



# WOW! Ed

The Center for Educational Improvement  
2011 International Education:  
Finland, Singapore, and the United States

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## Current Events

CEI participated in the DC Charter School Vendor Fair in early January. Three team members provided information on CEI services, including our capability for assisting teachers with Praxis Preparation and 21st Century Learning Skills. CEI is currently arranging School Improvement Symposia for several states. Please contact Dr. Mason at [cmason@edimprovement.org](mailto:cmason@edimprovement.org)

if you are interested in CEI making a presentation to your state/region.

CEI is currently leading the Center for Improving Ohio Schools as an Ohio approved SIG vendor. We now have a team of 40 professionals available to meet your needs. Please visit our [website](#) for more information.

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## Greetings!

What are your experiences with international education? What do you and your students know about education in other countries? In 2009, I served as an interim administrator at a small, international boarding school in Amritsar, India. At that school, the Cambridge International Accreditation system was just beginning to be implemented and I assisted in preparing the school for the rigor required by that system. When I examine many of the best practices in the U.S., these practices resonate with the approach we took at the school in India. At that school we began to focus on teaching students problem solving skills and emphasized a "global approach" to understanding the culture, history and context when designing solutions to economic, political, and social problems. During the year preceding my stay at this school, I brought in a consultant to help demonstrate Socratic learning, a technique used at many International Baccalaureate (IB) schools. All of these strategies required students to be more involved in their own learning, to take more responsibility for their education, and to think more deeply about the content.

I certainly learned a lot from the international community during my stay in India and I, like many, have gained a deeper appreciation of what the U.S. can learn from other countries.

Preparing the school in India for the Cambridge Accreditation was demanding. However, we determined that it was not as difficult as jumping up to the requirements to start an IB program. In this issue of Wow! Ed we focus on education of two countries where students are achieving the highest educational results: Finland and Singapore. In the next issue we will continue to explore how the educational systems in other leading countries compare to the expectations of IB programs and other systems in the U.S.



## Why are Finnish Kids So Smart?

Finland's educational system has evolved over the years to meet the social and economic needs of its people. Since the 1970s, Finns have strived to improve their education system. According to the Organization for Economical Cooperation and Development (OECD), Finland is now rated as the number one country in education.

## Services Provided

### School Improvement Plans

We can help you develop and monitor School Improvement activities to meet state and federal requirements. We are certified as school improvement officers in Ohio and trained in school improvement reviews in Washington DC.

### Workshops and Seminars

CEI implements our unique "WOW! Factor" presentation style for interesting and vibrant workshops.

We also provide over 40 different training modules that can be formatted to fit your school's needs. Among these are workshops on: co-teaching, closing achievement gaps, global education, and the Response to Intervention model. We provide both live, in-person and web-based workshops.

### Data Driven Instruction

CEI can assist teachers and administrators in training and implementing DDI programs into their schools.

### Praxis Tutoring

We offer Praxis tutoring for teachers working on completing their Praxis I or II tests, as well as the speciality exams.

### More information

Please visit our website for information or to arrange for a presentation regarding [services](#).

In the 2008 Program for Student Assessment test (PISA) given by OECD, Finland placed first in science and near the top for math and reading. In comparison, the United States placed in the middle of the 30 countries that were tested. In 2009 and 2010, students from many countries continue to score above the U.S.



What can the U.S. learn from Finland? Many are quick to point out that Finland is a very homogenous country. Not only are there very few second language learners, there is also relatively little immigration. These factors create greater stability and a reduced need for some of the supports that the U.S. must provide students. Also, most people in Finland earn middle class wages so there is not a discrepancy in income among the population. In fact, there is little gap in per student funding because of Finland's uniformly high tax rate and the lack of funding disparity across districts. Despite the obvious differences between the U.S. and Finland, is there anything the U.S. might consider adopting or adapting from Finland?

While children in Finland enter the education system at age 7, they are well prepared for school due to the high quality of universal daycare. Children in daycare often learn a second language (such as English or Swedish). Moreover, these children have been treated equally since birth and have been encouraged by a culture that values children. Children are taught to be more independent and to take more responsibility for themselves than what is expected of children in America.

The Finnish culture demonstrates significant support not only for education, but also for reading. For example, the government provides a new parents with a gift pack that includes a picture book, some libraries are co-located within shopping malls, and book buses bring libraries to remote areas.

In recent years, the Finnish approach to curriculum has also evolved. Finns have replaced lengthy prescriptive curriculum guides with shorter, less detailed guides. The current national math curriculum, for example, is under 10 pages. However, the Finnish focus on higher order thinking skills, and the system emphasizes creative problem-solving skills.

In Finland, there are high expectations for all students, and

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teachers provide accommodations such as tutoring and remedial specialists to students as soon as assessments confirm a need for such services. Many classrooms have two or more teachers and co-teaching is the norm. When educators found that students had the greatest difficulties in grades 7 through 9, they began to provide more money and time to support these students.

What of the teachers? All teachers are required to hold Master's degrees in their field and only the top 10% of the over 5000 applicants are accepted into university education programs. Teaching is a prestigious profession in Finland.

Instead of teaching to a standardized test like we do here in the United States, teachers in Finland are able to choose their own books and design their own curriculum. "The teachers in Finland expect more from their students," says Elina Lamponen. Lamponen is a high school senior in Finland who spent her junior year in Michigan. She said that in contrast to Finland, in Michigan she rarely was given an essay question during tests, and that most tests were multiple choice. "It was so bad," she said, "that I had to repeat the year when came back [to Finland]."

*Resources* Gamerman, H. (2008). What makes Finnish kids so smart? *The Wall Street Journal*, <<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120425355065601997.html>>

Pytel, B. (2009, Feb.) Why Finland is first in education: Learn why students in Finland score so high. Suite 101.com

<http://www.suite101.com/content/why-finland-is-first-in-education-a96642>

Salberg, P. (2007). Education policies for raising student learning: The Finnish approach. *Routledge Publishers*. 22:2, p.147-171.

### Kids in Singapore are Singing a Different Tune

Like Finland, Singapore is ranked close to the top according to the results on the PISA test given by the OECD. In 2009, Singapore placed fifth in reading, second in mathematics, and fourth in science. Singapore also had the second highest proportion (12.3%) of students who were top performers in all three domains.

However, Singapore's approach to education is very different from Finland's. Education in Singapore is very systematic and students are broken into different abilities almost their entire educational career as opposed to Finland's more collective approach.



Students in Singapore start their education at a young age, around 3 years old. They continue their schooling in the primary levels at age 6 which is broken into foundation and orientation stages. At the end of their 6 years at the primary level, they must take a Primary School Leaving Exam (PSLE) to determine if they are ready to leave primary grade levels. Students' performance scores determine their placement in the secondary schools.

At the secondary level, students are again broken up into "Special," "Express," "Normal (Academic)" and "Normal (Technical)." Each category is determined by the score on the PLSE. Recently, however, Singapore has begun to offer an "Integrated Program" in which students are allowed to take 6 years of secondary education and then take the exam for the International Baccalaureate. This is becoming a popular option for many students because it has moved away from the emphasis on the mere sciences, a side effect from the post-independence need for quick and basic education, to more refined subjects such as philosophy or political science, as well as the fact that scientific concepts are more heavily emphasized than before, as it is judged on the work of the student, rather than through an examination. The program is more project-based and students are expected to be independent learners.

The Ministry of Education plays a vital role in maintaining Singapore's education system. They promote a strong and rigorous environment for their students, and their competitiveness for elite education is matched by the competitiveness in the United States. Both Singapore and Finland rank high on the PISA, so how can the US learn from both these countries' different views and formulate a new plan for education in America?

#### Resources

Ministry of Education, Singapore. <<http://www.moe.gov.sg/>>, found January 2011.

Barbara Leitch Lepoer, ed. *Singapore: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1989. <<http://countrystudies.us/singapore/>>, found January 2011.



**Playing Catch-up: What the US is Doing to Reach the Educational Levels of Our International Counterparts**

There is a sobering effect when one thinks of the PISA scores of Finland and Singapore compared to that of the United States. For the 2009 PISA, the United States scored 15th in reading and 25th in math. The overall science scores have increased over the past nine years, but we are still considered average in overall ranking.

In comparing the educational systems and trends of Singapore and Finland, one can see that they reflect two very different views on education. "The mediocre performance



of America's students is a problem we cannot afford to accept and yet cannot afford to ignore," said Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan at the most recent press release of the 2009 PISA scores. But what is the United States doing now to help catch up with our international counterparts?

A separate OECD study of the characteristics of the world's top-performing education systems, along with similar student of American and International practices by McKinsey & Company, suggests that the U.S. can improve our standing by continuing to pursue reforms that have taken root in states and local school districts within the last two years. High-scoring nations set rigorous standards for their students, smartly use data to improve instruction, concentrate resources on the most challenged students, and invest heavily in the teaching profession. Those successful nations' practices closely mirror the priorities of the Obama administration's Race to the Top program, OECD and McKinsey found.

Is it enough to continue to do what we're doing? Or should we look at bringing in other options such as more schools to offer International Baccalaureate programs or redefining what it means to "test" our children?

*Resources:* Ed.gov blog (2009). International educational rankings suggest reform can lift the US. *US Department of Education*. <<http://www.ed.gov/blog/2010/12/international-education-rankings-suggest-reform-can-lift-u-s/>>, found December 2010.

### **Tomorrow, Next Year, and Beyond**

In this global society it is becoming increasingly important for educators and students to know of the expectations, the cultures, and the achievements of people round the world. By gaining a greater understanding of others we are in a better position not only to be of more assistance to others but also to incorporate their best practices into our lives and our schools.

As our cultural sensitivity increases, our ability to design and implement education curricula and instruction also improves. Over the next year, CEI will continue to explore the wow! in education in other countries to help us all form a better picture of both the realities and the possibilities for a stronger, more

meaningful, and more productive education for all children.

Sincerely,  
Christine Mason  
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