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Learning From Abroad

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The second in a seven-part series

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For the past two decades, the United States has been engaged in a sustained effort to improve academic achievement in our schools and to reduce persistent racial and socioeconomic gaps in achievement. While some states and large urban districts have made significant progress during this period, overall improvement in performance has been disappointingly modest.

Meanwhile, international assessments such as the **Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study** and the **Program for International Student Assessment** allow U.S. policymakers to compare the performance of our schools and students with those in other developed countries. These assessments leave no doubt that there are several nations (or in some cases, states or provinces) whose education systems manage to achieve both higher overall performance and more equitable outcomes than the U.S. system does.

The dominant reform movement in the United States, generally known as standards-based reform, was energized 20 years ago when the Kentucky Supreme Court found the entire state education system unconstitutional, wiped the slate clean, and invited the legislature to build a whole new system from the ground up. In 1990, the plan that emerged was embodied in law as the **Kentucky Education Reform Act**, or KERA. With its strong emphasis on rigorous academic standards, state assessments to measure progress against those standards, and strong accountability for results, KERA became the template that many other states followed over the ensuing decade to revise their education systems.

Imagine that in 2011 another state court were to strike down its education system and invite the legislature to begin anew. Imagine further that the legislative leaders, in their wisdom, decided to look for guidance at the education policies, practices, and financing and governance structures in consistently higher-performing systems like those of Finland; Singapore; Japan; and Ontario, Canada (in most of the world, education is organized nationally rather than at the state level as in the United States). What would a new state system in this country look like if it were redesigned based on the best international evidence and experience?

State-level designers of a new system would need to begin by focusing on the challenge of recruiting, preparing, and developing a high-quality teaching

About This Series

force. Successful education systems focus intensively on what happens in schools and classrooms between students and teachers. Other strong systems understand that teachers need to be well prepared, and consequently that teacher-preparation programs need to be rigorous.

In Finland, for example, all prospective teachers must go through a five-year university-based program that culminates in a master's degree. Finland, like most high-performing countries, recruits aspiring teachers from the top third of the talent pool, and its training programs now have 10 applicants for every available position.

Legislators and policymakers in high-performing countries understand that to attract top talent into teaching, the work must be seen as professional, and schools must be organized to support the continuous learning and development of teachers. In Japan, for example, this recognition takes the form of substantial time during the school day set aside for teachers to have collaborative planning opportunities and lesson study. Strong education systems give their highest priority to helping their teachers and principals get better at their work. This means more than professional-development workshops; it involves creating a school culture where the adults, just like the students, are encouraged and expected to think about their work and to continue improving their skills. Some high-performing systems also provide career opportunities for teachers so they can advance in the profession without having to leave the classroom entirely, unless they choose to. In Singapore, for example, teachers can choose among three pathways once they have established themselves as highly effective teachers. They can move onto an administrative track, heading toward the principalship. They can become specialists in areas like research, assessment, or technology. But they can also choose a pathway leading them to successive levels of responsibility as teachers. The pay scales in each pathway are comparable, so that at the end of the day a master teacher can make as much as a senior administrator.

School systems also require high-quality leadership from people who understand the core business of teaching and learning, and who focus their attention on teachers and classrooms. School leaders need access to resources such as innovative materials, time for teachers to collaborate, and infusions of new knowledge and ideas from outside the school.

A **working group** on the "Futures of School Reform," organized by the Harvard Graduate School of Education and led by Robert B. Schwartz and Jal D. Mehta of Harvard and Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute, includes more than two dozen researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from around the country. The group is seeking to engage a wider audience in an "urgent" conversation—one that it hopes can advance the national dialogue on improving public education for all children. The working group has received convening support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Spencer Foundation.

Education Week is running a seven-part series of Commentary essays expressing visions of members of the "Futures" group. The series, which concludes in the May 25 issue, is accompanied by a blog, The Futures of School Reform, written by the group. Readers are invited to participate by posting comments on the **blog**, or writing **letters to the editor**.

After addressing the quality of teachers and leaders, designers of our new state education system might then consider the kind of instructional infrastructure and support good teachers and leaders need to do their work. Here again there are important lessons from other nations.

Most high-performing countries begin with some form of national curriculum, but typically their curriculum documents are much thinner and less structured than ours. They highlight a few key topics in each subject and grade level that are essential for students to master, and provide guidance to teachers on how these topics might be approached, but leave a substantial amount of discretion for teachers—at the local level—to fill in the blanks. Assessments are closely linked to the curriculum, including the attention to higher-order skills. The assessments are also designed to provide diagnostic and instructional information, in addition to, or even instead of, student or school accountability information.

High-performing systems invest significant attention and resources in prevention and early intervention rather than remediation. In Finland, for example, teachers are well trained to diagnose learning difficulties, and every school has a “special teacher” whose job it is to work closely with regular classroom teachers. The specialized teachers provide additional, individualized help to struggling students so they don’t fall behind.

Successful systems quickly mobilize support from family-service agencies for students and families in need of specialized help, and generally work hard to make sure that no student falls through the cracks. The special education system is less formal: Providing the right supports for learning is more important than giving students a label. In Finland, as in other Scandinavian countries, all students are in a common untracked curriculum through lower secondary school (the U.S. equivalent of 9th or 10th grade), and there is a strong preference for inclusion rather than separate special education classes.

Similarly, high-performing systems respond to struggling schools early with intervention and support. In Ontario, low-performing schools receive intensive technical assistance and support. As a result, the number of struggling schools in the province has dropped from 110 to 18 in two years. Interestingly, Ontario and other high-performing states and nations do not close low-performing schools.

At the end of secondary school, most high-performing systems, especially those in northern Europe, provide students with a choice between a pathway leading to university and a pathway leading more directly to a career. The career-oriented pathways are very well developed, cover a very broad range of occupations (high-tech, low-tech; white-collar, blue-collar) and have strong employer involvement in shaping curriculum and setting qualification standards. These programs typically provide a mix of work-based and classroom-based learning, extend over three or four years, and culminate in a certificate with real currency in the labor market. Consequently, even in Finland—Europe’s highest-performing country and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development country where social class is the least predictive of school achievement—43 percent of youngsters opt for the vocational rather than the university pathway, knowing that there are routes back to further education at any point in their careers.These are not the only important features of high-performing systems. Countries with strong education systems do not leave it to the vagaries of the wealth of local communities to

fund education. In most other countries, the most money goes to the schools and districts serving children with the highest needs.

Also, these education systems have high alignment at the school, district, regional, and national levels, unlike the fractured system in the United States with its many small, independent districts and weak states.

High-performing systems provide a good balance of clear overall goals and standards but also significant school and district autonomy in which resources are directed to supporting better teaching and learning rather than to administrative processes.

As a consequence of these features, high-performing systems generally have a more collaborative and trust-based school culture than typically characterizes the U.S. system. Their administrative leaders are relentlessly positive and optimistic in their communications, stressing everyone's capabilities and contributions, not their deficiencies. They focus on improvement, not blame. They try not to divide people, or to declare winners and losers, but to keep everyone—students, parents, teachers, and others—engaged in a positive way.

This requires a respectful policy dialogue that must happen in structured ways to allow all parties to contribute and to have their voices heard. Making this happen in the fractious environments that now characterize education politics in the United States will not be easy, but it is essential.

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