



# Learning from education systems around the world: Q&A with Anthony Mackay

BY SUZANNE BOUFFARD

**A**nthony Mackay is a leading voice in global education policy, research, and development who has advised organizations, governments, and school systems on nearly every continent. *The Learning Professional* recently spoke with

him about how countries can learn from one another to improve professional learning, the educator workforce, and outcomes for students.

Mackay is co-chair of the board of trustees at the National Center on Education and the Economy, where

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he formerly served as president and CEO. He is also an expert advisor to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE), and several other international education organizations. He moderates the annual International Summit on the Teaching Profession and the Global Education Industry Summit and facilitates key debates at the events of the World Innovation Summit on Education (WISE). He was also a member of the Standards Advisory Council that helped develop Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning.

**Q: Why is it important for countries to collaborate on improving education?**

Learning from each other is hugely valuable — and underleveraged. We are, and have always been, interdependent, though perhaps that is even more the case now than it has been in the past. We are in the learning business together, as humans, and particularly humans in an AI world. We have some very tough challenges,

but also huge opportunities to become more human rather than less. People understand that, at a time when a sustainable future is in balance, it is crucial to have a perspective that is international, global, and planetary.

There is an orientation toward learning across international boundaries that has always existed among multiple sectors and industries. We have learned a lot from environmental challenges. Climate change is an area where, without international collaboration, there would have been no chance of making the progress we are now making. I know that we need to make it faster, but international collaboration is key to further progress.

We are learning that if we work together across jurisdictions — everyone, from politicians to professionals to citizens to young people — we will have a stronger social license to do the work. Often, you will find that government ministers get involved in international endeavors to not only to learn from each other, but to send a message to their own constituencies that this is the direction of travel we need to take.

This kind of international

collaboration has been perhaps less prevalent in education because the nature of the enterprise is so connected to place, to geography, to nationhood. There's a natural disposition to think about your learning system in these local terms. Yet I think educators are increasingly appreciating how others are tackling the work, particularly because we are increasingly recognizing our shared purpose. Most countries are now looking at how learning can seriously contribute to human thriving, to human flourishing.

**Q: What does that increasing global collaboration in education look like?**

International exchange is not only alive and well, but there is an appreciation that without it, we are not going to be able to advance the cause in any one country.

For example, the International Summit on the Teaching Profession is an annual convening that began in the U.S. 15 years ago. The then-U.S. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, came back from an OECD gathering and envisioned an interactive, debate-

oriented international convening, where ministers of education could come together with teacher union leaders for two to three days and tackle a whole range of issues around teacher policy. It has always been fascinating to see how much we can learn from each other.

We have over 20 high-performing countries (as measured by the international PISA assessment) who commit to shared participation. Countries make a commitment to priorities for action to advance teacher policy at the end of each gathering. Teacher learning and leadership learning are at the heart of those policies and priorities. When we are together again a year later, country reports reveal the progress made across all of these jurisdictions.

There are many international gatherings, including the High Performing Systems for Tomorrow program of work — a joint endeavor by OECD and the National Center on Education and the Economy. We have eight countries represented by their education permanent secretaries, together with their directors of strategy, working together to look at how we might be able to redesign our learning systems to address today's challenges and transform learning.

The OECD Future of Education and Skills initiative has brought many countries together over a sustained period of time to think differently about how we should judge the performance of our education systems on a new set of metrics that are responsive to today's needs, including economic prosperity, social cohesion, and individual and collective well-being.

And of course, there was the 2022 UN Transforming Education Summit, a galvanizing moment in the advancement of international collaboration. All UN countries have been reporting each year on what progress they are making on that transformation agenda. That effort is alive and well, including in many states and districts in the U.S.

## **Q:** How can we learn from other countries and contexts that are very different from our own?

PISA (the Programme for International Student Assessment) allows us to make international comparisons of students' performance on a variety of assessments that address foundational learning, advanced learning, and applied learning for 15-year-olds across OECD participating countries and beyond.

Over time, PISA has measured not only literacy, mathematics, and science, but a range of other domains, including critical and creative thinking. We inevitably compare and contrast across countries, but this gives us a way to learn from each other with a heightened level of appreciation about how other countries are tackling the issues we are all grappling with. We are learning a lot about how our jurisdictions are addressing the areas of collaborative problem-solving, global competence, and the general competencies and capabilities that we think all young people should have.

Of course, top-performing education systems around the world look different from one another. And in different countries, the way in which you go about governance and decision-making varies significantly. Some are more top-down than others, and some build partnerships at the community level more than others. If you think about the Baltic and Nordic countries, there is a strong ethos of collaboration, of social compacts. The cooperative relationship between the teacher unions and government is a key feature.

In Singapore — this year's host of the International Summit on the Teaching Profession — the Ministry of Education, the National Institute for Education, which prepares all teachers and all leaders in one institution, the Academy of Singapore Teachers, which spearheads professional learning, and the Singapore Teachers' Union are all deeply knowledgeable about

the profession. As a result, you have a profession that is constantly working on the expertise that is required and leaders who are coordinating and collaborating on policy and practice, embedding these approaches in the system as a whole.

It is clear that culture, politics, and governance play a very significant role. Learning to adapt and adopt what is appropriate, in your context, to serve your desired outcomes, is the key.

## **Q:** What are some of the important professional learning conditions or elements that are common across high-performing countries?

One of the crucial aspects of the agenda around teacher policy is the need for a system perspective. The concept of the system looks different across jurisdictions with different models of government and governance. Some have a unitary government, whereas others have a federal system of states or provinces — the U.S., Canada, Australia, and Germany — each with their own distinguishing characteristics. But what is common is the need to design an end-to-end system. How do you recruit and retain professionals, how do you prepare and induct educators, how do you think about career progression and leadership development? Very early on, we recognized that those defining features of a high-performing system are essential.

Other lessons we have learned from different countries include striving for consensus building, strengthening the teaching profession, and strengthening the leadership of that profession. This involves everything from setting a national plan through to implementation at a local level. The key enabling structures, shared beliefs and values, and aligned practices are vital.

A common thread is the importance of being standards-based and evidence-informed. Standards embody the knowledge

base, supporting decision-making and collaboration necessary for a profession to be a profession. To use the language from Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, standards need to define rigorous content, transformational processes, and conditions for success. That is how we make sure we are clear about the nature of our professional endeavors and expectations. Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning are an outstanding illustration of what we want from a profession, advancing the quality of teaching and learning. This is something that is now shared across multiple jurisdictions with different histories and cultures and ways of organizing learning.

I was the inaugural chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. We achieved an agreement on a national set of standards for the teaching profession. We were looking across at the U.S. and the work of Learning Forward and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. We agreed on the domains of professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement to constitute Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. This is a powerful mechanism for leveraging a common agenda. Shared language about our work generates confidence in and commitment to consistent quality.

**Q: What do you think needs to change in the educator workforce and educator support to achieve excellence across the globe?**

We need to be open to rethinking learning and redesigning systems. We have sufficient understanding now around what deep learning looks like, informed by the learning sciences, and we know that we need to rethink pedagogical practices and rethink assessment. All of this needs to be of an order that motivates and drives deeper levels of learning for all young people. You can't achieve this unless

you invest in changing the work, the workplace, and the workforce.

For example, in many countries, teams of teachers work with large groups of students and others work on one-to-one tutoring. This requires a different way of thinking about your workforce and how you allocate time, along with the provision of supporting structures. In many schools, the model of one-teacher-one-classroom is changing, guided by learning needs. The practice of having 80% to 90% of your time devoted to face-to-face teaching can be contrasted with working in teams of teachers, where teachers' time includes planning, reviewing, and research, and teaching contact hours may be limited to 50% of time.

As another example, some systems prioritize having a differentiated workforce supported by allied professionals, so there is a range of roles and responsibilities. Some staff prioritize social and emotional issues, and others focus on cognitive development. All are conscious of both.

This kind of thinking is important for meeting students' evolving needs, and also educators'. Most countries are experiencing teacher shortages and asking: How can we attract more young people into this profession? We know they will not be attracted to a work environment that is not technology rich, and they won't necessarily be looking at an environment where they need to show up on site every day. We need to change the environment. Give educators the chance to do the work with each other in different ways, in different learning environments with more flexibility.

**Q: What does it take to achieve that kind of transformation?**

The reasons for the successes we have derive from standards and processes designed to support improvement. But we have to go

further and be more innovative, and our efforts have to be supported by evidence. Different jurisdictions have different ways of thinking about and using evidence. In England, for example, they have an Education Endowment Foundation, seriously committed to deep collaboration between schools and the research community. The Netherlands has an approach to research and evidence that is a partnership model based on action research by educators. It's the commitment to that collaboration that matters.

Transformation needs to happen not only in our systems and practices, but also in our values and beliefs. In many countries, the multicultural, multidimensional nature of our communities requires a commitment to values and beliefs that embrace diversity, equity, inclusion, and indigeneity. To tackle the huge problems that we are confronting, in terms of environment, poverty, and conflict, we need to build among all people attitudes and dispositions that are respectful and sustainable. That is why there has been so much debate about what it is that we are attempting to ensure all young people know and are able to do — to care for self, others, and the planet.

We should be optimistic. We are having this conversation among educators, community leaders, employers, and civil society. It is a conversation about the competencies of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, problem-solving, creativity, and imagination. We need to think this way, and think about it together, if we are going to be able to tackle problems for which we don't yet have solutions and anticipate a better future. Now is the time for step change requiring a global perspective and a strong sense of global responsibility.

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