



**BOOK REVIEW: FINNISH LESSONS: WHAT CAN THE WORLD LEARN FROM
EDUCATIONAL CHANGE IN FINLAND?
THE SERIES ON SCHOOL REFORM**

Pasi Sahlberg. Teachers College Press. 2011

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Finnish Lessons is a comprehensive book about how Finland built a world-class education system during the past three decades. The author explains how education policies in Finland differ from those in other industrialized countries. Rather than relying on competition, school choice, and external testing of students, education reforms in Finland focus on professionalizing teachers' work, developing instructional leadership in schools, and enhancing trust in teachers and schools. The book details the complexity of educational change and encourages educators and policy makers to develop effective solutions for their own districts and schools.

Finland is consistently ranked as one of the top performing countries in the international test known as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) that measures the knowledge and skills of 15-year olds in the subject areas of reading, math, and science. (In 2009, 65 developed countries participated in PISA.) This book tells how Finland has the best educated young people in the world. The driving force behind the redesign of the Finnish educational system in the 1980's and '90's was not to achieve high international test scores, but to provide an equitable education for all students.

Book is a must-read for all concerned parents, educators, administrators, government officials, union leaders, policy-makers and scholars who are alarmed that current market-driven/competitive/punitive model isn't working and that a radical change is required. It's amazing that Sahlberg shares the Finnish roadmap with the world in what can only be described as an act of altruism.

Finnish teachers spend less hours per day teaching in classrooms than their U.S. counterparts. How a country can achieve such outstanding results with less teaching? Finnish authorities believes that "Less is More."

Finland has wisely chosen not to impose a standardized testing regime upon its schools (against the advice of some of its more conservative government officials and business leaders at the time its policies were being formulated). Without the need to devote precious time and resources to test preparation, Finnish teachers instead have freedom to spend school hours on something more useful: actual learning.

Project-based learning is common in Finland. This approach to pedagogy engages children, while inspiring them to think creatively, become absorbed in thoughtful analysis, problem-solve, and work with others in a collaborative manner.

The school day is much shorter for children. Daily recess is mandatory. There is less homework. The Finns are strong believers in not stifling the joys of childhood and allow plenty of time for children to play outside of school where they believe most learning is done.

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As a result of this Finnish climate of inspired learning, not only are there better academic results as objectively measured by PISA, students feel less stress and anxiety about school. Engaging students in this manner has resulted in a very low high school drop-out rate (less than 1%). This approach to education also results in a happier society. According to an array of international "happiness surveys" that Sahlberg cites, Finland is also ranked at or near the top.

The author recounts how Finland decided to go its own way in educational reform by not following either the "Asian Model" (wherein test scores & college-graduation rates may be high, but students are reportedly overworked and as stressed-out as their U.S. counterparts) or the market-driven model of the U.S., Britain, and a host of other Western countries.

Formal education in Finland does not begin until age 7, and continues - with various options - for the next nine years. Not everyone goes on to university. There's plenty of successful technical and on-the-job education. But everyone learns at least two, and usually three languages other than Finnish.

What is the secret to Finland's success? It starts with the teaching profession. On average, Finland accepts only 10% of applicants into its teaching universities. Applicants must not only have strong academic records, they must also possess interpersonal skills that will enable them to teach well. Next, Finland's teaching students must complete a 5-7 year course of study, earning both undergraduate and master's degrees. Sahlberg explains how course requirements include those in an underlying substantive area (e.g., science, math, etc.), along with pedagogy, research, and student teaching. Once the newly minted teachers are placed into schools, they will be paid well (with no student loan debt since their university education is free), while also having autonomy to adapt a loose national curriculum into one that meets local needs. They are free to choose their own teaching methods as they see fit. In other words, Finland trusts that its teachers will teach well without outside interference or oversight.

About The Author: Pasi Sahlberg is director general of the Centre for International Mobility at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in Helsinki. He is an expert in educational reform, training teachers, coaching schools, and advising policy makers. He has worked in Finland as a teacher, teacher educator, policy advisor, and director and served the World Bank and the European Commission as an education expert. He has a PhD from the University of Jyväskylä and is adjunct professor at the Universities of Helsinki and Oulu.