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Interview with Andreas Schleicher

Padraig O'Malley

This interview took place on March 17, 2014, in Washington, DC, with Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills, and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Schleicher is responsible for the Directorate of Education and Skills' research, analysis, and publication of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the OECD Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC), the OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS), and the development and analysis of benchmarks on the performance of education systems. The OECD reports on PISA, PIAAC, and TALIS were released between December 3, 2013, and June 25, 2014.

PADRAIG O'MALLEY: How does a country's culture affect the way its children respond to education?

SCHLEICHER: Countries with high-performing education systems typically put a great value on the future. People in these countries are willing to make tradeoffs between investing in the future and paying for it today. An extreme example is China, where poor families scrape together their last money to invest in the education of their children. You can see that attitude in the way exams are set. Every child is expected to succeed. There is little tolerance for failure. Also, students in China and other high-performing countries will tell you that success in education is not a question of talent; it's not a question of social background. It's a question of hard work and effort and trust in the teachers, who are helping students to succeed. Highly meritocratic education systems, like those in East Asia, for example, foster the idea that education is the route to success. You get to the great universities only by doing really well in school. No employer is going to hire you if you haven't been succeeding in education. I think that attitude is not as pronounced in the U.S. culture.

O'MALLEY: It is very difficult to talk about a U.S. culture. There are so many cultures. If you are interpreting the PISA scores for the United States, what is the significance of that kind of aggregation?

SCHLEICHER: Although the PISA scores in the United States vary from state to state, with, say, Massachusetts doing well and Florida doing relatively poorly, the effect of culture is consistent throughout the country. For example, a significant share of students attributes success more to talent than to the investment of effort. In East Asia, where students must pass a tough, high-stakes examination to receive a high school degree, that degree will have huge implications for their future. In the United States, in whatever state you are in, your high school degree is important but not to the extent it is in East Asia. Here there are many second chances, and that sets a different frame of reference for students.

O'MALLEY: We often hear that colleges in the United States are graduating people with BA degrees who don't have the qualifications needed in the new job market. They are taking the jobs that were once filled by high school students, and the result has been a flattening of wages.

SCHLEICHER: That's not what we see in a statistical way. Our data suggest that the lifetime earnings you have as a college graduate in the United States are still way ahead of those of high school graduates. You do see some college graduates doing work that was formerly done by high school graduates. But part of the reason is that the jobs have changed. Thirty years ago, to be a secretary, you wouldn't need a college degree. You were typing what somebody else told you. Today, people in similar positions are office managers. They have to plan schedules, think ahead. If we look at the match in the United States between the skills people have and how they use their skills in the workplace, we find very little skill mismatch. The amount of overskilling is fairly low. There is no magic pool of talent sitting around waiting for jobs. Actually, the United States is rather on the opposite side. Here you see significant skill shortages. The OECD carried out a study on skills in the United States that showed it's not just low ranking but actually dropping.

O'MALLEY: What, then, is the correlation between skills and the quality of education that children and young adults are emerging with from high school and college?

SCHLEICHER: The United States is dropping because other countries are improving. Actually, the skill base of young people moving into the job market is pretty similar to the skill base of people moving out of the labor market. So the decline in the skills has been only very modest. The big issue is that in most other countries, the young population does remarkably better than the older one

O'MALLEY: I am looking at an article in the *New York Times* in which you comment on a study from the Brookings Institution. It reveals that while "just under a third of the existing jobs in the nation's one hundred largest metropolitan areas require a bachelor's degree or more, about 43 percent of newly available jobs demand this degree, and only 32 percent of adults over the age of twenty-five have one."¹

SCHLEICHER: That's not a drop; it's simply that demand has risen. There's no drop in the share of people with degrees, and no drop in the share of people with skills. The change is that job requirements have increased. The skills you need in a job are advancing and the supply has remained flat.

O'MALLEY: What are high schools doing to prepare students to go to college and graduate with the technological or the cognitive skills necessary to fill new jobs?

SCHLEICHER: That's the point. In the United States there hasn't been much change. High school graduates come out more or less the same as they did ten years ago. In many other countries, there has been very significant improvement in the skill levels of high school graduates. The United States has not reflected the advanced requirements of labor markets in improvement in educational outcomes.

¹ Eduardo Porter, "Stubborn Skills Gap in America's Work Force," *New York Times*, October 8, 2013.

O'MALLEY: Why? Is it simply that other countries are more far-sighted than the United States?

SCHLEICHER: The dilemma is that you are educating children for jobs that have not been created, to use technology that has not been invented, to solve problems they have no idea are going to arise. The Nordic countries are a great example. They are not thinking, "Oh, this is the labor market. We have to train our students today to fill those jobs." They are actually saying, "We want to invest in the future of these children so that they can drive tomorrow's economy, not fill today's jobs." And that's really the hard part for education. Filling today's jobs is a matter for the people in the labor market. It's not a matter for the people at the front of the pipeline. Here you have to make decisions: What society do you want? What economy do you want? And how do you invest in the skill base? For example, you go to Shanghai where there are excellent schools and very, very strong results, and the economy is still at a very basic stage. You can go into a restaurant and find people serving you who speak in perfect English, and you can see they have a college degree. I have done this many times, and I have said to them, "You seem to have studied. Are you really sorry that you invested all of these resources and energy completing a degree and now you work in a restaurant?" The answer is almost always, "Well, you know, my past was a lot worse than where I am now. My future is going to be a lot better than where I am now, and I accept this price." They basically invest in the long run. They are saying, "When I have acquired the knowledge and skills that are required, this is going to change my life in the long term. It has changed my life. It is going to continue to change it."

O'MALLEY: The fact that a young person in a restaurant could say something like that to you is indicative of the kind of culture that is nonexistent in the United States. Here, a young person with a college degree working in a restaurant would say something like, "I do not want to do this kind of work"—and never think, "I have invested in my future."

SCHLEICHER: It is not just the United States. It's an issue for the western world in general. In Europe, we have a debt crisis. We are investing our future in consumption today. But in East Asia they are doing exactly the opposite. They are investing in the future, rather than spending on consumption today.

O'MALLEY: If you were a betting man, would you bet on East Asia in the next fifty years?

SCHLEICHER: Yes, because of the talent pool, that would be my clear bet. Also, those countries have a lot of challenges, but they are addressing them. Ten years ago you might have said about Singapore, "They are very good in mathematics, but they are very poor in creative skills." If you test creative skills today, they come out on top because they saw their weaknesses, addressed them, trained the teachers to do that, invested in the profession, and changed the schools. You don't see this kind of strategic reform playing out in the West. In many of the OECD countries, especially the United States, there has been a lot more money around for education, but people have spent it on things that have become popular with students, such as reducing class size. If you reduce class size, teachers are going to like you. Parents are going to like you. It's the politicians' favorite choice. A lot of money gets spent on this. Now go to a high-performing education system. They know that if you have to make a choice between the better teacher and a smaller class, you go for the better teacher. They have invested a lot less

money than we have, but they have invested it much more strategically. Because of the choices we've made, we have not seen any kind of productivity increases in education.

O'MALLEY: And 46 percent of teachers leave within five years.

SCHLEICHER: Yes. That is typical. And do you know why they leave? Because we do not give them any credible careers. We don't give them a future. If you tell a twenty-five-year-old person, "You're going to become a teacher in a math class in this school, and twenty-five years from now, you will still be a math teacher in this school," who do you get? But in Canada and Europe and East Asia, they offer people a career structure, saying, in effect, "Here you are in a school. Where do you want to go? Do you want to become a principal? We will put you in a leadership track. Do you want to be into curriculum development? We will invest in your professional development." The future is open for people. That's what's different.

O'MALLEY: So in other countries, teaching is actually a profession.

SCHLEICHER: A profession and a career.

O'MALLEY: In the United States, I might go to college, then come out of college and not know exactly what I should do. So I decide I'll teach for three or four years. And then I decide I'll go to graduate school, so I apply to graduate school, and I leave teaching. But from the beginning, I had no teaching skills.

SCHLEICHER: It's a question of work organization. We deal with the teaching profession as though it were part of a blue-collar industrial tradition. Someone figures out the curriculum, I tell you what to teach, and you just do it in the classroom. This is not what a knowledge-based profession is about. In a knowledge-based profession, you expect the profession to own its professional status, to build a professional status, to work with a high degree of autonomy in a collaborative culture. If you are in medical research and you develop something, tomorrow everybody's going to know about it. And who does medical research? Not some universities, some academics, no—the practitioners. Now think about education. There are always fantastic teachers who contribute a lot to the profession, but that is not the expectation we have for teachers. The expectation is you teach in the classroom, to the children, not building the future of your profession.

O'MALLEY: So we have several problems in the United States: teaching is not a high-status job, turnover is high, and since teachers come right out of college and walk into a classroom, they have no teaching skills. They don't know how to teach.

SCHLEICHER: That's right. But in Singapore, China, and Japan, to become a teacher, you study in a university and then you spend a lot of time in the school actually developing. In Finland, nine people apply for every teaching post. Only one gets it. It's easy to get into teacher training college the first year, but in the second year, you are in school and you are evaluated by peers, by principals. You're tested for your pedagogical talent. That is what we don't seem to get in the United States. We want people who are bright—and there is a lot of academic skill—but we

want people who are really committed, who have a passion for teaching, who have the capacity to deal with people, and that has nothing to do with test scores at a university.

O'MALLEY: In high-performing countries, when they are recruiting teachers for schools, do they perform aptitude tests to see whether the individual has the personal skills and the passion that are required for teaching, as distinct from academic skills?

SCHLEICHER: Yes. They look for those skills, but not with an aptitude test. You are actually observed in the classroom teaching a group of students, and people help you, they mentor you. And then after a year, they might say, "You can become a great teacher." Or they might say, "Maybe you should choose another career." It's a very, very tough selection process, looking not just at subject matter knowledge. You must show that you have the capacity to become a great teacher. And that's what creates the status. What has happened in many places is that the desire to have standards, to have objective evaluation, has pushed us more and more toward schooling for the things that are easy to measure, easy to test. Pedagogical talent is something you can only observe. It's hard to capture in an aptitude test. That's why you need professionals in the field. You need to trust professional judgment. Here everybody can enter teacher training, and that is the recipe for a low-status profession.

O'MALLEY: It has become a cliché in the United States to blame poverty for our low ranking in education. We say, "It's not an education problem, it's a poverty problem."

SCHLEICHER: And that's not true. We have a measure for that, which we call resilience. We look at the share of disadvantaged students and their probability to move to the top—basically, the capacity of the system to break through this cycle of disadvantage. In China, Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Finland, Switzerland, two-thirds of the most disadvantaged children are breaking through and moving to the top. In the United States, it's about 20 percent. The capacity of the education system to overcome poverty varies hugely across the countries, and that tells us that poverty is not destiny. There is a lot public policy can do to address it.

O'MALLEY: In these countries where students' resilience is high, what are the major factors that account for their being able to break through that barrier?

SCHLEICHER: Several things. The first is that neither poverty nor any other factor is accepted as an excuse for failure. Those systems have no tolerance for failure. There is a very strong expectation on the teacher to have every student succeed. They try to attract the most talented teachers into the most challenging classrooms. They put the best principals in the tougher schools. So they are not necessarily spending more, but they are squarely investing their resources on the children. Those systems have nothing like our grade repetition, for example, where you just pass the problem onto someone else, you don't solve it. That doesn't exist. Often they have no tracking. They have no streaming. So you as a teacher have to engage with some diversity. You have to accept that students have different talents, different strengths and that ordinary students have extraordinary talents. That's the expectation on the education system.

O'MALLEY: In the United States it appears that there is a socioeconomic distinction between the schooling resources available to children from privileged backgrounds and those available to children from more disadvantaged households.

SCHLEICHER: If you come from a privileged background, it doesn't matter whether you go to school in the United States or in Finland or in Germany or in Canada or in Shanghai—you'll come out pretty well. The difference public policy can make is for talented children from disadvantaged backgrounds. And that's where the United States actually loses a lot of its potential, because those children just do not get a good education. And they have only one chance. Children who grow up in a privileged area and do not do well in school still make it. There are a lot of roads to success if the system is right. But for children who grow up in one of these disadvantaged areas, education is their only bet. That message is something that high-performing education systems really get. They make sure those children get that chance.

O'MALLEY: Let's take two variables, parental involvement and teacher quality. Suppose you have a child from a disadvantaged area who is living in poverty with a single, working mother and attending a school that has inadequate resources and inadequate support for teachers. You have to choose between the child's having access to a school with better resources or having the parent heavily invested in her child's education, making sure the homework is done, watching her child's performance, and going to the school and asking questions. Which would be more important?

SCHLEICHER: You can achieve both if you give teachers time and resources for things other than teaching. I have had two experiences that deeply impressed me. Three months after the tsunami struck in the northeast of Japan, I visited the area and saw total destruction. Everything was in really bad shape. But what made a difference was that the teachers went to the parents to ensure that they had enough resources. Then last year I visited a school in one of the poorest provinces in China, where parents have had no education. This is a first generation of children educated in this school, so the parents cannot provide any home support. What do the teachers do? They call every parent of every child twice a week. They know they cannot expect those parents to come to the school, so they have to go to the parents. They have to involve them in the educational experience. The teachers have to explain to the parents the kind of trajectory their children are going through and they have to explain that their children will have a very different future than they have had. Inviting them for a parent evening is not going to address that point. You have to give teachers a role that goes beyond delivering subject matter content. Their social mission is a very important part of the success of education.

O'MALLEY: I once heard you say that in high-performing countries teachers spend just one-third of their time actually in the classroom.

SCHLEICHER: Yes. There's a lot of nonteaching working time.

O'MALLEY: So they are collaborating with each other. They are talking about students. They are looking at their performance, and that is simply absent in the United States. I know a young man who recently began teaching in a disadvantaged school in Boston. He was shocked by what

he found there. The students have no respect for their teachers and the teachers have no self-esteem.

SCHLEICHER: Here's the problem: in United States teachers are defined solely by the number of hours they teach. This is basically how unions and the government have agreed on the framework. There is a bit of professional development, but the hours teachers spend teaching is all that defines them, and that means they are not being treated with respect. If that's the way you define me, then that's what I'm going to do. And then I can say, "Oh, it's poverty. It's parents. It's everything except me." But if you tell the teacher, "This is what we expect you to do. These are the results you are to achieve, and we are going to give you the support, the instruments, the framework for collaboration to actually achieve it," you'll have a very, very different teacher. In this way, you create a professional image of a teacher not just as someone who conveys academic content but as someone who actually has to figure out what this student from that family needs to become successful.

O'MALLEY: The culture just does not put a high value on teachers and what teachers need. And now that is changing. We are moving into an age of digitalization. You have kids out there with their smart phones who can do every kind of thing technologically, practically from the time they are born, and yet you have teachers who have a hard time learning how to use these new technologies, or even the capabilities of these new technologies. So the child is ahead of the teacher. Is that an issue that needs to be addressed?

SCHLEICHER: I think that is very, very important and more extreme. You have twenty-first-century kids. You have twentieth-century teachers. And you have a nineteenth-century work organization. That discrepancy is the challenge that we face today, and it's not just a matter of the technological tools. In the past, the teacher had a monopoly on the knowledge to be conveyed. Today, that knowledge is available to everyone. As a student or as a principal, you can have access to the best teaching in the world, the best content anywhere in the world. The role of the teacher is to become the moderator of that process. That is the big challenge, and it is not just a technological challenge. It's your acceptance as a teacher that it's not for you to tell the student. In the past, if you didn't know the answer, you looked it up in an encyclopedia, and you could trust the answer to be true. That was twentieth-century teaching. Today, you look it up on Google and you find twenty-seven thousand answers and you have to navigate through all that information intelligently. That's the role of twenty-first-century teaching, and it is a big shift. In the classroom, within seconds, any student can challenge the teacher on anything. But I am less worried about the technological barriers because I see lots of incoming teachers who are quite knowledgeable.

O'MALLEY: Do you see that in the high-performing countries they are looking at the new technologies that are becoming available and screening their teachers in the use of these technologies for this technical classroom?

SCHLEICHER: In some. Korea is a good example. Singapore is a good example. Finland has always done that. But other high-performing countries still have a hard time with this. Japan I wouldn't rate very highly. Technological intensity is pretty low in the classroom. In society it's very high. They have much smarter smart phones than any the United States has. There is 4G

technology everywhere. In Japan they have a different philosophy. They think about learning strategies. Teaching in Japan is not about facts and figures. It's about cognitive activation, and so they see technology as something you can do at home—you can search and do all of that, but in school we want to teach you to think.

O'MALLEY: Here in the United States we have a skills gap and we pay very high wages to highly skilled workers. You would think that demand would encourage us to increase the supply. But instead we are attracting skilled foreigners who are filling the gap.

SCHLEICHER: That's coming to an end. You can see that clearly in migration patterns. The Chinese are finding jobs in their own country. The Indians are finding jobs in their own country. That skill shortage is one of the biggest challenges we are facing.

O'MALLEY: One of the things you found were that younger cohorts in other countries are consistently better educated than older ones. In the United States, that's not always the case. Why?

SCHLEICHER: It's the quality of schooling. That's exactly where it comes in. You can't blame the labor market or work or companies for training difficulties. The incoming cohort is the product of the education training system.

O'MALLEY: That would suggest that the training system has gone backwards, in a sense.

SCHLEICHER: In relative terms, exactly. The mark is rising everywhere. In most countries, supply has risen. In the United States, supply has really remained flat and that's what's widening the gaps.

O'MALLEY: Suppose you are advising me, and I am the head of education in the United States and I am looking at our ranking as number 27 and saying, "We're the greatest country on the planet, why aren't we number one? What do I have to do to move us from position 27 to position 5 or 6?"

SCHLEICHER: I am actually optimistic because I believe the first step has been taken. The first step is to get the targets right. And I think the Common Core State Standards are a very good example of establishing a world-class expectation for the education system. But the next step is the harder one. At the moment a lot of energy is being spent on creating new assessments for the standards. But that is not the next step. The next step is to put the effort squarely into attracting, developing, and retaining teachers who can implement the new standards. There is no shortcut to this. The quality of an education system can never exceed the quality of its teachers.

O'MALLEY: We didn't give this enough thought. We have teachers in the classroom who are expected to teach an entirely different set of standards. They don't understand it fully. And the children in the classroom certainly don't understand it. We must have specialists who can train the teachers. Therefore we have to have colleges, and we have to have a profession.

SCHLEICHER: Yes, that is the challenge. But I do think we can trust the profession itself to achieve a lot of this. You know there are always great teachers. You have to mobilize the knowledge of great teachers. Setting up a new teacher training college is not going to solve the problem. It's really about drawing out the best practices that are in the education system. You will find thousands of teachers who are able to understand and implement the Common Core. Get the wisdom of those teachers into the system.

O'MALLEY: They teach other teachers?

SCHLEICHER: Yes, exactly. Build professional learning communities. Teachers will be the best agents to make that happen. I think we underestimate that potential. We are treating teachers like workers on a factory assembly line. We have changed the equipment of the assembly line. Now we have to retool and retrain the workers. This is exactly the blue-collar mentality that I am criticizing. We need to get a professional work organization. Teachers have to own their professional standards. They have to become the masters of this process. If that happens, you have a chance. The best education minister cannot solve the problem of hundreds of thousands of teachers and millions of students. We need to mobilize the knowledge of those people, to change the profession.

If you rely on new teacher training institutions, and you develop wonderful new teachers but you replace only 2.5 percent of teachers in the workforce every year, it's not going to make a difference, and even worse, if you send a great teacher to a poor school, the school is going to win every time. That's not the way you change a system. You change the system by building capacity at the frontline. It's hard to do. But this is exactly what international comparisons teach us. This is not something that is impossible to do. Again, I come back to the example of Singapore's small system. Fifteen years ago they realized, "Our students are good on subject matter content and poor on creativity." That was a paradigm shift, like the Common Core. We have to change the mentality of teachers. We have to change the instrument of teachers. We have to develop a strategy around the Common Core and implement it successfully. In Germany, they have introduced the system of national standards. It has been quite successfully implemented. The introduction of technology has happened in every other profession except teaching. As long as we have this assembly mind set we're never going to change.