I recently had an opportunity to meet and talk with Pasi Sahlberg, Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation at the Finnish Ministry of Education and author of Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland (New York: Teachers College Press, 2010). Finland outperforms other countries on international assessments of mathematics, science and reading, and educational leaders around the world are turning to Finland for insights about how to improve education in their own countries. According to Sahlberg, Finland got its vision from the U.S., but it is taking a very different path to get there.

Since the 1970s, Finland has steadfastly pursued an empowering and inspiring dream—to provide good schools for all children regardless of where they live or what their parents do. American philosopher John Dewey expressed this ideal best when he wrote: “What the best and wisest parent wants for his child, that must we want for all the children of the community. Anything less is unlovely, and left unchecked, destroys our democracy.” Over the last forty years, Finland has developed a strong, comprehensive public school system with academic and vocational options at the secondary level followed by higher education in universities and polytechnics. Fair school funding, health care and pre-schools are part of the package and teacher education is a central lever of quality.

While the U.S. may aspire to “leave no child behind,” we have pursued this goal through a set of policies and practices that are completely opposite to those of Finland. Stahlberg uses the acronym GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement) to capture the approach to education reform that the U.S. and England have pioneered and spread to other nations in recent years. This “infection” is based on (a) competition; (b) standardization; (c) privatization; and (d) test-based accountability. In contrast, Finland’s approach depends on
(a) collaboration; (b) customization; (c) equity; and (d) trust.

Teachers and teacher education are accorded very high status. According to Stahlberg, in Finland it is harder to become a teacher than a doctor. 8,500 applicants compete each year for 750 places in teacher education programs. Run by universities and funded by the government, these five-year BA-MA programs offer advanced academic and professional study and extensive clinical training. How far this is from the fast-track, minimalist training programs so popular here and abroad!

Teachers in Finland earn decent salaries and evaluations are rare. They are drawn to teaching because it serves a compelling social mission and offers considerable autonomy and support. Having created an attractive, respected and well-trained profession, Finland trusts its teachers to act as professionals. They take collective responsibility for curriculum and assessment.

Two themes stand out to me in Finland’s educational success story: the unwavering focus on the moral purposes of schooling and the serious investment in teachers. Young people are a key national resource and Finnish society is committed to them. Developing this resource depends on providing a strong and equitable educational system where all students can discover their talents, pursue their interests, and prepare themselves for a meaningful and responsible future. Moreover, achieving this outcome requires a corps of well trained, socially committed teachers working together in a climate of trust and responsibility.