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Looking for School Improvement Ideas Beyond Our Borders

By **Helen Janc Malone**

As we move forward with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and preparations for celebrating the 60th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, it is imperative that we stop for a moment and think critically about what kind of educational system we want for our children in the 21st century. And, of equal importance, how do we get from here to there? One way to approach this complex task is to look outside ourselves, beyond the United States' borders, and consider what other nations have done or are doing to transform their educational systems.

Why look globally for inspiration and ideas?

U.S. school reformers are designing innovative approaches to educational improvement; however, such strategies reside on the margins, as our schooling system remains largely unchanged. We have considerable work left to close the achievement and opportunity gaps, to increase high school graduation rates, and to boost college-completion and career-training levels. Our **students' performance on the Program for International Student Assessment**, or PISA, not only shows an average standing among developed countries but also highlights the differences across demographic lines, further emphasizing the need to rethink what learning supports we offer to our students, particularly low-income students and students of color.

Although, as a nation, we have made progress on student-learning outcomes, we appear to be making incremental changes rather than finding sustainable solutions to our pressing education problems. Global perspectives might illuminate a different path.

What lessons could we draw from other nations?

Finnish, Singaporean, and South Korean PISA scores have been splashed across U.S. headlines, leading to a national outcry to improve our education system as a way to stay competitive and "win" the international test-score race. However, when we look deeper into the international benchmarking, our debate appears to be bifurcated between two sentiments: (a) that other countries are too different for us to learn from them and, thus, we should stick with domestic-only innovations; or (b)

that we could cherry-pick reforms applied by leading education nations and transplant them in the United States in hopes that the selected strategies would turn our schools around. Either view presents us with a false choice: to ignore other education systems altogether or to look for a silver bullet while disregarding contextual factors that interact in complex societies.

Researchers from six continents, representing 15 countries, and I took on the challenge of unpacking what lessons we could draw from international benchmarking in concert with our domestic innovations. In a recently published book, *Leading Educational Change: Global Issues, Challenges, and Lessons on Whole-System Reform*, we argue that educational change cannot happen only at the top but, rather, it must transform the learning process throughout an entire system, inside classrooms, within communities, within districts, and at state and federal levels. We also argue that educational change cannot happen in a piecemeal fashion. It must simultaneously address instructional practices; equity and educational justice; accountability and assessment; and the role we, as a society, play in supporting student learning and development.

What we, as a nation, ought to consider is that leading countries address education comprehensively, integrating several aspects of schooling simultaneously.

As my colleagues—including Andy Hargreaves, Dennis Shirley, Alma Harris, and Pak Tee Ng—argue in the book, top-performing countries:

- View education as a collective responsibility of paramount importance to their social, economic, and cultural sustainability and support the notion that advancing quality education for all students leads to an increased standard of living, innovation, national pride, and progress;
- Invest in human capital by recruiting only top high school graduates into teaching, putting them through a rigorous university training program, supporting them throughout their professional careers via ongoing development, and giving them a voice to inform education policy and shape curriculum and instructional practices inside their schools and classrooms;
- Build equitable systems whereby all students have access to support services based on their individual needs in order to ensure academic readiness, success, and preparation for career, life, and citizenship;
- Balance external and internal accountability, focusing on professional responsibility over the results of high-stakes standardized tests alone; and
- Have a guiding vision that drives education policy beyond political election cycles and quick-fix fads.

Finland exemplifies the tenets of meaningful educational change: The country has created a shared vision for education that did not involve being among the top PISA performers. Instead, **according to Pasi Sahlberg**, the director of the Center for International Mobility and Cooperation at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, the country invested in quality teachers, wraparound services for students, and frequent school-based diagnostic assessments to inform instructional practices; and focused on building a system of support on every level. The country's decades-long commitment to education as a vehicle for national success has added fuel needed to invest, innovate, and progress, thus leading to positive student-achievement results.

How do we apply international ideas domestically?

International lessons offer us learning opportunities that in combination with our domestic

considerations could lead to better education policies. We have to acknowledge that education is a complex endeavor, and that our policies cannot focus on one big idea that could change with every election. We have to approach education as a puzzle in which investing in pre-K-16 involves many pieces that have to fall into place: equitable resources; human-capital development; engaging learning environments and experiences; broad stakeholder involvement; and a mechanism to measure a comprehensive set of outcomes we can learn from and improve upon.

Our education system has to be about building knowledgeable and engaged lifelong learners. In our new edweek.org blog, *International Perspectives on Education Reform*, the contributors to *Leading Educational Change* and I will challenge the conventional thinking around these issues, and we invite you to join the conversation.

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