International league tables show that British pupils are falling behind their peers in South Korea or China. We have to stop lowering the bar in our schools, choose more academic subjects, and work longer hours.

According to Education Secretary Michael Gove, German statistician Andreas Schleicher is ‘the most important man in English education’. A profile for The Atlantic magazine was headlined ‘the world’s schoolmaster’. President Obama’s Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, is equally a fan. As head of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Schleicher is in charge of the ultimate schools league table: ranking the education systems of the OECD’s members.

Schleicher was born in Hamburg in 1964. While his father was a professor of education, Schleicher initially had little interest in the subject. Originally an indifferent student, it was only after he discovered his passion for the harder sciences that he went on to do well at school. He graduated with a degree in Physics from the University of Hamburg in 1988, and went on to study maths at Deakin University in Australia. It was only after attending a lecture by T. Neville Postlethwaite, an English education scientist in 1986, that Schleicher realised he might have an interest in his father’s subject after all. While Schleicher’s father believed that the human nature of education made it impossible to measure, Postlethwaite believed that it was only by comparing the statistics across countries that one could decide what worked and what didn’t. In 1988, Postlethwaite asked Schleicher to help him with the first international study on reading and writing. By 1994, Schleicher had joined the OECD in Paris.

By the late 1980s the OECD had started to take the idea of comparing the performance of the world’s schools systems seriously. In 1981, the administration of the new President Ronald Reagan ordered the creation of a National Commission on Excellence in

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Education. The Commission’s report, *A Nation at Risk*, released two years later, shocked America. It found that 23 million adults and 17 per cent of American minors were illiterate.\(^4\) Scores on the country’s SAT (Standard Assessment Tasks) tests had dropped throughout the 1960s and 1970s. To Reagan, this was more than just a shocking waste of human potential – it was a national security risk. In the words of the report, ‘the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people’.\(^5\) Earlier, while running for election, Reagan had called for eliminating the entire US Department for Education.\(^6\) After the release of the report, he changed course: education reform was to become one of the top priorities for his administration. As part of the reform programme, his administration desired data on what worked well elsewhere – and the OECD seemed the best able to provide it.

Originally reluctant, the OECD eventually gave in to its largest donor, and by 1988 the International Indicators of Educational Systems (INES) project was established. By the late 1990s, the OECD realised that it was not enough to try to compare and analyse already existing data. Instead, it determined to launch its own international survey: PISA. Schleicher was placed in charge. Many countries had boasted to him that they had the best schools systems in the world.\(^7\) PISA would give him the opportunity to work out who was right, and who was in for a nasty surprise.

So far, there have been four rounds of the PISA tests, repeating every three years. The first took place in 2000, and took in 32 countries. Today, over 70 countries and more than 500,000 pupils are involved.\(^8\) In each country, 5,000 pupils aged between 15 and 16 are chosen, and tested on their mathematics, reading and science. Unlike other international tests, PISA is less interested in how well pupils have done at learning a curriculum, and more interested in their ability at solving problems and applying basic skills. Each pupil is given a two-hour exam, including both multiple choice and longer written answers. Data from across the world are collected, and scaled so that the average score across the OECD is 500 points, and the standard deviation 100 points. Around two-thirds of students score between 400 and 600 points.\(^9\) A follow-up study of 30,000 students in Canada found that that PISA score proved a better predictor of whether they’d go to college than their grades.\(^10\)