

## Opinion

### Education in America: Learning Beyond Our Borders

Since the 1980s, politicians have blamed American public schools for our economy falling behind Japan. We've struggled with how to improve our schools, and many decided that a slash and burn approach would be better than consulting with experts and learning from the latest research.

In America, we rely on an educational approach that tests students' performance on high stakes tests, shutting down schools that do not measure up. Still, many politicians hold to this hard-hearted approach.

The counter argument is that we should spend more money on schools. In part, this comes from the realization that there are underfunded schools because we've allowed some communities to fall behind—a measure of growing inequality across the country.

When you examine the correlation between zip codes and test performance, poverty and low test scores appear to go hand in hand. Many assert if we fix our economy, we'll fix our schools. However, we're still not asking one of the most important questions—what can research tell us about improving our education system?

#### Looking Outside Our Borders

If we look beyond our borders, we find clues about how to do this. Finland's not only a country where students consistently score among the highest on international test scores, but they are a country that uses research as a guide to improve their schools—research that was mostly conducted in the United States with taxpayer funds.

I recently attended a forum about the future of schooling sponsored by Education Evolving. The most interesting part was receiving a copy of Pasi Sahlberg's new book "FinnishED Leadership: Four Big, Inexpensive Ideas to Transform Education".

Sahlberg, the author of several books about the remarkable Finnish education system, has been a teacher and professor. He now shares his experience and the successes of the Finnish education system. His message is that Finland's success is based on focusing on a few principles, proven methods (many of which have come from America), and research conducted at American universities.

#### Equity and Trust

The principles shaping Finnish education reform are equity and trust. Finland pursued a system guaranteeing equity of learning, success, and opportunity based on mutual trust between all parties.

#### Improving our Schools

Sahlberg's advice to American public schools:

1. **Make recess a child's right.** Our "addiction to reform" has caused us to lose sight of basic needs of the learning child. Emphasize the importance of play in learning.
2. **Use small data for big change.** Rather than looking at information unrelated to what we do in the classroom, examine what we are actually doing to tell us how to improve.

3. **Enhance equity in education.** In Finland, a “good” school is a neighborhood school for all children, regardless of family background, community characteristics, or personal conditions. All schools address disparities in health, nutrition, and socio-economic status. Equity’s about fairness and inclusion, not treating everyone the same.

4. **Know the difference between fact and myth.** Even with Finnish schooling. Don’t believe what you hear; be willing to learn about Finnish schools and what U.S. schools could be like.

### **The Path to Success**

In my experience, the most important element in teaching is finding paths that engage students in the excitement of learning—without it they cannot succeed.

I’ve written about these ideas in my book “We All Do Better: Economic Priorities for a Land of Opportunity”. To build an economy that works for everyone, we must set students on paths of success. If we don’t invest in institutions that will create an economy providing students what they need, it’s not the students who are failing—it’s us.

#### **About David Bly**

Now serving in his fifth term in the Minnesota House of Representatives, David Bly is a former educator who taught language arts and special education for 30 years in Minnesota public schools. Teaching in small towns and working with students who struggled in school, Bly came to see firsthand how connecting people to resources and opportunities is essential for the success of both the individual and the community. You can learn more about David Bly at [davidbly.com](http://davidbly.com).