

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

a briefing series for new england's educational leaders

I Want to Know More

A Leadership in Action Supplement

I Want to Know More is a selection of information and resources for education leaders, parents, and community members interested in learning more about school improvement. This briefing summarizes major findings from three reports that capture some of the essential features of high-performing schools and school systems across the globe.

What Can the World's Best Schools Teach Us?

When our students graduate, they will enter a world that is no longer defined by national borders, and they will be competing for jobs alongside ambitious, highly skilled workers from Europe and Asia. In an age when even customer-service calls can be answered in India, we need to empower the next generation with the best education possible. Our high schools can look abroad for new lessons and innovative ideas that will help them prepare students for success regardless of where life may take them.

What the U.S. Can Learn from the World's Most Successful Education Reform Efforts (2011)

This report was written Dr. Steven L. Paine, a former superintendent in West Virginia and president of the Council of Chief State School Officers, and Andreas Schleicher, a researcher from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and director of the Program for International Student Assessment—an international test administered annually to high schools students that provides one of the few common reference points for comparing educational performance across countries. The report also includes Dr. Paine's first-hand insights based on trips he took to observe schools and school systems in Finland, Singapore, and Canada.

Major Findings

The teaching profession in the United States does not have the same high status it once did, nor does it compare with the status teachers enjoy in the world's best-performing economies.

Fewer talented, highly skilled graduates in the United States aspire to a teaching career; nearly 50% of new teachers in America leave the profession within five years due to poor working conditions or compensation; and U.S. teachers—contrary to what many believe—work longer hours (an average of 50 hours a week) than teachers in higher performing countries.

High-performing nations establish high standards and apply them to all students. The best-performing education systems have developed world-class standards and they apply them to all students. In the United States, academic expectations often vary widely within a school (some students graduate knowing calculus, while others leave with only basic math skills, for example) and learning standards are different from state to state. The Common Core State Standards Initiative is helping to address uneven learning expectations by establishing strong, consistent learning standards in English and mathematics for the majority of America's public schools and students.

Only Luxembourg spends more money per capita on its students than the United States—and both are consistently less-than-stellar performers—and U.S. spending patterns vary widely from those in more successful countries. On international tests, the United States is a middle-range performer, along with countries such as Estonia and Poland, which both spend half as much per student. Luxembourg, which spends the most money per student, has significantly lower test scores than the United States. New Zealand and Shanghai, on the other hand, have two of the world's highest performing education systems, and yet they spend much less on education.

Socioeconomic differences play a particularly strong role in U.S. results. International test scores suggest that a student's family background and income level play a far more significant role in U.S. educational performance than in other countries. In other words, our schools are not as successful when it comes to reducing the disadvantages of poverty. That said, the United States has many excellent schools located in economically struggling communities with large low-income populations—which shows that strong teaching and leadership can help compensate for the disadvantages of poverty.

Something to Think About

Our elected officials have recently been focused on America's struggling economy, high unemployment, and debt. Education can be a major part of the solution to these problems.

A recent study suggests that if the United States could boost its educational achievement by twenty-five points on the Program for International Student Assessment test over the next twenty years—a result that was achieved by Poland in six years—it could add **\$41 trillion to our economy over the next generation.**

Bringing U.S. educational performance up to the average performance of Finland, the world's top-performing country, could add **\$103 trillion to the national economy.**

Narrowing the achievement gap between the United States and other countries by bringing test scores up to a basic level of proficiency could add **\$72 trillion to the U.S. economy.**

How the World's More Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better (2010)

How does a school system with poor performance become good? And how does one with good performance become excellent? To answer these questions, the authors of this report analyzed twenty systems around the world, all with improving but differing levels of performance, and examined how each has achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains in student outcomes, as measured by international and national assessments. Based on more than 200 interviews with educational leaders and an analysis of roughly 600 improvement strategies carried out by these systems—comprising perhaps the most comprehensive database of global school reform ever assembled—the report identifies the replicable features that school systems can use to move from fair to good or good to great.

Major Findings

A school system can improve no matter where it starts from. While the performance of many education systems has either stagnated or declined over the past decade, others show that substantial improvement can be achieved relatively quickly—often within six years. Schools can improve no matter where they are located or how disadvantaged their students or communities are.

Improving performance ultimately comes down to improving the student learning experience. The majority of education systems studied spend more resources on improving how instruction is delivered. Schools that have dramatically improved performance and student outcomes pay far more attention to teaching quality.

As school systems improve, different strategies are used. Systems cannot continue to improve by simply doing more of what brought them past success—each stage of the improvement journey requires attention to different aspects of the school or system. Improving learning for students requires educators to continue learning.

Different education systems undertake different reforms, but six strategies appear to be common to improving systems: (1) strengthening the instructional skills of teachers and the management skills of principals; (2) assessing students on an ongoing basis and addressing learning needs early; (3) improving data systems; (4) facilitating school improvement with supportive policies; (5) raising learning standards and improving curriculum; and (6) ensuring an appropriate professional advancement and compensation structure for teachers and principals.

Higher performing school systems continue to improve by giving schools more autonomy and empowering teachers. For example, these systems establish career paths in which stronger teachers take on more responsibility for mentoring newer teachers and promoting instructional excellence in a school. Teachers also work together closely—they collaboratively plan lessons, observe one another in the classroom, and teach classes in teams of two or more.

Leaders take advantage of circumstances to ignite reforms. Whether it was a socioeconomic crisis, low performance, or a change in leadership, improving systems use adversity, negative publicity, or poor test results to jumpstart their improvement process. Instead of making excuses and retreating, they used challenges as opportunities to rally community support and get better.

Strong leadership is not only essential to spark improvement, but to sustain it as well. Good leaders need to stick around. The average tenure of a superintendent in an urban school district in the United States is just three years—far too short a time period to oversee a successful improvement process. The systems that were studied actively cultivated the next generation of leaders to ensure smooth leadership transitions and continuity of reform goals.

How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top (2007)

This report reflects an attempt to understand “why the world’s top-performing school systems perform so very much better than most others and why some educational reforms succeed so spectacularly, when most others fail.” When it was released, the report encouraged more education leaders to look beyond the U.S. borders for the critical lessons and strategies they need to improve their own schools.

Major Findings

The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. Some school systems invest more money in education, others try to manage every element of the system to encourage better performance, and others still look to penalize poor performance and reward strong performance—but

it turns out that none of this matters if schools continue to deliver low-quality teaching in the classroom. The highest performing school systems invest in teacher quality by compensating teachers well, working to make teaching a high-status profession, and providing significant amounts of training, mentoring, and support to make sure that teachers are as knowledgeable and skilled as possible.

The only way to improve educational outcomes is to improve instructional quality. In the United States, for example, school principals spend the majority of their time on administrative responsibilities—managing budgets, facilities, staffing, etc.—while in high-performing countries principals generally spend most of their time on instructional leadership—coaching teachers, reviewing lessons, and making sure that teaching quality is exemplary in every classroom. Evidence suggests that teachers should receive an average of at least fifty hours of professional development every year to maintain and strengthen instructional quality, although some countries provide up to 100 hours of paid professional development and training to its teachers every year.

High performance requires that every child succeed—not just some. The average annual per-student expenditures of the top five percent of America’s best-funded public schools is \$12,500, while the bottom five percent of worst-funded schools is a mere \$5,700—a huge discrepancy. Similarly, teaching quality, learning standards, and educational opportunities vary widely not only across schools, districts, and states, but even within schools, with some students receiving excellent teaching and challenging opportunities, while others get mediocre teaching and watered-down courses. Exemplary performance demands that all students excel, not just some, and that resources and great teachers are devoted to the schools and students that need them most.

Still Want to Know More?

If you are interested in the foundational research behind many of the ideas discussed in the Leadership in Action series, we recommend our [Global Best Practices Research Summary](#), which is available on the [New England Secondary School Consortium website](#) or the engaging report [Changing the Odds for Student Success: What Matters Most](#) by McREL and the Stupski Foundation.

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is a new england secondary school consortium resource