

Q&A: Michael Barber

What works, works everywhere

LEADING REFORMER SAYS
SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES
CUT ACROSS OCEANS
AND CULTURES

BY TRACY CROW

JSD: In your work preparing the McKinsey report, *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*, you found that several policies and approaches delivered superior results for students. Can you describe those?

Barber: There were basically four key messages from looking at the best systems in the world. Although these systems were on three different continents, in Canada, in Finland, in Singapore and in other parts of Asia, all culturally extremely varied, they had three or four things consistently in common.

One is that they recruit really good people into teaching. They could recruit people with good qualifications — that is, good academic degrees — but also with the personal qualifications to be a good teacher,

things like their generosity, their liking of children, their ability to be an inspirer of young people. These successful systems screen for the human qualities and for the academic qualifications, and then they train them really well at the beginning. In Finland, for example, one out of 10 applications for teacher training is accepted into the program. Those systems are getting people with better qualifications and better qualities to be good teachers, and then they train them really well.

Secondly, when those teachers get into the profession and become teachers, the system focuses on them learning continuously. There's an ethic of continuous improvement in the profession within these countries and within the successful schools. You see

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a lot of embedded professional development with mentoring and coaching for support. You see joint planning of lessons, with teachers teaching them separately, looking at the data, reviewing the student work, and then teaching the lesson again. There's very much a focus on improving pedagogy built into the routines of the teachers. When you get see systems in the U.S. improving significantly, professional development close to the classrooms is very central to that improvement. Boston in the last 10 years is an example of that.

The third thing is that the systems expect that every child will succeed. When a child falls behind, people in these systems don't say, "Oh, that child's not clever enough or comes from a poor background." They say, "What's the barrier to that child keeping up with everybody else, and what do we need to do about it?" Finnish primary schools are the model of this.

Michael Barber was instrumental in preparing the 2007 report *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top* (McKinsey & Company), an international comparative analysis of the factors that create successful education systems. The report is available online at www.mckinsey.com/client-service/socialsector/resources/pdf/Worlds_School_Systems_Final.pdf.

Any child who falls behind is referred to special education — and it's not what you or I would call special education in our countries. It's truly expert teachers who are paid more, and they're on staff to diagnose a learning barrier or maybe a social, family, or cultural barrier. They'll work to unlock the barrier using a range of experts who have the knowledge. Their job is to get that child

back into the classroom with his or her peers as soon as possible.

The final point from the report is that these systems generally have very good school leaders, people who are extremely well-developed, who assemble the human and other resources at the school level to deliver the kind of quality I just talked about. In Singapore, for example, you can't become a principal without doing a six-month principal development program that involves looking at other schools, looking at schools in other countries, looking at businesses and other factors, and gaining the leadership qualities and a strategic understanding of your own education system. Only about half of the people who embark on that six-month course qualify to become principals. It's a very systematic development of leadership.

JSD: What role did culture play in the factors you found in successful school systems?

Barber: We were solely focusing on within-system factors in the McKinsey report. We didn't study the culture. The important thing about our report is we found similar things in Canada, England, Singapore, Korea, and other places. Those are very different places. You can dismiss Singapore and say it's a very different society from the U.S., or you can dismiss Finland and say it's a very homogenous society with a social democratic consensus, but when you put it all together, it's much harder to dismiss the findings. The findings are cross-cultural in that they are operational in three different continents. People tend to dismiss Canada, actually wrongly, on the grounds that it's much more homogenous. In Toronto, 57% of the population was born outside of Canada, never mind outside of Toronto or Ontario, so they've got huge diversity, and these systems are successful. While culture is important,



it doesn't invalidate the findings of the report at all.

JSD: What is happening in the countries that have such strong recruiting practices? How is teaching such a prestigious position that people are really competing to work in this field?

Barber: This is a very important factor. We've worked really worked at changing this in the U.K. with some success. First, pay is not the most important thing. Policy makers tend to assume that pay is the single variable they've got to play around with, but it isn't that, or rather it isn't just that. Of course, pay matters. Most systems pay reasonable but not spectacular salaries.

Secondly, there are qualities in teacher training that are important. If teacher training is really easy to get into and a lot of people drop out of it as they go through it, which is the case in the U.S., and to some extent it used to be here in the U.K., you could enter the training even if you were never really seriously going to be a teacher, and that gives it a low status. If the training is really hard to get

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Also, the quality of leadership in schools is important. We did a survey here in the U.K. when we had a big teacher shortage about 10 years ago. The single most important factor in teachers leaving the profession wasn't pay, wasn't challenging students, it was poor leadership in their school. They just couldn't get anything done. They just got frustrated.

The status of the teacher in society is very important — that's a big

MICHAEL BARBER

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Professional history: From 2001 to 2005, he was the founder and first head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, where he was responsible for the oversight of implementation of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's priority programs, including education. From 1997 to 2001, he was chief adviser to the U.K. secretary of state for education on school standards, responsible for the implementation of the government's school reform program. Prior to joining government, Barber was a professor at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Publications: He is the author of *Instruction to Deliver: Fighting to Transform Britain's Public Services* (Methuen, 2008) and numerous other books and articles.

thing in Finland. It's very well thought of to be a teacher. Obviously, this creates a virtuous circle, because if it's well thought of to be a teacher, students growing up in schools see teachers and want to be like them and then apply for teacher programs. That's hard to achieve from where most of the U.S. is.

Teach for America has been quite successful in attracting talented people. There are lots of people in the

JSD: Describe the professional learning you see in successful systems. How can schools foster that type of learning for teachers?

Barber: There seem to be some very clear lessons. What don't really work are off-site programs of an academic nature, or even nonacademic but not related to the job. I'm not saying those programs are bad. If a teacher wants to do an M.A. in educational sociology, that's a great thing to do. What I'm saying is that won't change practice or effect results in a school in a significant way. If you want to drive up the performance of a school or school system, that's not where you should put your dollars as a government.

Second, there are some very good, well-designed, top-down implemented professional learning programs that have changed the results of systems. The way Boston approached improving primary schools would be a case in point. A larger example would be our own national literacy and numeracy strategies in England focused on primary schools. I was running the school reforms starting in 1997, and the work peaked in 2000-01. The program drove up the performance of the primary system in a really signifi-

cant way. That was a very well-designed, top-down implemented professional development program where we in government developed the materials. We trained the trainers, they trained principals, they focused on the most challenging schools, and they worked away at that over three or four years. All of those trainers were skilled educators themselves, delivering evidence-based materials to teachers who wanted to learn or had pressure from our accountability system to improve their results. You can do whole-system reform and staff development in that top-down way. The problem with that is it's not sustainable in the long run. That will drive up the performance of the system in a short period of time — two, three, or four years — but it doesn't

learning, really focused on “how do I get the next child up to the standard?”

What you really want to achieve is to get that culture of professional learning in every school. That brings about consistent, continuous improvement. You see it in the best schools in the U.S and here, but you don't see it consistently across the U.S. and the U.K.

JSD: What can help to change a school's culture? Obviously it's not enough for teachers to want this or for principals to demand it.

Barber: If there is demand from teachers, not just individual teachers, but the profession collectively, that would help, but that wouldn't be enough. In England, we've devolved resources, power, and responsibility to

bureaucratic barriers to that. The barriers could be the competence of district leaders, or the degree to which districts have their own staff development or curriculum people of variable quality who soak up resources that could otherwise be spent on what I've just been describing.

Secondly, in the U.S. there are funding barriers, bureaucratic barriers, and in some schools, skill barriers. There's not sufficient focus in U.S. systems on developing school leaders and giving them the responsibility to set the staff culture I've described. It's quite a big challenge to do that. Some school districts manage to do that because they get the right leadership and set the right tone, and they make it all sing everywhere. You see individual school districts go a long way doing that. The problem is it takes only for a superintendent to move somewhere else, and the district sinks back. Embedding that culture in the schools and the professional ethic as well as in the working practices really makes it work.

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become embedded, the work doesn't become owned by the teachers themselves.

Where you really want to get to is beyond that, where professional learning is absolutely embedded in the practice of the school. There's time in the school day, there's time in the school year. There are teams of teachers working together, planning lessons, reviewing student work, comparing student work from different classes, and trying to understand why certain pedagogies seem to work more effectively than others. There are people in the school who are acknowledged experts — the coaches we call them — or the expert teachers in our primary strategy. This is the kind of person who is demonstrably effective, who will coach teachers, who will model lessons in their own classrooms. It's that culture of professional

the school principal so each school is a largely autonomous unit. Principals decide which teachers to recruit, how to allocate the budget, how to organize the curriculum, what textbooks to buy, what computers to buy. So in our system, the critical variable is the quality of the school leadership. Getting the professional development you want for school leaders becomes absolutely fundamental. They are the people who will set the culture, create the timetable, and create expectations for teachers. If the school leader creates a culture in which teachers are expected to look at data and worry about each student who falls behind, expected to watch each other teach, expected to work with mentors and coaches in the system, it will happen.

Our challenge is to get that to happen across all schools in a country. In the U.S., you've often got huge

JSD: When systems have good leadership in place, can they sustain a good culture even when good leaders leave?

Barber: Certainly that would be true in Finland and Singapore and some other systems. This works because of what Michael Fullan talks about as the ever-widening circle of leadership. To make something sustainable, you've got to widen out leadership. Leadership has to spread beyond an individual superintendent or individual school leader and ultimately be embedded out in the classrooms around the systems. When the culture passes a tipping point, then the expectations are already there, and anybody new coming in fits into that culture. Obviously, a bad leader could destroy it, but a good leader will build on it.

I recently spent an evening with

20 of England's best principals. One thing we discussed was that these school principals are now increasingly taking responsibility for more than one school. They lead two, three, or four schools, and they are bringing their culture into more than one building. So that's one way of widening out the circle of leadership. They are also consciously appointing people and building the capacity of staff in their schools to become school leaders. They were saying that increasingly one of their own internal measures of what makes them successful leaders is how many people they develop in their own schools that go on to

want everybody to achieve those high standards. It follows logically that children with the furthest to go need the most money spent on them. They need more support to get to those standards than children with less distance to travel. Most systems in the world would fund schools in poorer areas or students from more disadvantaged backgrounds at higher levels than students with advantaged backgrounds. That's a major distribution issue and stands out as a uniquely American thing to do.

The second distributional question is that America tends to tie up more of the resources in administra-

Barber: I recently spoke at a conference at the Aspen Institute, where I talked about the history of U.S. education and also about NCLB and possible refinements. I would encourage readers to take a look at that for more information (see <http://snipurl.com/4j9i0>). But I would mention two other things.

I see the need for something like national standards across the U.S. I don't mean federal government-determined standards, I mean an agreement among sufficient states to get national standards, as the American Diploma Project is beginning to do. You don't have a choice about whether you achieve national standards, because they will be imposed by globalization. Physics doesn't change at the Rio Grande or the 49th parallel. It's the same everywhere. As the economy around the world globalizes, you're going to have to compare the standards your school system sets, wherever you are, to the standards in other systems. By accident or design, the U.S. ultimately will end up with something like national standards, but they may be implicit and chaotic or America could decide to do it properly. There's no serious option of not having something like standards that compare to the rest of the world.

Also, in the U.S. there needs to be a serious discussion about the quality of teacher training, initial teacher education before you become a teacher. Is it working, is it aligned with what we need, is it consistent with best practices around the world, and are we getting the right people into teaching? How the profession becomes something attractive to talented people and whether people in teaching are respected in the U.S. can be influenced by Delaware or Ohio, but ultimately, it's a national question. ■

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become school principals elsewhere. The best leaders bring more leaders through.

JSD: You've also studied funding and its relationship to whether a school succeeds. Describe what you see related to the money spent on education.

Barber: As you would expect, there is by no means a direct correlation. Spending more money won't guarantee improved performance. I'm not saying money doesn't matter — of course, it's fundamental. But obviously a lot depends on how you spend the money and what you spend it on.

America spends more per student than most countries in the OECD. Two distributional questions stand out which America does need to pay attention to. First, generally speaking, Americans spend more money per head in better-off areas than in poorer areas. To the rest of the world, that just looks completely nonsensical. We're in an era where we're setting high standards for everybody. We

There are more layers of administration and therefore less money getting into the classrooms in schools in many systems. That's not to say that administration doesn't matter, but in some cases, unnecessary administration is in effect taking money away from the children. The place you really want to spend the money is as close to the classroom as possible. I've described a principle that every extra dollar or pound should be spent at the classroom level unless there's a good case for spending it somewhere else. You reverse the burden of proof. At the moment, the money is in the hands of those at the top of the system, and they decide how much to give to the school. They should set that system on its head and say, "Let's give it all to the school unless we can justify spending the money somewhere else." That's quite a radical thought for the U.S.

JSD: What else can the U.S. do nationally to create more successful systems in this country?