TESTING, TESTING

What Alberta can learn from Finland about standardization and the role of the teacher.

By LARRY BOOI & J. C. COUTURE

ISTOCKPHOTO/MRLOZ

Alberta students take standardized exams in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. Finland has no standardized tests, yet its students are top performers.

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire."
William Butler Yeats

I

IN MARCH, A DELEGATION OF 13 FINNISH high school principals and ministry officials visited high schools in the Crowsnest Pass, Calgary, Edmonton and Grande Prairie. While in Alberta, they joined 300 local educators at a symposium on innovation. In May, a group of 19 Alberta educators went the other direction, to Finland for a week, to examine approaches taken in Finnish schools.

These were the first forays in an emerging partnership between the two countries. Educators on both sides are keen to learn from each other—to take the best from each system, two of the most highly regarded in the world. The partnership was formalized in December 2010 between the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), Alberta Education and the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

To ensure that the partnership focuses on real innovation, rather than becoming what the Finns call "educational tourism," it's being evaluated by an international team of experts, including Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley of Boston College, authors of *The Fourth Way: The Inspiring Future for Educational Change.* "Too many people line up outside classrooms telling teachers what to do," says Shirley. "The Alberta/Finland partnership is transformational in that it's about teachers themselves developing school reform."

Alberta's delegation formed in the wake of "Inspiring Action on Education." The 2010 government report called for a transformation of the system. Education Minister Dave Hancock: "We know the world is changing, and that education must change with it to prepare students for a future that none of us can predict." The Alberta teachers also went abroad in the spirit of a question posed by Gordon Thomas in "The Courage to Choose" (ATA research update, Fall 2010): "What kind of society do we want to create in Alberta and what kind of teaching and learning will get us there?"

When it comes to our K–12 school system, Albertans have much to be proud of. That Finnish educators should want to partner with us is one more testament to this fact. But our conversations with Finnish teachers provided a few lessons as well. If we believe that our overriding task in schools should be to develop the full potential of all of our students, with all of the diversity and differences among them, one thing is clear: we'll only get so far with a system that focuses on standardization, goals that are easily measured through multiple-choice exams and teachers who are essentially technicians. The combination of such a model with unpredictable education funding leaves us vulnerable.

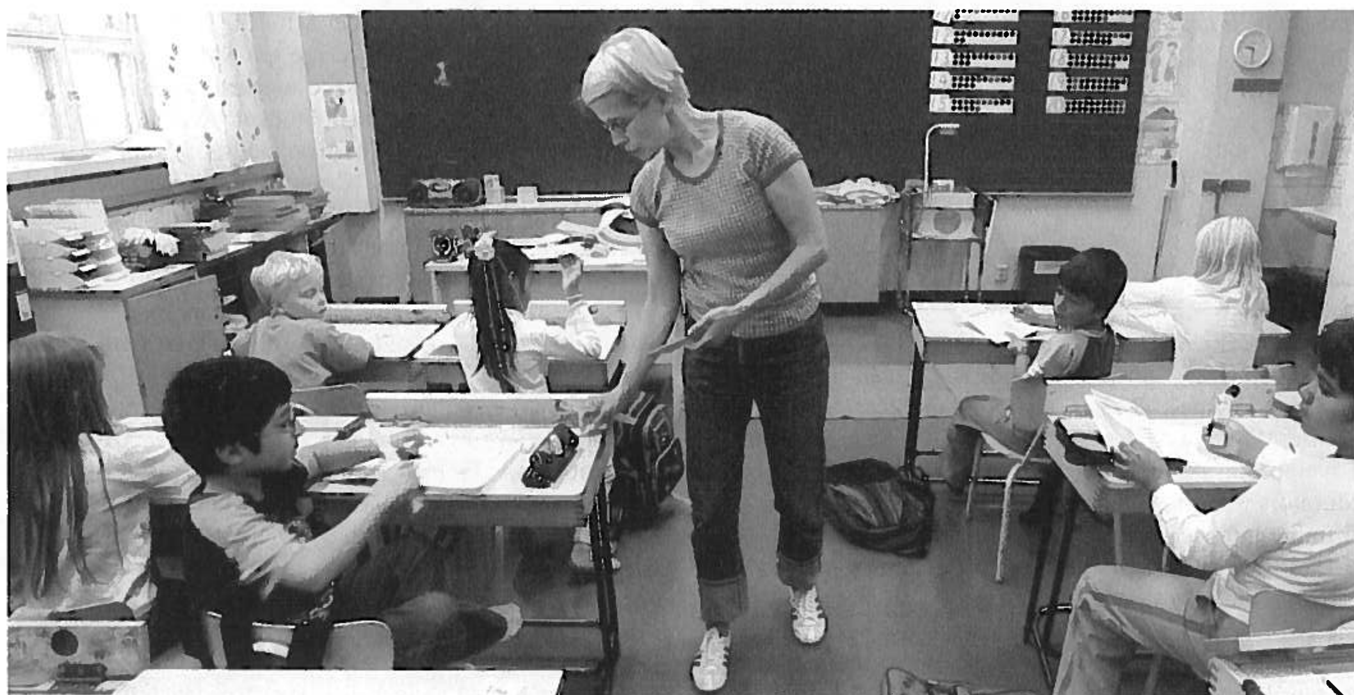
OF ALL THE PLACES WE MIGHT PARTNER WITH, why Finland? Well, partly because the Nordic country is the only jurisdiction in the world to outperform Alberta on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) over the past decade. The PISA rankings, coordinated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), are based on tests in reading, math and science taken by 15-year-olds in more than 60 countries. While only assessing a narrow range of student learning, the PISA results do bolster what Shirley and Hargreaves have long claimed—"that Alberta and Finland are world leaders in educational development."

But while the two jurisdictions score high by international measures, they organize their education systems in very different ways. Finland has a population of 5.3 million who speak three official languages—Finnish (92 per cent), Swedish (6 per cent) and a small minority of Sami in Lapland. Finland has 720,000 students in a highly decentralized system organized through 339 municipalities. Alberta's 3.7 million people primarily speak English (79 per cent) and French (2 per cent). Its 600,000 K–12 students are organized in a centrally managed governance structure that includes 62 school authorities overlapped with municipal governments.

Finland ranked as having one of the world's top education systems in 2000, 2003, 2006 and 2009.

In contrast to Alberta, Finland has a small, decentralized education bureaucracy. The roughly 250 people employed by the National Board of Education and the 300 at the Ministry of Education & Culture have largely devolved curriculum and programming decision-making for the entire basic and post-secondary education system to local communities. For example, the country's 33 pedagogical associations, such as the Finnish Association of Teachers of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry & Informatics, are responsible for assessment. In contrast, Alberta Education employs 640 full-time staff, who centralize curriculum and assessment decision-making through 100 curriculum and assessment staff in Edmonton (compared to 18 in the Finnish National Board of Education in Helsinki). Alberta's Ministry of Advanced Education also employs a large staff.

In addition to being more decentralized and less bureaucratic, Finland puts a higher priority on the early years of child development. Through the Ministry of Social Affairs & Health, children are checked at ages 1, 2, 3 and 5. These simple, cost-effective diagnostic tests identify barriers to learning early on, when interventions can more easily be made. Alberta students, on the other hand, are first formally tested through the Early Child Development (ECD) Mapping Initiative, a research project that uses kindergarten teachers' assessments of five-year-olds to identify potential barriers to learning.



A teacher in Vaasa. How does Finland encourage good teachers? "Teaching is the incentive, with higher prestige than doctors or lawyers."

Finns' core curriculum for the first few years of elementary school is based on learning through play—not the typical North American paradigm of hurrying the child. Learning to read and write starts relatively late from an Alberta perspective, at the age of 7. The Finns believe that this gives the best possible starting point for learning in school, which they support with extensive brain research and research on learning. Their research and practice show that motor development and children's brains are ready by Grade 1, and thus students quickly learn to read and write.

A

ALBERTA EDUCATORS OBSERVED AN EVEN MORE fundamental difference between the two systems, however. Says ATA president Carol Henderson, "As we talked more with Finnish educators, I grew to understand their education system is based on relational trust rather than data trust."

Indeed, the aspect of the Finnish model that most attracts many educators—in Alberta and beyond—is the philosophy of "less is more." What the Finns *don't* do in education runs counter to many assumptions in North America. For example, they don't have any standardized tests in their schools. Instead, they rely on teachers to assess students.

Educator Pasi Sahlberg, of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation at Finland's Ministry of Education & Culture, sums up their approach in his book *Finnish Lessons: What can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*

"The term 'accountability' cannot be found in Finnish educational policy discourse," he writes. "Educational reform principles since the early 1990s—when much of the public sector administration went through a thorough decentralization—have relied on building professional responsibilities and encouraging lateral learning among teachers rather than applying administrative accountability policies. Therefore... thematic assessments, reflective self-evaluations and an emphasis on creative learning have established a culture of mutual trust and respect.

"Before the end of upper-secondary school, or Grade 12, no external high-stakes tests are employed. There is no inspection of teachers and only loose external standards steer the schools. This leaves teachers with many opportunities and professional responsibilities to focus on learning rather than be concerned about frequent testing and public rankings of their schools."

The Finns do sample testing to ensure the quality of the overall system—10 per cent of students of a certain age cohort per year, usually ninth graders—but reject what one official describes as "the North American obsession with sorting kids and ranking schools." In Alberta, students take standardized provincial tests in Grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. These assess a very narrow band of learning outcomes and are not only expensive but redundant.

Furthermore, the Finns get world-class results with a basic system that sees students spend the equivalent of two years less in school than Albertans do. Finnish elementary students not only don't begin school until age 7, they spend 40 per cent less time every day in formal instruction than do Alberta students.

GETTYIMAGES/OLIVIER MORIN

The Finnish approach also promotes a strong curricular role for the arts, strong community support for schools, smaller classes, lighter course loads for teachers and early and sustained support for children with special needs—in short, a commitment to "lift up every individual child from the bottom at the first signs of difficulty," write Hargreaves and Shirley in *The Fourth Way*. The authors conclude that Finland succeeds mainly by "attracting highly qualified teachers with supportive working conditions, strong degrees of professional trust and an inspiring mission of inclusion and creativity." Above all, educational improvement efforts are focused on the school rather than at the civic or national level.

Canadian journalist Rick Salutin examined Finland in a March column in the *Toronto Star*, part of "Saving Public Education," a series written after he spent several months in schools in Finland, Toronto and Saskatchewan. He noted that high school isn't compulsory in Finland and the country has "a grad rate of 93 per cent compared to 76 and 77 per cent in Canada and the US."

"How do they encourage teacher engagement in Finland?" he writes. "They don't. Teaching is the incentive. It is high prestige, higher than doctors, lawyers and architects. Last year there were 10 applicants for every university position in teaching programs, which get to 'cherry-pick' from the top 20 per cent of high school grads. There are entrance exams and interviews, plus a 'teaching-like' activity in which they're observed to see if they have the right stuff. The training averages from five to seven-and-a-half years and is comparable to other professional degrees. All teachers must have a master's degree and do a thesis."

> "I grew to understand that Finland's education system is based on relational rather than data trust."

Like Finland, Alberta places a priority on developing high-quality teachers. Our faculties of education work with the ATA and the government to ensure that graduates meet rigorous standards, and teachers are required to maintain annual professional growth plans. Overall, however, Alberta teachers have a different relationship to their school administration than do their Finnish counterparts.

P. Jean Stiles, principal of Jasper Place High School in Edmonton, witnessed this first-hand. "Finnish principals have total trust in their teachers and seem confident about the learning taking place," she says. "They don't feel the need to mandate that teachers collaborate at the end of a busy day, as sometimes happens in Alberta; it happens organically. Finnish teachers are trusted and given time to create innovative courses for students and provide experiential learning."

Salutin also speaks favourably of Finnish classroom conditions, noting that teachers in middle school teach the equivalent of four 45-minute classes daily—about half as much as Alberta teachers. The rest of their time is used for preparation, curriculum development and staff dialogues. He says teachers are trusted to use the time well "because they're dedicated professionals in a 'learning community.'"

IN DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM A DIFFERENT approach to education, it's important to recognize that Alberta is not Finland. The Nordic country differs most notably in its socio-economic context. Its system of social welfare results in substantially less economic inequality, while poverty is surely Alberta's greatest learning disability. Hungry children don't learn well, and children from impoverished backgrounds too often start school behind their peers in various measures of readiness to learn.

Finns are prepared to support strong public education and public services in general through a system of progressive taxation. While Albertans overwhelmingly support public education (94 per cent of Alberta students attend public schools), our province's flat tax, as well as other aspects of its low-tax regime, have created an environment in which government revenue—and often funding for basic public services—fluctuates unmercifully with the price of oil. Says the ATA's Henderson: "If Alberta relinquished its title as the lowest-taxed province and settled instead for a tie with BC for lowest tax rate in the country, this would yield $11-billion for education, healthcare, children in poverty and seniors."

Finland is also more ethnically homogeneous than Alberta, although ethnic diversity has increased faster in that country than anywhere else in Europe since 2000. Here is where Finns seem most eager to learn from Alberta teachers, especially from those who instruct children whose first language is not English. The educators who visited Alberta cited our success at creating inclusive environments, where students from diverse backgrounds and with different capabilities are taught together. They also spoke highly of the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement, a program that encourages teachers, parents and the community to collaborate in ways that address specific, local education needs.

Given Alberta's identified need to transform its education system, it makes sense to consider best practices no matter where they originate. The basic principles of Finland's approach are not unique to Finland, or to any particular setting.

By contrast, we can also learn what not to do from reform in the US, whose education system is in decline. Its elements, implemented over the past two decades, are largely ideological: "market-based" reforms (the application of "business insights" to the running of schools); an emphasis on standardization and narrowing of curriculum; extensive use of external standardized assessment; fostering choice and competition among schools, often with school vouchers; making judgments based on test data and closing "failing schools"; encouraging the growth of charter schools (which don't have teacher unions); "merit pay" and other incentives; faith that "technologically mediated instruction" will reduce costs; an overwhelmingly "top-down" approach which tells everyone what to do and holds them accountable for doing it.

President Obama's educational policies have largely reinforced this overall approach, to the great disappointment of many educators. US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has pushed states to include merit pay, charter schools and standardized testing in order to qualify for federal funding in the key "Race for the Top" program (soon dubbed "Race to the Bottom" by critics). These directions are popular with large corporate interests, notably educational publishing companies. K–12 education in the US presents an estimated trillion dollars in opportunities for potential privatization.

> Alberta will only get so far with a focus on standardized exams and teachers-as-technicians.

The thing about these approaches is not merely that they don't work—US scores on international tests are not improving—but rather that they actually seem to make matters *worse*. Former US Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch, once an advocate of "market reforms" in education, critiques these directions in her 2010 book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. She characterizes charter school benefits as unfounded in evidence and describes performance-based pay as mean-spirited, punitive and deeply indifferent to the real problems teachers face.

W

WHAT PROBLEM ARE WE TRYING TO SOLVE? In other words, if Alberta students do very well on international tests already, why don't we simply stay on the same path?

In truth, while international tests measure a range of competencies, they tell us little about how well we're developing the full potential of every student. A focus on standardization and testing means getting the maximum number of students to meet "acceptable standards." In Alberta, that means ensuring that 85 per cent of students achieve these standards on multiple-choice provincial achievement tests in Grades 3, 6 and 9. The irony is we've come to believe our success rests on a culture of bureaucratic accountability. But how good are we at fostering students' talents in critical thinking, in the arts, in becoming active and engaged citizens of democratic communities? The troubling answer is that we don't know, mainly because these skills must be measured in ways outside our current standardization paradigm.

Educational researcher David Berliner argued at the 2009 Greater Edmonton teachers convention that our world is increasingly characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. He said that we need to help students deal with this reality, and that part of our focus has to be on developing critical and creative thinking skills. Finnish students are immersed in curriculum and courses devoted to the development of these "soft" skills, notes principal Stiles. Problem-solving activities, critical-thinking tasks and teamwork were evident in the academic and vocational classrooms she visited.

The Finnish system is more flexible and every student has an individualized learning path. Such a path "would benefit all students, though our 'at risk' students would benefit the most," says Stiles. "The curriculum is broken into smaller components and can be packaged in a variety of formats. The Finns build learning paths that capitalize on a student's strengths."

In addition, we're simply not developing the full potential of our "average" students. While Alberta has International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement for high-performing secondary students, we provide fewer specialized supports for the majority of students, who don't head to university. Sahlberg believes that while Alberta does a good job with strong students, his sense is we're not doing enough for those "who haven't found their gifts and talents yet." This view was driven home for one of the exchange participants, Matt Christenson, principal of Calgary's Centennial High School. "In Finland, 50 per cent of young people see the vocational trades as a preferred route to success," he says. "This is a stark contrast to Alberta, where university-track studies are subtly branded as the only game in town."

Other serious problems still need to be addressed. We have the second-highest dropout rate in Canada and inadequate education for Aboriginal students. A freeze on special education funding has been in place for three years. But before Alberta's teachers can focus on these areas, they face a more immediate concern. The province is expected to lose up to 1,000 teachers and support staff this fall due to cutbacks announced in the spring. As the ATA's Henderson notes, it's not a question of affordability, it's a question of priorities. The loss of so many teachers at once could do long-lasting damage to our education system—with a possible tumble down the PISA rankings the least of our worries.

ALBERTA HAS A STRONG PUBLIC K–12 SYSTEM, but we can't afford to be complacent. A transformation like the one that propelled Finnish students to the head of the international class—and has consistently kept them there—is most likely to occur in schools that clearly focus on building upon the gifts and talents of all of our young people, with conditions of practice and the necessary supports to enhance teachers' professionalism. We need to continue our conversations with Finnish educators, not simply because their students have high test scores, but because their education system is directly focused on these principles. ■

Larry Booi was president of the ATA, 1999–2004. J. C. Couture is an executive staff officer with the ATA. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the ATA.