

Teacher and School Leader Effectiveness: Lessons Learned from High-Performing Systems

Teacher effectiveness has rapidly risen to the top of the education policy agenda. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) identified the issue as one of four key elements in its Race to the Top competition, and more than a dozen states, responding to Race to the Top incentives, adopted laws revamping teacher education and evaluation systems, hoping to ensure that teachers are effective in the classroom.

The focus on teacher effectiveness makes sense. While there might be disagreement about the most effective ways to measure and develop effectiveness, educators and policymakers generally agree that ensuring that teachers are capable of improving student learning—and that school leaders are able to help them do so—is perhaps the most significant step they can take to raise student achievement. This conviction is backed up by research. The evidence is clear that teaching is one of the most important school-related factors in student achievement,¹ and that improving teacher effectiveness can raise overall student achievement levels.²

In an effort to find best practices in enhancing teacher effectiveness, the Alliance for Excellent Education (Alliance) and the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) looked abroad at education systems that appear to have well-developed and effective systems for recruiting, preparing, developing, and retaining teachers and school leaders. The goal was not to find policies that could be imported wholesale to the United States; rather, the idea was to learn from international examples and see if lessons could be applied in the U.S. context.

Comparisons between countries are valuable for a number of reasons. First, they broaden the view of what is possible. Too often, policymakers remain stuck with conventional ideas, bound by precedents in their own context, and are unable to see options that might be available and successful. By providing policymakers with an expanded view of the policy choices that might be available, comparisons can expand the toolbox. Second, international comparisons show how ideas work in practice at the system level. By exploring other systems in depth, policymakers can see what the implementation challenges are, how other nations dealt with them, and what remains to be solved. Such explorations can help enable policymakers put in place new policies with a clearer eye.

Finland, Ontario, and Singapore

For its examination of teacher effectiveness policies, the Alliance and SCOPE looked to Finland, Ontario, and Singapore. These jurisdictions have attracted a great deal of attention in United States education policy circles recently, and with good reason. Most significantly, they get good results: they are among the highest-performing jurisdictions in international tests of student achievement, and their results are among the most equitable in the world. The gaps between the lowest-performing and the

highest-performing students in Finland, Ontario, and Singapore are much smaller than in the United States, and the average performance is quite high.³

These jurisdictions also represent models that the United States can learn from. Although they are considerably smaller than the United States as a whole, they are equivalent in size to substantial U.S. states, where most education policy is made and takes effect. In terms of population, Finland is about the size of Colorado; Ontario is slightly larger than Illinois; and Singapore is about the size of Kentucky.

Moreover, these jurisdictions are increasingly diverse in student population, despite their reputations as homogeneous. Finland is attracting a growing number of immigrants from the Middle East and North Africa, and some schools in Helsinki serve primarily immigrant students. About a quarter of Ontario's residents are from outside Canada. And Singapore has a number of minority groups speaking four official languages (and many more unofficial ones) and representing the diverse communities that make up that nation-state.

Finland, Ontario, and Singapore also provide important lessons for discussions of policies to develop teacher and school leader effectiveness. All attribute their educational success in large measure to their efforts to recruit, prepare, develop, and retain a strong educator workforce within a purposeful human capital system. The policies they have implemented demonstrate that the focus on educator effectiveness in the current U.S. education policy debate is appropriate: The right efforts to improve teacher effectiveness can lead to higher and more equitable student achievement. These efforts include

- a systemic approach;
- strong recruitment and preparation;
- attractive teaching conditions;
- continuous support for learning; and
- proactive leadership development.

Lesson 1: It Takes a System

While the educator-development systems of Finland, Ontario, and Singapore differ in significant ways, what they have in common is that they are just that—*systems* for teacher and leader development. They include multiple components, not just a single policy, and these components are intended to be coherent and complementary, to support the overall goal of ensuring that each school in each jurisdiction is filled with highly effective teachers and is lead by a highly effective principal.

This vision of a system of teacher development is sometimes describes in terms of “human capital management,” as a people-centered approach is termed in business. This framework draws organizational attention to recruiting, developing, and retaining talented individuals as



well as focusing leaders on supporting their effectiveness.⁴ In creating a human capital system, organizations might start with a component that addresses their most urgent need, but they recognize that all of the elements require attention and must work together effectively.⁵

The systems in Finland, Ontario, and Singapore encompass the full range of policies that affect the development and support for teachers and school leaders, including

- recruitment of qualified individuals into the profession;
- their preparation;
- their induction;
- their professional development;
- their evaluation and career development; and
- their retention over time.

Leaders in these jurisdictions recognize that all policies need to work in harmony or the systems will become unbalanced. For example, placing too strong an emphasis on recruitment without concomitant attention on development and retention could result in a continual churn within the teaching profession.

That said, each of the jurisdictions has chosen to place its primary focus on particular aspects of the system. Finland, for example, has sought since 1979 to invest intensely in the initial preparation of teachers. That year, the country required all teachers, including those teaching in the primary grades, to earn at least a master's degree in education, in addition to a bachelor's degree in one or more content areas. To complement the powerful initial preparation, Finland then provides teachers with considerable support—primarily time to collaborate with their peers to develop curricula and assessments—and considerable autonomy.

Ontario, meanwhile, emphasizes building the capacity of the teaching workforce. The province has instituted a comprehensive induction program for new teachers that includes professional development and appraisal, as well as an appraisal program for all teachers that focuses on development and growth. These policies are intended to complement the strong initial preparation that all teachers receive, and they have served to reverse an exodus from the teaching profession.

Singapore augments its strong initial preparation and induction with a highly developed performance management system, which spells out the knowledge, skills, and attitudes expected at each stage of a teacher's career and, based on careful evaluation and intensive supports, provides a series of career tracks that teachers can pursue. These enable teachers to become mentor teachers, curriculum specialists, or principals, thereby developing talent in every component of the education system. The systems in all three jurisdictions are continually being refined. Finland's Ministry of Education has become concerned that teachers need more support, so the country is considering strengthening induction and professional development for practicing teachers. Ontario has surveyed teachers and found that there were some gaps in initial preparation in areas like classroom management and the teaching of special-needs students, so the province is revamping its induction system to address those areas. Singapore is looking to strengthen instruction in skills such as problem solving and critical thinking that are increasingly important in a global economy and society.



Lesson 2: Get It Right from the Start

Leaders in Finland, Ontario, and Singapore all believe that getting the right people into teaching and preparing them well is a critical piece of teacher development. All of these systems have strong systems for recruiting and preparing teachers.

In each jurisdiction, entry into teacher education programs is extremely selective. Finland chooses one out of every ten individuals who apply to become primary school teachers; Singapore has traditionally chosen participants from the top third of high school classes (the nation is now moving rapidly toward graduate-level preparation); and in Ontario, where graduate-level preparation is also the norm, the process is highly competitive. In that way, each jurisdiction helps ensure that highly capable people go into teaching.

Finland, Ontario, and Singapore not only recruit able candidates, they also screen them carefully to ensure that they have the attributes that make teachers effective—including commitment to the profession and evidence of the capacity to work well with children, as well as academic ability. In Finland, for example, the two-stage process first looks for top academic honors and then examines students' understanding of teaching—through both a written exam on pedagogy and their participation in a clinical activity that replicates a school situation and demonstrates social interaction and communication skills as well as teaching attitudes and behaviors.

Pasi Sahlberg, director of the Center for International Mobility (CIMO) in Helsinki, says that his daughter, an excellent student, was at first rejected for a teacher-education program because she said she wanted to go into teaching to follow in her parents' footsteps. Only when she demonstrated a stronger commitment to the profession could she be admitted.

Once selected, applicants for teaching in each jurisdiction go through carefully designed and well-supported preparation programs. In Finland, teachers must earn at least a two-year master's degree in education at one of eight universities that are known internationally for their rigorous, research-based programs.

A substantial amount of the time spent in teacher education is in clinical practice in one of the model schools that partner with each university. In these schools, teachers are specially selected and trained to ensure they can model effective practice and coach beginners. During training, primary teachers spend 15 percent of their time in classrooms, while subject-matter teachers spend one-third of their time in classrooms.

Ontario teachers also go through rigorous preparation at one of thirteen universities accredited by the Ontario College of Education. These programs generally consist of three or four years of undergraduate study and a year of teacher preparation at a faculty of education.

Singapore revamped its teacher education programs in 2001 to increase teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills as well as their content knowledge. All teachers, including those who teach in elementary schools, must demonstrate deep mastery of at least one content area (plus study of other subjects they will teach), and clinical training has been expanded. Candidates in undergraduate training programs spend more than twenty weeks working in the classroom over the course of their preparation. Those who undertake the one-year graduate program complete a ten-week practicum in a school.



Significantly, all three jurisdictions subsidize the preparation of teachers. In Finland and Singapore, teacher education is paid for completely by the government; in Ontario, the government provides most of the tuition for teacher candidates. With those subsidies, promising students can enter teacher education knowing that they will not carry large debts once they graduate.

Lesson 3: Make Teaching an Attractive Profession

Finland, Ontario, and Singapore have been able to attract and retain highly effective teachers in part because teaching is an attractive profession that many individuals want to join and stay in. Unlike in the United States, where the top high school graduates often pursue careers in medicine, law, or business, teaching is a draw for academically talented youth, who stay in the profession rather than leave to find more lucrative jobs.

In some respects, this attractiveness is a cultural phenomenon. In Finland, for example, teaching was the top-rated job by college students surveyed in 2008. Furthermore, males rated teachers as the most desired spouse, while females rated teachers as the second-most admired, after medical doctors.

The respect accorded to teachers is not just about money. While new teachers in Singapore are paid nearly as well as doctors entering government service, Finland's teachers—among the most admired professionals in the country—earn about the average Finnish salary, the equivalent to the average of mid-career teachers in industrialized nations (\$41,000 in U.S. dollars in 2010).⁶ Salaries in Ontario range from \$37,000 to \$90,000, comparable to those in the United States.

Yet each jurisdiction has developed and implemented policies that make teaching attractive, and these efforts clearly have paid off.

Support for teaching and teachers in these jurisdictions comes straight from the top. Leaders have frequently expressed their belief that teachers are vital, and this has helped raise the status of the profession. In 1966, just after Singapore declared independence, then Minister of Education, Ong Pang Boon, stated that “the future of every one of us in Singapore is to a large extent determined by what our teachers do in the classroom.” Forty years later, in 2006, the nation's prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, observed, “Just as a country is as good as its people, so its citizens are only as good as their teachers.”

In Ontario, the provincial premier bestows annual awards for excellent teachers. The Premier's Awards for Teaching Excellence are awarded each May to “recognize educators and staff who excel at unlocking the potential of Ontario's young people,” according to the province's website. Teachers are supported in using research to improve their practice and their schools, and they are recognized when their efforts succeed.

In addition to offering rhetorical support, leaders have adopted policies to improve teachers' working conditions and sense of professionalism, elevating teaching to the level of other professions like medicine and law.

As part of its efforts to professionalize teaching, Ontario ended several policies adopted in the 1990s, such as testing and evaluation requirements that teachers had seen as punitive, which led to an exodus from the profession. The incoming Liberal government, which took office in 2003, instead created a Working Table on Teacher Development that included teacher representatives, and adopted policies



aimed at providing support and building teachers' capacity to teach more effectively. The province now has a surplus of teachers, as do Finland and Singapore.

Finland has built professionalism into its system. Because teachers are so well prepared, they are also well respected and much trusted, and operate with considerable autonomy inside the classroom. The country has no external tests other than samples taken at two grade levels, and instead relies on teachers to develop their own assessments of student learning based on the National Curriculum. In that way, the country has signaled that teachers are professionals who can make sound judgments about student progress.

Singapore's performance management system also creates a strong profession. Teachers have numerous opportunities to grow professionally and take on leadership responsibilities, based on demonstrations of competence. Depending on their own abilities and career goals, teachers can remain in the classroom and become lead and master teachers; they can take on specialist roles, like curriculum specialist or guidance counselor; or they can take the leadership track and become administrators. The Ministry of Education is continuously looking for ways to recognize and promote teacher leadership, both for individuals who have demonstrated various talents and for teachers as a whole.

Lesson 4: Invest in Continuous Learning

In addition to providing strong initial preparation for teachers and creating working conditions that encourage retention, each of these jurisdictions also provides opportunities and support for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills, to improve their practice, and to grow as professionals. All three jurisdictions provide considerable time for teachers to work collaboratively and learn together during the regular school schedule—as much as five times what U.S. teachers receive. This enables teachers to become both individually and collectively more effective and helps ensure that highly effective teachers remain in schools.

Such efforts are critically important to avoiding the disruption and cost associated with teacher attrition. In the United States, about one-third of beginning teachers leave the profession within five years, costing districts \$7.3 billion a year.⁷ Teachers are most likely to leave if they feel ineffective or unsupported.

Singaporean teachers have about twenty hours a week built into their schedule for shared planning and learning, as well as one hundred hours per year of state-supported professional development outside of their school time. Furthermore, Singapore's performance management system is designed explicitly to link to professional development and provide growth opportunities for effective teachers. All teacher and leadership training is at government expense. How far teachers advance depends on their interests and the competencies they can demonstrate, through an extensive evaluation system.

Finland, meanwhile, provides opportunities for teachers to develop their practice. Finland's teachers have relatively light teaching loads—Finnish high school teachers teach about half the number of hours U.S. high school teachers teach—and thus teachers there have ample time to collaborate with one another to develop and hone lessons and study the latest research.

Ontario's annual evaluation system for teachers is designed for professional growth. As part of the system, teachers must complete the Annual Learning Plan, which outlines growth goals for the year.



This plan allows teachers and principals to work together to plan improvement strategies and identify needed professional development.

In addition, Ontario's Ministry of Education also funds the Teacher Learning and Leadership Program, which provides job-embedded professional development for qualifying teachers. Teachers who are part of the program join a provincewide network, which shares ideas and best practices. The ministry also provides opportunities for teachers to spend a year or two in the ministry to work on provincial policy. This practice not only enhances teachers' knowledge and skills, it also improves policy by giving teachers a hand in setting it and ensuring that it can be implemented effectively.

Lesson 5: Proactively Recruit and Develop High-Quality Leadership

One of the most significant aspects of the educator-development systems in Finland, Ontario, and Singapore is their investment in leadership development and support. These systems recognize that high-quality leadership strengthens teaching by providing skillful guidance and creating a school vision that all teachers share.

The evidence shows that school leadership is second only to teaching in its effects on student learning. About a quarter of the school-related variation in student achievement can be explained by school leadership.⁸

In all three jurisdictions, school leaders are expected to be *instructional leaders*. They are expected to know curriculum and teaching intimately and be able to provide guidance and support to teachers. While management and budgeting are important aspects of leaders' jobs, their instructional leadership role is paramount. Effective instructional leaders can evaluate teachers skillfully, provide them with useful feedback, assess the school's needs for professional development, and direct instructional resources where they are most needed. Principals are attuned to the learning needs of students and adults.⁹

To help ensure that every leader can fulfill this role, all three jurisdictions proactively recruit principals from among the ranks of expert teachers who exhibit leadership potential. In Finland, in fact, principals by law must be qualified to teach in the school they lead. That means not only that someone from outside of education cannot become a principal but also that an elementary teacher cannot become a principal in a high school.

The three jurisdictions also provide training for principals that is designed to ensure that they can assume the instructional leadership role expected of them. In Ontario, prospective principals take part in the Principals Qualifications Program, which consists of two components, each totaling 125 hours, plus a practicum. The program is provided by faculties of education and principals' association. In Singapore, candidates who are selected after an interview process enter the six-month Leaders in Education program, conducted by the Ministry of Education, which includes, in addition to coursework, field-based projects, and visits to other countries to learn about effective practices.

All of the programs also include extensive clinical training. In Finland, for example, some university-based programs include a peer-assisted leadership model, in which part of the training is done by shadowing and being mentored by the senior school principal.



Conclusion

Taken individually, these lessons might sound familiar to American ears. Many states and school districts have instituted programs to recruit highly capable individuals into teaching and prepare them effectively, provided ongoing support and development along with career paths for veterans, and invested in high-quality leadership. These efforts have increased in recent years as policymakers have recognized the importance of teacher effectiveness in improving student learning. In 2010, for example, ED launched a campaign to raise awareness of teaching and attract individuals to the profession. ED also made teacher effectiveness a top priority in its Race to the Top program, and many states developed comprehensive plans for developing teacher effectiveness as part of their proposals.

However, as promising as they are, these efforts do not yet add up to a comprehensive system in most communities. While some states view teacher development systemically, others do not, and many of the initiatives tackle the issue in a piecemeal fashion. Few states or districts have created a seamless, well-supported pipeline to school leadership positions. As the examples from high-performing nations show, only a systemic approach will ensure that all schools and classrooms are staffed by highly effective leaders and teachers.

Federal and state policy can help all states and districts systemically approach teacher development. The pending reauthorization of both the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Title II of the Higher Education Act—which addresses teacher education—provide opportunity for Congress to look for ways to create incentives and provide support to states and districts to develop and refine systems for teacher and leader effectiveness. Individual states can take steps to create coherent policies and practices as they coordinate their own systems. With sound policies and efforts at both levels, the United States can develop a world-class educator workforce.

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Endnotes

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