Is the U.S. Doing Teacher Reform All Wrong?
Lessons from Finland and Shanghai

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There is good reason for education reform efforts to focus on teaching. We know that although about two-thirds of the achievement gap can be explained by family poverty, teachers are among the most important in-school factors that affect student learning, with some teachers being better than others at helping children progress. We also know that most teachers are given cursory and unhelpful evaluations (if they are evaluated at all) and that tenure makes it difficult to remove bad teachers from the classroom.

To address these problems, many American education reformers spent the past decade demanding that districts and states get tough with teachers and provide them with more prescriptive advice on how to improve their practice. The political results are the new state laws written in response to the Obama administration’s Race to the Top grant program, some of which base up to 51 percent of a teacher’s evaluation on student test-score data.

But what if the United States is doing teacher reform all wrong?

That’s the suggestion of a new report from the National Center on Education and the Economy, a think tank funded mostly by large corporations and their affiliated foundations. The report takes a close look at how the countries that are kicking our academic butts—Finland, China, and Canada—recruit, prepare, and evaluate teachers. What it finds are policy agendas vastly different from our own, in which prospective educators are expected to spend a long time preparing for the classroom and are then given significant autonomy in how to teach, with many fewer incentives and punishments tied to standardized tests.

Finland, for example, requires all teachers to hold a master’s degree in education and at least an undergraduate major in a subject such as math, science, or literature. Finnish teacher-education programs also include significant course work in pedagogy—exactly the sort of instruction former New York City schools chancellor Joel Klein recently called useless. All teacher candidates must write a research-based master’s dissertation on an issue in education policy or teaching practice, and will then spend a full-year as a student teacher reporting to an experienced mentor.

Shanghai takes a somewhat different approach; its teacher candidates take 90 percent of their college courses in the subject they will teach, and are expected to complete the same undergraduate programs as students who will go on to receive Ph.Ds in math or the sciences. As in Finland, however, a new teacher in Shanghai will spend the first year of his employment under the supervision of a mentor teacher, who is relieved of some of her own classroom duties in order to spend more time training the newbie.

You can see how these international examples cut against the grain of American education reform. Our approach has largely borrowed the Teach for America model. First, we attempt to bring more elite college graduates into the teaching profession by decreasing the credentialing necessary to become a teacher: no student-teaching year or education degree required, just a few weeks of
summertime training are supposed to suffice. Then we expect teachers to spend much of their time preparing children for standardized tests, whose results, in turn, will be used to judge teachers’ competency.

The NCEE report makes a persuasive case that the Obama administration and its allies in the standards-and-accountability school reform movement have teaching policy exactly backward. The way to increase the prestige of the teaching profession is not to make it easier for elite people to do the job for a few years and then burn out, but to make it more challenging to earn a teaching credential, so that smart young people are attracted to the rigor of education programs. Within such a system, alternative credentialing programs for career changers could still play an important role. But alternative pathways will never have the capacity to provide the entire teacher corps.

Following this approach, Finland has been able to abolish test-score based accountability, finding that the folks who come through their challenging teacher professional development pipeline are well prepared to create their own curriculums and assessments. “It is essential for high-performing countries to trust its teachers, but it had better have teachers it can trust,” writes Marc Tucker, author of the NCEE report.

The takeaway, I think, is that teaching reform efforts should focus more heavily on rebuilding the pipeline into the profession, and less on creating complex reward and punishment systems for current teachers, most of whom oppose increased testing, and many of whom are demoralized by the direction of American education policy. For those teachers already in the classroom, the single most powerful professional development experience is not merit pay, but good, old-fashioned collaboration, working side-by-side—over the course of a full-year—with an experienced mentor.