

# **Beyond Standardization:** Powerful New Principles for Improvement

A new phase of reforms promises to move us past standards and accountability and into an era that allows greater creativity, flexibility, inclusiveness, and inspiration.

**BY ANDY HARGREAVES AND DENNIS SHIRLEY**



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What has the  
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WE ARE entering an age of post-standardization. Improvement in terms of tested achievement has reached a plateau. The curriculum is shrinking, classroom creativity is disappearing, and dropout rates are frozen. Top-down prescriptions without support and encouragement at the grassroots and local level are exhausted. If you find that you are in the midst of another grueling year of trying to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, if you dread teaching the standardized literacy program that your district has adopted, and if your classroom coaches and mentors have turned into curriculum compliance officers, then “post-standardization” might sound like more academic argot coined by ivory-tower intellectuals. But hold on! Especially when we look beyond the American context, signs are emerging that the era of market competitiveness between schools in delivering standardized curriculum and teaching practices is on its last legs.

High-stakes and high-pressure standardization, where short-term gains in measurable results have been demanded at any price, have turned many U.S. schools not into learning-enriched environments, but into enervating “Enrons of educational change.”<sup>1</sup> When policy makers turn up the heat; define reading, writing, and math as core subjects to be tested; and threaten to close struggling schools that can’t make AYP and to disperse their pupils, educators respond — and with a vengeance! They slash social studies at the same time the country is internationally isolated; they skimp on science when there is unprecedented global competition for technological breakthroughs; and they decimate the arts, foreign languages, and physical education with the prospect that America’s next generation will be uncouth, uncultured, and unfit.

And what has the U.S. gained from its obsession with raising test scores? Although more time has been spent on language arts and math since 2001, this has come at the cost of reducing time for such subjects as science, history, and the arts.<sup>2</sup> NAEP reading scores for 4th and 8th graders have remained flat for more than a decade. Math scores show more encouraging signs of progress, especially for pupils in the bottom 10th percentile, so here we have the proverbial silver lining in the dark clouds.<sup>3</sup> But U.S. teachers have suffered mightily through the nation’s new policies, and they resent it. Only 15% indicate on surveys that the No Child Left Behind Act is improving local education,<sup>4</sup> indicating a loss of faith in the government’s ability to galvanize the very people who care the most about educating this nation’s children.

Confronted by data on the limits of existing strategies and challenged by the economic need for increased innovation and creativity, a new shift in education reform is upon us. This is already evident in recent developments in Finland, Canada, England, and the United States. Beside and beyond standardization, each of the alternatives outlined here contains different theories of action, of how and what to change, and carries different consequences — though all, to some degree, wed proposals for future change with traces and legacies from the past.

## **Finnishing Schools**

In January 2007, with colleagues Gabor Halasz and Beatriz Pont, one of us undertook an investigative inquiry for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) into the relationship between leadership and school improvement in one of the world’s highest performing education systems and economies: Finland.

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At the core of Finland's success and sustainability is its capacity to reconcile, harmonize, and integrate elements that have divided other developed economies and societies — a prosperous, high-performing economy and a decent, socially just society. While the knowledge economy has weakened the welfare state in many other societies, a strong welfare state is a central part of the Finnish narrative that supports and sustains a successful economy.

The contrast with Anglo-Saxon countries, where material wealth has been gained at the expense of increasing social division and also at the cost of children's well-being, could not be more striking. The U.K. and U.S. rank dead last and next to last, respectively, on the UNICEF 2007 survey on children's well-being, while Finland ranks near the top.<sup>5</sup>

The Finnish education system is at the center of this successful integration that, in less than a half-century, has transformed Finland from a rural backwater into a high-tech economic powerhouse.<sup>6</sup> Respondents interviewed by the OECD team indicated that Finns are driven by a common and articulately expressed social vision that connects a creative and prosperous future to the people's sense of themselves as having a creative history and common social identity.

Technological creativity and competitiveness connect the Finns to their past in a unitary narrative of lifelong learning and societal development. This occurs within a strong welfare state that supports education and the economy. Schooling is free as a universal right from well-funded early childhood education through higher education — including free school meals and all necessary resources, equipment, and musical instruments. Science and technology are high priorities. Almost 3% of GDP is allocated to scientific and technological development, and a national committee that includes leading corporate executives and university presidents, and is chaired by the prime minister, steers and integrates economic and educational strategy.<sup>7</sup> Yet Finland also boasts the highest number of composers per capita in the world.<sup>8</sup>

This educational and economic integration occurs in a society that values children, education, and social welfare. Finland's high school graduates rank teaching as their most desired occupation. As a result, entry into teaching is demanding and highly competitive, with teaching applicants having only a 10% chance of acceptance.<sup>9</sup>

In Finland, the state steers but does not prescribe in detail the national curriculum. Trusted teams of highly qualified teachers write much of the curriculum at the local level, adjusting it to the students they

know best. In schools characterized by an uncanny calmness, teachers exercise their sense of professional and social responsibility to care especially for children at the bottom, so as to lift them to the level of the rest. Individual assistants are available for children who struggle, special educational support is provided for those with more serious difficulties, and school teams including teachers, administrators, welfare workers, and the school nurse meet regularly to discuss and

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support children in danger of falling behind.

By law, Finnish principals must have been teachers themselves and most continue to teach at least two hours per week. By remaining tethered to the daily details of teaching and interacting with children, principals enjoy credibility among their teachers and overcome the traditional divide between administrators and teachers.

How is it, school principals in Finland were asked,

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that they could still teach as well as lead in their high-performing education system on the leading edge of the global economy? “Because,” one said, “unlike the Anglo-Saxon countries, we do not have to spend our time responding to long, long lists of government initiatives that come from the top.”

Of course, there are dramatic differences between Finland and the U.S. For example, Finland has only four million people and little ethnic diversity; the U.S. has more than 300 million people and extraordinary cultural and linguistic diversity. We cannot duplicate Finland, but we also should not dismiss it.

Finland contains essential lessons for societies that aspire, educationally and economically, to be successful and sustainable knowledge societies, societies that go beyond an age of low-skill standardization. Building a future by wedding it to the past; fostering strong connections between education and economic development without sacrificing culture and creativity; raising standards by lifting the many rather than pushing a privileged few; developing a highly qualified profession that brings about improvement through commitment, trust, cooperation, and responsibility; and sharing responsibility for all of our children’s futures, not just those in our own schools or classes — these are just some of the signs about possible lessons to be learned from Finland’s exceptional educational and economic achievements.

## Can-Do Canada

If Finland seems too far away geographically, demographically, and politically to offer lessons for educational improvement to the United States, then

let’s move closer to home — into Canada. In the latter half of the 1990s and beyond, the Canadian province of Ontario was the epitome of standardization. Its conservative agenda of diminished resources and reductions in teachers’ preparation time, high-stakes tests linked to graduation, and accelerating reform requirements exacted high costs on teaching and learning. Research one of us conducted in six secondary schools exposed the pernicious impact of its policies.<sup>10</sup> Teachers complained of “too many changes, too fast,” “too much, too quickly,” “just so much, so soon,” to an extent that was overwhelming. Having to take shortcuts meant teachers did not always feel they could do their best work. “What a waste of my intelligence, creativity, and leadership potential!” one teacher concluded. Ontario’s education system was about as far removed from the needs of a fast-paced new knowledge economy as a country could get.

This changed in 2003 when the Liberal Party replaced the Progressive Conservative government. Appointing a well-published education policy scholar in the education ministry’s most senior position, and being formally advised by international change consultant Michael Fullan, the province wedded a continuing commitment to test-based educational accountability with initiatives that built capacity for improvement and provided professional support.<sup>11</sup>

A Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat has driven instructional improvement by using teams of consultants and coaches supported by quality materials and by avoiding the worst excesses of the overly-prescriptive models that characterized literacy strategies in the U.K. and U.S.<sup>12</sup> Though provincial targets are fixed, schools and districts are also encouraged to commit to and set their own goals.

Within this framework of high aspirations, building professional capacity is emphasized. The province has allocated \$5 million to teacher unions to spend on professional development, successful practices are networked across schools, and underperforming schools are encouraged (not compelled) to seek assistance from government support teams and higher performing peers.

As with other alternatives, this reform strategy also has imperfections. For instance, the measurement-driven emphasis on literacy and math seems to be a politically expedient (if slightly modified) import from England more than an educationally necessary improvement strategy, given Ontario’s already strikingly high performance in literacy on international tests.<sup>13</sup> But these limitations could be remedied by widening the reform focus, developing professionally

shared rather than politically imposed targets, and testing sample populations rather than administering a complete census for accountability purposes.

Notwithstanding these limitations, Ontario's theory of action offers many lessons. Intelligent accountability, increased investment, heightened trust, and strengthened professional networking provide a noteworthy contrast to policies endorsed south of the border that cut funding, pit teachers and schools against one another, and reduce teacher professionalism to the hurried implementation of policy makers' ever-changing mandates.

## England's Edge

Across the Atlantic is one of America's closest policy partners, Britain. We recently evaluated a major project in England involving more than 300 secondary schools that had experienced a dip in measured performance over one or two years. These schools were networked with one another, provided with technical assistance in interpreting achievement results, given access to support from mentor schools, and offered a modest discretionary budget to spend in any way they chose, provided it addressed the goals of improvement.<sup>14</sup> Participating schools also had a

practitioner-generated menu of proven strategies for short-, medium-, and long-term improvement.

The initial results of the project were remarkable. More than two-thirds of these networked schools improved at double the rate of the national average over one or two years, and they entirely avoided the characteristic top-down mandates and prescriptions that typified English educational reforms before this point.

In this high-trust culture of schools helping schools and the strong supporting the weak, teachers and administrators praised the flexible budgeting that focused on improvement, applauded the network's conferences for their inspirational input and practical assistance, and greatly appreciated the availability (rather than forced imposition) of mentor schools and principals who shared practical strategies and advice.

Schools were especially successful in improving in the short term, stimulated by the menu of short-term strategies provided by experienced colleagues. Teachers and schools excitedly implemented and exchanged short-term change strategies, such as providing students with test-taking strategies, paying past students to mentor existing ones, feeding students with bananas and water before examinations, bringing in examiners and university teachers to share their grading

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criteria with students, collecting mobile phone numbers to contact students who did not show up on exam days, introducing motivational speakers for such vulnerable groups as working-class boys in old mill towns, providing web-based support for home learning, and so on.

Such short-term strategies do not bring about deeper transformations of teaching and learning, but they do give instant lifts in measured attainment — and in ways that largely avoid the unethical manipulation of test-score improvement in regimes of stan-

The English example suggests that it is the “peer factor” more than the “fear factor” that offers our best hope for raising achievement further.

ardization (e.g., selecting only higher-performing students, narrowing the curriculum, or teaching only to the test). Useful in their own right, these strategies have even greater value when they are confidence-building levers that assist more challenging long-term improvements.

But this approach also has limitations. Strategies are “so gimmicky and great,” as one principal put it, that they do not challenge or encourage teachers to question and revise their existing approaches to teaching and learning. The rush to raise achievement injects teachers with an addictive “high” of short-term success. The result is a somewhat hyperactive culture of change that can be exhilarating but also draining and distracting.

The project’s successful short-term strategies therefore seem to serve less like levers to longer-term transformation than like lids upon it. In part, this is because the project — successful as it is — remains embedded in a wider national policy culture of short-term funding and proposal cycles, pressure for quick turnarounds and instant results, proliferation of multiple initiatives, and language that emphasizes moving students into the right achievement cells. Educators talk about “targeting” the right groups, “pushing” students harder, “moving” them up, “raising aspirations,” “holding people down,” and “getting a grip” on where youngsters are.

Yet, despite this limitation, the success of high-

trust networks, school-to-school collaboration, discretionary budgeting, and a combination of proven insider experience with powerful outside-in evidence, points to a potential for an even greater transformation still to be unleashed. This alternative theory of action holds great promise if it can be separated from the surrounding context of bureaucratic accountability and wedded instead to higher-level professional and peer-driven principles of accountability. The English example suggests that it is the “peer factor” more than the “fear factor” that offers our best hope for raising achievement further.

## Growing the Grassroots in America

American educators who teach poor and working-class children can only look with envy at the broad social safety net enjoyed by children and youth in other western nations, where educators are not expected to achieve everything by themselves. Rather than learn from other nations about policies that increase economic performance and social cohesion, reduce income disparities, and expand educational access for all, American policy makers have endorsed the untested and ideologically driven strategy of more markets, more privatization, and more pupil testing as the path to academic achievement.

Yet policy makers are not the only shapers of public education. One of the more inspiring recent developments in the U.S. has been the emergence of community and youth organizing as drivers of change and creators of “civic capacity” in urban education.<sup>15</sup> For years, these local initiatives were bit players in school reform. Symbolic language about “parent involvement” rarely went beyond one-on-one deals between individual parents and the educators who served their children.<sup>16</sup> Larger efforts to organize parents indicated that they were usually divided among themselves, incapable of galvanizing anything beyond episodic protests, and sidestepped in the push for standardization and control. Moreover, this pattern of fragmented and fractious engagement has occurred within a new context of “diminished democracy,” in which fewer Americans participate in the traditional forms of civic life and prefer large voluntary associations that represent their interests but do not bring them into deliberative processes in the public sphere.<sup>17</sup>

Yet perhaps the tide is starting to turn. A new wave of community and youth organizing, supported by such powerful funders as the Ford, Hazen, Mott, and Gates foundations, is helping to get us beyond the “deep reforms with shallow roots” that Michael Us-

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dan and Larry Cuban decried as endemic patterns in American change efforts.<sup>18</sup> In New York City, the Community Collaborative to Improve District 9 Schools in the South Bronx developed a teacher support program with that city's public schools that reduced teacher attrition from 28% to 6.5% in targeted schools in a single year.<sup>19</sup> In Philadelphia, high school activists with Youth United for Change exposed the way by which one of the only three second-

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ary schools in the city that achieved AYP did so: by having teachers coach students on test items and by posting answers to anticipated test questions on walls where tests were administered.<sup>20</sup> In Chicago, the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and other community groups have created a Grow Your Own teacher preparatory program linked with area universities to prepare poor and working-class parents to become certified teachers.<sup>21</sup>

In these and other cases, community and youth organizers have moved beyond 1960s-style protest politics to conduct research with university allies, create and lead charter schools, provide professional development for teachers, and educate parents in how to combine data analyses of pupil achievement with in-class observations of teaching and learning.

Earlier work by one of us has documented efforts by the Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas to turn around struggling urban schools in the 1990s — efforts that developed a network of roughly 150 Alliance Schools that linked schools with faith-based institutions and community organizations, although these promising efforts fell on hard times as new accountability systems led principals to view working with parents as a distraction from the quest for AYP.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Oakes and Rogers in Los Angeles have described how UCLA faculty provided crucial expertise to community and youth organizing groups that has ranged from high-level legal representation to the day-to-day politics of improving large urban high schools.<sup>23</sup>

We do not yet know whether these diverse efforts will be sustainable. But if government does not meet its obligations, then activist parents and communities must become the prime movers of educational change. The emerging educational activism of grassroots America indicates that powerful reform efforts need not all begin with governments or guiding coalitions that come from the top. Instead, with the support of foundations and other organizations, these reforms can unleash the immense commitment and capacity locked up in our children's homes and communities.

## Conclusion

When we put together what we can learn from the Finns, the Canadians, and the Brits, as well as from the grassroots activism of ordinary Americans, we begin to see the evolution of powerful new principles of improvement. These are different from the principles of markets, standardization, and the quick but fleeting turnarounds that have dominated U.S. reform efforts for more than a decade — the same strategies now being abandoned by other nations. These new principles suggest that:

- A compelling, inclusive, and inspirational vision for economic, social, and educational development that offers people more individual choice is in the best American traditions of freedom and justice, appeals to public spiritedness, and includes financial responsibility for the development of others.
- Learning and achievement priorities should follow the vision, which means much more than narrowing numerical achievement gaps in tested basics. We must attend to the basics but also move far beyond them. Creativity and innovation for the knowledge economy, cosmopolitan identity and global engagement in an age of insecurity, environmental awareness if we are to avert a planetary catastrophe, physical fitness for all to turn back the epidemic of obesity, and cultivation of the arts and humanities that enrich our spirit and develop our responsibility toward others — these are the learning priorities of a sustainable knowledge society. Americans need a more enriching and engaging curriculum for all, not to replace the basics, but to bolster and move us beyond them.
- This kind of powerful learning calls for high-

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quality teaching. But high-performing countries elsewhere do not create and keep quality teachers by using the market to manipulate the calculus of teachers' pay. Rather, good and smart people are called to teaching and kept in the profession by an inspiring and inclusive social vision to which the society subscribes and for which it accords high status.

- Trust, cooperation, and responsibility create the collegiality and shared, committed, professional learning that improve classroom effectiveness and raise standards with students. Shared targets rather than externally arbitrary AYP keeps pushing teachers to higher and higher levels of performance. Such strong professional learning communities depend on inspirational and more widely distributed leadership, rather than fleeting and heroic turnarounds that rely on single individuals. At a time of extraordinary demographic turnover in school and school leadership, the time is ripe for America to undertake significant investment in developing and renewing its next generation of leaders.

- Data can inform and enhance teacher decisions and interventions, but they should never "drive" instruction. Teaching entails gathering information from a variety of sources; and some valuable teacher traits have more in common with the skilled thespian who responds instantly to a demanding and vocal audience and with the doctor who combines evidence and intuition to diagnose a patient than with the civ-

il engineer who relies on scientific data to design roads, bridges, or tunnels. Evidence collected by teachers that enables schools to compare themselves to similar schools and that stresses how schools and teachers make a difference to the students they serve is a more fair and instructive guide to improvement than are the crude data which are too often used to rank and shame struggling schools.

- The evidence from almost everywhere else points to how much teachers and schools can learn from being networked with peers and how achievement gaps can be narrowed by systems that encourage and support strong schools to help their weaker counterparts. It would make immense sense for Americans to reallocate resources to peer learning and to systems of teachers helping teachers and schools helping schools.

- Governments are often pushed into politically popular though educationally ineffective strategies for change because they feel they must pander to parental nostalgia for schools as they remember them. Treating parents as customers and clients, as recipients of services, or as targets of external interventions only intensifies this sense of defensive nostalgia. But the activist element in American communities demonstrates what can be achieved when parents and communities are engaged and empowered to advocate for and help improve the quality of education for some of the nation's poorest children. Great value can be added to educational investment through parallel investment in parent and community development. Educators cannot be expected to do everything themselves.


A bigger and better vision; a bolder view of enriching and engaging learning; the inspiration, support, and professional discretion that will attract and retain the very best teachers; a national strategy that will develop and renew the leadership that can build and constantly improve strong professional learning communities; intelligent accountability that monitors standards and improves every child's instruction; ambitious, professionally shared targets rather than politically arbitrary ones; support for school networks where good practices can be exchanged and the strong can help the weak; and recasting parents and commu-

nities as actively engaged partners rather than as consumers, recipients, or targets of government strategies and services — these are the international and instructive lessons for education reform if the United States does not want to fall even further behind its international competitors.

Now is the time for U.S. education to learn from other nations about the most productive ways forward. There is no good reason why the wealthiest nation in the world should be ashamed about investing in all of its children and their futures. That is the true challenge that all Americans who care about their nation's future must now face.

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