

## BOOK REVIEW

# In Finland, Students Win When Teachers Compete

Review by Sandra Stotsky

About four decades ago, Finland introduced major reforms to grades 1 through 12 and teacher education, with noteworthy results. In 1970, less than 10 percent of its students graduated from high school. By 2010, most graduated.

What did Finland do to achieve such a dramatic increase and become one of the highest-scoring countries on the Programme for International Student Assessment since 2000?

We can find some answers in Pasi Sahlberg's account of the policy changes that led to these achievements, focusing on Finland's reforms to the teaching profession.

Finns who become teachers must graduate from an academic high school (Finland also offers vocational high schools) and pass an examination to make them eligible for university admission. They must then get a place at a university (for which competition is fierce), which means they are in the top 10 percent or so of their grade 9 class (when compulsory education ends).

Those who seek to teach grades 1-6 must complete a five-year university program. Those who seek to teach grades 7-12 must complete a program lasting from five to more than seven years. Both programs include a research-based M.Ed. degree.

## Rigorous Entry Requirements

One of the key elements in Finland's educational reforms was admission to a university-based teacher training

*Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland*

By Pasi Sahlberg

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program for all teachers. The first cut for prospective elementary teachers is based on their matriculation examination scores, high school record, and relevant out-of-school activities. Top candidates then complete a written exam on assigned books on pedagogy, demonstrate social and communication skills in a role-playing activity, and explain in an interview why they want to teach.

The benefits of such a competitive process for prospective teachers are obvious. Teacher preparation programs can concentrate on instruction, curriculum, and education research because admitted students deeply understand the content of the subjects they will teach.

Because of their academic qualifications and pedagogical training, teachers can be granted a great deal of autonomy in the classroom to address the National Curriculum Framework for Basic Education, which lays out a set of general academic objectives but leaves curriculum development and textbook selection for grades 1 to 9 to schools.

Because of teachers' academic and

pedagogical qualifications, no external or national tests are needed in grades 1-9. Similarly, the teaching profession is held in high respect, and there is an extremely low attrition rate. Only 10 to 15 percent of teachers leave during the course of a career, according to Sahlberg.

## Key Elements: Choice, Competition

One would never know that choice and competition were key elements in Finnish education reform by reading what teacher educators in the United States laud Finland for, to judge by the endorsements of Sahlberg's book.

For example, in one foreword, Andy Hargreaves of Boston College's education school claims choice and competition are not part of the Finnish education system, just equity and collaboration. Yet competition drives high school students seeking admission to a university and a teacher preparation program. And choice is pivotal for the motivation to continue secondary education (whether in a vocational or academic high school).

Our educators like the benefits of Finnish reform: teacher autonomy in grades 1-9, no external tests or test-based accountability, and a collaborative, school-level approach to curriculum. But apparently they don't understand either the conditions that produced these benefits or that the motivational elements of choice and competition are simply in different parts of the Finnish educational system. Unlike the philosophy behind current U.S. educational policies, it seems Finnish students, not their teachers, are held accountable for their learning after grade 9.

Sahlberg emphasizes the academic requirements for admission to and exit from teacher preparation programs. And he notes teachers would find their profession less appealing if the academic bar were lowered. According to Sahlberg,



an increase in intellectual demands has made elementary teaching in Finland more, not less, attractive.

## Ignoring Real Lessons

So far, no U.S. education school dean or education policy maker has picked up on how Finland upgraded its teacher preparation, for elementary teachers in particular. In fact, our teacher educators go out of their way to ignore this key component of Finnish reforms.

In an Educationweekly blog post on January 31, 2012, all the contributors could suggest to "Attract Top Candidates" was increased starting salary, passion, and perseverance. Yet average teaching salaries in Finland are not different from those in other major professions, although there is no single salary schedule.

Yes, there are lessons for Americans to learn from Finland's reform efforts, but not the recommendations Sahlberg makes in his final pages, ending with an emphasis on "engagement" and "creativity" as "pointers of success" in K-12. As education policies in this country begin to aim our schools and teachers at the yellow brick road to "creativity," a goal that can't be measured or evaluated objectively, in addition to reducing time on academic learning, we need to ask who it really benefits. And is this how parents of low-performing students want demographic achievement gaps closed?

*Sandra Stotsky is professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas, holder of the 21st Century Chair in Teacher Quality, and author of the forthcoming The Death and Resurrection of a Coherent Literature Curriculum (Rowman & Littlefield, June 2012). A much longer version of this essay will appear in the Journal of School Choice.*

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