**We are rewarding the wrong school leaders**

**The UK is falling behind in international league tables because it is appointing, rewarding and recognising the wrong school leaders, say Alex Hill and Ben Laker**

Why does the UK educational system fall behind its peers? In the 2012 Program for International Assessment (PISA) study, the UK invested the 8th largest amount of 34 OECD countries, but only came 19th in mathematics, 14th in science and 16th in reading.

To try to answer this question, we studied the changes made by 411 leaders of UK academies and the impact they had both during their tenure and in the three years after they left. Our findings, published in *The Harvard Business Review,* suggest it’s because we’re appointing, rewarding and recognising the wrong leaders: leaders who talk a good game, but have no impact, or leaders who make everything look great while they’re there, but it all falls apart after they leave. Instead, the leaders we found who improve long-term exam results – we call them architects – were the least rewarded, least recognised and were rarely appointed.

Many leaders talk passionately but don’t change anything

Why is this? Is it because their exam results don’t improve until late in their tenure or after they’ve left? Or is it because they’re outsiders who’ve often not worked in education their entire career and see things differently?

Is it because they’re leaders first and teachers second in a profession that prioritises teaching and often thinks schools can’t, or shouldn’t, be managed? Or is it because they don’t publicise what they’re doing and quietly get on with the job in hand?

Whatever the reason, we need to fix it if we want to improve our education system.

At the moment, we reward and recognise a group that we call “surgeons” who dramatically improve exam results whilst they’re in charge by cutting poor performing students and focusing resources on the immediate problem – the children taking their GCSEs this year. In our study, 38 per cent of these leaders received a knighthood and 24 per cent a CBE, MBE or OBE. They were also typically paid 50 per cent more than other leaders. However, their improvements weren’t sustainable and in some cases it took four years for the school to recover, with up to £2 million paid to consultants to help clear up the mess.

However, possibly more worryingly, the worst performing leaders in our study – the “philosophers” – were the ones we encountered most commonly, especially in “good” or “outstanding” academies. If our findings are representative of the whole UK educational system, then we estimate that 82 per cent of our schools are led by philosophers. These articulate leaders are also highly recognised, with 30 per cent receiving a CBE, MBE or OBE and 43 per cent appointed as national leaders of education. However, although they talk passionately about the importance of good teaching and get everyone excited, they don’t actually change anything and their schools either coast or decline.

We need to identify, develop and appoint more “architects” if we want to transform our educational system. But how can we do this?

First, we should measure the number of students who graduate from a school with at least grade C in five or more subjects, not the percentage of students. This would show the value they add to society and encourage our best leaders to run our largest schools.

Second, we need to judge leaders on their legacy as well as their tenure, and accept that it takes up to three years before sustainable improvements start to show.

And third, we need to encourage talented leaders to come and work in our schools by creating a positive, supportive, stimulating and rewarding environment. Most architects had worked in industry for 10 to 15 years before running a school – and used the leadership experience they’d gained elsewhere to redesign the school and transform the community it serves.

Alex Hill and Ben Laker are founders of the Centre for High Performance