

Why Their Kids Learn Better

By Bambi Betts

International educators are determined to understand why kids in some countries consistently out perform others. The latest McKinsey report is of critical importance in this quest. McKinsey & Company is a global management consulting firm with a social sector component, that advises the world's leading businesses, governments, and institutions.

In their initial widely referenced 2007 report, 'How the World's Best School Systems Stay on Top', McKinsey uncovered some common themes, the most significant of which was 'the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers. Research has shown that of all the controllable factors in an education system, the most important by far is the effectiveness of the classroom teacher.' (from the executive summary of the 2010 report).

Dozens of other studies, large and small, corroborate these findings.

In this latest report, released in September of this year, McKinsey examines one little studied aspect of the 'formula' which has apparently contributed to the learning success of students in the top performing countries (based to a large degree on performance on international examinations): 'who' they let into the teaching profession.

The report boldly confirms that these top performing countries – notably Singapore, Finland and South Korea – 'recruit 100% of the teaching corps from the top third of the academic cohort and then screen for other important qualities.'

It goes on to note that while there is clearly no one 'silver bullet,' the extraordinary success of these top performing systems suggest a 'top third' strategy deserves consideration (specifically by the US, to which the report's recommendations are targeted). The report details specifically what each of the top three high performing systems do to attract, recruit and retain quality teachers, including: pay equal to other professions, specialized training, opportunities for advancement, and 'bestowing enormous social prestige on the profession.'

The full report can be viewed and downloaded at:

http://www.mckinsey.com/clientservice/Social_Sector/our_practices/Education/Knowledge_Highlights/Economic_impact.aspx