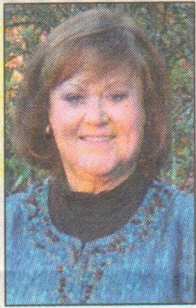


# What we can learn from Finland



**Sheila Hocutt Remington**

Last week I had the opportunity to attend the “Alabama-Finland Education Policy Summit” held at the University of Alabama Birmingham (UAB) and sponsored by The Mike and Gillian Goodrich Foundation in partnership with UAB.

Dr. Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and author, gave the keynote address focusing on his most recent book *Finnish Lessons 2.0*. He has worked as a teacher, researcher, and policy advisor in Finland and has examined education systems around the world. Dr. Sahlberg is also an expert in school improvement and international education issues, and Finland is known for having one of the best education systems in the world. So I was eager to hear what wisdom he could impart on improving education in Alabama.

Dr. Sahlberg spoke on lessons that could be learned from the educational changes in Finland and the problematic and unintended consequences of the American education system’s approach to reform. According to Dr. Sahlberg, these are common reasons that some education systems do not improve as they should:

- Too much emphasis on competition
- Reliance and dependence on standardized tests
- Test-based accountability
- Deprofessionalization
- Privatization

One of his most famous quotes is, “The worst enemy of curiosity is standardization.” I couldn’t agree more. Through my work on the ESSA Implementation Committee, the overuse of standardized tests and test-based accountability are some of the issues we are working to correct.

When you look at what makes some educational systems successful, you find the following are emphasized:

- Cooperation and collaboration between colleagues and districts (educators must work together not alone)
- Emphasizing creativity rather than standardization
- The importance of trust-based responsibility
- Professionalization
- Equity (schools must be funded fairly)

I found all of those reasons gratifying, as our members have spent years telling our legislators precisely those very things.

Dr. Sahlberg also used his time with us to describe a typical school day in Finland for a fourth-grader. One very noticeable difference, Finnish students have time designated for “play” and visiting with friends built into their schedules. They find value in allowing time for children to simply be children. They found that happier students are better students. Finally, something I think all educators already know – healthy students make better learners.

My day at the Summit was well spent. It is my hope that someday we can concentrate on an educational environment that promotes rather than prevents educational excellence.