

THE LEADING Teacher

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

Transatlantic teamwork

TEACHERS IN FINLAND
AND ALBERTA, CANADA,
SWAP EXPERIENCE TO FUEL
IMPROVEMENT

for positively achieving educational development are the school, not the system.

“We all have the same goal — to make the world a better place through public education,” said Matt Christison, principal of Centennial High School in Calgary, Alberta. “I think this project has challenged a lot of things that were tacit in my understanding of how schools work.”

Hargreaves and Shirley are involved in evaluating the ATA project. The teachers’ association project, begun in 2011, is a collaboration with

the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. In March 2011, a delegation of 13 Finnish educators visited five high schools in Alberta, and a few months later, 19 Alberta educators went abroad for a week to observe in Finnish schools. Finnish teachers subsequently spent a week in five Alberta schools, reflecting on classroom practices, assessments, and instructional strategies.

Both Alberta and Finland have garnered world attention because of their consistently high performances on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) exams, which assess the performance of 15-year-olds in 65 countries in literacy, math, and science. The top performance of the two systems may be connected to the view of teachers as professionals and the way teachers interact to create a learning environment conducive to student achievement.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

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By Valerie von Frank

When Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley discuss high-performing countries, they talk about the “fourth way.” The fourth way to raise student achievement emphasizes long-term gains over short-term fixes, inspiration and innovation over top-down accountability, and collective responsibility over competition. Capacity building is more about self-directed growth and development, according to the two Boston College professors of education.

In the province of Alberta, Canada, and some countries such as Finland, the fourth way is already in practice. Take, for example, a recent initiative of the Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) in which pilot high schools representative of different characteristics are exchanging visits and information with teachers and students in Finland to deepen their knowledge and continue their push for improvement. The project involves educators driving the initiative for reform and teachers themselves in developing ideas. The partnership, according to the ATA, is based on the hypothesis that the real work of reform and the locus of influence



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COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

The ATA collaboration is an example of the continued drive that marks high-performing countries, Shirley and Hargreaves said, but particularly the emphasis on having teachers drive the innovation, rather than a more prescriptive model.

“The U.S. is locked into a command-and-control system of education,” Hargreaves said. Under the headline “The lemming race to the top” in the foreword of *Finnish Lessons*, Hargreaves writes that current U.S. policies that stress testing and competition detract from efforts to create a system of improvement. “It is based on a failed theory that teacher quality can be increased by a system of competitive rewards, and it rests on a badly flawed model of management where everyone manages their own unit, is accountable for results, and competes with their peers — creating fiefdoms, silos, and lack of capacity or incentives for professionals to help each other,” he writes.

Hargreaves and Shirley point out that students achieve at higher levels when teachers collaborate with their colleagues around planning lessons and operate in high-trust communities that allow them professional responsibility.

“Inquiry is an ingrained part of what Finnish teachers do,” Hargreaves said. In Alberta, he said, the government is funding programs that allow teachers to design their own innovations and inquire into effective practice.

“How teachers collaborate plays out differently in different contexts,” Shirley said. “In Alberta, there’s a lot of teachers going into each others’ classrooms and observing, then giving each other feedback. In Finland, there’s lots of

collaboration around lesson planning.”

The Finns undertook a series of reforms in the 1970s to move education decisions to the local level, eliminating a national inspection system and promoting school self-evaluation. “Ownership of the evaluation by teachers, together with inputs from parental feedback and pupil self-assessment, have contributed to positive changes in classroom practice,” according to Webb, Vulliamy, Häkkinen, & Hämäläinen (1998). The Alberta Teachers’ Association noted that while the province has 640 full-time staff to work on curriculum and assessment in coordination with 100 staff in Edmonton, the Finnish National Board of Education employs 18 (Booi & Couture, 2011). The changes in Finland allow schools to respond to community needs, increasing the opportunity for teachers to influence their own work. Teachers now help decide school courses, select textbooks, and have input in budget decisions and school operations.

Jean Stiles, principal of Jasper Place High School in Edmonton, Alberta, which is part of the ATA project, said she found the Finnish teachers’ approach to developing curriculum “fascinating.”

“It’s teachers getting together and working on their teaching,” Stiles said. But in both Finland and Alberta, she said, “teachers are taking control, saying ‘These are our kids; this is our school, and we want to make it better.’ ... Teachers are excited about their jobs.”

Stiles said both cultures have a sense of collective responsibility. “Once you’ve developed a culture where you say, ‘All these kids matter and we’re not prepared to let anybody fall through the cracks, and we’re going to be really transparent about our data, and let’s talk about how we can help one another,’ you start to get this feeling that it’s all about kids. You say, ‘Are we doing the best possible for the kids we have?’ When you develop that kind of a system, that’s the accountability.”

MORE THAN IMITATION

Hargreaves and Shirley emphasize that simply imitating another nation’s system is not the answer, but that nations, like schools, can learn from one another and adapt ideas to meet needs within their own context. Hargreaves and Shirley, who will publish a book on the global fourth way in 2012, are evaluating the Alberta/Finland partnership. They highlight several characteristics of high-performing systems based on their own analysis of those two systems and others they have studied, including Korea and Singapore. High-performing systems, they say:

Hire the best people. In Finland, for example, “teaching is seen as something really smart people do,” said Hargreaves. Finnish teachers are drawn from those at the top of their classes and only about 10% of applicants are accepted to university programs for education. They then are pro-

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ARTICLES

World-class district: Missouri district credits professional learning for international distinction

The Learning System, Spring 2011

Read how a small, suburban school district in Clayton, Mo., ranked first in the world in science and reading, and second in the world in math.

www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2266

A world of possibilities: Educating for global competence

Tools for Schools, May/June 2010

Read how schools are preparing students to compete more than ever on an international playing field.

www.learningforward.org/news/articleDetails.cfm?articleID=2076

BOOK

Team to Teach: A Facilitator’s Guide to Professional Learning Teams

NSDC, 2008

This step-by-step book includes all the necessary guidelines for facilitators to help educators build a successful professional learning team.

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vided a free education through their master's degrees. Those planning to teach in the later grades have master's degrees in the subject area. Universities run training schools where prospective teachers practice their craft. Once they enter the profession, teachers work a minimum of three workdays outside school hours each year on further education, funded by their employers, focusing on locally-determined topics. Teaching has become the first-choice profession in Finland for women and the second choice (after doctor) for men, Hargreaves said.

Have a culture that inspires rather than penalizes.

Countries that perform at high levels instill professionals with a sense of possibility rather than a fear of falling short, Hargreaves said. They concentrate on moving the majority, rather than highlighting stars and singling out low-performers. "America concentrates on the extremes" at either end of the bell curve, Hargreaves said — those below and above the majority in the middle. "The rest of the world puts the emphasis on moving the most professionals and children forward."

Have teachers innovate, not just implement. In the fourth way, Hargreaves said, teachers work continually together around curriculum and assessment rather than using a curriculum that is handed to them. "If you're innovating, you try something new," he said. "If you're implementing, you're just getting better at what exists." Alberta, for example, provides funding for teachers' inquiry into their own practice to allow them to learn from it, he noted.

Recent research in classrooms around the world in Australia, England, Finland, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, and Senegal found that "innovation is a teacher-level phenomenon" (SRI International and Microsoft Partners in Learning, 2011). The report also concluded that "Innovative teaching happens more in environments where teachers have access to strong programs of professional development" (p. 22), marked by both intensity and design. Predictors of innovative teaching, the report states, include collaboration among teachers focused on teaching and learning, teacher appraisals aligned with innovative practice, and ongoing professional development focused on integrating new teaching practices.

Allow teachers professional latitude. High-performing countries, Hargreaves writes in the foreword to *Finnish Lessons*, develop "teachers' capacity to be collectively responsible for developing curriculum and diagnostic assessments together rather than delivering prescribed curricula and preparing for the standardized tests designed by central government." Singapore's philosophy, he said, is "teach less, learn more." Time needs to be carved out, he said, for teachers to design their curriculum together. In Finland, teachers develop most of their curriculum together with broad guidelines from the government. Christison, the Calgary principal, said he was amazed at the high school math guidelines for Finnish schools — six pages of outcomes over

nine to 10 courses. Alberta, he said, has 16 pages for 10th grade common math alone.

Expect teachers to collaborate. "In high-performing systems, teachers are resourced, encouraged, and expected to work with and learn from each other, not mainly to teach by themselves and then have an occasional meeting to look at data after school," Hargreaves said. In Finland, teachers spend less time in the classroom than in any other developed country, he noted, compared with U.S. teachers, who spend more time in the classroom than teachers in any other developed country. "It's like lawyers being in court all the time without ever having time to prepare their case," he said. "America is the Legal Aid of international education reform."

Have career tracks for teacher advancement. Finnish schools offer teachers leadership opportunities without becoming administrators. Singapore has three teaching career tracks, Hargreaves said, that teachers can move between. "In low-performing systems," he said, "teachers have flat careers where they often feel stuck."

Stiles, principal at Jasper Place, summed up her school's efforts at improvement this way: "If we could have accountability, which is something we value, at the same time as being able to make decisions — about curriculum, delivery of curriculum, instructional practice — close to kids, I think that's where (success) lies. Teachers are impacting their profession and making good professional decisions. It's all about site-based decision making."

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley are authors of *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change*, 2009, Corwin.

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