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America’s Need for Outstanding Teachers

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 The once world revered American educational system has been increasingly steeped in the shadows of new global competitors while wallowing in its own mediocrity. The highly influential trilogy of Mckinsey reports (2007-2010) on global education illustrate just how large the gap between American education and world leading institutions has become. These reports all seem to echo one unifying piece of wisdom; “The quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.” (Mckinsey, 2010). Finland, which has reigned as the premier education model for the last decade, largely owes the success of its system to the embracing of this truth. Its uncompromising dedication to attracting, hiring, and retaining the most expert teachers it possibly can has earned its educational system global reverence. It is time that American policy makers and education administrators look to the evidence of the effectiveness of this approach, and follow Finland’s lead in providing the American students with the outstanding teachers they deserve.

American schools have a serious problem when it comes to the quality control of their teachers. The most recent of the Mckinsey reports state that it is generally 75% of the lowest performing college students that pursue education as a career (Mckinsey, 2010). Numerous factors contribute to this problem. First, becoming a teacher in the United States today is not a very attractive prospect to most college students. Teaching is generally considered to be a difficult job with inadequate pay, which makes the prospect of paying the debt one accrues from a teacher certification program all the more daunting. It is not very well respected by

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much of American society, which negatively impacts the attitudes of students and their parents, and inevitably makes the teacher’s job more difficult. The majority of American classrooms are crowded and filled with students that are performing at mediocre to below average levels, including many students with behavioral problems and learning disabilities. The teacher is expected to effectively improve the skills of each of these students while sticking to a meticulous curriculum and testing schedule laid out by the federal government that takes away much of the teacher’s autonomy. The challenge of balancing the high needs of the students with the demanding and controlling standards of the federal education system remains unappealing to potential future educators. Second, there exists a wealth of education programs in the U.S. that have incredibly low entrance standards, as well as modest to minimal graduation requirements. This unfortunately attracts waves of underachieving students while diluting any sense of prestige associated with pursuing education as a career. It is fascinating that American policy and culture in regard to education have allowed for the lowest achieving students to become the body of educators for all future scholars. As educational commentator Amanda Ripley (2013) put it, it is “a bit like recruiting flight instructors who had never successfully landed a plane, then wondered why so many planes were crashing” (p. 85). Finally, the crushing debt that the majority of education students will acquire to complete their teaching programs seems all the more insurmountable when faced with their meager future income. America’s failure to make teaching a preferred profession is unfortunate, but this mistake can quickly be rectified by following Finland’s formula for success.

Finland has grasped the importance of building its schools around an army of excellent teachers, and in doing so has become the premier education system in the world. The essence of Finland’s teacher-centered educational philosophy is captured in this passage from *Surpassing Shanghai* (2011);

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“If we can somehow manage to recruit highly talented young people to enroll in our teacher preparation programs and then redesign those programs to equip all incoming teachers to differentiate instruction, diagnose learning problems, and assess student progress; and if we can create the conditions in which schools that allow teachers to exercise professional judgment and discretion in selecting materials and designing instruction tailored to the needs of their students; and if we can create school cultures in which teachers take collective responsibility for the learning and well-being of their students… then we can be reasonably confident that virtually all schools will thrive” (p. 63).

Finland successfully recruits their outstanding teaching force by making it one of the most desirable professions available. They do this by making the career competitive, highly respected, and by giving them autonomy to design and implement curriculum (Tucker, 2011). It also costs a Finnish student nothing to obtain the required degrees to become an educator, which makes their salary all the more substantial than their debt burdened American counterparts (Tucker, 2011). With a strong desirability for the profession being established, the qualification process for entering one of the eight educational programs in the country has the power to be highly selective. These programs are considered as prestigious as getting into medical school, or a college like MIT in the United States (Ripley, 2013), and recently received “more than 6,600 applicants competing for 660 available slots in primary school preparation programs” (Tucker, 2011, p. 63). By the time Finnish education students complete their rigorous training, which includes distinguishing elements such as substantial student research requirements, subject-specific pedagogy, training for diagnosing learning disabilities and differentiating instruction, and a full year of clinical experience, Finnish education students are ready to fulfill their role as educators (Tucker, 2011). Finland’s tactics for creating a strong desirability for the career of education, as well as the rigor in which it prepares it teachers, can and must be applied to America’s educational system.

America must follow the lead of Finland and other global leaders of education in attracting, hiring, and retaining outstanding teachers if it is to raise its system out of mediocrity

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and into excellence. In 2010 a Mckinsey report titled “How the World’s Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better” identified the American education system as a performing at a “good,” or average level, compared to other systems performing at “great” and “excellent” levels. The report prescribed a unique plan of action for systems to advance from mediocre performance to higher levels which included “increasing the responsibilities and flexibilities of schools and teachers to shape instructional practice…” (p. 4). Unfortunately, the American education system seems to be taking an opposite route by diminishing teacher autonomy through the implementation of strict Common Core curriculum. Amanda Ripley (2013) noted that we “had the equation backwards,” and that “we were trying to reverse engineer a high-performing teaching culture through dazzlingly complex performance evaluations and value-added data analysis” (p. 96). Increase in teacher autonomy is needed to improve the school system, but it can only be successful when the teaching workforce is competent enough to create and effectively teach its curriculum, properly diagnose and address unique learning abilities, while accurately collecting and analyzing classroom data to ensure its students are performing at high levels. To effectively revolutionize the body of American educators, there are a number of changes that need to happen. The profession must first become more attractive to top performing college students through a combination of upping the prestige and cultural significance of the profession, decreasing or even eliminating the cost of degree programs, and letting teachers enjoy more autonomy in the classroom and school system. Education programs must also revamp their admissions and credentialing processes to be much more stringent, and better prepare their students to be effective in the classroom and competitive with the leading students in the global field of educators. This strategy must also be implemented swiftly if it is to be effective as 1.6 million teachers are projected to retire between 2011 and 2021, and those vacancies in the school systems desperately need to be filled by bright and inspiring minds

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(Ripley, 2013). The need for this reform is as real as it is practical, despite what some critics may have you believe.

Radically restructuring the way in which teachers are trained and hired in this country will not happen without protest and strict opposition from some, but the arguments that will likely surface against this reform, as well as those already being made, do not hold water. If the number of schools which can offer education programs, as well as the number of students who qualify for said programs, is to be drastically reduced, then there might be the scare that there will simply not be enough qualified teachers to fill the demand of the school system. However, this would not be the case as there is a well documented overabundance of licensed teachers who cannot find work. The rate at which schools turn out new teachers is grossly disproportionate to the amount of available positions, as it was recently reported that “Rhode Island’s teacher-preparation programs produced five times more teachers than Rhode Island's public schools actually hired each year” (Ripley, 2013, p. 91). One argument that has been made by both Finnish and American university leaders and educators is that “the inclusion of such professional, practical training might dilute academic standards for the rest of the departments and lower their institution’s prestige” (Ripley, 2013, p. 89). No Finnish college administrator would make that argument today though, as these education programs have become the source of much of these schools’ world recognition and admiration. There is also the issue of how to finance the degree programs of future educators. This is something that could be potentially covered by the state and federal funds that would no longer be used to support the hundreds of under qualified education programs. Beyond this, additional funds would eventually flow from the money saved by public schools from eliminating costly micromanagement tactics and regular federal testing (Tucker, 2011). Finally, there is a crowd that will accuse educational administrators in favor of these reforms as being elitists. This was the case with the education

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commissioner of Rhode Island was when she raised the standards for the education programs in the state, and similar criticisms were launched against Finland’s educational reformists in the 1970’s (Ripley, 2013). It can also be argued that the process of being accepted to medical school and graduating as a licensed doctor is also elitist, but there are far fewer people who would see that as a problem as no one wants to be treated by an under qualified physician. The same rationale should be applied to education. More importantly, the consequences of not enacting these reforms actually pave the way for a much more pervasive and cancerous form of elitism. As outlined by the 2010 Mckinsey report titled “Closing the Talent Gap,” the continued failure of the American school systems will propagate a “permanent national recession” resulting in continued social and economic disparity (p. 8). This grim prospect alone should be a powerful motivator for America’s education system to embrace change.

It is time for American educators, administrators and policy makers, and the public at large, to decide the value of providing all present and future students with an excellent education. It has long been an American ideal that the strength of the nation’s democracy, economy, and society as a whole, is inseparably intertwined with the quality of its public schools. Armed with the knowledge that having an outstanding public education system is necessary for our nation to flourish, and the evidence that substantial improvement in our schools is almost certain when a new commitment is made to the quality of America’s teaching core, the American public should overwhelmingly embrace the attracting, hiring, and retaining of high caliber educators.

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