

# Foreword:

## UnFinnished Business

In the 1960s, the Russian launch of Sputnik propelled a massive drive to develop science and mathematics innovation in U.S. schools. In the 1980s and 1990s, the rising sun of Japan and other Asian tiger economies prompted calls to copy Japanese educational methods—making schoolwork more rigorous, extending the impact of standardized testing, and increasing the number of hours of schooling over the school year. In the past decade, the burgeoning economies of India and China have provoked United States commissions and initiatives to advocate the teaching of 21st-century skills, tougher curriculum requirements, common national standards, yet more testing, increased competition between teachers and schools, and harder work for everybody. Nevertheless, over the past quarter century, the standards and performance of American teachers and schools have steadily declined in relation to international benchmarks. In spite of this, across more than 2 decades of educational reform, the United States, like many other Anglo-American nations, has epitomized Einstein's definition of madness: keep doing the same thing while expecting to get a different result. Force, pressure, shame, top-down intervention, markets, competition, standardization, testing, and easier and quicker passages into teaching, closure of failing schools, the firing of ineffective teachers and principals, and fresh starts with young teachers and newly established schools—the very reform strategies that have failed dismally over 2 decades in many Anglo-Saxon nations—are being reinvented and re-imposed and with even greater force and determination.

### THE LEMMING RACE TO THE TOP

The critics are already out in force. International change adviser Michael Fullan predicts that President Obama's Race to the Top strategy, with its intention to turn around the nation's 5,000 worst performing schools, lift limits on establishing charter schools, and introduce measures such as performance-related pay to raise the teacher quality—will end in failure (Fullan, 2010). The strategy, Fullan says, pays little or no attention to developing the capacity of leaders and teachers to improve

together or as a system; it is based on a failed theory that teacher quality can be increased by a system of competitive rewards, and it rests on a badly flawed model of management where everyone manages their own unit, is accountable for results, and competes with their peers—creating fiefdoms, silos, and lack of capacity or incentives for professionals to help each other.

Former Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch also condemns Barack Obama's "awful education plan," which she regards as even worse than its much derided predecessor, *No Child Left Behind* (Ravitch, 2010a). The plan promotes charter schools even though the evidence indicates that they do not consistently or even on average outperform their public school district alternatives, and that they simply "skim the best students in poor communities," leaving the rest to flounder (Ravitch, 2010a). Meanwhile performance-based pay ties teacher rewards to results on appallingly designed tests of dubious validity and "destroys teamwork" among professionals who instead "need to share what they know." The reform, she concludes, is "mean-spirited, punitive, and deeply indifferent to the real problems that teachers face."

Professor Yong Zhao, the leading American expert on educational reform in China and Southeast Asia, points out that China, the leading economic competitor of the United States, is actually decentralizing its curriculum, diversifying assessment, and encouraging local autonomy and innovation. Meanwhile, Zhao concludes, while China is decentralizing and Singapore is promoting a creative environment characterized by the principle of "Teach Less, Learn More," U.S. education has been stubbornly "moving toward authoritarianism, letting the government dictate what and how students should learn and what schools should teach" (Zhao, 2009, p. 40).

In culture, politics, and business—as well as in educational reform—too many Anglo-American cultures and societies have developed an unhealthy obsession with all that is bigger, harder, tougher, faster, and stronger. Companies that sacrifice customer safety to short-term shareholder value; businesses that wreak ecological havoc with excessively bold and risky efforts to increase profitability; financial collapses that result from astronomical levels of unrepayable debt; turnaround specialists who create arbitrary disruption by setting unrealistic targets for growth and equally arbitrary quotas for staff dismissals—these are the consequences of the impatience, hubris, arrogance, and greed that characterize the worst kinds of business. Failure, firings, competition, and closures are the educational equivalent of unsustainable change in business. What they offer is oversized, pumped-up, artificially enhanced school reform on steroids.

Even in business, these larger-than-life strategies of turnaround and improvement do not produce sustainable improvement. Companies may be broken up, assets sold off, and employees fired with impunity, and all this might increase short-term shareholder returns, but few strategies of these sorts survive in the long-term

and many turnaround companies eventually become casualties of their leaders' reckless behavior. Indeed, management expert Manfred Kets de Vries explains how many so-called turnaround specialists are little more than psychiatrically disturbed narcissists, sociopaths, and control freaks (Ket De Vries, 2006).

### THIRD AND FOURTH WAYS AHEAD

The worst of the steroidal school reform movement has been tempered by lighter, less punitive alternatives in other Anglo-American contexts. Here, the political targets and goals for test-driven improvement in the fundamentals of literacy, mathematics, and science are still imposed with insistent inflexibility, but they are now moderated by a less harsh improvement discourse and by higher levels of professional support in the form of improved materials, increased resources, and better training.

About a decade ago in England, and more recently (and somewhat differently) in Ontario, Canada, and Australia, a model has been advanced and advocated that stands between and beyond the complete professional autonomy of the 1970s, and the mean-spirited, miserly, market-driven, and standardized reforms that characterized England in the early 1990s, and other places after that.

The “Third Way” of educational change reflected in the models offers a double twist on more blatantly steroidal reform efforts:

- a clear emphasis on the moral purpose of education
- a commitment to capacity building

These components sound more professionally plausible and inspiring than their reform counterparts that hounded and hectored the teaching profession into submission. Yet in reality, they are still highly problematic.

First, the admirable advancement of moral purpose in Third Way reforms repeatedly turns out, in practice, to be *the same* moral purpose irrespective of culture, country or context—*Raise the bar and narrow the gap* to improve tested achievement scores in literacy and mathematics (linked to imposed system-wide achievement targets). Whether it is Ontario, Australia, Bermuda, or Greater Manchester in England, the goal or moral purpose is almost identical. The countries and cultures may differ but the consultants' PowerPoint slides remain pretty much the same. In the Third Way, people aren't defining or developing their own shared visions or moral purposes. They don't *own* their visions. They *rent* them from other people.

Second, while the Third Way has an admirable commitment to capacity-building, it has often distorted the meaning of “capacity people” and diverted people from the noble purposes that underpinned its origins. The idea of capacity-building

first emerged in the context of developing countries. Much like the concept and strategy of community organizing, capacity-building meant helping a community help itself. It was a humanistic and empowering concept directed toward assisting people to fulfill their own personally compelling purpose. In Third Way policies, though, capacity-building has often turned into something else—training people in prescribed strategies to deliver accountability goals and targets imposed by others.

In the Third Way, capacity-building is about training for policy delivery. In the Fourth Way of inspiration, innovation, and collective responsibility, as set out by Dennis Shirley and myself as a result of our direct work in high-performing jurisdictions like Finland and Alberta, Canada, capacity-building is more about self-directed growth and development (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009). In short, and to be very clear: The Third Way is about renting and delivering the policies of others, while the Fourth Way is about shared ownership and development of a community's own compelling purposes.

### **THE NORTHERN LIGHT APPROACH**

Into all this policy mix has come the unlikeliest exemplar of educational success—Finland. With its unexpectedly and consistently superlative performance on international tests of student achievement, its possession of the narrowest achievement gaps in the world, and its equally high rankings on ratings of economic competitiveness, corporate transparency, and general well-being and quality of life, this little Nordic country of barely 5.5 million people has illuminated a different path to educational and economic goals than those being forged by the Anglo-American groups of nations.

Curious about and intrigued by Finland's unusual example, educators and policy makers from all over the world have visited this Scandinavian country to try and discover the secrets of its success. I have been fortunate enough to be among them. In 2007, I had the rare opportunity to take a small team from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to Finland to examine the relationship between the country's achievement record and its strategies of school improvement and leadership development (Hargreaves, Halasz, & Pont, 2008).

Unlike many other commentators on the Finnish experience, we did not rely solely on secondary sources, or on a few interviews with senior policy makers, or on the available educational research literature. We observed and interviewed students, teachers, school and district administrators, university research experts, and Ministry of Education staff up to the very highest level. We read material on the history and organization of Finland as a society and of its dynamic leading company, Nokia. We wanted to understand the country and its history as well as its schools, and to grasp what explained its dramatic economic and educational turnaround after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Finland's protected

Soviet markets in 1990. In all this research, it quickly became evident to us that the leading authority on Finland's distinctive educational reform strategy was and still is Pasi Sahlberg.

Sahlberg grew up in a Finnish educational family. He taught in the Finnish school system and then at the university level. From there, he went on to oversee the professional development strategy for the Ministry of Education. Like all the best researchers and commentators, Sahlberg was and remains both an insider and outsider. As a loyal and trusted insider who now heads up one of Finland's leading organizations in the field of innovation, Sahlberg possesses a rich and authentic grounding in and understanding of the inner workings of the country's educational and societal system that are often so mysterious to outside visitors.

Leaving Finland for a significant position with the World Bank, Pasi Sahlberg quickly developed the capacity to understand, interpret, and provide systemic support for countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. In addition to publishing a range of key scholarly articles on Finland, he also wrote the definitive country report on Finland for the World Bank.

Pasi Sahlberg's insider status here is critical. He is not only interested in systemic educational reform in a cerebral sense. He cares passionately about and remains deeply connected to the students, teachers, and communities that reforms ultimately serve. One of the distinguishing features of his character is that upon entering a new country anywhere in the world to provide systemic evaluation and support, one of his first professional acts is always to teach a mathematics lesson and converse with the students in one of the country's everyday secondary schools.

Pasi Sahlberg helped our OECD team to understand, as he will help readers of this book understand, what makes Finnish reform distinctively successful, and why it has proved inconvenient to the Anglo-American group of nations as an exemplar of educational change. Finland, he shows,

- has developed and owned its own vision of educational and social change connected to inclusiveness and creativity, rather than renting a standardized vision that has been developed elsewhere;
- relies on high-quality, well-trained teachers, with strong academic qualifications and master's degrees, who are drawn to the profession by its compelling societal mission and its conditions of autonomy and support—compared with the rapid entry strategies of short-term training and high teacher turnover advanced in countries like England and the United States;
- has an inclusive special educational strategy where nearly half of the country's students will have received some special education support at some time before completing 9-year basic school, rather than the special education strategy of legal identification, placement, and labeling of individuals favored by Anglo-American nations;

- has developed teachers' capacity to be collectively responsible for developing curriculum and diagnostic assessments together rather than delivering prescribed curricula and preparing for the standardized tests designed by central governments; and
- has linked educational reform to the creative development of economic competitiveness and also the development of social cohesion, inclusiveness, and shared community within the wider society.

Pasi Sahlberg urges us not to follow the educational reform strategies (which he calls GERM) advanced by Anglo-American political leaders and their educational advisors who dismiss the potential lessons of Finnish educational reform because of their ideological inconvenience. Nations that have become committed to and stuck with high rates of economic inequality respond only to public impatience for tough talk and short-term gain. He shows how those who dismiss Finland (in favor of their own preferred models, of course) on the grounds of its modest size as a nation overlook how its population of 5.5 million is close to the average of most U.S. states, where the bulk of educational policy decisions are made. Against the argument that Finland is just too different from America, England, or Canada (as if India, China, and Japan are not!), Sahlberg reveals how Finland has dramatically changed its identity and orientation as a nation, and how other countries can and must also do so as well.

There are unresolved questions in Anglo-American educational reform that pumped-up steroidal reform strategies and the “lemming” Race to the Top will never be able to answer but that Sahlberg’s work profoundly can. This is not just because Pasi Sahlberg is the most credible indigenous expert on his own country’s exemplary reforms. It is also because, as a world-ranking scholar, and former World Bank expert on a host of countries and their educational systems, Sahlberg has developed an international perspective on educational reform in general as well as the outsider’s advantage in being able to make all that is familiar in Finland fresh to others.

One of the ways that teachers improve is by learning from other teachers. Schools improve when they learn from other schools. Isolation is the enemy of all improvement. We have spent decades breaking down the isolation of teachers within and between our schools. It is now time to break down the ideology of exceptionalism in the United States and other Anglo-American nations if we are to develop reforms that will truly inspire our teachers to improve learning for all our students—especially those who struggle the most. In that essential quest, Pasi Sahlberg is undoubtedly one of the very best teachers of all.

—Andy Hargreaves