

## EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

**Finland's Success Is No Miracle**By **Pasi Sahlberg**

The Finnish education system has been at the center of global attention for exactly a decade. Until the publication of the first Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA, results in December 2001, education in Finland didn't have an international reputation. Finnish results on previous international assessments had been average, at best. Even the Finns themselves thought their education system was nothing special and expressed particular concern about the quality of instruction in math and science in the 1980s and 1990s.

Finland's stellar results for the first cycle of PISA in 2000 and for each subsequent cycle of the triennial international test have dramatically altered domestic



as well as international opinion. Educators at home and abroad have been forced to assess what Finland does differently. What may come as a surprise is that Finland has neither engaged in researching its own, distinctive reform measures, nor generated change knowledge to steer education policy implementation. Instead, Finnish researchers have relied on the theories and insights of their international peers. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, we have experienced a transformation of our education system, from which three important lessons have emerged.

First, part of Finland's success has stemmed from studying other education systems. Since the birth of public education in the 1860s, educational ideas and models first from Germany and Sweden and later from Anglo-Saxon countries have shaped the Finnish education system and policies. The very structure of schools, curricula, and vocational learning-for-work programs were influenced by theories and practices in these and other countries. Although there are some Finnish inventions in the current system—such as modular rather than annual curricula for upper-secondary students, performance-based vocational

qualifications, and a supplementary year of school between lower- and upper-secondary school for those in need—most innovation in current pedagogy, student assessment, and school leadership originates beyond our borders.

Education ideas from the United States have played an especially significant role since the 1980s. In fact, I am one of the domestic messengers who imported great American educational innovations, including cooperative learning, to Finland. Finnish authorities have likewise made significant use of ideas from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development; the European Commission; and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization. In short, the Finns have been open to learning from other education systems.

Second, formulation and implementation of education policies have been built upon close cooperation with education authorities, municipalities that govern the schools, and—through Finland's Trade Union of Education—teachers. Since the early 1990s, education-development strategies have been implemented through five-year development plans that are a result of a consultation process with these parties. The voices of other stakeholders—business leaders, nongovernmental associations, researchers, and parents—are always included in these development plans. This consensus-based policymaking process has guaranteed sustainability of reforms and maintained the focus on a singular, shared vision of ongoing reforms. There have been over 20 different ministers of education and government coalitions since the 1970s in Finland, but the main principles of education policy have changed little.

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Finally, the key driver of education-development policy in Finland has been providing equal and positive learning opportunities for all children and securing their well-being, including their nutrition, health, safety, and overall happiness. Finnish authorities, in this regard, have defied international convention. They have not endorsed student testing and school ranking as the path to improvement, but rather focused on teacher preparation and retention; collaboration with teachers and their union representatives; early and regular intervention for children with learning disabilities; well-rounded curricula; and equitable funding of schools throughout the country. Many have argued that it is not possible to achieve excellence in student learning and equity in education simultaneously. The experience in Finland—as well as in Canada and Japan—shows that, with smart and sustainable efforts and professionally committed personnel in schools, such excellence is possible. Even to many Finns, success once seemed unlikely, but the PISA results have silenced those in doubt.

While most elements of Finnish education reforms have been deliberate, there has also been a measure of good luck. The deep economic and financial crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s created an opportunity for Finland to question its conventional thinking about education. This opened the doors to a rapid increase of school and teacher autonomy, customized curricula, and flexible learning pathways in secondary education.

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Yet not all new ideas proved fruitful. One of the educational reform recommendations for which we had high hopes and expectations was information and communication technology. Investment in school infrastructure, software development, and training of teachers was huge during the 1980s and the 1990s. Frequent surveys of Finnish teachers' use of technology in instruction, however, demonstrated that technology can't be the main driver of change in education. In fact, in many places it has become an overbudgeted and underused element of the education system. It is, at best, an enabler and a tool if used mindfully by teachers and students.

By rejecting standardized testing and concomitant school and teacher accountability measures, Finland has instead charted its own path by focusing on equity, professionalism, and collaboration. Much as Finland has learned from the United States, Canada, Germany, England, Sweden, and other nations about pedagogy and curricula, Finland may now be looked to for lessons about educational policy. American educators should look at Finland not to import elements of its school system, but as a place where great American educational theories and inventions are practiced system-wide every day.

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