

Surpassing Shanghai: An Agenda for American Education Built on the World's Leading Systems

Reviewed by [Anatoli Rapoport](#)
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In 2009, I took my students to Finland as a part of our study abroad program. In the city of Juvaskyla we visited several schools, observed classes, and talked to teachers and administrators. As probably all educators in the world, we wanted to know the secret of the Finnish miracle; namely, how does it happen that Finnish students were so successful in international tests. Among all the talks and meetings the most surprising (to me) revelation was a simple answer that I heard from a science teacher. "I don't know," he said. "They come here and we teach them." So simple! Students come to school and teachers teach them. But what exactly does it mean *students come* and *teachers teach*? And most importantly, what does this mean in the Finnish context and how different this is from say Canadian or US contexts? *Surpassing Shanghai* is an attempt, and I should immediately say a very successful attempt, to shed light on how students come (prepared!) and how teachers teach (successfully!) in such different and remote from each other places as Shanghai, Finland, Japan, Singapore, and Canada.

This book includes chapters that originally were manuscripts submitted by the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE) to the Organization of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) for the report entitled *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers: Lessons from PISA for the United States*. The report was released in December 2010 and presented detailed descriptions and analyses of the education systems of the nations that have constantly outperform others. The initial purpose for the report dictated the strategy of the analysis that looked at educational achievements primarily through the lenses of economic benefits. The comparative analyses employed in the report were based on the rationale that competition among countries revolves around human capital and the comparative advantage in knowledge.

Part I of the book is a collection of chapters each of which describes one of the high performing systems of education. Although each chapter is a narrative with its own dynamics and nuances, the book does not leave an impression of a collection of separate stories. On the contrary, the reader will find a smoothly flowing lucid text that chronicles success stories in education in different parts of the world. The common purpose of all the authors, to demonstrate the potential reasons of success and to draw attention to the conditions in the US education that need changes, dictated a common structure of each chapter. All chapters include concise historical overviews of their respective countries, a rich and focused description of social and cultural context, a broad, detailed account of the education system, authors' in-depth analysis of the system and its successes, and a section *What can be learned from...* This last section is particularly important because it presents a summary of the most powerful educational ideas that helped the respective

country to succeed.

In the chapter about Shanghai with a very telling subtitle *How a Big City in a Developing Country Leaped to the Head of the Class*, Kai-ming Cheng, Chair of Education at the University of Hong Kong and a member of China's Advisory Committee on Curriculum Reform, presented a detailed analysis of education reforms in China's most populous city. Shanghai presents an interesting, although not unique case where a major administrative, industrial, or cultural center demonstrates much better results than the nation.

Attention to teachers is in the core of what we call the Finnish miracle. Robert B. Schwartz and Jal D. Mehta highlighted distinguishing qualities of teacher education in Finland: (a) it is heavily research based, (b) it strongly focuses on developing pedagogical content knowledge, (c) it includes a strong clinical component, and (d) all pre-service teachers are trained to diagnose students with learning difficulties.

Another traditional world leader in quality education, or as Marc S. Tucker and Betsy Brown Ruzzi call her in their chapter a *Perennial League Leader*, Japan, has been the focus of attention in the United States since the early 1980s. The example of Japan intensified the standardization movement in this country. Almost twenty years after academic standards were first adopted, we are still debating their advantages and disadvantages. Japan's education performance is impressive: ninety-four percent of the age cohort completes high school. Once a very rigid system, it is loosening up and some moves to more freedom are being made. But the structure, the spine of the system is in place. The authors specifically emphasize the role of Japan's national curriculum: almost 75 percent of available time in any high school is devoted to five core subjects.

In 1965, Singapore was a poor, small newly independent country with very few natural resources. In the chapter *A Journey to the Top, Step by Step*, Vivien Stewart describes how a little red dot on the map, as Singaporeans call their nation, became an undisputed leader in education. The *Thinking Schools, Learning Nation* model, which is the Singapore's response to the global knowledge-driven economy, is described and discussed.

The last chapter in Part I is about Canada, which recently joined the club of top performers. Jal D. Mehta and Robert B. Schwartz justly indicate the importance of Canada's case: unlike other PISA leaders that are usually culturally homogeneous countries with strong central government, Canada has become successful within a highly federated system that features diversity with respect to culture, country of origin, and language. The obvious similarity of characteristics with the United States makes Canada's example particularly compelling. The Canadian model, the authors argue, demonstrates that success in education is achievable without a national strategy and with a very limited federal role.

The two final chapters of the book in Part II present the editor's vision of what elements of the best educational policies and practices can be considered in the United States'

context and how they can be implemented. The analysis is based on the competitive market approach with the assumption that a successful company adopts competitors' innovations when the innovations work well and when they make sense for the company itself. Although some readers may find the market- and competition-based approach to education hardly convincing, the analysis and conclusions that followed are well justified and clear. The top performing nations demonstrate education systems that rank highest with regard to quality, equity, and productivity. Thus, the author calls for benchmarking other countries' education systems to compare broad goals, policies, practices, and institutions. This comparison should never stop because education is a dynamic phenomenon and no education system stands still for very long.

Yet, despite a very helpful nature of the book, the reader can find some caveats. For example, Kai-ming Cheng refers to one of the stages in the development of educational system in China in the 1950s as the *rigid Russian model* that probably should be called *Soviet* instead. It is also not clear what the author means by *proletariat ideology*. This seems to be a politically loaded ideologeme that needs additional explanation. Marc Tucker contends that after World War II, the United States came to conclusion that "we had little to learn from anyone" (p. 169) which is historically not accurate. The steps that followed the Sputnik panic or the 1983 *Nation at Risk* report are clear evidence of attempts in the United States to make use of foreign educational experiences. However, the reader will agree with the most significant argument that all the authors put forward. Despite geographic, social, or ideological differences, despite diverse cultural traditions, the stakeholders in all described cases see human resources as the most critical aspect of school reforms.

Sir Michael Sadler noted that the practical value of studying foreign systems of education is that it will result in understanding our own. *Surpassing Shanghai* is a true gift for those who want to understand other systems of education better as well as the deficiencies of education in the United States. Many readers might question the theoretical framework that was used for the final analysis but very few will call into question the results of this analysis. There is no doubt that *Surpassing Shanghai* is an important contribution to the field with the clear and unequivocal message. Practical educators as well as theorists will find this book very useful.

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