



Freeing the Italian school system

Andrea Ichino^{a,b,f,g,h,*}, Guido Tabellini^{c,d,e,f,h}

^a European University Institute, Italy

^b University of Bologna, Italy

^c Bocconi University, Italy

^d IGER, Italy

^e CIFAR, Canada

^f CEPR, England

^g IZA, Germany

^h CESifo, Germany



HIGHLIGHTS

- The bad performance of the Italian school system is not due to the lack of funding.
- Italian schools should be more autonomous in their teachers and curriculum management.
- The priority is to improve the quality of expenditure, not to increase its quantity.
- Our proposal is inspired by a 1988 UK reform and by USA Charter Schools experiences.

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ABSTRACT

The disappointing performance of the school system in Italy is one of the likely factors that reduce growth in this country. We take it as a case study with interesting implications for other European countries with similar school systems. Lack of funding is not the answer. The Italian school system needs to move in the direction of more autonomy given to individual schools, in the management of teachers and in the curriculum. The paper discusses a reform proposal that can achieve this goal, while at the same time learning from international experiences. Specifically we adapt to the Italian environment a similar reform introduced in the UK in 1988 and the best of the Charter Schools experiences in the USA.

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1. Introduction

The first conference of the European Association of Labor Economists took place in Turin 25 years ago. Since then, the Italian growth rate has been declining, without any signs of inversion compared to the similarly declining pattern that had characterized Italy in the previous 25 years (see Fig. 1). As Europeans you must be worried about this weak link of the Union. As labor economists, you are probably interested in how much our daily research life helps in suggesting a way out for Italy.

Indeed, we think that there is something useful to be learnt, also for an international audience, from a discussion of what Italy should do to invert this negative trend. In this paper we focus on the education

system, which is one of the most deeply studied topics by labor economists and is widely recognized to be a crucial engine for growth. International data indicate a strong correlation between growth rates and standardized student achievement test scores, both in terms of levels and trends. Moreover, recent works by Hanushek and Woessmann provide evidence in favor of a causal interpretation of this evidence (Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008, 2011, 2012). As Italy comes out quite badly from these international comparisons (see Fig. 2), it becomes an interesting case study.

Italians are typically told that the only reason of this dismal performance of their school system is a severe lack of funding, an explanation that appears to be consistent with the cuts to educational expenditures that government of all colors have recently implemented. However, the data suggest that this cannot be the primary reason for the bad results of Italian students in international standardized comparisons. Up to a few years ago, expenditure per student in education was greater in Italy

* Corresponding author at: European University Institute, Department of Economics, Via Piazzola 43, Firenze, Italy.

E-mail address: andrea.ichino@eui.eu (A. Ichino).

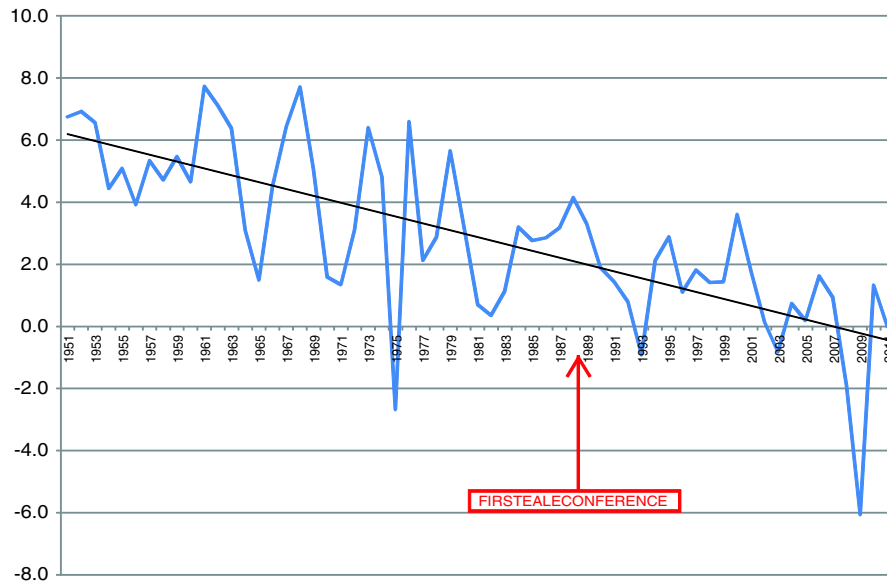


Fig. 1. Italian growth rate in the last 50 years.

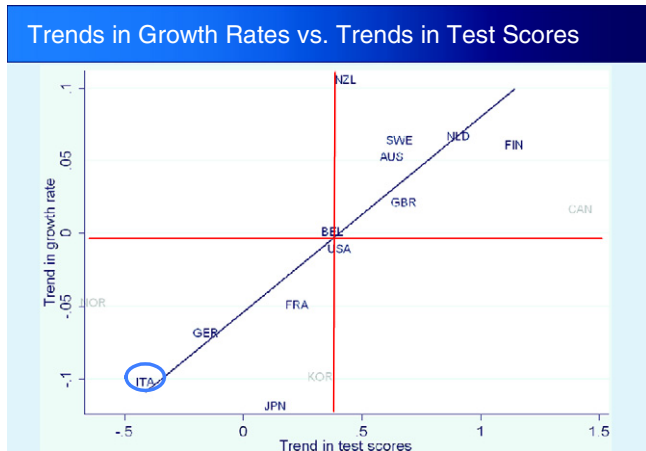
than in most other OECD countries (see upper-left panel in Table 1 and Fig. 3), while for more recent years it is close to the average (see upper-right panel in Table 1 and Fig. 3B). How can this be given that public expenditure in education has been low relative to GDP and total government spending, as shown in the bottom left and right panels of Table 1? Private spending cannot be the answer, since it is a very small fraction of total expenditure in education (2.2% in 2000 with an increase up to 3.4% in 2010 for primary and secondary instruction, according to OECD, Education at a Glance). The answer is demographics. Fertility has been lower in Italy than in comparable countries (see Table 2): in a country with few children, even if a lower fraction of common resources is devoted to education, expenditure per student can still be higher than in countries with a younger population. The relevant indicator is expenditure per student, not expenditures as a fraction of GDP or public spending. In this respect, and despite the recent expenditure cuts, resources per student do not seem to be lower in Italy than in comparable countries. The real priority is to improve the *quality of expenditure*, not to increase its *quantity*.

The reform proposal described in this paper aims precisely at generating the correct incentives for a better use of existing and future resources in a sector that is crucial for growth.

2. How the problem should be approached

In order to tackle the most urgent needs of the Italian education system, it is of the utmost importance to focus on the long-term design for Italian schools. The approach that has been followed since the 1960s is instead mainly based on marginal, incremental interventions. This is the result of many different ideological preclusions and vetoes toward more overreaching (and usually effective) reform proposals. However, we think this *modus operandi* is no longer suitable. The resistances that our long-term reform is bound to generate should be overcome. In order to do that, our proposal cannot be imposed to everyone. It therefore entails a voluntary adhesion to the new system during a probationary period. The new configuration will be based on independently managed schools, competing among each other and coexisting with more traditional ones.

The approach that we are suggesting may appear utopian and unrealistic, given the many constraints and hindrances of the current Italian socio-economic situation. However, we think that the way of proceeding we propose here is the only possible alternative to pursue the changes that, in our opinion, the Italian system pressingly requires. Consider for instance one of the most central issues at hand: the recruitment and retribution of better teachers, those who are more prepared, and more willing to undertake the difficult but crucial task of educating new generations. A number of different studies, which are presented in detail throughout this work, clearly show that teachers' quality is one of the key points for the success of a schooling system.¹ However, in order to make some improvements in this field, one should decide between two broad and contrasting approaches. On the one hand, one could opt for a solution entailing autonomous schools, with the power to freely manage their human resources. On the other hand, there could be configurations based on a single entity, centrally managing the entire system and upon which all teachers depend, vested with the power to even decide who may become a teacher. Similarly, it is important to define the degree of autonomy that should be granted to each school when designing its educational offer. It could be possible to have “pre-packed menus”, rigidly imposed by a central authority (such as the



Source: Hanushek and Woessmann (2012)
 Note: Scatter plot and linear regression line of trend in the growth rate of GDP per capita from 1975 to 2000 against trend in test scores.

Fig. 2. Growth rates and test score trends in different countries. Note: Scatter plot and linear regression line of trend in the growth rate of GDP per capita from 1975 to 2000 against trend in test scores.

Source: Hanushek and Woessmann (2012).

¹ A case in point is the study conducted in Chetty et al. (2011).

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