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NATIONAL NEWS

- 1) [From Finland, an Intriguing School-Reform Model](#); Anderson – New York Times
- 2) [Study: Two-fifths of high school graduates are unprepared for college or the workforce](#); de Vise – Washington Post

STATE NEWS

- 3) [Florida high school graduation rate is highest ever](#); Postal – Orlando Sentinel
- 4) [Louisiana: National school chief search urged](#); Sentell – The Advocate
- 5) [Rhode Island officials to discuss Race to the Top](#); Staff – Associated Press
- 6) [Utah educators pleased with gov's education recommendations](#); Schencker – Salt Lake Tribune

NATIONAL NEWS

From Finland, an Intriguing School-Reform Model

New York Times

By: Jenny Anderson

December 12, 2011

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/13/education/from-finland-an-intriguing-school-reform-model.html?_r=2&pagewanted=1&ref=education

Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and author, had a simple question for the high school seniors he was speaking to one morning last week in Manhattan: "Who here wants to be a teacher?"

Out of a class of 15, two hands went up — one a little reluctantly.

"In my country, that would be 25 percent of people," Dr. Sahlberg said. "And," he added, thrusting his hand in the air with enthusiasm, "it would be more like this."

In his country, Dr. Sahlberg said later in an interview, teachers typically spend about four hours a day in the classroom, and are paid to spend two hours a week on professional development. At the University of Helsinki, where he teaches, 2,400 people competed last year for 120 slots in the (fully subsidized) master's program for schoolteachers. "It's more difficult getting into teacher education than law or medicine," he said.

Dr. Sahlberg puts high-quality teachers at the heart of Finland's education success story — which, as it happens, has become a personal success story of sorts, part of an American obsession with all things Finnish when it comes to schools.

Take last week. On Monday, Dr. Sahlberg was the keynote speaker at an education conference in Chicago. On Tuesday, he had to return to Helsinki for an Independence Day party held by Finland's president — a coveted invitation to an event that much of the country watches on television.

On Wednesday, it was Washington, for a party for the release of his latest book, "Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland?," that drew staff members from the White House and Congress.

And Thursday brought him to the Upper West Side, for a daylong visit to [the Dwight School](#), a [for-profit school](#) that prides itself on internationalism, where he talked to those seniors.

Ever since [Finland, a nation of about 5.5 million](#) that does not start formal education until age 7 and scorns homework and testing until well into the teenage years, scored at the top of a well-respected [international test in 2001 in math, science and reading](#), it has been an object of fascination among American educators and policy makers.

Finlandophilia only picked up when the nation placed close to the top again in 2009, while the United States ranked 15th in reading, 19th in math and 27th in science.

The Finnish Embassy in Washington hosts brunch seminars with titles like "Why Are Finnish Kids So Smart?" and organizes trips to Finland for education journalists eager to see for themselves. In Helsinki, the Education Ministry has had 100 official

delegations from 40 to 45 countries visit each year since 2005. Schools there used to love the attention, making cakes and doing folk dances for the foreigners, Dr. Sahlberg said, but now the crush of observers is considered a national distraction.

Critics say that Finland is an irrelevant laboratory for the United States. It has a tiny economy, a low poverty rate, a homogenous population — 5 percent are foreign-born — and socialist underpinnings (speeding tickets are calculated according to income).

Its school system has roughly the same number of teachers as New York City's but far fewer students, 600,000 compared with New York's 1.1 million. Finnish students speak Finnish and Swedish and usually English. (Patrick F. Bassett, head of the Washington-based National Association of Independent Schools, a fan of what Finland has been doing, said one of the things he learned on his own pilgrimage to Finland was that the average resident checks out 17 books a year from the library.)

"There are things they do right," said Mark Schneiderman, vice president of the American Institutes for Research, "but I'm not sure how many lessons we get are portable." Frederick M. Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, said Finlandophilia was "totally deified" and "blown out of proportion."

But Linda Darling-Hammond, an education professor at Stanford, said [Finland could be an excellent model](#) for individual states, noting that it is about the size of Kentucky.

"The fact that we have more race, ethnicity and economic heterogeneity, and we have this huge problem of poverty, should not mean we don't want qualified teachers — the strategies become even more important," Dr. Darling-Hammond said. "Thirty years ago, Finland's education system was a mess. It was quite mediocre, very inequitable. It had a lot of features our system has: very top-down testing, extensive tracking, highly variable teachers, and they managed to reboot the whole system."

Both Dr. Darling-Hammond and Dr. Sahlberg said a turning point was a government decision in the 1970s to require all teachers to have master's degrees — and to pay for their acquisition. The starting salary for school teachers in Finland, 96 percent of whom are unionized, was about \$29,000 in 2008, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, compared with about \$36,000 in the United States.

More bear than tiger, Finland scorns almost all standardized testing before age 16 and discourages homework, and it is seen as a violation of children's right to be children for them to start school any sooner than 7, Dr. Sahlberg said during his day at Dwight. He spoke to seniors taking a "Theory of Knowledge" class, then met with administrators and faculty members.

"The first six years of education are not about academic success," he said. "We don't measure children at all. It's about being ready to learn and finding your passion."

Dr. Sahlberg, 52, an Education Ministry official and a former math teacher, is the author of 15 books. He said he wrote the latest one, which sold out its first printing in a week, in response to the overwhelming interest in his country's educational system. It was not meant to claim that Finland's way was the best way, he said, and he was quick to caution against countries' trying to import ideas à la carte and then expecting results.

"Don't try to apply anything," he told the Dwight teachers. "It won't work because education is a very complex system."

Besides high-quality teachers, Dr. Sahlberg pointed to Finland's Lutheran leanings, almost religious belief in equality of opportunity, and a decision in 1957 to require subtitles on foreign television as key ingredients to the success story.

He emphasized that Finland's success is one of basic education, from age 7 until 16, at which point 95 percent of the country goes on to vocational or academic high schools. "The primary aim of education is to serve as an equalizing instrument for society," he said.

Dr. Sahlberg said another reason the system had succeeded was that "only dead fish follow the stream" — a Finnish expression.

Finland is going against the tide of the "global education reform movement," which is based on core subjects, competition, standardization, test-based accountability, control.

"Education policies here are always written to be 'the best' or 'the top this or that,'" he said. "We're not like that. We want to be better than the Swedes. That's enough for us."

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Study: Two-fifths of high school graduates are unprepared for college or the workforce

Washington Post
By: Daniel de Vise
December 13, 2011

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/college-inc/post/study-two-fifths-of-high-school-graduates-are-unprepared/2011/12/12/gIQA_rZKnpO_blog.html

Two-fifths of high school students graduate prepared neither for traditional college nor for career training, according to a study from researchers at Johns Hopkins University and the University of Arizona.

College-preparatory programming has expanded dramatically in the past decade, with participation in [Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate](#) more than tripling. Career-preparatory programs have evolved, as well, and school-to-work “pathways” have replaced tired old vocational programs.

But they are not enough. One-third of high school students complete the modern college-preparatory track, and another one-quarter graduate from career-preparatory programs. The remaining high school population, an estimated 40 percent, do neither.

They are “a virtual underclass of students,” the researchers write, who finish high school with a transcript filled with watered-down general education courses and few prospects for success either in traditional college or in professional training.

The study is titled “[The Underserved Third: How Our Educational Structures Populate an Educational Underclass](#),” and it was written by Regina Deil-Amen at the Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Arizona, and Stefanie DeLuca, a sociologist at Hopkins. It actually published last year in the *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, but the findings were released to the general public Monday.

Many contemporary jobs require less than a bachelor’s degree; indeed, workers in high-demand fields can [earn more money without a bachelor’s degree](#) than counterparts in low-paying fields who have a degree.

But the structure of American high schools is trapped, the authors write, in a culture that “blindly advocate(s) bachelor’s degrees as the only valuable option and the cure for all social ills.”

“Tracking” is a dirty word in public education. Yet, high schools have tracked students since time immemorial, and tracking endures to this day. The approximately one-third of all high school students who participate in credible AP or IB study make up the gifted, college-preparatory track. Another group, about one-quarter of the student population, is steered instead into career preparatory study and occupies a lower track, although no career programs are ever advertized in quite that way.

One group is explicitly prepared for college, the other for the labor market. One population progresses to four-year colleges; the other enrolls in short-duration career training programs at community colleges or career colleges or simply enters the workforce. Both groups are well-served by their education.

And the underclass? That would be the group that dwells below the level of AP and IB study, in lightweight, second-tier courses that might be called “honors” or AP but lack rigor. If you have a child taking AP courses at a high school where few students ever pass AP tests, then your kid is probably a member of the underclass.

The solution, the authors write, is to abolish tracking altogether and to reimagine high school as a tool to prepare all students for both college *and* careers.

The ideal high school curriculum, they argue, would incorporate the best aspects of both tracks: academic rigor and cutting-edge career preparation. Students might choose one of several academic “pathways” that “include both academically rigorous, college-preparatory requirements and challenging professional and technical knowledge grounded in industry standards,” they write.

Educators around the Washington region would probably say they already do this: many urban/suburban high schools steer students into various career-oriented pathways that also (in theory) immerse students in rigorous college-preparatory academics. They are often called “academies” or “learning communities”.

But as students and parents well know, some of these programs are rigorous, and some are not. Ambitious, college-bound students typically steer clear of any program that sounds the least bit “vocational,” fully expecting that it will lack college-preparatory rigor. And more often than not, this study concludes, they are right.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

STATE NEWS

Florida high school graduation rate is highest ever

Orlando Sentinel

By: Leslie Postal

December 12, 2011

<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/features/education/os-florida-high-school-graduation-rate-20111212.0.3835397.story>

Florida’s high school graduation rate climbed again and hit another all-time high this year at 80.1 percent, the state announced this morning. In 2007, the state’s graduation rate was 70.3 percent.

The improved graduation rate for the 2010-11 school year follows a six-year trend of a growing percentage of Florida students earning diplomas, the Florida Department of Education said.

The news will be welcomed by Florida's high school administrators and teachers, whose schools are graded in part by graduation rates. High school A-to-F grades are expected later this month.

Florida's graduation rate was 79 percent last year.

In Central Florida, the graduation rate climbed in Lake and Orange counties and fell in Osceola, Seminole and Volusia counties. Seminole's graduation rate of 93.3 percent was down half a percentage point, but still well above the state average and among the highest in Florida.

Fifteen Orange high schools – up from five last year – posted graduation rates of 90 percent or better. The district's goal is to have a system wide rate of 90 percent. It is now 80 percent.

"We are well on our way," said Vickie Cartwright, the senior administrator for accountability. "That is very good news for us."

Hispanic students, who nationally often have the lowest graduation rate of any racial or ethnic group, have made some of the biggest gains in Florida, the state said.

Hispanic students' graduation rate hit 77.3 percent this year, up two percentage points from last year and 13 percentage points from four years ago, the department noted.

The graduation rate for black students was 68.4 percent, the same as last year, but up more than 11 percentage points from four years ago.

One of Florida's education goals is to improve the graduation rates among those two groups, both of whom historically lagged behind their white classmates. The white graduation rate this year was 86.8 percent, up 1.4 percentage points from last year.

The Central Florida schools with the top graduation rates were Legacy High Charter School in Orange (100 percent), Crooms Academy of Information Technology in Seminole (99.3 percent) and the Osceola County School for the Arts (98.2 percent).

Lake Nona High in Orange had the highest rate among traditional high schools, graduating 97.3 percent of its students.

Education Commissioner Gerard Robinson called graduation "one critical step toward the path to college and career" in a prepared statement that praised the improved rate, especially given the "challenging budget year" the state faced.

"I want to commend Florida's teachers, students, parents and school leaders for their dedication to helping their students learn and earn their high school diplomas," Robinson said.

Florida's graduation rate calculates the percentage of students who finish high school four years after they enroll. It includes students who earn regular and "special" diplomas, which are those awarded to students with disabilities in the state's "exceptional education" program. It does not include students who earn GEDs.

The state's method of figuring its graduation rate — one created by the National Governors Association — deletes from the calculations students who leave to attend adult education programs.

The federal government has proposed a measure of calculating graduation rates that would count those students as "non graduates" and would also not count as graduates recipients of "special" diplomas.

So under the proposed federal plan, which could kick in next year, Florida's high school graduation rate would look much worse.

Even if the federal plan, which is still under discussion, doesn't come to be, Florida's graduation rate could still drop in coming years, even under the current method of calculation.

The state likely will increase the passing scoring students need on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test to earn a diploma, a change that would kick in for the Class of 2014. And it has already upped its graduation course requirements, demanding that students take more math and science classes and pass end-of-course exams in those subjects.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Louisiana: National school chief search urged

The Advocate

By: Will Sentell

December 13, 2011

<http://theadvocate.com/home/1550150-125/national-school-chief-search-urged.html>

Leaders of a coalition of teacher unions and others who oppose Gov. Bobby Jindal's choice to be Louisiana's next state superintendent of education said Monday they want a nationwide search to fill the job.

"To choose not to invest in a thorough selection process will surely shortchange the state's education system for decades to come," said Jack Loup, chairman of The Coalition for Louisiana Public Education, in an "open letter" to members of the state

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education.

BESE President Penny Dastugue said Monday that no nationwide search is planned.

Jindal backs state Recovery School District Superintendent John White for the job.

The governor got heavily involved in this year's races for BESE after he was unable to get enough votes for White earlier this year.

The 11-member board now includes nine or 10 members generally aligned with Jindal and who are likely to back White when BESE decides the issue in January.

At least eight votes are needed to hire a superintendent.

The superintendent recommends and carries out policies that affect about 668,000 public school students statewide.

Loup's group, which also includes local school board members and superintendents, suffered several losses among candidates that it backed for BESE.

In his letter, Loup urged the state board to offer a formal, nationally advertised application process, including criteria for the job, an open evaluation of all the candidates and a public interview process.

In a reference to White, the letter says it would be a mistake to focus on one candidate who is a "recent arrival to our state without formal, professional education credentials, and without certified teaching experience," and that doing so would ignore top-flight candidates "well versed in our state's history and needs."

Loup also is president of the St. Tammany Parish School Board.

In a telephone interview, Dastugue noted that the state has had an acting superintendent since May.

"We don't have the funds or the time to do a nationwide search," she said. "And we have a lot of heavy work that needs to be done immediately, so I don't see that happening," Dastugue said of the request by Loup's group.

She also said the state did an extensive search when White was hired as RSD superintendent.

White, 35, became RSD superintendent on May 1. Before that he was deputy chancellor for the New York City school system.

He was also executive director of Teach for America in Chicago for three years and taught high school English in Newark and Chicago.

The RSD oversees troubled public schools in New Orleans, Baton Rouge and elsewhere.

Ollie Tyler is serving as acting state superintendent of education.

Tyler announced last week that she will leave the state Department of Education at the end of January.

She assumed the job when former Superintendent Paul Pastorek quit in May to take a private job in the Washington, D. C., area.

Dastugue said BESE members will be sworn in on Jan. 9 and the board will meet soon after to deal with the superintendent issue.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Rhode Island education officials to discuss Race to the Top

Associated Press

By: Staff

December 13, 2011

http://www.boston.com/news/local/rhode_island/articles/2011/12/13/ri_education_officials_to_discuss_race_to_the_top/

WARWICK, R.I.—Rhode Island officials are planning to give an update on the state's participation in the federal Race to the Top education funding program.

The meeting with Education Commissioner Deborah Gist is set for Tuesday afternoon. Her office says those invited include all superintendents, school committee leaders, teachers' union presidents and charter school representatives.

Gist's office says the meeting will also cover the state's intention to ask the federal government for relief from some provisions of No Child Left Behind. Organizers also say a presentation will be delivered on the statewide implementation of educator evaluations.

The federal government awarded Rhode Island \$75 million in education funds in 2010 under the Race to the Top program.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Utah educators pleased with gov's education recommendations

Salt Lake Tribune

By: Lisa Schencker

December 12, 2011

<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/53100691-78/million-recommendations-utah-education.html.csp>

Teachers could get raises, schools could get more money for new students and students could find themselves taking new types of tests if Gov. Gary Herbert gets his way.

Herbert unveiled his budget recommendations Monday, saying he'd like to see lawmakers spend an additional \$111 million on public schools next school year. That would amount to more than one-fourth of the projected \$400 million in additional revenue the state is expecting.

In all, he's recommending \$3.6 billion for schools next year, a figure equal to about 28 percent of the total state budget.

"We are a state that does believe in public education," Herbert said Monday at Bountiful High, where he spoke with reporters and students. "We have our own unique challenges with larger families, but we spend a lot of the money we generate here and put it back into public education."

State Superintendent Larry Shumway said Monday his office was still analyzing the details of the proposal, but education leaders are generally pleased.

"This will represent a turn of the corner in Utah public education from the last several years of decreasing resources to getting us back on the track of creating opportunities for districts to improve the quality of their services," Shumway said.

Not everyone, however, is happy with the recommendations, with the Utah Democratic party calling it "a slap in the face" partly because it doesn't recommend enough of an increase to education. Utah has the lowest base per pupil spending in the nation.

"This is a tired, uninspired Republican half-commitment to the children of Utah," said Utah Democratic Party Chairman Jim Dabakis, in a statement. Herbert, however, noted that many of his proposals are aimed at making progress toward the state's goal of having 66 percent of adults with postsecondary degrees or certificates by 2020. It's necessary that many adults get postsecondary education to keep Utah's economy strong, he said.

Herbert specifically wants to see lawmakers spend \$41 million to pay for nearly 12,500 new students expected in Utah schools next year. In recent years, annual enrollment growth has not always been fully funded, leaving schools to fill in the gaps by making cuts, raising class sizes, increasing taxes or dipping into reserves.

Herbert is also recommending giving teachers raises by increasing base per pupil spending, known as the weighted pupil unit (WPU), by 1 percent or about \$21.5 million, though that money would ultimately go to school districts, which would make the final decision and use that money for a number of costs.

He also wants to see \$10 million go toward continuing optional extended-day kindergarten and using technology to help young children. He wants to see lawmakers spend \$12 million to implement computer-adaptive testing for students, which are tests that change in difficulty as students take them, helping teachers to better pinpoint students strengths and weaknesses. And he wants \$2.2 million put toward giving more college readiness tests, such as the ACT; \$2 million toward helping charter schools with start-up costs, replacing federal money Utah no longer receives; and \$10 million toward classroom supplies.

Their recommendations that largely line up with the wishes of a group of Utah business leaders, who made their own pitch for improving school funding Thursday, said Mark Bouchard, chair of the group's Prosperity 2020 education initiative.

The recommendations are also in line with most of what the state school board is requesting — minus a couple items. Schools, for example, lost about \$8 million for programs for at-risk kids to budget cuts last year, and the governor's recommendations don't include restoring that money. The recommendations also don't include restoring \$5 million to a program that helped school districts pay to send students to Utah College of Applied Technology campuses during the day.

But on the whole, educators seem pleased with the recommendations.

Utah Education Association president Sharon Gallagher-Fishbaugh said Monday she was encouraged to see recommendations to increase the WPU and fund early intervention programs such as optional extended-day kindergarten.

"We see this budget as a positive sign," Gallagher-Fishbaugh said.

Bountiful High financial literacy and psychology teacher Jaclyn Stegen, who attended Herbert's presentation Monday, said it would be nice for teachers to get more pay, and she also hopes to see computer-adaptive tests and other technology for students implemented.

"I like the sound of it," Stegen said of Herbert's overall recommendations. "Anytime you hear somebody say something about more money for education, I'm all about that."

[\(Back to top\)](#)