

PISA-Results

# Criticism is getting louder

Everyone wants to do well in PISA, as if that were good education policy

by Michael Felten,\* Germany



Michael Felten.  
(Picture ma)

In Germany, more and more voices are criticising the global school performance study PISA and its consequences. In February 2024, for example, the German Philologists' Association suggested withdrawing from this process altogether. Among the well-known critics is Rainer Kaenders,\*\* the top maths

teacher trainer at the University of Bonn.

In an interview<sup>1</sup> he said: "PISA is not the solution; PISA is the problem". Every few years, a scandal is staged around the findings, although the differences between many countries are nowhere near as great as the PISA makers suggest. In fact, the study itself is "the biggest disaster in the German educational landscape". How is this to be understood?

Rainer Kaenders points out that the maths skills of young people in training and at university have declined sharply since the turn of the millennium. The reason: because of the PISA shock, maths teaching in Germany has changed drastically. As a fact, it did have an excellent reputation. Since 2003, however, its primary goal has been to do well in the PISA test. As a result, the curricula were "cleared out" of arithmetic skills and mathematical concepts; instead, pupils were



Rainer Kaenders. (Picture Benjamin Westhoff)

now trained to provide new, supposedly "everyday life" types of tasks with the correct answers.

In the wake of PISA, the "output and competence orientation" that has been established in educational standards, curricula and centralised examinations is particularly deplorable. What sounds harmless is in fact intended to make pupils more available as human capital to the economy. The means to this end: a catalogue "into which future employees are classified. Companies can then choose what kind of skills combinations they need." However, this completely misses the *Humboldtian* ideal of a social, free, and educated individual who proves to be fit for life – and not just in terms of work.

Kaenders also criticises the fact that this concept of competence underestimates pupils' intrinsic motivation to learn, which is why we believe we must use "psychotechniques" to help: "You have to give the children the feeling – and that feeling is enough – that they are part of a community, that they have abilities and that they are doing it voluntarily." And then they are motivated – no matter what.

However, this contradicts what *Plato* said about education. For him, it was always about the world. It is what motivates you. "I do geometry because it exists. I'm interested in differential equations because I find it fascinating and useful in itself. And not because it teaches me any skills that an employer could later put to

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\*\* *Rainer Kaenders*, Professor of Mathematics and its Didactics at the Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-University of Bonn.

good use. School should enable motivation to ignite in the world and not rely on psychological techniques.”

Of course, this requires enough teachers, but the shortage of teachers cannot be solved through digitalisation. “Digital tools can be used very sensibly, but they cannot replace teachers.” There are enough people interested in becoming teachers, but they are put off by what schools have become. “The centralised ‘abitur’ (university entrance tests) is just one of many examples that show that teachers are not even trusted to assess their own students; centralisation and bureaucracy are on the rise.”

Kaenders is sceptical about a change for the better: “No established party now has a viable vision for an independent education policy. Everyone is talking about digitalisation, heterogeneity, and democratic values. But conservatives no longer insist on the classic educational

canon; liberals no longer demand that schools prepare students for the meritocracy; the Greens no longer want to develop their personalities in a pluralistic society; the left no longer has the self-empowerment of the combative learners for more social justice in its programme.” Everyone only wants to do well in PISA, which is seen as good education policy. This is a disaster and there is no end in sight.

*(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)*

<sup>1</sup> As we did not receive permission from the editors of the publication to translate the interview with *Rainer Kaenders* into French and English, “Swiss Standpoint” asked the educationalist and journalist *Michael Felten* to write an article summarising the content of the interview. You can find the full interview with Rainer Kaenders in German on our website. Link: <https://schweizer-standpunkt.ch/news-detailansicht-de-gesellschaft/der-eigentliche-skandal-ist-pisa-selbst.html>

PISA survey report: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/international-comparisons-of-education>