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FACE BOOK

## Imported From Britain: Ideas to Improve Schools

By [SAM DILLON](#)

WASHINGTON — During a decade in power in Britain, the government of Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) made efforts to improve English schools, with some apparent successes. Because American public education faces similar challenges, like what to do with failing schools and how to recruit better teachers, some educators believe there is much to learn from England's experience.

A few are turning to Sir Michael Barber, a senior adviser to Mr. Blair from 1997 through 2005, who received his title in recognition of his educational contributions. As a partner at McKinsey & Company, he has been advising education policymakers, including the [Ohio State](#) Board of Education and [Joel I. Klein](#), the New York schools chancellor.

Sir Michael's recent book, "Instruction to Deliver," is a favorite of Mr. Klein's. Last year, the schools chancellor asked Sir Michael to address hundreds of New York principals at [Lincoln Center](#) about school improvement strategies.

Sir Michael elaborated on those themes in a recent interview in the dining room of the Hay-Adams Hotel in Washington, where he was staying during a consulting trip. A gray-haired fellow who often cocks his head to one side when emphasizing a point, he occasionally asked and answered his own questions, and he stressed the importance of improving teacher quality.

"What have all the great school systems of the world got in common?" he said, ticking off four systems that he said deserved to be called great, in Finland, Singapore, South Korea and Alberta, Canada. "Four systems, three continents — what do they have in common?"

"They all select their teachers from the top third of their college graduates, whereas the U.S. selects its teachers from the bottom third of graduates. This is one of the big challenges for the U.S. education system: What are you going to do over the next 15 to 20 years to recruit ever better people into teaching?"

South Korea pays its teachers much more than England and America, and has accepted larger class sizes as a trade-off, he said.

Finland, by contrast, draws top-tier college graduates to the profession not with huge paychecks, but by fostering exceptionally high public respect for teachers, he said.

Under Mr. Blair, Sir Michael said, Britain attracted more talented young teaching candidates by offering stipends of £7,000, or about \$14,000, for college graduates undergoing a year of teacher training. The government set up a national curriculum to govern such training and started a nationwide public relations campaign aimed at persuading prospective teachers that society would value their work, he said.

“We completely recast our teacher recruitment and training system,” Sir Michael said.

Before joining the Blair government, Sir Michael experienced England’s educational system personally, in stints as a schoolteacher, teachers’ union official and university professor. He lives in the East End of London with his wife. Their three daughters are fully grown.

Public education in England and the United States evolved along similar paths, he said.

In the early 1980s, government reports deploring educational mediocrity rattled both nations, inspiring movements to improve standards and accountability on both sides of the Atlantic. And during the last decade, both nations began federally driven school improvement efforts, he said.

“But it’s a lot harder to do education reform in the United States than in the U.K.,” Sir Michael said.

That, in part, is because of sheer size, he said. England’s elementary and secondary educational system, which has about seven million students and 24,000 schools, he said, is more akin to California’s, which has about 6.3 million students and 9,500 schools, than to the United States’, which has about 50 million students and 90,000 schools.

But more important, he said, Britain’s political system endows its prime ministers with greater powers to impose new practices than any corresponding American official enjoys, since basic education policies in the United States are set in the 50 states and in the nation’s 15,000 local school districts, he said. Even though President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Law has considerably increased federal influence over what happens in American schools, Washington still plays a subsidiary role to states and municipalities, he said.

“Once Britain’s prime minister is elected, he has a majority in Parliament and it’s much easier to change things,” Sir Michael said. “In contrast, the founding fathers created a political culture where you have to get consensus from competing factions.”

In Ohio, for instance, Sir Michael led a McKinsey team last year that helped produce a 102-page report recommending new education policies based on the best practices in Britain and other countries.

(The report can be seen at [www.achieve.org/files](http://www.achieve.org/files)

/World\_Class\_Edu\_Ohio

\_FINAL.pdf.)

But for the state to put its recommendations in place in a coherent way, he said, would require an unlikely alignment of galaxies: The Ohio State Board of Education, the state’s new Democratic governor and its Republican-dominated Legislature would all have to cooperate closely.

“And that’s not to mention Ohio’s 613 school districts,” he added. “So it’s a real challenge to align all these actors behind that reform.”

In Mr. Blair’s Britain, it was possible to impose a new policy quickly. From 1997 through 2001, when Sir Michael headed the Standards and Effectiveness Unit of the Department for Education and Skills, he presided over the shuttering of some 130 chronically low-performing English schools.

No American state has addressed its failing schools with a vigor that is even remotely similar, even though under No Child Left Behind, about 1,800 of the nation's schools have been identified as in need of overhaul. So far, none of the 50 states have even outlined a forceful set of policies for such schools.

When it comes to failing schools, Sir Michael expresses impatience. When a public school is failing — not just going through a rough patch, but also systematically failing to educate its students — he says there is only one question the authorities should consider: “How do I get these children a good education as fast as possible?”

“Once you have the answer to that question, you just do it,” he said. “If it's close the school, you close it and move the children into a better one. If there are no better schools nearby, close it and replace it with another on the same site. But you do whatever it takes.”

If Sir Michael uses forceful language as he recalls his days as a powerful official in the Blair government, in his role as a McKinsey partner he speaks more cautiously, noting the need to respect clients' confidentiality, and perhaps in deference to the McKinsey official sitting in on the interview.

Despite his new corporate personality, however, Sir Michael said he believes his role is still pushing for better schools. When a hotel manager, attracted by the presence of a news photographer, asked Sir Michael to identify himself, he responded, “I'm an education reformer, and this is The New York Times.”

Sir Michael said that he considers No Child Left Behind to be an outstanding law, perhaps one of the most important pieces of education legislation in American history, he said. But the law is not without its flaws, he said, which include its methodology for identifying underperforming schools on the basis of student test scores alone.

“It depends much too often on quite crude tests and one year's data,” he said.

The world's best school rating systems, including England's, he said, not only consider test results, but also send government inspectors directly into schools to search for causes of poor performance. McKinsey's report on Ohio recommended that the state create a corps of inspectors like England's, which reviews every school at least once every three years, examining the teaching environment and the caliber of school leadership, and suggesting changes, he said.

New York has set up a similar corps of inspectors, he added.

How do American educators react to Sir Michael's advice?

Michael Cohen, president of Achieve Inc., a nonprofit group that helps states raise academic standards, worked with Sir Michael on the Ohio report, and watched him outline its findings in a meeting with the state's 19-member board last fall.

“They just ate him up,” Mr. Cohen said. “The combination of his wonderful British accent and humorous approach — you can't do much better than that in a public speaker.”