



Reflections on the 2012 International Summit on the Teaching Profession

Ministers, union leaders and teacher leaders from 23 of the 25 highest-performing and most rapidly improving education systems on PISA accepted an invitation from U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan, the OECD and Education International to discuss how to prepare teachers and develop school leaders for the 21st century. It was an unprecedented turnout of those in education who can make change happen. They met because they realize the urgency of raising the status of the education profession, because they know that governments and the profession are in this together, and no doubt also because they were convened by an education secretary who has demonstrated that bold reform can be successfully implemented even in the most challenging times.

It was striking to see how much education – traditionally inward-looking, siloed and at times provincial – has become internationalized, with success no longer measured by national standards alone but by what the best-performing education systems show can be achieved. Secretary Duncan may have surprised delegates when he explained how much of his reform agenda builds on the experience of the most successful educational systems and the outcomes from last year's Summit. But no less so did Zhang Minxuan, mastermind of Shanghai's school reform that helped to propel the province to the top of rankings on the most recent PISA assessment, when he recounted how he and his colleagues had toured the world in the 1990s to find out how countries as different as the United States and Switzerland were successfully addressing the policy challenges his province had faced at that time. The idea was not to copy what they were doing, but to learn from them and put together a design for Shanghai that would be superior to anything that they had seen anywhere. Though one can always question whether policies that are successful in one place will succeed in another – and surely no country can simply adopt another nation's system or policies – comparative data and analysis seem to rapidly expand the scope for learning from the successes and failures of education policies and practices around the world.

Where important things are happening in schools, there are people that make these things happen. A consistent thread throughout discussions at the Summit was the central role of leadership in high-performing education systems. This was all about supporting, evaluating and developing teacher quality; about vision for results, equity and accountability and a culture of commitment rather than compliance; and about aligning pedagogical goals with strategic resource management.

I also took away from the discussions how important it is to have a system-wide perspective and connect school leaders so that their work is coherently aligned with the larger goals of the systems. Ministers and union leaders stressed the need to distribute leadership effectively so that school leaders can take on this larger system-level role. As the Swedish Minister Jan Björklund put it, if there are too few people involved in leadership, things will simply not change because there are so few people promoting change and so many against it. Or, in the words of the Slovenian Minister Žiga Turk, in the age of Twitter, your effectiveness as a leader depends much less on your administrative powers than on your capacity to attract followers. But it became equally clear that there can be competing demands between leadership and leaders, between structures and coherence, on the one hand, and visionary and entrepreneurial individuals, on the other – and between the need to pinpoint responsibilities in schools and avoid autocratic school leadership that undermines the profession and precludes the development of 21st-century teaching skills.

While everyone seemed to agree on what leadership in the 21st century needs to look like, there was much debate about how best to develop effective leaders. Some countries explained that they put the premium on professionalized recruitment, seeking to attract high-quality candidates and carefully selecting candidates with strong instructional



knowledge, a track record of improved learning outcomes, and leadership potential. Others underlined the central role of high-quality training, careful induction and ongoing development and appraisal in order to enable school leaders to set a strategic direction for their schools, remain responsive to local needs, enhance their role in teachers' professional development, and promote teamwork among teachers.

The success in leveraging the knowledge and skills of talented leaders for system-wide improvement and developing effective leaders at scale, as reported by high-performing countries as different as Canada, Finland or Singapore, seemed truly remarkable. These countries do not wait until teachers have reached the level of seniority to apply for leadership positions; they assess young teachers continuously for their leadership potential and give them ample opportunity to develop their leadership capacity. They put far-sighted succession planning in place and show that leaders are not just born but can be developed and supported. It was widely agreed that success will depend on school leaders defining and assuming their professional responsibilities or, as the Dutch Minister Marja van Bijsterveldt put it, governments will need to listen to the voices of principals and teachers to articulate what the standards of their professional practice should be.

The Summit then turned to how to prepare and enable teachers to deliver the skills that students will need to succeed in the 21st century. Everyone realizes that the skills that are easiest to teach and easiest to test are now also the skills that are easiest to automate, digitize and outsource. Of ever-growing importance, but so much harder to develop, are ways of thinking – creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, decision-making and learning; ways of working – including communication and collaboration; and tools for working – including information and communications technologies. The Nordic countries, in particular, also highlighted the importance of skills as they relate to citizenship, life and career, and to personal and social responsibility.

That led Ministers and union leaders to debate the kind of learning environments that would be conducive to the development of such skills. It became clear that 21st-century learning environments must make learning central and encourage student engagement, ensure that learning is social and collaborative, be relevant and highly attuned to students' motivations, be acutely sensitive to individual differences and provide formative feedback, promote connections across activities and subjects, both in and out of school, and perhaps most important, be demanding of all students without overloading them. Hong Kong brought up the interesting question of where the spiral of equipping students for the 21st century, preparing teachers to teach those students, and creating the teacher training institutions that can develop those teachers ends. Nobody was able to provide an answer, but the list of demands participants placed on teachers in the 21st century seemed very long. They need to be well-versed in the subjects they teach, and that includes both content-specific strategies and teaching methods. They need a deep understanding of how learning occurs and mastery of a broad range of learning strategies. They need to work in highly collaborative ways with other teachers and professionals in networks of professional communities. They need to reflect on their practices in order to learn from their experience. And they need to master the skills in technology required both to optimize the use of digital resources in their teaching and to use information-management systems to track student learning.

While countries such as Singapore and Finland were acknowledged as being somewhat further advanced than others in the pursuit of these goals, every country seems to struggle with the widening gap between what modern societies demand and what today's school systems deliver. One thing became clear, however: many education systems are giving teachers mixed messages about the skills they know are needed, on the one hand, and what they make visible and thus value in the form of examinations and assessments, on the other. Unions brought this up and underlined the urgency for examinations and assessments to re-appraise trade-offs between validity gains and efficiency gains. Governments will need to deliver on this if they are serious about walking the walk when it comes to 21st-century skills.

Ministers and union leaders struggled equally hard with the third theme of the Summit: how to improve the match between teacher demand and supply. Even if some ministers stated that they had plenty of teachers, virtually all seemed to have difficulties in attracting the most talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms to ensure that every student benefits from high-quality teaching. In a number of countries, the challenge is compounded by aging teacher populations, frequently leading to an overload of instruction and administrative work for teachers and, at the system level, to lowered requirements for entry into the profession and teaching other subjects. In some countries, there was talk of a downward spiral – from lowered standards for entry, to lowered confidence in the profession, resulting in more prescriptive teaching and less personalization – that risked driving the most talented teachers out of the profession, thus further aggravating the mismatch between teacher supply and demand.



Not surprisingly, this was also the area where governments and unions seemed widest apart. Union leaders were right in emphasizing that, in many countries, teacher pay is not up to the pay in other professions requiring similar qualifications. As the Finnish union leader put it, if you pay peanuts you will get monkeys. But this discussion overlooked that many of the countries that are paying their teachers well are simply making more effective spending choices between teacher pay and professional development, on the one hand, and instruction time and class sizes, on the other. These countries often end up spending far less overall than countries that have tied up much of their spending in smaller class sizes, which unions also continue to push for. It has been easy to achieve more with more resources, but in these times of economic difficulties, governments and unions will need to take a hard look at how to achieve more with less.

Ministers and union leaders agreed, however, that making teaching a well-respected profession and a more attractive career choice, both intellectually and financially, investing in teacher development, and creating competitive employment conditions were all essential for achieving a better balance between teacher supply and demand. It was striking to see how high-performing education systems have generally transformed the work organization in their schools by replacing administrative forms of management with norms that provide the status, pay, autonomy and accountability, and the high-quality training, responsibility and collaborative work that are integral to all professions. These countries also tend to provide effective systems of social dialogue, and appealing forms of employment that balance flexibility with job security, and grant sufficient authority for schools to manage and deploy their human resources. Not least, they complement policies and practices to expand the pool of talented teachers with targeted responses to particular types of teacher shortages that offer incentives for teachers to work in tougher conditions.

Delegates also pointed out that matching teacher supply and demand relies on an environment that facilitates success and that encourages effective teachers to continue in teaching. Teacher leaders, in particular, emphasized that they place a premium on self-efficacy in an instructional environment where they are, on genuine career prospects, on the quality of their relations with students and colleagues, on feeling supported by their school leaders, and on adequate working conditions.

Last but not least, it became clear that education needs to become a social project. Partnerships and coalitions are necessary for strengthening and building the profession. Such coalitions demand trust and respect, and require all actors to move beyond their comfort zone. As several speakers noted, seeking short-term political gains by shaming teachers will not strengthen the profession but tear it apart.

As complex as the challenges are, and as much as one could be tempted to dwell on their complexity and despair, it was encouraging to see how ministers and union leaders took away important lessons for their own country in the concluding session of the Summit:

Belgium intends to conclude a pact with providers of education and trade unions on the teaching career.

China seeks to vigorously improve the pre-service education for teachers and expand early childhood education for all children. Denmark wants to make elevating the status of the teaching profession a top national priority and underlines that educational pathways from age 0 to 18 need to strike a careful balance between social and subject-matter skills.

Estonia aspires to a comprehensive reform of pre-service, in-service and co-operative professional development, following the model of the most advanced education systems.

Finland seeks to develop new collaborative models for school development and teacher-education development, a better alignment between curricular goals and educational assessment, and improved pedagogical use of social media.

Germany will bring its ministers and union leaders together to advance the dialogue among the social partners beyond rhetoric.

Hungary seeks to better align and reinforce the context, process, feedback and relationships among key players, aiming for genuine collaboration among stakeholders.

Japan will advance its holistic reform of preparation, recruitment and professional development.

Korea wants to strengthen collaboration between school leadership and local communities.



The Netherlands will introduce peer reviews for school leaders and teachers as the primary instrument for quality assurance.

New Zealand will further develop a systemic approach to making successful practice common practice.

Norway intends to work on career paths for teachers that can be combined with distributed and collaborative leadership, and focus on how to implement national reforms in the classroom.

Poland will place the premium on preparing teachers for 21st-century skills.

Singapore seeks to advance its whole-system approach to education reform to achieve impact and sustainability.

Sweden wants to do more to attract top students into the teaching profession and to create incentives to reward high-performing teachers throughout their careers.

Switzerland will seek new ways to create careers for teachers and integrate other professionals into teaching.

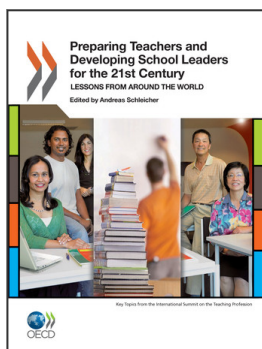
The United Kingdom seeks to promote an atmosphere that promotes trust in and respect for teachers.

The United States seeks to build a coherent and systemic process for engaging all actors in comprehensive, large-scale change, challenging every assumption, big or small.

Of course, none of these pronouncements implies a formal commitment on the part of governments or unions, but they underline the intention of ministers and union leaders to move the education agenda forward. The 2013 Summit will show how fast these visions turn into reality.

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