

What we can learn from Finland’s successful school reform

Finland came from behind to become the world leader in student achievement. Their strategy is the opposite of what we’re doing in America.

By Linda Darling-Hammond

One wonders what we might accomplish as a nation if we could finally set aside what appears to be our de facto commitment to inequality, so profoundly at odds with our rhetoric of equity, and put the millions of dollars spent continually arguing and litigating into building a high-quality education system for all children. To imagine how that might be done, one can look at nations that started with very little and purposefully built highly productive and equitable systems, sometimes almost from scratch, in the space of only two to three decades.

As an example, I am going to briefly describe how Finland built a strong educational system, nearly from the ground up. Finland was not succeeding educationally in the 1970s, when the United States was the unquestioned education leader in the world. Yet this country created a productive teaching and learning system by expanding access while investing purposefully in ambitious educational goals using strategic approaches to build teaching capacity.

I use the term “teaching and learning system” advisedly to describe a set of elements that, when well designed and connected, reliably support all students in their learning. These elements ensure that students routinely encounter well-prepared teachers who are working in concert around a thoughtful, high-quality curriculum, supported by appropriate materials and assessments—and that these elements of the system help students, teachers, leaders, and the system as a whole continue to learn and improve. Although no system from afar can be transported wholesale into another context, there is much to learn from the experiences of those who have addressed problems we also encounter.

The Finnish Success Story

Finland has been a poster child for school improvement since it rapidly climbed to the top of the international rankings after it emerged from the Soviet Union’s shadow. Once poorly ranked educationally, with a turgid bureaucratic system that produced low-quality education and large



Illustration by M. Glenwood

inequalities, it now ranks first among all the OECD nations (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—roughly, the so-called “developed” nations) on the PISA (Program for International Student Assessments), an international test for 15-year-olds in language, math, and science literacy. The country also boasts a highly equitable distribution of achievement, even for its growing share of immigrant students.



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In a recent analysis of educational reform policies, Finnish policy analyst Pasi Sahlberg describes how, since the 1970s, Finland has changed its traditional education system “into a model of a modern, publicly financed education system with widespread equity, good quality, large participation—all of this at reasonable cost.” (*Sahlberg, 2009, p. 2.*)

More than 99 percent of students now successfully complete compulsory basic education, and about 90 percent complete upper secondary school. Two-thirds of these graduates enroll in universities or professionally oriented polytechnic schools. More than 50 percent of the Finnish adult population participates in adult education programs. Ninety-eight

percent of the cost of education at all levels is covered by government rather than by private sources.

Although there was a sizable achievement gap among students in the 1970s, strongly correlated to socio-economic status, this gap has been progressively reduced as a result of curriculum reforms started in the 1980s. By 2006, Finland’s between-school variance on the PISA science scale was only 5 percent, whereas the average between-school variance in other OECD nations was about 33 percent. (Large between-school variation is generally related to social inequality.)

The overall variation in achievement among Finnish students is also smaller than that of nearly all the other OECD countries. This is true despite the fact that immigration from nations with lower levels of education has increased sharply in recent years, and there is more linguistic and cultural diversity for schools to contend with. One recent analysis notes that in some urban schools the number of immigrant children or those whose mother tongue is not Finnish approaches 50 percent.

Although most immigrants are still from places like Sweden, the most rapidly growing newcomer groups since 1990 have been from Afghanistan, Bosnia, India, Iran, Iraq, Serbia, Somalia, Turkey, Thailand, and Vietnam. These new immigrants speak more than 60 languages. Yet achievement has been climbing in Finland and growing more equitable.

Strategies for Reform

Because of these trends, many people have turned to Finland for clues to educational transformation. As one analyst notes:

"Most visitors to Finland discover elegant school buildings filled with calm children and highly educated teachers. They also recognize the large autonomy that schools enjoy, little interference by the central education administration in schools' everyday lives, systematic methods to address problems in the lives of students, and targeted professional help for those in need." (*Sahlbert, 2009, p. 7*)

Leaders in Finland attribute the gains to their intensive investments in teacher education—all teachers receive three years of high-quality graduate level preparation completely at state expense—plus a major overhaul of the curriculum and assessment system designed to ensure access to a “thinking curriculum” for all students. A recent analysis of the Finnish system summarized its core principles as follows:

- Resources for those who need them most.
- High standards and supports for special needs.
- Qualified teachers.
- Evaluation of education.
- Balancing decentralization and centralization. (*Laukkanen, 2008, p. 319*)

The process of change has been almost the reverse of policies in the United States. Over the past 40 years, Finland has shifted from a highly centralized system emphasizing external testing to a more localized system in which highly trained teachers design curriculum around the very lean national standards. This new system is implemented through equitable funding and extensive preparation for all teachers. The logic of the system is that investments in the capacity of local teachers and schools to meet the needs of all students, coupled with thoughtful guidance about goals, can unleash the benefits of local creativity in the cause of common, equitable outcomes.

Meanwhile, the United States has been imposing more external testing—often exacerbating differential access to curriculum—while creating more inequitable conditions in local schools. Resources for children and schools, in the form of both overall funding and the presence of trained, experienced teachers, have become more disparate in many states, thus undermining the capacity of schools to meet the outcomes that are ostensibly sought. Sahlberg notes that Finland has taken a very different path. He observes:

"The Finns have worked systematically over 35 years to make sure that competent professionals who can craft the best learning conditions for all students are in all schools, rather than thinking that standardized instruction and related testing can be brought in at the last minute to improve student learning and turn

around failing schools." (*Sahlberg, 2009, p. 22*)

Sahlberg identifies a set of global reforms, undertaken especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, that Finland has not adopted, including standardization of curriculum enforced by frequent external tests; narrowing of the curriculum to basic skills in reading and mathematics; reduced use of innovative teaching strategies; adoption of educational ideas from external sources, rather than development of local internal capacity for innovation and problem-solving; and adoption of high-stakes accountability policies, featuring rewards and sanctions for students, teachers, and schools. By contrast, he suggests:

"Finnish education policies are a result of four decades of systematic, mostly intentional, development that has created a culture of diversity, trust, and respect within Finnish society in general, and within its education system in particular.... Education sector development has been grounded on equal opportunities for all, equitable distribution of resources rather than competition, intensive early interventions for prevention, and building gradual trust among education practitioners, especially teachers." (*Sahlberg, p. 10*)

Equity in opportunity to learn is supported in many ways in addition to basic funding.

Finnish schools are generally small (fewer than 300 pupils) with relatively small class sizes (in the 20s), and are uniformly well equipped. The notion of caring for students educationally and personally is a central principle in the schools. All students receive a free meal daily, as well as free health care, transportation, learning materials, and counseling in their schools, so that the foundations for learning are in place. Beyond that, access to quality curriculum and teachers has become a central aspect of Finnish educational policy.

Improving Curriculum Content and Access

Beginning in the 1970s, Finland launched reforms to equalize educational opportunity by first eliminating the practice of separating students into very different tracks based on their test scores, and then by eliminating the examinations themselves. This occurred in two stages between 1972 and 1982, and a common curriculum, through the end of high school, was developed throughout the entire system. These changes were intended to equalize educational outcomes and provide more open access to higher education. During this time, social supports for children and families were also enacted, including health and dental care, special education services, and transportation to schools.

By the late 1970s, investment in teachers was an additional focus. Teacher education was improved and extended. Policy makers decided that if they invested in very skillful teachers, they could allow local

schools more autonomy to make decisions about what and how to teach—a reaction against the oppressive, centralized system they sought to overhaul.

This bet seems to have paid off. By the mid-1990s, the country had ended the highly regulated system of curriculum management (reflected in older curriculum guides that had exceeded 700 pages of prescriptions). The current national core curriculum is a much leaner document—featuring fewer than 10 pages of guidance for all of mathematics, for example—that guides teachers in collectively developing local curriculum and assessments. The focus of 1990s curricular reform was on science, technology, and innovation, leading to an emphasis on teaching students how to think creatively and manage their own learning.

There are no external standardized tests used to rank students or schools in Finland, and most teacher feedback to students is in narrative form, emphasizing descriptions of their learning progress and areas for growth. As in the NAEP exams in the United States, samples of students are evaluated on open-ended assessments at the end of the second and ninth grades to inform curriculum and school investments. The focus is on using information to drive learning and problem-solving, rather than punishment.

Finland maintains one exam prior to attending university: the matriculation exam, organized and evaluated by a matriculation exam board appointed by the Finnish Ministry of Education. Although not required for graduation or entry into a university, it is common practice for students to take this set of four open-ended exams that emphasize problem-solving, analysis, and writing. Teachers use official guidelines to grade the matriculation exams locally, and samples of the grades are re-examined by professional raters hired by the matriculation exam board. Although it is counterintuitive to those accustomed to external testing as a means of accountability, Finland’s use of school-based, student-centered, open-ended tasks embedded in the curriculum is often touted as an important reason for the nation’s success on the international exams.

The national core curriculum provides teachers with recommended assessment criteria for specific grades in each subject and in the overall final assessment of student progress each year. Local schools and teachers then use those guidelines to craft a more detailed curriculum and set of learning outcomes at each school, as well as approaches to assessing benchmarks in the curriculum. According to the Finnish National Board of Education, the main purpose of assessing students is to guide and encourage students’ own reflection and self-assessment. Teachers give students formative and summative reports both through verbal and narrative feedback. Inquiry is a major focus of learning in Finland, and assessment is used to cultivate students’ active learning skills by asking open-ended questions and helping students

address them.

In a Finnish classroom, it is rare to see a teacher standing at the front of a classroom lecturing students for 50 minutes. Instead, students are likely to determine their own weekly targets with their teachers in specific subject areas and choose the tasks they will work on at their own pace. In a typical classroom, students are likely to be walking around, rotating through workshops or gathering information, asking questions of their teacher, and working with other students in small groups. They may be completing independent or group projects or writing articles for their own magazine. The cultivation of independence and active learning allows students to develop metacognitive skills that help them to frame, tackle, and solve problems; evaluate and improve their own work; and guide their learning processes in productive ways.

Improving Teaching

Greater investments in teacher education began in the 1970s with the expectation that teachers would move from three-year normal school programs to four- to five-year programs of study. During the 1990s, the country overhauled preparation once again to focus more on teaching diverse learners higher-order skills like problem-solving and critical thinking in research-based master’s degree programs. Preparing teachers for a research-based profession has been the central idea of teacher education developments in Finland.

Prospective teachers are competitively selected from the pool of college graduates—only 15 percent of those who apply are admitted—and receive a three-year graduate-level teacher preparation program, entirely free of charge and with a living stipend. Unlike the United States, where teachers either go into debt to prepare for a profession that will pay them poorly or enter with little or no training, Finland made the decision to invest in a uniformly well-prepared teaching force by recruiting top candidates and paying them to go to school. Slots in teacher training programs are highly coveted and shortages are virtually unheard of.

Teachers’ preparation includes both extensive coursework on how to teach—with a strong emphasis on using research based on state-of-the-art practice—and at least a full year of clinical experience in a school associated with the university. These model schools are intended to develop and model innovative practices, as well as to foster research on learning and teaching. Teachers are trained in research methods so that they can “contribute to an increase of the problem-solving capacity of the education system.”

(Buchberger and Buchberger, p. 10)

Within these model schools, student teachers participate in problem-solving groups, a common feature in Finnish schools. The problem-solving groups engage in a cycle of planning, action, and reflection/evaluation that is reinforced throughout the teacher education program and is, in fact, a model for what teachers will plan for their own students, who are expected to incorporate similar kinds of research and inquiry in their own studies. Indeed, the entire system is intended to improve through continual reflection, evaluation, and problem-solving at the level of the classroom, school, municipality, and nation.

Teachers learn how to create challenging curriculum and how to develop and evaluate local performance assessments that engage students in research and inquiry on a regular basis. Teacher training emphasizes learning how to teach students who learn in different ways, including those with special needs. It includes a strong emphasis on “multiculturality” and the “prevention of learning difficulties and exclusion,” as well as on the understanding of learning, thoughtful assessment, and curriculum development. The egalitarian Finns reasoned that if teachers learn to help students who struggle, they will be able to teach all students more effectively and, indeed, leave no child behind.

Most teachers now hold master's degrees in both their content area and in education, and they are well prepared to teach diverse learners—including special-needs students—for deep understanding, and to use formative performance assessments on a regular basis to inform their teaching so it meets students' needs. Teachers are well trained both in research methods and in pedagogical practice. Consequently, they are sophisticated diagnosticians, and they work together collegially to design instruction that meets the demands of the subject matter as well as the needs of their students.

In Finland, like other high-achieving nations, schools provide time for regular collaboration among teachers on issues of instruction. Teachers in Finnish schools meet at least one afternoon each week to jointly plan and develop curriculum, and schools in the same municipality are encouraged to work together to share materials. Time is also provided for professional development within the teachers' workweek. As is true in many other European and Asian nations, nearly half of teachers' school time is used to hone practice through school-based curriculum work, collective planning, and cooperation with parents, which allows schools and families to work more closely together on behalf of students. The result is that:

"Finnish teachers are conscious, critical consumers of professional development and inservice training services. Just as the professional level of the teaching cadre has increased over the past two decades, so has the quality of teacher professional development support. Most compulsory, traditional inservice

training has disappeared. In its place are school- or municipality-based longer term programs and professional development opportunities. Continuous upgrading of teachers' pedagogical professionalism has become a right rather than an obligation. This shift in teachers' learning conditions and styles often reflects ways that classroom learning is arranged for pupils. As a consequence of strengthened professionalism in schools, it has become understood that teachers and schools are responsible for their own work and also solve most problems rather than shift them elsewhere. Today the Finnish teaching profession is on a par with other professional workers; teachers can diagnose problems in their classrooms and schools, apply evidence-based and often alternative solutions to them, and evaluate and analyze the impact of implemented procedures." (*Sahlberg, 2007, p. 155*)

The focus on instruction and the development of professional practice in Finland's approach to organizing the education system has led, according to all reports, to an increased prevalence of effective teaching methods in schools. Furthermore, efforts to enable schools to learn from each other have led to "lateral capacity building": the widespread adoption of effective practices and experimentation with innovative approaches across the system, "encouraging teachers and schools to continue to expand their repertoires of teaching methods and individualizing teaching to meet the needs of all students." (*Sahlberg, 2007, p. 167*)

A Finnish official noted this key lesson learned from the reforms that allowed Finland to climb from an inequitable, mediocre education system to the very top of the international rankings:

"Empowerment of the teaching profession produces good results. Professional teachers should have space for innovation, because they should try to find new ways to improve learning. Teachers should not be seen as technicians whose work is to implement strictly dictated syllabi, but rather as professionals who know how to improve learning for all. All this creates a big challenge . . . that certainly calls for changes in teacher education programs. Teachers are ranked highest in importance, because educational systems work through them." (*Laukkanen, 2008*)

Finland has undertaken these elements in a systemic fashion, rather than pouring energy into a potpourri of innovations and then changing course every few years, as has often been the case in many communities in the United States, especially in large cities. And while this small nation has conducted this work on a national level, similar strategies have been employed at the state or provincial level in high-scoring Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, and provinces like Hong Kong and Macao in China, also with positive outcomes.

They demonstrate how it is possible to build a system in which students are routinely taught by well-

prepared teachers who work together to create a thoughtful, high-quality curriculum, supported by appropriate materials and assessments that enable ongoing learning for students, teachers, and schools alike.

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