

Opinion **Education**

We are setting up a generation to fail at school

The disturbing global decline in test results rests on wrong-headed curriculum changes

JOHN BURN-MURDOCH



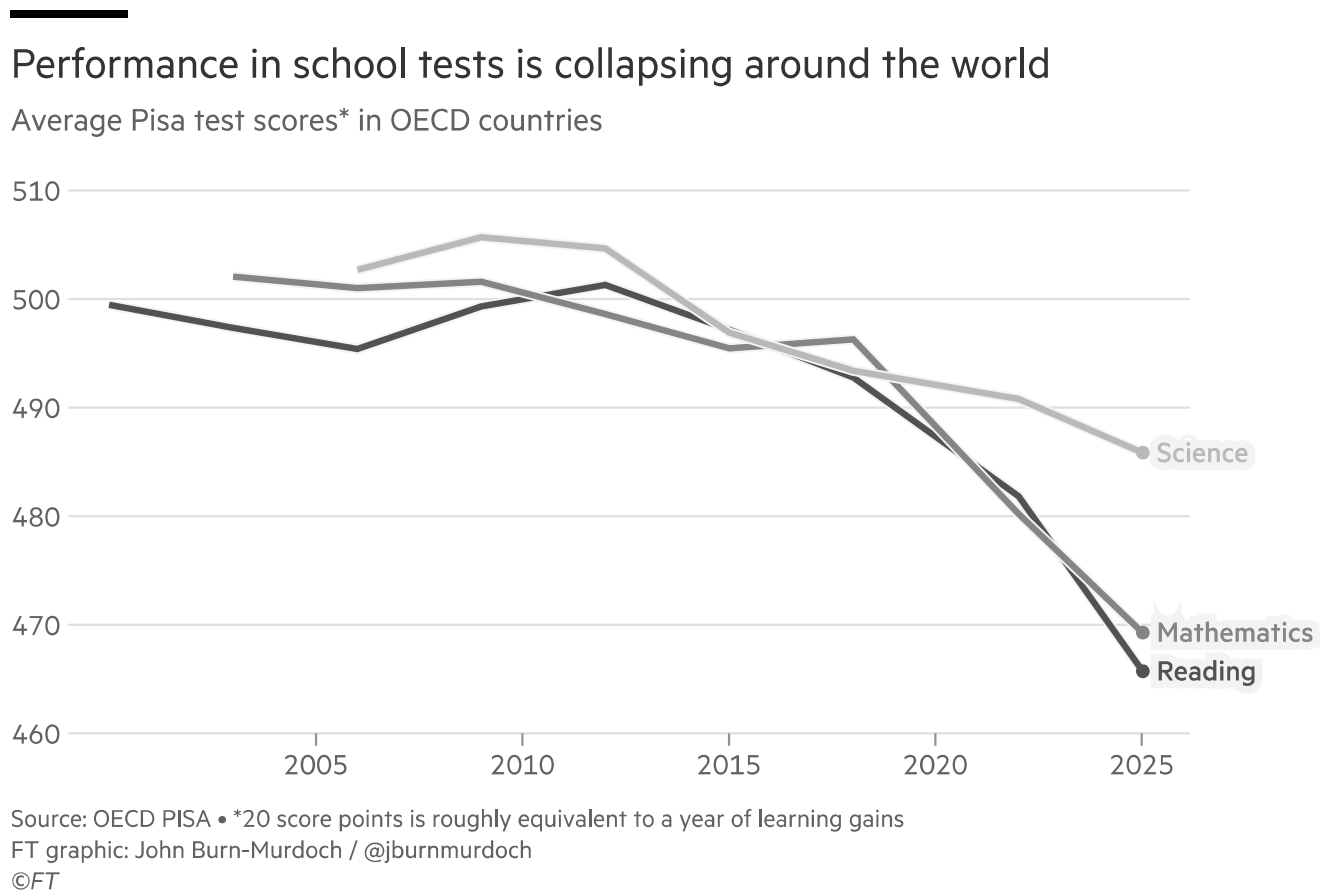
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When the OECD's Pisa study of teenage reading, mathematics and science abilities around the world showed a marked drop in 2022, many hoped this was a short-term hit from pandemic learning disruptions. The 2025 figures published a few days ago showed the opposite: a steepening of the decline. All told, the results show fifteen-year-olds in high-income countries today are roughly one and a half years behind their 2015 counterparts in terms of literacy, knowledge and reasoning skills.

We should always be careful of over-interpreting alarming trends, but the findings align with separate measures of adult skills, plus national tests as well as long-running surveys tracking young people's difficulties with concentration and learning.



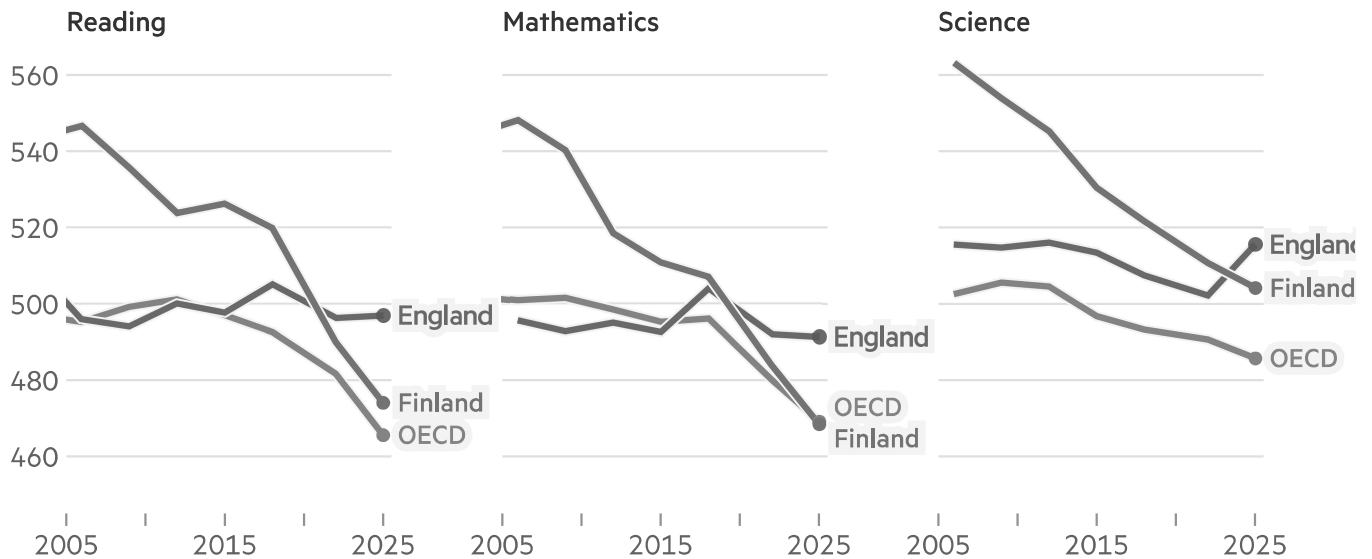
The research highlights the effects of digital distraction both in and out of the classroom and raises the possibility that using AI to help with schoolwork may be undermining the learning process. But another notable finding suggests changes in what and how children are taught may also play an important role.

During the 2000s education officials flocked to Finland — the top performer in Pisa scores of the day — to learn from what it was getting right. They saw a system that prized flexibility and autonomy for pupils and a curriculum prizing “transferable skills” like critical thinking while placing less emphasis on core subjects and standardised testing or performance rankings. Glowing reports were written, and the Finnish model spread.

There was one problem: even as these visits were taking place, Finnish scores were in a sustained slide. Today, its results are little better than the average country, and many argue its exceptional performance — which peaked around 2000 — owed more to the conventional comprehensive approach it had used in previous decades.

Once hailed as the gold standard, Finland's results are falling steeply

Average Pisa test scores*



Source: OECD PISA • *20 score points is roughly equivalent to a year of learning gains

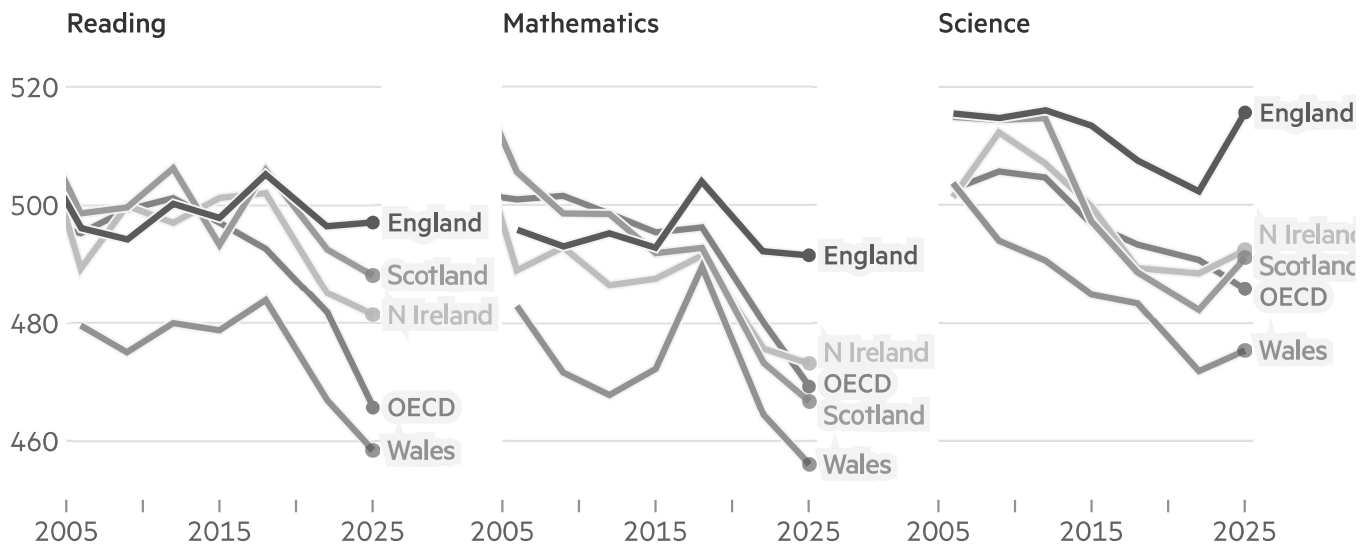
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Recent results in the UK support this theory. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland went down similar routes to Finland during the 2010s, shifting away from established curricula and towards more broadly defined learning outcomes, scrapping school league tables and some standardised tests. By contrast, England doubled down on the established curriculum with strict guidance on the content schools must cover in core subjects, alongside the use of league tables with performance measures that made the rankings harder to game. Fifteen years on, England's results have held up, propelling it into the top ten internationally, while in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland they have plummeted.

England has bucked the international trend of collapsing school test scores

Average Pisa test scores*



Source: OECD PISA • *20 score points is roughly equivalent to a year of learning gains

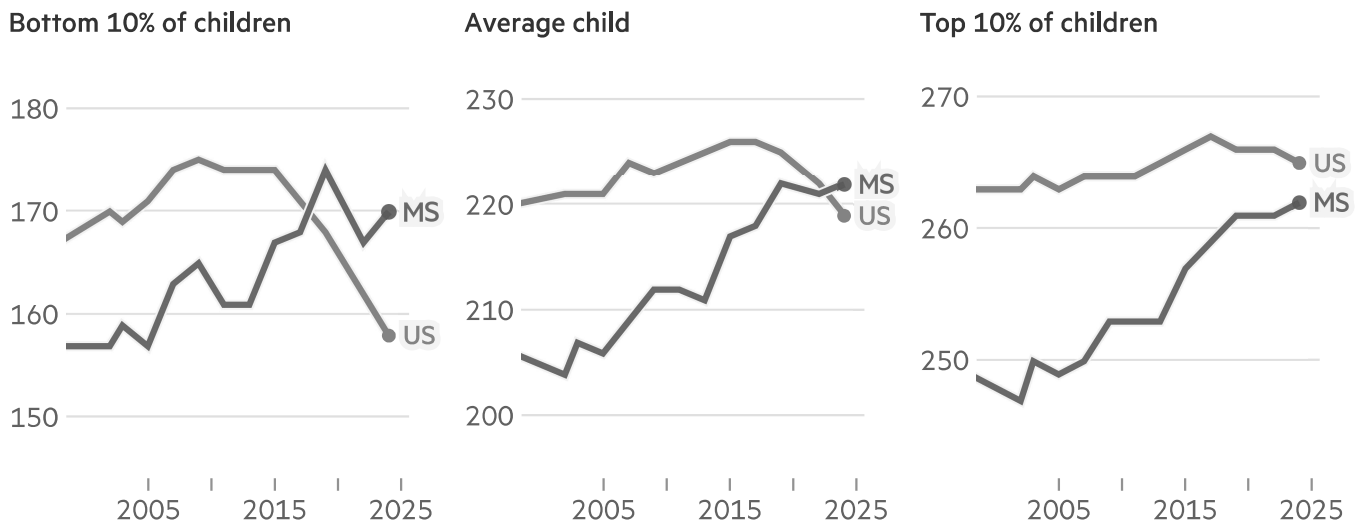
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It is a similar story in the US, where children in poorer southern states like Mississippi have made huge gains, overtaking their counterparts in wealthy states like California and moving from well below the national average to above it. Improvements have been especially pronounced among the lowest-scoring children. There, as in the UK, the most common explanations are Mississippi's adoption of evidence-based classroom methods including teaching phonics at an early age, and its emphasis on accountability, from school rankings to requiring that children be capable readers before they progress.

Children in Mississippi have made big gains in reading while performance has worsened elsewhere

Reading score at grade 4 in Mississippi vs the US average



Source: US National Assessment of Educational Progress

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Common counter-arguments tend to fall flat. Doesn't the performance-centric model harm children? It appears not. Schoolchildren in England report the same levels of happiness or pressure as those in Scotland and Wales, and no difference in mental health, points out Daisy Christodoulou, director of education at No More Marking and author of three books on evidence-based education.

What if the OECD's assessments only test narrow mastery and miss precisely the broader skill sets others would prefer to elevate? If anything, it's the opposite. Pisa is specifically designed to test the combinations of skills that children should be developing whether they're in England, Scotland, Finland or China.

Ironically, as Christodoulou has argued, skills like critical thinking and creativity are often highly dependent on knowledge its advocates often derogate.

My worry is that, in many countries, the past decade has seen a dangerous combination of weakening standards and reduced rigour in education. This has happened just as the rise of digital distractions and shortcuts has made these skills especially important for young people to develop the knowledge and abilities they will need in an uncertain future.

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