

## 6. LETTER TO A NEW EDUCATION MINISTER<sup>11</sup>

# 6

July 2008

Dear Minister,

As a frequent visitor to your country and an admirer of its cultural richness, I was delighted to read of your recent appointment as minister of education. In your previous job, you often voiced your concerns about the state of your country's education system. I have also read your writings where you call into question old ways of thinking about education and are highly critical of how education policy has been put into practice in your country. In a recent interview you spoke passionately of your sense of frustration and even anger that past efforts to improve the education system for your country's young people have achieved so little. You also expressed your concern that international cooperation has not helped find lasting solutions to the most pressing problems in education.

With this letter, I feel compelled to do more than simply wish you a successful term of office. You are in a key position to make a difference. Friends of mine have warned me that there are more productive ways of spending my time than writing you this letter. It is wildly optimistic, they told me, to imagine that an education minister would take the risk of publicly acknowledging that there are major problems with the education system. Instead, they urged, I should seek out your advisors and let them know my thoughts.

Ministers, like many of us, are well-meaning individuals, but experience has shown that good intentions are not always enough. It is also clear that improving an education system is not just a question of money. If it were, surely the billions already spent would have stimulated measurable improvements by now. Money has rarely been the solution to

---

<sup>11</sup> I was inspired to write this fictitious letter by my old friend, Seymour Sarason, who wrote a collection of letters to a fictitious future president of the United States. I also owe him the story about the man who went to the doctor which was told to me on one of his visits to work with me in Helsinki. You can read these letters in his book *Letters to a Serious Education President*, Corwin Press, 1993. The idea of the policy epidemic is from another friend, Benjamin Levin, presented in *An epidemic of education policy: (what) can we learn from each other?* in *Comparative Education*, 34(2), 131-141. Any lack of clarity, errors and omissions in this chapter are entirely my responsibility.

the problems of education systems; ironically, it is often a part of the problem. So let us look at your time as education minister openly and courageously, while recognising past educational achievements.

In my time, I have met many people in your situation. As you will soon see for yourself, institutions, interest groups and individuals, among them your colleagues, students, teachers and parents, will all come to you with their suggestions about what you should do. Some will come bearing promises of political or financial support for your work, others will offer to help you fix those parts of the education system that work improperly. Then there are those who will want your support for their own political agendas.

I know you are probably well aware of this. However, allow me to say that you may not be aware of the sheer variety of ideas on education you will encounter during your time as minister. Two considerations may help shape your response. It is vital to be absolutely clear about the exact nature of the problems facing your education system. In your previous job, you declared that "education is not just an important issue, it is the issue because the future of our people and our culture are at stake." But giving education top priority does not constitute a diagnosis. You may find it useful to think about the education system and its problems in the same way a doctor thinks about a patient. If someone has a serious illness, diagnosis is not always easy even for the most experienced of doctors. A correct diagnosis often begins with the realisation that the patient is not suffering from one ailment but rather a complex mix of ailments. There is no need to worry about how complex these problems are, but you must avoid being influenced by the urgent nature of the problem so that your diagnosis misses the real cause of the sickness and ends up only treating the minor symptoms.

Your opposite number at the ministry of health can tell you better than I can how doctors treat their patients but the relevance of this analogy to the education sector is obvious. A friend of mine, who

has spent the best part of his life working for educational change, told me a story that I find very relevant to the question of how to heal an education system. It goes like this:

"One day a normally fit and healthy man felt unwell. He soon started to feel so bad that he went straight to his doctor and told him that he was losing his strength and finding even the basics of daily life very tiring. The doctor could not see any signs of illness but gave him a check-up anyway. Everything seemed normal and he told the man he was perfectly healthy. But this was not what our man wanted to hear. He knew he was unwell and asked the doctor to examine him again. The doctor, somewhat annoyed at having his professional judgement doubted, took another look. Again, he found no signs of illness but the man continued to insist on treatment. After thinking for a while, the doctor said: "I want you to do the following routine six times a day for the next two weeks. Take off all your clothes, stand in front of an open window and breathe deeply for 20 minutes." "But doctor, it is January and freezing cold outside," said the man, "if I do as you say, I will surely catch pneumonia." The doctor replied "In that case, come back and I will cure you because I know how to treat pneumonia!"

For me the irony of this story is not the fact that this is so often what happens in real life. It is the fact that in the world of education reforms we so often end up doing what we can do rather than what we should be doing. But we can only do something about the real issues if we have understood what they are in the first place. Clearly I am not telling this story to illustrate the failings of the medical profession. For me, this story poses an important question: how can you go about identifying what is the biggest issue facing your education system? This first question raises more questions such as - how well equipped is your administration to understand the real nature of the problem? How willing are you to rein in the instinct to adopt "solutions," including those put forward by your

## 6. LETTER TO A NEW EDUCATION MINISTER

international colleagues, if they are not relevant to your main problem? To what extent will you and your team be influenced by fashionable ideas on education reform that have become common currency at international conferences and workshops? Will you be able to convince your partners, and your own citizens, that the problems of your education system cannot be solved by simple “solutions,” like fixing a broken window? What do you think a good education system should look like? How do other education ministers go about gathering evidence and making decisions that will improve their schools?

Discussing these issues with colleagues from other countries may cause you to conclude that many themes of education policy are the same from one country to the next. This might lead you to believe that governments learn how to reform their education systems from each other. How else it can be that two nations as different and distant from each other as Canada and Britain have chosen to implement education reforms that are identical? In the same way, education reforms in many Eastern European countries look very similar, focusing as they do on educational standards, assessment systems and information and communication technology.

Before giving my opinion on whether the spread of common themes in education reform is really the result of mutual learning between governments or the result of something else, I would like to offer some personal observations about some of the current trends in education. There are many ways to describe global education policy trends; I will highlight only a few major ones, both desired and worrying ones.

1. Education policies in many countries, on paper at least, value learning over teaching. Many countries have redesigned school curricula and the content of qualifications according to descriptions of the knowledge and skills students must acquire rather than what teachers must teach. There has also been a change of emphasis from requiring students to master specific knowledge to helping them learn to solve problems and deal with real life situations.
2. Education reforms in many countries aim to improve education for all, not just for some. This principle has become more important as social and cultural diversity in many countries has increased. Equality of opportunity in education, as you point out in your interview, is a good way of building social cohesion and stability. Policies that give priority to equity tend to advocate having the same schools and classes for all, using unified curricula without ability groupings and moving students up a grade automatically rather than holding them back as a cure for poor performance. These are all welcome changes, but there are others which are less so.
3. Believe it or not, schooling in many countries is becoming like a market commodity. This trend is based on the assumption that competition and information are the primary drivers of improvement. The logic is very simple; competition is the driving force behind efficiency and economic growth, therefore competition between schools and students must be the best way of improving student performance. In this emerging education marketplace, parents are free to choose which school they send their children to. In order to do so, parents need comparable data on student achievement and school performance, based on a national curriculum. As a result of this thinking, education systems in many countries have been ‘standardised’ by creating common standards for teaching and learning and for teachers and heads of schools.
4. An economic rationale and the preparation of individuals for workforce and international competition are commonly cited reasons for educational reform. Education, as you well realize, is, indeed, an important driver of a country’s economic welfare. But an interesting shift in education policy discourse has occurred over the last 30 years. Social promotion and individual well-being appear less often than before in contemporary education policy

agendas. Education reforms still aim at equity goals, and social mobility is mentioned, but not as they were once. And reforms are, to be correct, also based on other points than just economic arguments. If I, or better yet, you, examine education policies in randomly selected countries, you and I would readily note a change in how the need for education reform is expressed.

So if education policy themes are common to many countries across the world, is this the result of a process of mutual learning? I would suggest a different metaphor to explain the global transfer of education policies. But first, let me explain why I think learning is difficult for governments, and even more so, dare I say, for individual ministries as they suffer from specific problems that often prevent them from learning from others.

You, and certainly your advisors and technical experts, have access to global education data and to some of the most brilliant researchers on education. You also interact with other ministers and their advisors and researchers. But at the end of the day, you are dealing with political issues, since most of education reform is all about politics. Technical rationality and problem solving – familiar to anyone who works in public administration – rather than posing problems take up the time of most ministers and their staff. However genuine learning thrives on the exchange of ideas, innovation and opportunities for reflection. A second problem is that access to superficial information and ideas through the media and the internet often acts as a substitute for real learning.

The way education policies emerge around the world, I have concluded, is not best described as a process of mutual learning. In your statement of intentions as education minister, you suggest that the work of your predecessors with the international education community, especially with foreign consultants, has not always helped your fellow citizens understand the fundamental problems facing education. Indeed, they may even have triggered new ones, as you claim. Seen from afar it can look as if many

countries are adopting a similar approach to education reforms. But a closer look shows this is not necessarily the case. What actually happens is that ideas are borrowed from one education system then applied to another as though the culture, people, teachers and pupils were all interchangeable. A friend who served as a deputy education minister once told me that rather than carefully selecting the most appropriate blueprint for reform, his ministry seemed to be suffering from a kind of policy epidemic.

Although this may seem distasteful, there may be similarities between how education policies and diseases spread. Epidemiology uses three terms – the agent, the host and the environment – to describe how severe infections move from place to place. People become ill as a result of interactions between all three. Not everyone gets infected, even though they may have been in the same place as someone who actually caught the disease, because some people have more resistance to the same agent than others.

Just for the sake of interest, may I invite you to consider how the global education reform movement (or germ) behaves like a germ in an epidemic. Just like diseases, education policy ideas spread quickly around the world but whether they “infect” governments or not depends on the needs for reform and the level of awareness of the education expert communities in each country. Several governments may be infected by the same germ, but the severity of the infection will vary greatly.

I would like to offer you two moral imperatives you may find useful in your work and these are prevention and repair. What I mean may become clearer if you think about these two words in the context of an epidemic. When you are worried about your child’s health in the midst of a dangerous flu epidemic, the first thing you think about is how to prevent him or her becoming infected. Only if the worst happens do you look for a cure, namely the repair. Simple enough. But I dare say that up to now, education policies in both your country and mine have concentrated much more on repairing than prevention. With

## 6. LETTER TO A NEW EDUCATION MINISTER

health care reforms, in contrast, the idea of prevention has long been seen as a cheaper and more effective alternative to the cure. I feel sure you will agree with me on this.

What you need to know as you move the emphasis from repairing to prevention in educational reform is that prevention has two separate but interconnected strands. First, education policies must effectively prevent your schools, teachers and students from getting into serious trouble, such as students dropping out due to lack of motivation or good teachers leaving their jobs due to poor working conditions. Second, you must be sceptical and question the policy ideas and information that the global education reform movement will bring to you and your staff. The best preventive strategy, in my modest opinion, is ensuring that your best technical education experts available are constantly advising you and collaborating with you – and, of course, that you carefully listen to their suggestions.

The aim of this letter is to wish you good luck in this important mission. It is also to provide some ideas on how to be well equipped to receive, process and act upon the flood of education policy advice that will reach you through many channels. You may view policy development and education reform in your country through an epidemiologist's eyes; an awareness of the role of agents, hosts and environments related to improving the performance of your education system. Another strategy might be to work like a medical doctor who diagnoses already-occurring illnesses and set about to cure them.

But there is another, even better, strategy - becoming a serious leader in education, someone who can show the way and install an authentic passion for getting involved in education reform in your citizens. You may wonder – how do I go about energising public thinking on education to strengthen its “resistance to infection” by policy ideas that may be popular but are not effective? What I am suggesting, to be sure, is not easy. However, encouraging participation by your citizens can only make your education system stronger and more responsive.

I also encourage you to engage in mutual learning with your colleagues in other countries. As you have stated many times, there is no point in blindly copying policies and ideas from other education systems. The less your education policy changes resemble an epidemic and the more they are the result of mutual learning, the closer you will be to the goals you have set yourself.

In his famous speech “Beyond Vietnam: a time to break silence” delivered at Riverside Church, New York City, in April 1967 Martin Luther King Jr. said, “a time comes when silence is betrayal”. But all too often those who speak truth to power come to regret it. The way I see it, time is now. With these thoughts, let me wish you good luck once more and assure you that I will be following your leadership in education with great interest.

Yours faithfully,  
*Pasi Sahlberg*  
*Education reformer*