

# Pasi Sahlberg Visits Minnesota, July 2012

*Note to the Reader:*

*Pasi Sahlberg had a long day of conversations with Minnesotans on July 19, 2012 about the schools in Finland. With Education Evolving in the morning; then at lunch and dinner with small mixed groups of legislators, teachers, union officials, students and persons in the business and foundation world. An official in the Ministry of Education and Culture in Helsinki, Sahlberg is today probably the person most involved with explaining to countries around the world the organization, the operation and the essential principles of the education system that Finland developed beginning about 1970.*

*Because each of the discussions touched on some of the same questions I have taken the liberty of combining Sahlberg's responses, to make these notes read as if there had been a single discussion. Some quite central policy issues came quickly to the surface in each discussion. In several respects they went beyond what was covered in Sahlberg's book, Finnish Lessons, or in Tony Wagner's video, The Finnish Phenomenon. It was a candid set of discussions and Education Evolving hopes that what you read here will stimulate a continuing policy discussion in Minnesota.*

■ *Ted Kolderie*

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**Sahlberg:** I should perhaps put a few things in perspective first. Finland never set out to win a high ranking among the nations. That just happened, as PISA after 2000 began to show our students' learning. Achievement is a secondary result; something that happens when you concentrate on good teaching. Also, Finland is not a socialist state. In 1970 it was a centralized state, but today it is very decentralized. We have a market economy. We do not 'command' our schools to improve; we give them authority to improve.



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Achievement and learning are very different concepts. You can measure achievement; you cannot measure learning. Learning is a very broad concept having to do with the development of the whole child. Knowing a subject, having academic skills: these are tools for personal development. Finland relies mostly on teachers' judgments whether and how well students have learned. We do no universal standardized testing. We sample, to give the state an understanding of what is happening.

**Q:** How much time do you spend in America? What's brought you here now?

**Sahlberg:** I probably average a week a month in this country. I've been in about 35 states. I lived in Washington, working for the World Bank, from 2002-2007. I'm one of two non-Americans on the board of ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development). Brad Blue and Joe Graba and Ted Kolderie asked me to come to Minnesota. My son, Eero, is with me: He's going to the Twins game tomorrow.

I met Monday with Secretary Arne Duncan, one-on-one. There will be a delegation of about 45 Americans going to Finland in August. Linda Darling-Hammond will lead it; with Roberto Rodriguez, the White House education adviser; Joanne Weiss, Duncan's chief of staff; others. The Education Funders Strategy Group is involved. We get about two delegations a week. We always tell them we want to know what they do in their country. All the high-performing nations say the key is an openness to learning from each other. Though the national strategies can be quite different. The USA for example emphasizes testing and accountability; Finland emphasizes trust.

**Q:** How important is the program for child care? **Sahlberg:** There is a maternity/paternity leave when a child is born. Then in Finland one parent can stay home for the first three years. There is financial assistance for child care; related to family income. We try to get things right at the start; to prevent problems rather than to 'fix' problems later. When I lived in Washington people were forever talking at dinner parties about their problems with child care, about finding good schools; about paying for college. There are not these conversations in Finland.

**Q:** Did your culture create the kind of equity you have in your school system, or did the education you developed create the culture? **Sahlberg:** The culture of equity is general in the Nordic countries. Finland was the first country to give votes to women, in 1906. It was central to the welfare state created after 1950. Equity is a goal, along with learning. OECD will be measuring, rating, countries in terms of the equity of their education systems.

By 'equity' we mean simply that learning should not be detectable from the family background. The Coleman studies found that outcomes here *were* predictable from the income and educational level of the parents. A fully equitable system refutes this; the schools overcome the starting deficiencies. This is hard. Schools that do this well are performing better than schools that score high with students from advantaged homes. Our ethic is that what we want for our own children we also want for other people's children: If those other children fail, we've all failed.

Again, it is not easy to measure either learning or equity. It is easy to measure 'achievement', so you do that. We rely on teachers to assess learning. Out of learning comes achievement.

**Q:** How do you get the roughly 40% of your young people to move into vocational-technical education? We have a serious prejudice against that here.

**Sahlberg:** We do not track and channel students. We keep a lot of flexibility in 'upper secondary' so students can move from one to the other. Also, it has been very important now to have university education beyond the vocational secondary; the 'polytechnics'. I ask Americans what we in Finland should tell Arne Duncan, and they say: "Tell him to reform high school". In Finland we have no grade-levels in secondary school. Students can take however many years they want after age 16: two, three, five. It is all personalized. So we have almost no students quitting; perhaps four per cent.

**Q:** Our (chartered) school would like to do this. But we would then get dinged for a low graduation rate. Our politics assumes that both students and teachers are not competent; have to be forced to perform. **Sahlberg:** I hear people everywhere saying that teachers used to be more valued. Probably their high status in Finland result from trusting them with the work of learning and from all having a master's degree in education. Our master's degree opens to employment in all fields, different professions. Sweden used to be like Finland. Today Sweden is very different especially re: teachers. It is now not filling all its university training slots. Partly this results from the growth of 'free schools'. Also, employment conditions there have changed. Finland offers a real professional role.

**Q:** The schools I looked at for my book about teacher-run schools are mostly in the chartered sector. **Sahlberg:** Finland has about 75 effectively charter schools. Part of the public system. They follow the state curriculum framework. They are authorized by the ministry. They are operated by a variety of

organizations. They are formed not for 'quality' reasons but to provide an alternative approach. Sometimes Catholic school: Finland still has a state church so religious instruction (Lutheran) is a part of the curriculum. I do understand why people create charter schools here: There are quality problems: I remember Washington DC. But, again, we all try to get good schools for everybody's children. Sweden is a laboratory, today; stagnating. **Q:** Sweden is undergoing big demographic changes. **Sahlberg:** This produces the 'free schools'.

**Q:** In our country, of course, education is mainly in the hands of a separately-elected political body, the local board of education. What's the role of the 'local authority' in Finland? How are the schools financed, for example? **Sahlberg:** The states enacts the legislation; sets the curricular framework. The municipalities employ the teachers. Salaries are set in a bargaining process at the state (national) level. Administration is very decentralized. The municipalities, some 330 of them, are general-purpose bodies responsible for education along with other functions. Every municipality has a board to oversee the schools, appointed by the political leadership. Revenue is distributed from the state to the municipalities. Financing is mostly from the income tax. Some money is raised locally. The money distributed is not earmarked for education. There is some extra financing for schools in sparsely-settled parts of the country. More recently we are weighting the distribution for socio-economic factors associated with immigration.

**Q:** So what are your issues, now? **Sahlberg:** There are challenges coming from our own success. And there is economic pressure on our public sector. We have a parliamentary system; 10 parties. There are always coalitions. Currently there are six parties participating. Budgets are being cut; even, last year, education. Next year there will be a big decline. Small high schools will be closed; also small universities. This might be demoralizing. Finland is also getting more immigration. **Q:** From where? **Sahlberg:** From everywhere: the European Union, the Balkans, Afghanistan, Africa. This feeds the extreme right, in our country as everywhere in Europe. We do not have the long tradition you have, of being an immigrant nation. It is hard for the older generation. But we need the new population. Our birth rate is low. Finland needs 100,000 in-migrants in the next five years. Finally, our good record breeds some complacency. I told Arne Duncan to get his people to ask us where we see ourselves being in 2030. No one knows. Finnish educators are divided, for example, about the role of technology. Will students be learning increasingly on their own? Another view, that comes from concerns about how much time young people already spend on-screen, argues for no technology at

all; for direct personal interchange. Our government has no position. We spend so much time talking about our past that we are not looking forward.

**Q:** I'm concerned about the sense here that everyone must learn the same thing. Talking about 'individualizing' unnerves people. How does Finland manage to give schools so much autonomy? **Sahlberg:** Again: Our national curriculum framework is a guideline for the municipalities. And the matriculation exam (to enter university) pretty well shapes the high school curriculum. Legally the municipalities are in charge. But the practice is to delegate authority to the school. The municipality approves what the school proposes to do.

**Q:** This means there're differences then among the schools within a municipality? **Sahlberg:** Yes. Some schools will go heavy on the arts, for example. The decision reflects the interests and wishes of the parents at the school. **Q:** What's the accountability to balance this authority? **Sahlberg:** I always ask visitors what they most take away. Usually they say: The sense of trust. This is shaped by the freedom our schools have from the tendency in America to measure everything. All teachers have master's degrees; are trained to do this work. Let them do it. This trust was helped also by removing, in the 1990s, the state 'inspectorate' that used to come in to check on the schools.

**Q:** Let me unpack this a bit. Here, now, schools and teachers are very controlled. How do the Finnish schools run? **Sahlberg:** We are very decentralized. We steer as little as possible. There is a 'principal' who is the leader. Twenty years ago the 'principalship' was a kind of honor given to a teacher about to retire. Today it is a career of its own. The principal can decide to delegate authority to teachers. Some do -- though there are also some of the old type of autocrat. Finnish law says you can be a principal only in the type of school in which you are qualified to teach. The superintendent is named by the mayor. There is one union, to which about 95% of the teachers belong (principals and superintendents, too). (Overall, 82% of Finland's labor force is unionized.) There is also a Confederation of Academic Professionals to which doctors and lawyers also belong. With the national bargaining all teachers are paid on the same scale. There has been no strike in the last 25 years.

**Q:** Say more about the parental input. **Sahlberg:** Every school is responsible for writing its own curriculum, and parents serve on the committees developing that school-level curriculum. There is open choice among the schools, though the parents will be responsible for arranging the transportation. Then there are also those charter-like schools: Waldorf or Rudolph Steiner; what you call

'outward bound' schools. **Q:** Is there any home schooling in Finland?

**Sahlberg:** Five students, perhaps.

**Q:** What lessons do you think most apply here . . . recognizing that we aren't going to let each school develop its own curriculum? **Sahlberg:** Reconsider your insistence on testing. We test a lot in Finland, but mostly it's by teachers wanting to know where a student is having difficulty learning. We sample nationally to learn how well things are coming overall.

**Q:** I'm most struck by what you say about equity. **Sahlberg:** Again, this is not 'equality'. And it's not only racial; it has to do with family background as well. In the late 1960s we abolished the private schools that had educated the elite. How is that possible? We realized that success in the OECD required us to have a broadly educated population. Only five million people in the world speak Finnish. Our people had to know world languages. It took 20 years to get consensus on the new comprehensive system. The final vote came on November 22, 1963. **Q:** There's no 'exit' by social-class, as there is here. **Q:** Is there tracking? **Sahlberg:** Not any longer. Student paths are related to aptitudes. **Q:** Here there was a class division between vocational and academic education. Does Finland start students with 'hand work' in the primary grades to see what the interests and aptitudes are? **Sahlberg:** Yes. We look early for the vocational interest. Every primary school classroom has a piano, for example. We put less emphasis on academics. A school cannot test students until fifth grade. But the big inducement for the vocational career is probably having now the 'universities of applied science'; the polytechnics. **Q:** Steve Jobs famously said he could hire large numbers of trained technical people, but couldn't find them. **Sahlberg:** It's hard to believe your high schools are producing young people 'career ready'. That would require providing them with work opportunities during their school years.

**Q:** Is the students' school day really as short as we hear? If so, how do you handle the 'custody' function of school? **Sahlberg:** The short day is mainly for high school; upper secondary. Students can leave after school. We do not have school buses: Our public transportation sets its schedules to fit the school hours. Athletics and extra-curricular activities are organized outside school; on a community basis. We trust the students; allow them much freedom. We rarely insist on homework.

**Q:** What kind of expectations do you set for the students? **Sahlberg:** High, yes. This will be a challenge. In 20 years 20% of Helsinki's population will be immigrant. So it is an important question what we expect. We do not compare

a student to any grade-level average. We ask: How far have you progressed, given where you started? About a third of those in the comprehensive school are considered special-education; are on individualized plans (though in the regular classroom). Our law requires schools to relate to the individual student.

**Q:** Is the learning individualized for the other students too? **Sahlberg:** Yes; it's oriented that way, especially in upper-secondary students are on their own learning plan. We try to intervene early to get this right.

**Q:** What do you wish you had differently in Finland? **Sahlberg:** Conversations like this. I can't imagine a discussion like this, there. We need debate; disagreement. We have no sense of the future. Nokia had become complacent. (**Q:** There is a big article in the Wall Street Journal about this today.) In 10 years information will be readily available to everybody. What then will 'school' be? It is scary.

**Q:** Is it true that your teachers spent only about half as much of their time teaching as here? **Sahlberg:** Yes; as your background paper says: about 600 hours a year compared to about 1,100 hours here. In the USA the teachers' lounge seems to have disappeared. Teachers have little time to meet together about students' problems. Contrast this with doctors or lawyers getting together on a 'case'. Finland has a big advantage in having so many qualified people wanting to come into teaching: We can be quite selective.

**Q:** What do you feel is most mis-understood about Finland? **Sahlberg:** How far education is connected to other societal factors. Perhaps half of the results in our schools are attributable to outside-school factors. We have a high participation in voluntary organizations; our 'third sector', for example.

**Q:** I hope that when our delegation visits Finland you will emphasize you do not use the top-down approach that does not work here. But let me ask: What happens in Finland after ninth grade? **Sahlberg:** Annually about five per cent end the period of compulsory school with no idea what to do. The 95% divides almost equally began academic 'upper secondary' and vocational 'upper secondary'. The decision is not irrevocable: There are options to go back and forth. As I say: Both now can lead to higher education. About 25-30% pass the matriculation exam when they first take it. More pass later.

**Sahlberg:** We have a curriculum revision coming. We do this every four years. Two weeks ago Parliament increased the teaching time for both the fine arts and manual arts; possibly at the expense of science and math. Today people are saying our country's future depends on creativity. We recognize we are going

the opposite way from most countries. **Q:** You vary education, and the results are uniformly good. We standardize, and our results are widely disparate. **Q:** We pay little attention to the individual student's progress. We have little autonomy for the school and teacher. It is a failure at the administrative, the institutional, level.