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From Finland, an Intriguing School-Reform Model

By JENNY ANDERSON DEC. 12, 2011

Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and author, had a simple question for the high school seniors he was speaking to one morning last week in Manhattan: “Who here wants to be a teacher?”

Out of a class of 15, two hands went up — one a little reluctantly.

“In my country, that would be 25 percent of people,” Dr. Sahlberg said. “And,” he added, thrusting his hand in the air with enthusiasm, “it would be more like this.”

In his country, Dr. Sahlberg said later in an interview, teachers typically spend about four hours a day in the classroom, and are paid to spend two hours a week on professional development. At the University of Helsinki, where he teaches, 2,400 people competed last year for 120 slots in the (fully subsidized) master’s program for schoolteachers. “It’s more difficult getting into teacher education than law or medicine,” he said.

Dr. Sahlberg puts high-quality teachers at the heart of Finland’s education success story — which, as it happens, has become a personal success story of sorts, part of an American obsession with all things Finnish when it comes to schools.

Take last week. On Monday, Dr. Sahlberg was the keynote speaker at an education conference in Chicago. On Tuesday, he had to return to Helsinki for an Independence Day party held by Finland’s president — a coveted invitation to an event that much of the country watches on television.

On Wednesday, it was Washington, for a party for the release of his latest book, “Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland?,” that drew staff members from the White House and Congress.

And Thursday brought him to the Upper West Side, for a daylong visit to [the Dwight School](#), a [for-profit school](#) that prides itself on internationalism, where he talked to those seniors.

Ever since [Finland, a nation of about 5.5 million](#) that does not start formal education until age 7 and scorns homework and testing until well into the

teenage years, scored at the top of a well-respected [international test in 2001 in math, science and reading](#), it has been an object of fascination among American educators and policy makers.

Finlandophilia only picked up when the nation placed close to the top again in 2009, while the United States ranked 15th in reading, 19th in math and 27th in science.

The Finnish Embassy in Washington hosts brunch seminars with titles like “Why Are Finnish Kids So Smart?” and organizes trips to Finland for education journalists eager to see for themselves. In Helsinki, the Education Ministry has had 100 official delegations from 40 to 45 countries visit each year since 2005. Schools there used to love the attention, making cakes and doing folk dances for the foreigners, Dr. Sahlberg said, but now the crush of observers is considered a national distraction.

Critics say that Finland is an irrelevant laboratory for the United States. It has a tiny economy, a low poverty rate, a homogenous population — 5 percent are foreign-born — and socialist underpinnings (speeding tickets are calculated according to income).

Its school system has roughly the same number of teachers as New York City’s but far fewer students, 600,000 compared with New York’s 1.1 million. Finnish students speak Finnish and Swedish and usually English. (Patrick F. Bassett, head of the Washington-based National Association of Independent Schools, a fan of what Finland has been doing, said one of the things he learned on his own pilgrimage to Finland was that the average resident checks out 17 books a year from the library.)

Photo



Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and author, with students at the Dwight School in Manhattan. Credit: Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times

“There are things they do right,” said Mark S. Schneider, vice president of the American Institutes for Research, “but I’m not sure how many lessons we get are portable.” Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said Finlandophilia was “totally deified” and “blown out of proportion.”

But Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford, said [Finland could be an excellent model](#) for individual states, noting that it is about the size of Kentucky.

“The fact that we have more race, ethnicity and economic heterogeneity, and we have this huge problem of poverty, should not mean we don’t want qualified teachers — the strategies become even more important,” Dr. Darling-Hammond said. “Thirty years ago, Finland’s education system was a mess. It was quite mediocre, very inequitable. It had a lot of features our system has: very top-down testing, extensive tracking, highly variable teachers, and they managed to reboot the whole system.”

Both Dr. Darling-Hammond and Dr. Sahlberg said a turning point was a government decision in the 1970s to require all teachers to have master’s degrees — and to pay for their acquisition. The starting salary for school teachers in Finland, 96 percent of whom are unionized, was about \$29,000 in 2008, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, compared with about \$36,000 in the United States.

More bear than tiger, Finland scorns almost all standardized testing before age 16 and discourages homework, and it is seen as a violation of children’s right to be children for them to start school any sooner than 7, Dr. Sahlberg said during his day at Dwight. He spoke to seniors taking a “Theory of Knowledge” class, then met with administrators and faculty members.

“The first six years of education are not about academic success,” he said. “We don’t measure children at all. It’s about being ready to learn and finding your passion.”

Dr. Sahlberg, 52, an Education Ministry official and a former math teacher, is the author of 15 books. He said he wrote the latest one, which sold out its first printing in a week, in response to the overwhelming interest in his country’s educational system. It was not meant to claim that Finland’s way was the best way, he said, and he was quick to caution against countries’ trying to import ideas à la carte and then expecting results.

“Don’t try to apply anything,” he told the Dwight teachers. “It won’t work because education is a very complex system.”

Besides high-quality teachers, Dr. Sahlberg pointed to Finland’s Lutheran leanings, almost religious belief in equality of opportunity, and a decision in

1957 to require subtitles on foreign television as key ingredients to the success story.

He emphasized that Finland's success is one of basic education, from age 7 until 16, at which point 95 percent of the country goes on to vocational or academic high schools. "The primary aim of education is to serve as an equalizing instrument for society," he said.

Dr. Sahlberg said another reason the system had succeeded was that "only dead fish follow the stream" — a Finnish expression.

Finland is going against the tide of the "global education reform movement," which is based on core subjects, competition, standardization, test-based accountability, control.

"Education policies here are always written to be 'the best' or 'the top this or that,'" he said. "We're not like that. We want to be better than the Swedes. That's enough for us."

Correction: December 15, 2011

An article on Tuesday about a visiting Finnish educator and author who spoke to Upper West Side students about his country's educational system misstated the surname of a vice president at the American Institutes for Research who was critical of the widespread admiration for Finnish methods. He is Mark S. Schneider, not Schneiderman.