



The Education Gadfly

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Letter to the Gadfly: Speaking to "Standing on the Shoulders of Giants"

By [Marc Tucker](#)

Checker's [review of *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants*](#) was, of course, coming from Checker, thoughtful. But it seemed to turn on the assumption that the agenda it contained was for the nation as a whole, and therefore for an education system controlled by Washington. But that is not so. On page forty, where I introduce the policy agenda, the text says, "To be clear, this is not an agenda for the United States; it is an agenda for individual states." Later on, I suggest that there might be a new Race to the Top competition, for states that are interested in pursuing this agenda, but then, on page 46, the text says, "But the real action would be, of course, in the states. Whether or not the federal government chooses to take an active role, the states have all the authority they need to move in the direction outlined here."

So we are actually in violent agreement that the United States should not want and does not need a national education system built on the pattern, let's say, of Finland or Japan. That is actually why I picked out one Canadian province as the very model of how to begin the implementation process.

I found the [podcast Gadfly did on the paper](#) fascinating. The logic line advanced by the participants seemed to go something like: 1) Other countries are far ahead; 2) they already have lots of teachers who are highly regarded and well educated; 3) we need to catch up, and don't have much time; 4) so we need to use test scores to identify our worst teachers and get rid of them.

I find this logic hard to follow. My underlying argument, looking at the experience of other nations, is that there are no shortcuts to a high-quality education system. The participants on the podcast seem to argue that there are shortcuts and we should use them. But they never explain how these shortcuts would work. We cannot fire our way to high-quality schools. They did not explain where we will get better teachers than the ones they want to fire.

The whole country is behaving as if there is a way to get sustained top performance at scale without greatly increasing teacher pay, greatly raising the bar for getting into teachers colleges, insisting that teachers have a deep knowledge of the subjects they teach, arranging for them to learn their craft from master teachers, requiring that they get their teacher education in research universities rather than third tier institutions of higher education, and so on.

The point of the paper is to say that there is nothing mysterious or culture-specific about the way these other countries have gotten there. It is very hard work. And there are no shortcuts. We appear to be The United States of Instant Gratification.

Marc Tucker is president of the National Center on Education and the Economy and author of the recent report "[Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: An American Agenda for Education Reform](#)."