is unclear. There's a risk they slip back into a worse status quo. We could end up with

complete fragmentation of education where people turn to their own solutions.

Some countries like China have seen great implementation of technology in their school systems. Teachers have collaborated in unprecedented ways to develop and design new learning environments. With the pandemic, we have seen efforts to completely reconfigure the people, spaces, technology, and time, that's quite a courageous step. You have probably seen less reform but more change in education than ever before.

UTMJ: What do you mean by more change but less reform?

AS: Often what we do in education is add another process on top, like add a new curriculum or new level of teacher education. However, very little changes in the classroom. Looking at the learning outcome scores for a country like Canada, there have been marginal improvements over the past 20 years but no transformational reform.

Now by change, I mean what happens in the minds of students: their attitudes, aspirations, knowledge, and skills. I think we've seen the emergence of new skillsets like a greater emphasis on teamwork. Before the pandemic, we talked a lot about agency and your capacity to do something. Now people talk about co-agency – how do we work with people who are different from us. For example, wearing masks carries a social responsibility. Our individual actions have implications for others and what others do has implications for us. I think this is an interesting development.

UTMJ: How might health care professionals contribute to education?

AS: Healthcare and education are tightly interdependent – you're not going to learn very well in school if you're not healthy. I think teachers need to be more aware of the emotional, social and physical well-being of their students and healthcare workers need a better sense that emotional health really depends on education. Maybe schooling in the future post-pandemic will not just be an academic institution, but also a place where healthcare professionals, education professionals, and psychologists will work closer together.

UTMJ: What are the next steps for the OECD?

AS: Our priority is to accompany countries through the recovery process economically, socially and educationally. In my Directorate, this means building better schools and universities by re-imagining what we need for the future. In a time of artificial intelligence, we need to ask ourselves what it means to be human. This is centre to our future work at the OECD.