

Roundtable News

Education in Europe

Your guide to international comparisons and education in England, Finland, and France



Lebanon PA superintendent Marianne Bartley and Finland's Pasi Sahlberg enjoy light moment while answering Roundtable questions

For those interested in data and national differences in schooling, the Roundtable's Fall 2013 meeting was a feast for the eyes and the mind. Held at New York University's John Brademas Center in Washington, D.C., it was a tale of two competing narratives. One argued that large data systems, including international assessments, are flawed and need to take context into account. The other tended to take assessment results

at face value and argued for a dramatic reshaping of traditional systems of public schooling.

Roundtable members imposed their own meaning on the data, leaving the feast with appetites satisfied but whetted for more. This edition of *Roundtable News* examines international assessments, school systems in France, Finland and England, a dramatic new criticism of the

In This Issue:

- Education in Europe - p 1
- International Assessments: A Cautionary Tale - p 2
- France: A Centralized System -p 3
- England: Decentralization with a vengeance - p 4
- Global partnerships- p 4
- Finland: Attacking Inequity Inside and Outside Schools - p 5
- Ravitch: Reign of Error - p 6
- The superintendents take- p 7
- Here and There - p. 8

Below: François Weil, Recteur of the Sorbonne describes French schools



American school reform movement from a former true believer, and reports on what Roundtable superintendents make of it all.

INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENTS: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Average scores on national and state tests need to be interpreted with great caution, argued Martin Carnoy, Vida Jacks Professor of Education at Stanford University. Such averages can be misleading, he said, a reality that is true for ALL international and state assessments. Carnoy, (r), along with Richard Rothstein of the Economic Policy Institute, completed a seminal analysis in 2013: *What do international tests really show about U.S. Student Performance?* Among the issues:

- Different tests measure different types of cognitive knowledge; TIMSS, for example, purports to be curriculum based, while PISA purports to assess the application of skills.
- Average tests scores on TIMSS and PISA differ from year to year, behaving differently across time in the same country.
- TIMSS and NAEP math scores for the U.S. rise similarly from 2000 to 2011, but PISA demonstrated a decline across the same period, with dramatic declines between 2000 and 2007.
- In every country in the world, children from families disadvantaged in terms of family and community cultural, social, and human capital resources score, on average, much lower than their advantaged counterparts.

- With regard to PISA results, U.S. students do much better than commonly reported or understood when average PISA results are adjusted across nations to account for mother’s education, parents higher education, and PISA social class index (a measure Carnoy refers to as Family Academic Resources – FAR).
- This adjustment reduces the differences between the U.S. and the top scoring countries by one-third (although nations like Finland and Korea continue to outpace the U.S. national average).



- In the United States, reported Carnoy, large variation exists in how well similar FAR students perform in schools in different states.

Where to turn? Carnoy believed that strong accountability systems as in Massachusetts seemed to have effects. And alignment of curriculum with standards is essential, he concluded.

Cautions

Carnoy warned that although PISA seemed to accurately reflect the proportion of disadvantaged

children in the U.S., it oversampled disadvantage concentrated in urban areas, while under-sampling dispersed poverty in rural communities.

The result: PISA probably understates the true average American score by a point or more.

Moreover, he argued, American educators could learn a great deal by examining how similar students in some states in the United States make big gains on 8th-grade NAEP Math while their counterparts in other states did not. That would be more profitable than visiting schools overseas hoping to find a magic elixir to bring home for domestic consumption.

Finally, he cautioned against taking international comparisons of per-pupil costs too seriously. “In the United States,” he said, “benefits, including health insurance and pensions, are loaded into education budgets. They can increase per-pupil costs by 20-25%.” In Finland and much of Europe these outlays are off budget for schools, he reported—accounted for in municipal and civil service accounts.

Nor, he added, are private expenditures to promote learning figured into these calculations. “In Korea,” he said, “typical parents may spend \$10,000 annually on tutoring. This money doesn’t show up in the per-pupil expenditure comparisons.”

Carnoy’s PowerPoint available at: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/45362102/Carnoy.pptx>

FRANCE: A CENTRALIZED SYSTEM

By tradition, the Rector of the Paris Académie is the senior academic civil servant in France. Like his colleagues in some 30 other French académies, such as Bordeaux and Lyons, François Weil, Paris Académie Rector, is appointed to his position by the President of France and serves at the president’s pleasure. Weil reported he is responsible for overseeing 300,000 primary and secondary students, nearly 400,000 university students, and 40,000 teachers, administrators and staff.

Broad Outlines of the System. Weil described a highly centralized system of education, a tradition stretching back to the time of Napoleon. Education has been considered “a public service since the 1870s, a service committed to republican ideals stressing that education is free, secular and compulsory.”

In a system then, that is “public, centralized, and democratized,” school attendance is mandatory until age 16, at which time students pursue the secondary baccalaureate diploma. About 85% of French students attend public schools, with 15% in private schools, principally Catholic schools that are financed by the government in return for agreeing to contracts supporting the national curriculum. Just about all 3-5-year-olds attend nursery schools; attendance at a nursery school (école maternelle) is compulsory at age 6, at which point students are introduced to reading.

Age	School	Compulsory?
0-2	Crèche	No
3-5	Nursery	No
6	Nursery	Yes
6-11	Primary School	Yes
11-16	Junior High (Collège)	Yes
16-18	High School (Lycée)	No

Challenges. French education today, said Weil, faces several challenges that have encouraged the new president of France, François Hollande, to call for reinventing French education. Among the challenges the French seek to address are the following:

- Disparity in educational outcomes for students.
- Adapting pedagogy to needs of the 21st century.

- Teacher training.
- Reversing reductions that cut budgets, reduced teacher training, and shortened the primary school year to 144 days.

The new government has mounted “an impressive budgetary effort grounded in a firm belief that investment in education is the best investment we can make.” The funds are directed at reducing educational inequality; adapting pedagogy to the needs of the 21st century; and training teachers in equity. These are by no means easy fixes, stressed Weil.

“Paris,” he said, “remains a ‘tale of two cities,’ in which highly advantaged children take advantage of the capital’s rich cultural heritage while many low income children have barely traveled beyond their own street or the blocks surrounding their home and school.”

Despite these challenges, “Most French citizens consider education to be a contract between France and its citizens and believe the state should provide public education to all its citizens.”

A more complete summary of Weil’s presentation is available at www.superintendentsforum.org

Video of François Weil’s presentation is available at: www.facebook.com/ntsupsrt



Weil (r) takes questions from Roundtable as Executive Director James Harvey looks on

ENGLAND: DECENTRALIZATION WITH A VENGEANCE



When Tony Blair formed a new Labour government in 1997 he announced three priorities: “Education. Education. Education!” reported Sue Hackman recently retired from overseeing standards in the Department for Education. The Labour government created “accountability heaven,” she said. “If it moved, we tested it.”

Hackman described a process of setting targets that were aspirational, a process in which schools that set demanding standards ac-

tually made more progress, even if they didn’t reach the standard, than schools that satisfied themselves with lower standards. “But the press killed us for not meeting the targets,” she said ruefully.

The 1% solution. “I’m a big believer in the 1%-a-year improvement approach,” said Hackman. “Politicians want 5%, but you can’t sustain that year-in and year out.” Hackman became an advocate for progress data and for “naming and shaming” about 400 schools that were told they would be shut down if they didn’t improve and “opened under new management.” Most of these schools improved, but she remains distressed that achievement gaps still exist.

A New Government. The new coalition government took office with achievement rising, the gap closing and no money. It pursued a “permissive ideology, with aggressive deregulation, a theology of school autonomy, and a belief in a

small, powerful state.” The targets set by the prior Labour government went into the “bonfire,” a lot of consultants were hired, and the middle tier of school administrators (people like superintendents) was weeded out.

Today, she reported, 51% of secondary schools are academies or free schools—receiving direct funding and allowed to choose their own curriculum and freed up from control by local authorities. Initially, reported Hackman, a lot of large companies were interested in this agenda, but she sees increasing signs of their backing away from schools because they don’t think involvement can add to the bottom line.

Hackman’s PowerPoint at: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/45362102/Hackman.ppt>

Video of the Hackman presentation at: www.facebook.com/ntsupprt

GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS FOR EDUCATION

“I believe private and state schools should come together to provide the best education for all,” said Sir Peter Birkett, CEO for the United Kingdom and Europe of GEMS Education, the largest provider of private education in the world.

Birkett pointed to his prior success with London’s Barnfield Federation schools as proof of the pudding. Taking over two failing schools, the Federation increased graduation figures dramatically while putting perhaps \$125 million into capital improvements. He brings six key lessons and challenges from Barnfield to his work with GEMS: maintaining corporate vision, being consistent and fair, growing in a measured way, managing risk, retaining the best staff, and rebuffing cynics. GEMS, a company founded in Dubai, has a vision of being “the world’s leading provider of quality education, enriching the lives of millions of children and the communities in which they live.” It’s goal is to educate 5 million children by 2024 and positively impact the lives of 500 million more.” Birkett’s PowerPoint presentation at: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/45362102/Birkett.pptx>

Video of presentation at: www.facebook.com/ntsupprt



FINLAND: ATTACKING CHALLENGE OF EQUITY INSIDE AND OUTSIDE SCHOOLS

Finland, a system with some 3,000 schools, “insists that all students attend the same basic school through Grade 9,” reported Pasi Sahlberg (below), global ambassador for Finnish education. Universal childcare on a voluntary basis is provided. National legislation provides a right to preschool programs



and also insists that students have a right to learn.

Schools in Finland are inclusive, he reported. Upper secondary education is voluntary, although the state hopes that all students will enroll.

In fact, about 95% of students do.

One side effect of inclusiveness is that the incidence of special needs declines as students progress through the grades in Finland, unlike just about everywhere else. Elsewhere, the older students get, the more disabilities are identified. In Finland, however, school personnel identify students’ needs very early and meet them. As a result, the older students get, the less their need for special services.

Finland, argued Sahlberg, has an equitable public school system. To advance equity, it spends about 30% of school spending on early childhood education, almost three times the proportion allocated in the United States. It is also a highly equitable society. On a scale linking income inequality and achievement as measured by PISA, Finland demonstrates high achievement and low inequality—with the United States and Britain at the opposite end of the spectrum, each demonstrating high

levels of income inequality and relatively low student achievement.

GERM. How are school systems being improved around the world? asked Sahlberg. By the GERM approach: the Global Educational Reform Movement, an effort emphasizing competition, standardization, test-based accountability and school choice. The GERM approach stands in marked contrast to the approach in Finland where competition is frowned on and students do not take a national assessment until they are 16.

GERM Approach	Finnish Approach
Competition	Collaboration
Standardization	Customization
Accountability—tests	Accountability—trust
School Choice	Equity

In Finnish schools, he emphasized, there are no student grades before Grade 5, so there are no numbers to encourage students to compete with each other. “In Finland, we see standardization as the enemy of creativity. Accountability is what is left after responsibility has been taken away.” The lessons from Finland, he noted, are that we need to place less emphasis on standardized tests and more trust in teachers. “Excellence comes from equity, not from tests”

Sahlberg pointed to three key drivers underpinning Finland’s educational success: A systematic focus on equity. A commitment to the idea that less is more. And enhanced professionalism for teachers. In the 1970s, he noted, childhood poverty in Finland stood at 20%. Today it is about 3.4%. Less is more—the system committed to less homework, no test preparation, and no private tuition. A junior high school teacher in Finland teaches for about 700 hours annually, compared to 1,100 hours for a teacher in the United States. Whereas a Finnish student will spend about 5,500 hours in compulsory instruction between the ages of 7 and 14, an American student will spend more than 7,000. Finally, the Finns acknowledged that teachers can’t do everything. Still, the system wants the best teachers in the classroom. In a typical year (to 7)

THE UNITED STATES: A REIGN OF ERROR

New York University’s Diane Ravitch, author of the best-selling *Reign of Error*, was once a true believer in the reform agenda of competition, accountability, charters and privatization. But in a dramatic turn-around about five years ago, she abandoned those beliefs.

“I believe in Einstein’s advice,” said Ravitch (r), “we should standardize automobiles, not people.” She described the reform movement as a set of inter-linked hoaxes:



- **Hoax 1:** *Misuse language.* What passes for “reform” these days amounts to the destruction of schools, said Ravitch. No Child Left Behind was a hoax, as teachers are being fired based on goals no one believed in the day they were written. What kind of race to the top leaves teachers demoralized and schools closed? We’re actually racing to privatize American public schools.
- **Hoax 2:** *The narrative of failure.* NAEP scores have been improving for every ethnic group in the United States since 1970, reported Ravitch. High school graduation rates are the highest they have ever been, while dropout rates are the lowest in history.
- **Hoax 3:** *We are losing our international competitiveness.* Our performance on international tests is better today than it was in 1964 when the first of these international assessments appeared in 1964. Once an advanced economy reaches a certain level on these assessments, rank order means nothing.
- **Hoax 4:** *The private sector can do it better.* On-line charters use tax dollars to recruit students and finance political campaigns. They employ minimum-wage teachers and generate huge profits for owners, while producing astounding dropout rates of their own.
- **Hoax 5:** *We can identify excellent teachers via value-added assessment.* What performance-based-accountability measures is who is in the classroom, said Ravitch, not how well a teacher is teaching.

- **Hoax 6:** *Tenure is the problem and should be abolished.* Whereas Finland relies on responsibility and trust, American reformers rage against teachers. Tenure in K-12 simply promises due process in disciplinary proceedings.
- **Hoax 7:** *Smart college graduates with 5 weeks of teaching can do the job.* Would that it were so easy. This terrible hoax has the effect of eliminating professionalism in the field.
- **Hoax 8:** *Merit pay is the answer.* Merit pay has been tried for decades and has never worked. The latest research from Vanderbilt indicates that even bonuses of \$15,000 cannot motivate improved teaching.
- **Hoax 9:** *Competition will help public schools.* If that were true Milwaukee, which has had charters and vouchers for 20 years, would have the best school system in the country. But in fact, Milwaukee demonstrates that charters and vouchers simply take money out of public education, leaving schools and the community in the lurch.
- **Hoax 10:** *Testing is the solution.* The United States, she pointed out, is the only country in the world that tests students in every grade. Testing, she claimed, is an accurate measure only of family income.

But the biggest hoax of them all, said Ravitch, is the claim that education is the great civil rights issue of our time and that poverty is just an excuse for failure. We need to understand, said Ravitch that choice turns parents into consumers, not citizens, and that public education is not a consumption item.

“It’s not as though teachers say, ‘It’s time I took out that excellent lesson plan I’ve been hiding in the drawer!’ ”—Diane Ravitch

Solutions. When Finland is providing the very best students in the country with five-year, research-based degrees, it is hard to take seriously the claim that American schools can be turned around if a handful of exceptional students are put into challenging classrooms with only five weeks of training. We need a much more serious effort, declared Ravitch. “Start with the reality that children (to 7)

Finland (cont'd)

Finland has 8,500 candidates for about 750 positions in teacher preparation programs. And the program is five years (ideally) and, in practice, six years for most. “The result is that all Finnish teachers have a research-based master’s degree. We rely on them for planning, assessing students, and devising solutions to students unique educational challenges.”

“About two-thirds of the things that explain student performance are related to out-of-school factors...”—Pasi Sahlberg

Sahlberg poured cold water on the idea that Finland’s teachers could turn student achievement around in the U.S. “When people in the U.S. say that if only we had teachers like Finland’s everything would be fine, I don’t believe that’s true. You have to take out-of-school factors like poverty into account. Everyone understands that about two-thirds of the things that explain student performance are related to out-of-school factors and at best only about half of the remaining one-third is related to teachers.... We cannot argue that we can solve the problems in the United States simply by having better teachers.”

Pasi Sahlberg’s PowerPoint presentation is available at: <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/45362102/Sahlberg.pdf>

Video of presentation at: www.facebook.com/ntsuprnt

Ravitch (cont'd)

begin life and school with different advantages and disadvantages and go from there.” Society should guarantee all mothers with good pre-natal care. “We are 131 out of 134 countries in low-birth-weight babies. We’re tied with Somalia.”

Next, provide preschool education on a voluntary basis to all. Follow that up by reducing class size, especially in the early grades and in communities with the greatest challenges. All students need a full and rich curriculum, including the arts and physical education every day.

Then provide wrap-around services, including health care, in the schools. Many parents have challenges—health care needs, unemployment, emotional problems—and schools can serve a role in helping communities deal with them.

Finally, follow Finland’s example and set out to minimize inequality. The tax code should be used to eliminate poverty.

Ravitch ended with a plea: “The purpose of education is not to raise test scores but to produce good citizens. It should be organized to produce graduates who treat others with respect, consider the consequences of their actions, engage in civic action, and, hopefully, create liberty and justice for all.”

A more detailed summary of Ravitch’s presentation is available at:

www.superintendentsforum.org

Superintendents’ Take

When it came time for Roundtable members to process all this information, several themes emerged. **Donald Beaudette**, former Norwell (MA) superintendent, commented on what he saw as a whiff of arrogance at OECD during a 2012 visit, hardly the attitude one would expect from an organization producing the questionable data described by Martin Carnoy. Lebanon (PA) superintendent **Marianne Bartley**, concluded that France was trying to fit a modern conception of education into an old paradigm.

Rob Slaby (Storey Co., NV) emphasized that in Finland “the whole emphasis is on children and the future.” In the United States, by contrast, he thought people tended to worry about support for retirement security through Social Security, and Medicare.

Several were struck by the fact that Finland, unlike England and the U.S., set out to eliminate a childhood poverty rate of 20% about 40 years ago and succeeded. The rate in Finland is now below 4%. The Finns also routinely rank first in the Western world on several assessments; England and the U.S. (with childhood poverty rates between 16-24%) produce only fair results

The policy issue, suggested **David Bickford** of Orange-Windsor, Vermont, seems to be how immediate we have to be and how long-term we can afford to be

HERE AND THERE



AASA on Fieldbook

“*The Superintendent’s Fieldbook* is more than just a good read; it is an invaluable resource for administrators, filled with guidance, lessons and tips for success. It ... can guide a superintendent in everything from speaking before a chamber of commerce to explaining test data to the public.”

That’s just the beginning of a powerful review of the second edition of the *Fieldbook*, a best-seller for Corwin Press written by four founders of the Roundtable. The review appeared in the November issue of AASA’s award-winning *School Administrator*.

Find the review here:
<http://preview.tinyurl.com/n4ga9eo>

Order the *Fieldbook* at:
<http://tinyurl.com/pqprqul>.

American Education: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Roundtable director James Harvey was asked by the French Embassy to make a November 2013 presentation on American education to administrators of more than 100 schools in the United States that offer the French baccalaureate. The slides used in the presentation are available at:

www.superintendentsforum.org

Calendar & Contact

February 2014

ASCD’s journal, *Educational Leadership*, publishes article on decline in teacher morale by Roundtable director.

March 17, 2014

ASCD Meeting, Los Angeles, California Roundtable director presents new indicator system for American education on behalf of Horace Mann League and Roundtable.

July 11-13, 2014

Summer Meeting, Chicago, Illinois Poverty and its educational correlates.

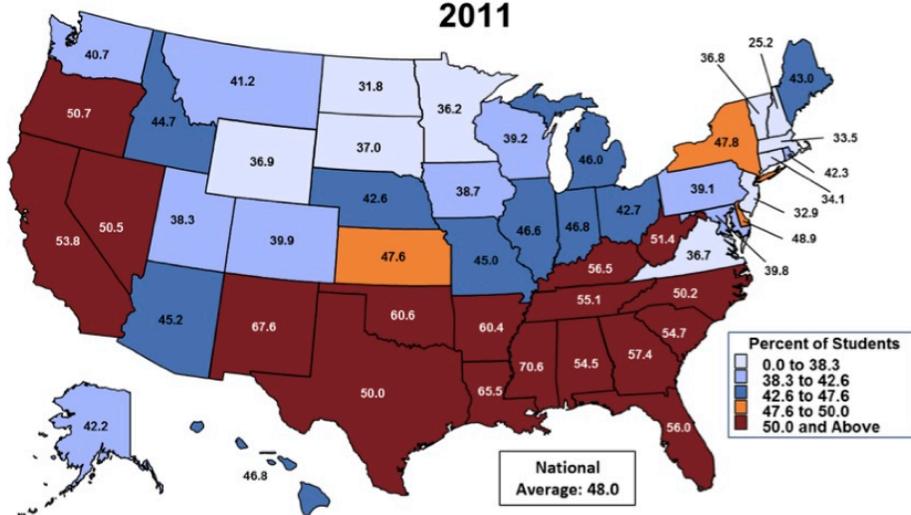
October 10-12 2014

Fall Meeting, Seattle, Washington Total Quality Management

The Roundtable:

National Superintendents Roundtable
 9425 35th Avenue, NE, Suite E
 Seattle, WA 98115
 206-526-5336
harvey324@earthlink.net
www.superintendentsforum.org

Percent of Low Income Students in All Public Schools 2011



SOUTHERN EDUCATION FOUNDATION, 2013