

improves school-time learning as much as the quality of teachers.³ The national education systems that are rated near the top vary in many ways. But high-performing countries like Finland, South Korea, and Singapore are all also at the top in their investments in teacher professional development, teacher salaries, and teacher recognition.⁴

In contrast, those nations that have turned to school choice initiatives in recent years have far more mixed records. In New Zealand, which adopted a countrywide school choice initiative in 1989, student achievement has not improved, while the segregation of Maori from European-descended students has increased.⁵ In Sweden, the adoption of a nationwide voucher program in 1992 has been followed by students declining from still well above average in their Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores in 2000, to below average in math, reading, and science by 2012.⁶

It is also worth noting that, as American elementary and secondary school performance has declined in comparative perspective and its higher education sector has also become increasingly embattled, the United States' longstanding advantage over other OECD countries in the percentage of its 25-34 year-old residents with college educations has diminished sharply, falling from a 17% edge in 2000 to a 4% advantage in 2016.⁷ Although America's higher education system remains the world's finest, it cannot prosper if the nation's K-12 schools are not performing well.

This contemporary context makes the Teachers Institute approach to improving teacher quality more essential for America today than ever before, and especially for its most high-need students. Initiated at Yale, which has had a successful Institute

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since 1978, the Teachers Institute approach of blending teachers from different grade levels in small, intensive, collaborative, long-duration seminars devoted to development of rich content knowledge and improved communication skills has all the features that educational research shows to be crucial for teacher professional development. These include:

- a focus on content, and on pedagogy linked to content;
- active teacher learning;
- teacher leadership;
- extended duration;

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- collective participation by teachers from the same school, grade, or subject;
- alignment with state and local standards; and
- ongoing evaluation.⁸

It is important to note that in the latter regard, each Teachers Institute always has its program evaluated every year by all its participants. In multiple cities over several decades, teachers have consistently rated their Institute experiences as especially valuable in terms of the factors that educational researchers find to be the most important ingredients of teacher quality:

- teachers who really know their subjects;
- teachers with good basic writing, math, and oral presentation skills;

- teachers with high expectations of their students;
- teachers who are enthusiastic about teaching; and
- teachers who can motivate all students to learn.

Participation in Teachers Institute seminars has also been shown to be associated with higher retention rates for teachers in their jobs, a hallmark of outstanding educational systems like Finland's.⁹ And as described by Ellen Kisker elsewhere in this issue of *On Common Ground*, the Yale National Initiative of the League of Teachers Institutes is developing new means for more comprehensive evaluations of Teachers Institutes, including assessments of the curriculum units teachers write in Institute seminars, and systems for tracking and analyzing their uses and their impacts in classrooms.

But skeptics may reasonably ask: if the Teachers Institute approach has been around for roughly forty years, during the same era in which the performances of America's K-12 public schools, and American confidence in their schools, have declined along many dimensions, how can it be a significant part of the solution to the nation's education problems today? Shouldn't we look, as American often do, for some radical quick-fix to cure our woes—like, perhaps, dramatically privatizing education further?

The sobering yet compelling answer is that the quest for a quick-fix is in fact a main reason why the Teachers Institute approach and related educational initiatives have had real but limited positive impacts on the nation's educational challenges thus far. Strengthening teaching to strengthen learning, and thereby strengthen the nation, is an endeavor that, as international experience demonstrates, requires significant investment in programs that are both broad and deep over extended periods of time. Impatient for rapid progress, Americans have been reluctant to make those investments, and

have become only more so as a variety of quick-fixes (small high schools, mandatory yearly improvements in standardized test scores, and yes, voucher programs) have failed. In every city where Teachers Institutes have been established, all participants have regularly testified to their positive contributions. Yet Institutes remain too few and too limited in size to realize their full potential, both within large cities like my own Philadelphia, and in America as a whole.

What this means is that for American education, Teachers Institutes are a bit like Dorothy's slippers: they are an answer to our problems we have had all along, while failing to recognize their potential. Today, as leaders of higher education institutions realize that they must make more substantial and visible contributions to American education as a whole if they are to regain much of the support from funders and parents that they have lost, and as more Americans are discovering that there is no educational Wizard of Oz that can fix all our problems with the wave of a magic wand, it may be possible to begin to do what we should have done decades ago. The United States needs to invest in its teachers, just like the most successful school systems in the world; and it must do so in many ways. One of the most promising ways is for institutions of higher education and public school districts to invest in the creation and enlargement of Teachers Institutes in every part of the country that has high-need schools and students at risk—bringing the proven benefits of this great program for improving teacher quality to many more states, cities and towns, and to a far greater percentage of the nation's teachers and students. Making those investments now not only has a better chance than any other route of reform to make America's K-12 education systems "great again." It has a better chance than any other path to make America's schools what they really should be: *better*—and better for more students of

all backgrounds—than they have ever been before.

Notes

1. See e.g. Drew DeSilver, "U.S. students' academic achievement still lags that of their peers in many other countries," Pew Research Center, February 15, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/02/15/u-s-students-internationally-math-science/>.
2. *The Hechinger Report*, "U.S. Spends Less as Other Nations Invest More in Education," *U.S. News*, September 18, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2017-09-18/while-rest-of-the-world-invests-more-in-education-the-us-spends-less>.
3. Jenny Anderson, "America is slowly sucking the life out of education—starting with its teachers," *Quartz*, September 12, 2017, <https://qz.com/1074113/oecd-2017-report-america-is-slowly-sucking-the-life-out-of-education-starting-with-its-teachers/>.
4. *Ibid.*, and see also Katie Pisa, "Who are the world's most valued teachers," *CNN*, October 5, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/04/health/teacher-pay-and-status/index.html>.
5. Sarah Butrymowicz, "What would actually happen if we gave all parents the chance to pick their children's schools? New Zealand's history of school choice offers some lessons," *The Hechinger Report*, February 20, 2018, <http://hechingerreport.org/actually-happen-gave-parents-chance-pick-childrens-schools/>.
6. Sarah Butrymowicz, "Betsy DeVos' school choice ideas are a reality in Sweden, where student performance has suffered," *The Hechinger Report*, February 28, 2018, <http://hechingerreport.org/betsy-devos-school-choice-ideas-reality-sweden-student-performance-suffered/>.
7. Jenny Anderson, "America is slowly sucking the life out of education", *op. cit.*
8. For a review of the pertinent educational literature, see Rogers M. Smith, "To Strengthen Teaching: An Evaluation of Teachers Institute Experiences," March 2009, http://teachers.yale.edu/pdfs/An_Evaluation_of_Teachers_Institute_Experiences.pdf.
9. *Ibid.*; Katie Pisa, "Who are the world's most valued teachers," *op. cit.*