

THE LEARNING System

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

KEY DRIVERS FUEL INTERNATIONAL SUCCESSES

By Anthony Armstrong

Peer- ing across international borders for education success stories has become increasingly popular recently. However, understanding another system's successful reform model, along with the role professional learning plays, is loaded with challenges. Contextual and cultural factors in other nations make replicating a transplanted model next to impossible.

Education consultant and author Michael Fullan offers a lens through which education leaders can examine international models on a systemic level. In *Choosing the Wrong Drivers for Whole System Reform* (Fullan, 2011), written for the Centre for Strategic Education, Fullan presents four "right" drivers of education reform that should be primary motivators and contrasts them with "wrong" drivers that, while valid, should be a secondary consideration and not used to lead reform.

In Finland and Singapore, two countries where impressive success in education is influenced by cultural and contextual factors, determining the primary drivers can help educators glean clear lessons to adapt in their contexts.

Finland and Singapore serve as models of high-performing systems.



BUILD CAPACITY

The first right driver Fullan presents is what he calls the "learning-instruction-assessment nexus," or capacity building. The wrong driver, as a polar opposite, is accountability. Fullan asserts that instead of focusing on accountability as the driver for reform, through such things as test results and teacher evaluations, improving instruction should be the driving force behind change efforts (Fullan, 2011, p. 8).

In labeling assessments and evaluations as wrong drivers for system reform, Fullan reiterates that he is not discounting their value, as long as they are smaller parts of a complex system built on drivers that are more likely to lead to successful results (Fullan, 2011, p. 9).

Finland's strong teacher preparation programs and a culture of capacity building, shared leadership, and teacher collective responsibility have created a cultural trust that frees their education leaders from needing accountability systems to build social confidence. "The fact that there seems to be very little interest in Finland in instituting the assessment and external account-

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ability regimes that have characterised the reform strategies of many OECD countries ... is perhaps the best evidence of the fundamental trust that seems to exist between the educators and the community” (OECD, 2011, p. 131).

This commitment to high-quality capacities creates a strong sense of collective and professional responsibility within schools’ collaborative learning communities and drives teacher professional learning.

For Singapore, said Tony Jackson, vice president of education for the Asia Society, “capacity is the lynchpin for success.” Its professional learning system relies on collaborative learning communities and is much more structured than the Finnish system. According to Jackson, “Singapore schools do a lot to improve teachers over time. For example, teacher-learning circles meet for eight two-hour sessions, over a period of four to twelve months. The learning circles meet, identify common problems, come up with solutions to those problems, pilot the solutions, and share the results with other teachers.”

Singapore teachers are expected to spend 20 hours per week working with colleagues during the school day, said Jackson. Additionally, they are expected to engage in 100 hours of professional learning each year outside the school.

Within the structure of their professional learning hours, teachers have the freedom to develop learning plans at the beginning of the year that are reviewed at the middle and end of the year. These reviews are not for a formal accountability review, explained Jackson. Instead, they are developmental tools that identify areas of focus for the following year.

“One of the things that is different about schools that have this kind of system,” said Jackson, “is that the teachers want to be a part of it. They want feedback that helps them improve. This is different from other systems entirely because the feedback is welcomed.”

VALUE SOCIAL CAPITAL

While much of the dialogue surrounding education reform emphasizes appraising and improving individual teachers, Fullan’s second driver stresses the importance

of using social capital to build collaborative cultures that foster individual development. Social capital resides not in individuals but in the relationships among them and how those relationships allow for the exchange of expertise and support.

Fullan argues that allowing all teachers to engage in daily peer-to-peer collaboration empowers them to take

ownership of their profession and ongoing, continuous instructional improvement (Fullan, 2011, pp. 13-14). This collaborative environment then feeds the growth of the human capital, or individual growth, by serving as both lateral and public accountability.

“It is important to realize that individual capital will never compensate social capital in school,” said Pasi Sahlberg, director general of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation in Helsinki, Finland, and author of *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland?* “In other words, teacher professional development should equally focus on developing collegiality among teachers, not just knowledge and skills of each teacher. This is what Finland has systematically done during the past two decades.”

According to Sahlberg, the strongest driver of teacher professional

learning in most Finnish schools is the autonomy the schools have to implement curriculum and annual work plans. Each school in Finland designs its own curriculum and the capacity to implement it invokes a stronger sense of commitment and collective responsibility than if it were created by outside parties.

To leverage social capital in Singapore, the Ministry of Education created professional teacher networks that “serve as catalysts for and support of teacher-initiated professional development through sharing, collaboration, and reflection,” said Jackson. The networks bring together master, lead, and beginning teachers and others to engage with each other through learning circles, teacher-led workshops, conferences, and publications.

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According to Jackson, learning communities in Singapore and other high-performing countries are an expected part of the professional community and are not viewed as a perfunctory obligation. Singapore schools, he said, ensure that their teachers have the capacity to use the learning community structure well, whereas other lower-performing countries may treat learning communities as a human capital obligation that is fulfilled when a group of teachers are placed in the same room.

FOCUS ON PEDAGOGY

The proper role for technology in reform efforts, said Fullan, is as a tool to support the appropriate pedagogy (Fullan, 2011, p. 15). An ongoing challenge for many systems is the temptation to view technology as the primary driver for many solutions.

For Finland, pedagogical models and practices are at the forefront while technological tools are relegated to supporting the educational content and acting as links “between learning and study environments outside school” (Ubiquitous Information Society Advisory Board, 2010, p. 24).

“That’s the key,” said Jackson of Singapore’s use of technology. “They clearly see technology as an aid to high-quality instruction, not in place of it.”

IMPLEMENT SYSTEMICALLY

Instead of focusing on single pieces of reform that are linked together, Fullan asserts that systems must coordinate reform efforts systemically, including recruitment, professional learning, working conditions, and leadership roles as careers evolve (Fullan, 2011, p. 16).

“Schools can become real professional learning communities when all their members are from the same craft,” said Sahlberg. “Finnish schools are communities of learning and care where responsibility is distributed among all staff.”

Singapore’s teacher evaluation system is an example of a systemic driver through its holistic appraisal of teacher capacity. According to Jackson, it assesses a multitude of competencies for teachers, including student academic and character development, pedagogical initiatives the teachers have developed, professional learning activities, contributions they have made to their colleagues and their schools, and their relationships within the community. These holistic evaluations are conducted by a number of different people, including department heads and principals. The standards by which teachers are evaluated were developed with input at multiple levels, and included teacher input in the piloting and ongoing refinement.

“This vetting of the evaluation program by teachers is

HIGH MARKS FOR FINLAND AND SINGAPORE

For the last decade, Finland has consistently ranked as one of the top educational systems in every benchmark in the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey of 15-year-olds in principal and industrialized countries (OECD, 2011, p. 118). Singapore ranked among the top education systems in the 2009 PISA survey, and has historically earned high marks on other international benchmarks. The United States, in contrast, earned only an average ranking in the 2009 PISA survey.

important for everyone’s buy-in,” said Jackson. “Everyone has to agree with the evaluation’s goals to be effective. The purpose of the evaluation is to create a dialogue that is frequent, clear, and detailed. It must also include how teachers can improve their craft, not just if they are doing well.”

For those system leaders who seek to learn from

the successes of other countries, Jackson emphasized the importance of studying globally but thinking locally. “It is critically important to learn from other countries and systems,” said Jackson. “But there has to be a redesign and adaptation to benchmark thinking to other places. We need to work on our own solutions and consider our own structure and social context to design processes to solve problems for our own states and cities to make systemic change.”

Learning Forward BELIEF

Professional learning decisions are strengthened by diversity.

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