

***Finnish Lesson: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?***

**Pasi Sahlberg (2011)**

**Executive Book Summary  
Trishia Hastings**

**Book Overview**

*Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn about educational change in Finland?* is a book that goes beyond the headlines about the educational system that makes that country rank so highly on international assessments such as PISA.

Sahlberg details historical elements that contributed to the evolution of the Finnish education system and compares those to typical global educational reform movement characteristics. Which he refers to as GERM.

Finnish Lessons describes the important role that teachers play in the success of student achievement. It outlines how other nations may benefit from adopting some of the strategies and policies that make Finland a leader in education.

**Finnish Lessons**



What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?

**Pasi Sahlberg**

Foreword by Andy Hargreaves  
Series Foreword by Ann Lieberman

the series on school reform

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**SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST**

- **Why is the education system in Finland currently getting so much attention?**
- **What is the Canadian connection?**
- **What is the GERM movement?**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### Pasi Sahlberg

The author of *Finnish Lessons*; What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?

*Pasi Sahlberg is a leading authority on Finland's educational reform strategy. He grew up in Finland, taught in the Finnish system as well as at the university level before working for the Ministry of Education. Sahlberg left Finland to work for the World Bank. He currently works with educational leaders from many different countries including the United States and*

*Canada consulting on educational reform.*

*Sahlberg describes himself as caring passionately about students, teachers and communities that reforms serve. When he goes to a new country the first thing he does is teaches a secondary math lesson and talks to students about what they know. This helps him get a grassroots feel for what is happening within the school.*

*Finland is successful at implementing and maintaining policies and practices that make up sustainable leadership and change.*

### INSIDE STORY HEADLINE

#### FINLAND FAST FACTS

- Located in Northern Europe between Sweden, Norway and Russia
  - Population approximately 5 million.
  - Highly industrialized economy
  - Official language is Finnish
- 100% of people aged

**“Money is rarely the solution to problems in education. It is about efficient spending.”  
(p. 57)**

## THE FINNISH PARADOX: LESS IS MORE

**Peruskoulu** is the nine year comprehensive Finnish school system which begins at age seven. Some of the key characteristics of it include;

- Increased levels of education attainment of adults
- Widespread equity in terms of learning outcomes and performance in schools
- Achievement on international assessments
- Efficient spending of public dollars almost totally funded by public sources including adult education

**Peruskoulu** is based on differentiation, personalized learning and special support for those who require it. Early intervention and special education are important and provides opportunities for all to learn. The typical Finnish classroom has diverse needs. Students are automatically promoted as the curriculum is modular rather than based on years. The theory behind the no repetition rule, is that it is ineffective in helping kids and expensive at the same time.

An assistant teacher is common in each classroom to help support the individual needs of students.

Early intervention and prevention is important. Early recognition of learning, social and behavioral difficulties is key. The education is socially fair and inclusive providing equal opportunities to completing school.



## EQUAL EDUCATIONAL REFORM IS THE FINNISH

Can Finland be a model for educational reform for other countries? The Finnish approach to education is currently a part of the conversations in many countries including the United States and Canada. The ranking of Finnish students on international assessments are consistently near the top which has captured the attention of many. Education reformers look to the elements that make Finland so successful. The massive reform of the education system in Finland over the past 50 years have developed it into what it is today.

Finland was at war from 1939 to 1945. The cost to the country was great both financially and in terms of lives lost making it necessary for the country to re-develop. Post war Finland moved from a largely agricultural nation to an industrial society. After the war until 1970, the education system underwent comprehensive reform and the entire structure of the school system changed. A public school system was created that was more focused on technology and innovation.

The 1980's marked the beginning of rethinking educational theory in Finland. The focus was on critical and independent thinking skills. Large scale cooperative learning initiatives were launched at the university level and later in schools. Science teaching methods were diversified, resulting in an increased level of trust and the ability of teachers to raise the quality of student learning.

The 1990s saw improvements through networking and self regulated change. The Aquarium project was implemented which infused social media into traditional community work. The focus on sharing and collaboration prevented schools from viewing each other as competition.

From 2000 to the present, the focus has been on enhancing efficiency of structures and administration. Structural reforms have focused on post secondary education and deleting the administrative line between primary and high schools.

### INSIDE STORY HEADLINE

#### *The Finnish Education System Today*

*The Finnish system has not been “infected by market-based competition” and high stakes testing policies. Instruction is the key element that makes a difference in what schools do and learn. Students in Finnish schools are supported with free nutritious meals, psychological counseling and health services. Education is seen as public good and therefore has a strong nation building function.*



## INSIDE STORY HEADLINE

### TEACHING IN FINLAND: STUDENT ASSESSMENT

An important responsibility for a teacher in Finland is student assessment. High stakes standardized assessments are not used to determine student progress or to determine success. Four main reasons for this include:

1. Policy gives high priority to autonomy, personalized learning and creative thinking
2. Curriculum, learning and teaching should be what drives the practice and time of the teacher rather than assessment and tests.
3. Cognitive and personal progress is viewed as the responsibility of the school
4. The Finnish National Strategy for student assessment considers testing as just one piece of evidence to determine student success.

**The only external assessment is given at the age of 18 or 19 which serves as a requirement for higher academic education.**

## THE FINNISH ADVANTAGE: THE TEACHERS

*The factor that trumps all of the rest in terms of the success of education in Finland: excellent teachers.*

*The teaching profession is highly regarded and respected in Finland. It is a sought after profession and*

*compete for a chance to be trained to do it. University is also publically funded.*



## CATEGORIES OF TEACHERS:

1. Kindergarten teachers– licensed to work in kindergartens and pre-schools
2. Primary school teachers– teach in grades 1 to 6 in the 9 year comprehensive school
3. Subject Teachers–teach specific subjects at grades 7 to 9. They may teach one to three subject areas
4. Special Education teachers– work individually or in small group with students with special needs in primary or upper grade comprehensive schools
5. Vocational Education Teachers– teach in upper grade vocational schools

A research based master's degree is the basic qualification required to teach in elementary school in Finland. Universities train teachers to have a broad basis of knowledge and skills in both theory and practice. They enter the programs with a solid foundation in a range of subject areas. The most abled and talented individuals are those who teach.



**“Leaders are teachers.”  
(pg. 92)**

## THE FINNISH WAY: COMPETITIVE WELFARE STATE

*What makes Finland unique, is that it has been able to develop schools into places where nearly everyone succeeds and almost no one fails. Finland has a good economy with low levels of corruption. Citizens enjoy a good quality of life making it one of the most prosperous nations in the world. It has been built on flexibility and seeking goals with some level of risk and creativity.*

*These same principles have been applied to education policies in Finland. Interdependency between public sectors and sustainable leadership provide a solid basis for decisions to be made.*

*Globalization and the analysis of policy around the world has become a common vision for educational reformers. By using common indicators, the comparison is easily made between the distinguishing features of education systems and students achievement.*



**“In Finland, people trust schools.” (p. 130)**

## MORE EQUITY THROUGH GROWING DIVERSITY

Finland is becoming more culturally diverse as immigration is on the rise.

Poverty is a factor which makes learning difficult for children all over the world. Child poverty can be defined as those who live in homes with an income below 50% of the national average. In Canada 13.6% of children live in poverty. In the United States, 21.7% of children live below the poverty line while in Finland only 3.4% live in poverty.

There is a close collaboration between systems in Finland which provide equitable sociocultural opportunity.

In Finnish society social sectors including health and early intervention create equity. The belief is that the education system alone cannot educate a child.

PISA (Programme for International student assessment) is the benchmark used to evaluate educational systems. More than 70 economies have participated to date. Finland always ranks near the top especially in the area of science. The test is not linked to curriculum but rather to one's ability to apply knowledge and skills.



## INSIDE STORY:

### BEWARE THE GERM!

The idea of Global Educational Reform or GERM was born from the sharing and exchanging of educational policy and ideas between nations. It is not a formal global policy but rather an ideal with a specific hidden agenda based on a set of assumptions.

NONE of the principles associated with GERM have been adopted by Finland. They include the following;

1. Standardized teaching and learning
2. Focus on literacy and numeracy
3. Teach a prescribed curriculum
4. Borrow reform ideas from other nations that are market oriented
5. Implement test based accountability and control.

The Finnish system has been grounded with alternative policies to those commonly found in global educational policies as listed above.

#### Reflective Question:

**What are you thoughts on the principle characteristics of the GERM?**

## THE FINNISH WAY

In comparison to the typical global educational reform movement principals listed above, the Finnish way is different.

In comparison to the elements listed above, the Finnish way is atypical

1. Customize teaching and learning – use differentiation
2. Focus on creative learning
3. Encourage taking risks. Teacher developed and school based deci-

sions related to teaching practices often lead to innovative ways of doing things differently.

4. Learn from the past and adopt good pedagogical practices that work. Do not use that do not work – be innovative.
5. Have a shared responsibility and trust in professionals to make decisions.

Support for the Peruskoulu was challenged by many in the business community after its inception in the 1970s. In the late 1980s, criticism of the system by some politicians, business leaders and teachers led to a survey being launched to determine the effectiveness of Peruskoulu. Critics suggested that it did not foster talent but rather killed it because it does not provide supports for gifted learners. This criticism coincided with the uncertainty of the economy in Finland.

When the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released the results from the 2001 PISA assessment, the critics of Peruskoulu were hushed.

Finland outperformed OECD countries in reading, math and science which validated the practices of Peruskoulu.

## Leaders are Teachers

A research based master's degree is the basic qualification required to teach in elementary school in Finland. Universities train teachers to have a broad basis of knowledge and skills in both theory and practice. They enter the programs with a solid foundation in a range of subject areas. The most able and talented individuals are those who teach.



**“Finland has attained success in building increased equity through increased ethnic and cultural diversity in its society.” (p. 69)**

## EQUALITY AND COMPETITIVENESS

*After the second world war, Finland followed the social policies of other Nordic countries. This developed the nation into a welfare type state in which basic social services including education were provided.*

*It is not only that the education system function effectively in Finland. It must be noted that the education system functions within all other systems that are successful. These include health, environment, governance, technology and others. The education system is intertwined with other public sectors in Finland which allows it to be successful. System success is built on long term vision. Flexibility is one of the key elements of the successful outcomes of the education and economic sectors in Finland.*

### **Flexibility is a key element in education (p. 112)**

## A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY

*Finland faced an economic downturn near the beginning of the 1990s. One of the industries that turned it around was the birth of a company called Nokia, which realized a technological focus in Finland. Nokia is a leading mobile communication company and employs more than 100.000 people around the globe.*

*Building the knowledge base was another key element in changing things in Finland. The economic sector has relied on the education sector to prepare students to be able to meet the demands of the workforce.*

*Characteristics included innovative, critical thinking and competent in dealing*

*with the swift changes associated with the technological environment in Finland.*

*The emergence of technology and industry in the mid 1990s directly impacted the focus on schools to provide hands on cross-curricular projects in school.*

*The interaction between sectors have contributed to what Hargreaves and Fink term "sustainable leadership."*

*This highly developed and well trained workforce adds to the human capital of the country.*



*“The Finnish Way reveals that creative curricula, autonomous teachers, courageous leadership and high performance go together.”*

*“During the next ten years about 1.2 billion young 15 to 30 year olds will be entering the job market and with the means now at our disposal about 300 million will get a job. What will we offer these young about a million of them? I think this is one of our greatest challenges if we want to achieve peaceful development.” (p.1)*

*Marti Ahtisaari–  
(former president of Finland  
1994-2000)*

## WE CAN LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER

*School reform in Finland has been ongoing since the late 1970s. Until the end of the twentieth century, Finland followed the example of other nations and implemented their practices into their education system.*

*Finland has shown that it can be innovative and learned from past*

*experience*

*developing*

*policy and*

*practice from what is learned.*

*Finland has chosen a different*

*approach and not followed the*

*guiding principles as described in*

*the Global Educational Reform*

*Movement (GERM).*



## A CANADIAN CONNECTION

*Sahlberg refers to assessment and standardized testing practices that are currently happening in the province of Alberta. Alberta had implemented the use of provincial assessments to measure student performance in reading, mathematics and science. Results were used to inform about the quality of education. The provincial authorities did not use the data to rank schools. However, there were some jurisdictions in the province that did. Parents and teachers became frustrated with the idea that teaching was being sacrificed for raising test scores. In 2009, the grade three tests were removed.*

*The following year, the ministry dissolved the Accountability Department. This move indicated a shift from testing and a move toward different policies.*

## WHAT MAKES TEACHING A TOP JOB IN FINLAND?

*In Finnish education three conditions for keeping them in schools emerge. They include;*

- 1. Provide a workplace that allows them to fulfill their moral missions. “Teachers expect a full range of professional autonomy to practice what they have been educated to do: plan, teach, diagnose, execute and evaluate.” (p. 76)*
- 2. Teacher education should be competitive and attractive to high school graduates.*
- 3. Pay is not merit based, but should continue to increase as their experience level increases.*

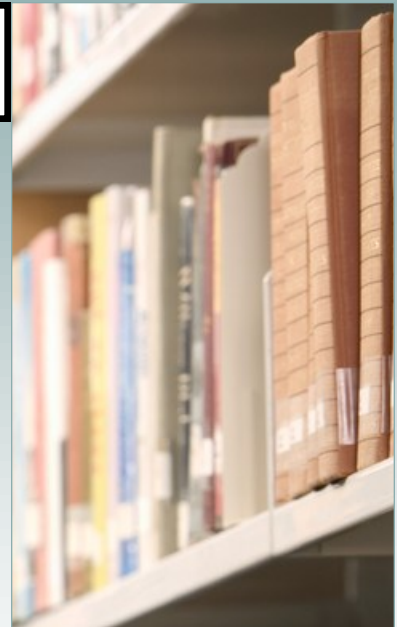




## EQUALITY AND COMPETITIVENESS

Sahlberg describes what educational reform might look like in the already very successful Finnish education system. Some of the features that he described include;

1. Allow students to develop a personal road map for their personal learning
2. Less classroom based teaching, more through hand held portable devices which keeps up with technological change.
3. Development of problem solving and interpersonal skills. Social networking in the future will be less about seeing others face to face. This will put more of a focus on media and communication. The future will require students to develop social interaction skills both virtually and in reality. School have to also shift and change.
4. Engagement and creativity needs to be used as indicators for success. Lack of engagement is a big challenge for teachers currently. Engagement in productive learning should become an important criteria to determine the success of failure of schools in the future.



## A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY

Finland has indicated that there is another way of providing education. The alternative way to what is typical is working and people are paying attention. The Ministry of Affairs in Finland suggest that even though things are very positive in terms of Education in Finland, the country must continue to ask what next steps are so that they can continue to grow and develop while meeting the needs of students. Some potential concerns that have been raised for the future.

National authorities are paying closer attention to schools, sug-

gesting that there is declining confidence from parents and students. There has been a recent reduction in funds in less populated areas meaning some schools may be merged with others. Finland is also slipping away from the top position as the most transparent nation. Income equality continues to be high. The challenge will be to maintain that equality.



OECD  
PISA

OECD Programme for International Student Assessment

**INSIDE STORY:  
Critical Review**

*"The Finnish way of educational change should be encouraging to those who have found the path of competition, choice, test-based accountability, and performance based pay to be a dead end."*

*(p. 144)*

*For Finns, personalization is not about having students work independently at a computer. The Finnish Way is to tailor the needs of each child with flexible arrangements and different learning paths. Technology is not a substitute but merely a*

**Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?**

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*This book is a must read for policy makers and educators. Pasi Sahlberg conveys the historical context which the country exists in that has developed their education system to what it is today.*

*Finland directly contradicts every characteristic that is typically associated with educational reform around the world. He refers to this phenomenon as the GERM.*

*Sahlberg explains how Finland does it differently and is experiencing success in terms of improved student achievement.*

*This book provides a hopefulness and a new refreshing lense with which to view education and what it could be. Rather than blame, it is truly about collaboration and highlights the importance of creativity, innovation, trust, shared responsibility and the difference a good teacher can make.*

*Trishia  
Hastings*

**"What is needed in the future is not educational reform, but renewal."  
(p. 127)**

**Finnish  
Lessons**



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