

## Equity

Dr. Pasi Sahlberg, a respected Finnish educator and visiting Harvard professor, said you can't lift educational policies from one country and apply them to another, because education is grounded in the cultural attitudes of a nation. In Finland, they value equity above all else. In Philadelphia those in control value competition and market-based "choices." It is a portfolio, "dump the losers" mentality. It is wrong, and we must change course.

The Finnish parliament decided to fundamentally change their education policy in the early 1960s, shifting to a system where ALL children had the same educational opportunities and sufficient resources to develop their unique talents. The Finns chose EQUITY, and that choice allowed them to transition from an agrarian-based economy to a high-tech economy in one generation. I encourage you to read Dr. Sahlberg's book *Finnish Lessons*. Here are some highlights:

- In Finland, teachers have an average 15-20 years of experience. Today in the United States, most students have teachers with a mere 1-2 years of experience.
- Finland's educational policies encourage collaboration. When schools apply for grants, a key factor in winning support for a project is how it supports partnerships and strengthens the community overall. Here, policies encourage intense competition at all levels. It is unhealthy for everyone. One Florida elementary school was recently called out for administering doses of Mountain Dew to students to boost their standardized test scores. We are doing this to CHILDREN, and to what end?
- Finns don't give students grades with numbers or letters before the fifth grade. Yet we've made standardized test scores for children as young as kindergarten the ultimate measure of student success. We use these scores to justify firing teachers and closing schools. We have given testing way to much power, and that power is being abused.
- Finnish children don't attend school until the age of seven and their education emphasizes play. Here we starve children of social interactions and limit recess. We push worksheets and test prep rather than offering them engaging experiences like field trips and extracurricular activities.

According to Sahlberg, the United States already has everything it takes to build a stellar system of education. No more "innovation" is needed. We must reduce class sizes. Bring back nurses, counselors, librarians, literacy coaches, and social workers. Make time for recess and socializing. Embrace art, music, drama, and sports.

Our kids are creative, unique individuals who should not be afraid to risk failure in making progress. They should not be "standardized." High-stakes tests are undermining kids' confidence to try new things and the ability to access a REAL education. Finnish children are getting what they need. Ours are not, and so parents must refuse these tests. We have a right and indeed an obligation to do this. That is why our family will refuse PSSA testing and all field-testing next year. I hope many more families will join us.