



Stealing from the World's Best Schools

What One U.S. Teacher Learned by Visiting Countries that are Doing Education Right

Why do students in two dozen other countries, from China to Canada, continue to outperform American students in math, science and reading? And what does that reality mean for the future of our kids—and our nation? These are questions that drove Milken National Educator award-winning teacher Keith Ballard to become the first documented K-12 teacher to complete a self-funded study of more than 170 schools in countries around the world that regularly beat us on international exams.

To discover what these places are doing right, he talked his way into meetings with top education officials in Estonia. He slept in his car so he could visit schools in pricey Switzerland, ate lunch in a school cafeteria in Singapore and donned an apron in a home economics class in Finland. He even landed tours of classes in North Korea. Over the course of a decade, he filmed hundreds of hours of video that have attracted millions of online views. Now, in his thought-provoking book *Stealing from the World's Best Schools*, Keith blends firsthand accounts from inside the world's top classrooms, hard data and his own experiences as a public school teacher to explore eight elements of the world's most successful education systems. Ballard does advocate for sweeping change. But he also offers practical steps every reader—whether you're a parent or a teacher, a student or a policymaker—can take right now to nudge our schools in the right direction and help our students prosper in this hypercompetitive world.



Feel free to reach out with any other questions you may have using the contact details below.

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Quick Facts

Full Title: Stealing from the World's Best Schools
What One U.S. Teacher Learned by Visiting Countries that are Doing Education Right

Authors: Keith Ballard with Brooke Staggs

Page Count: 264 pages

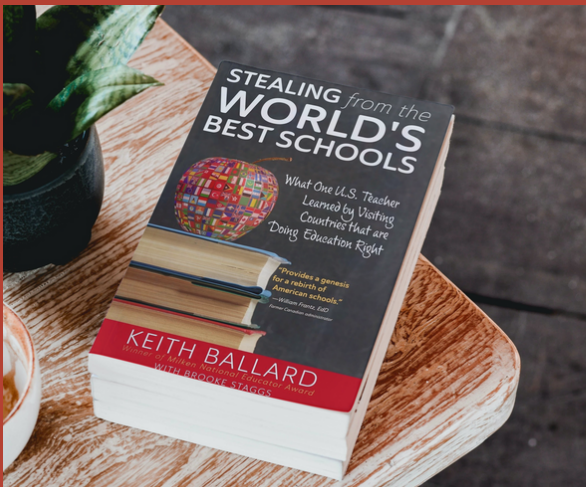
Genre: Nonfiction

Publication Date: 06/28/2022

ISBN: 979-8-218-01323-3

Price: \$5.99 digital & \$14.99 paperback

Where to buy: Amazon



Excerpt

from Chapter 4 on
Vocational Education

Along a tree-lined street in Slovenia's capital of Ljubljana, I watched as neighborhood residents filtered into a small store selling a variety of baked goods. The counter held a case full of picture-perfect chocolate bars and fruit-topped cakes, with a glass dome full of scones next to the cash register. Loaves of fresh bread and rolls lined long wooden shelves, with the shop name, Kruh & Cukr, scrolled in white on a black chalkboard wall.

It looked like a typical professional bakery in Europe. Only here, student workers assisted customers as they picked out cupcakes and bread to take home to their families. Also, everything for sale was made by teenagers who attend Biotechnical Educational Center Ljubljana, a vocational high school and two-year college that's attached to the store.

Similar arrangements exist for Biotechnical Educational Center students hoping to work in other fields. An adjacent restaurant serves up meals cooked by budding chefs, for example, while students in their last year of the veterinary technician program assist the staff vet in caring for pets brought to a nearby clinic. And all of those services come at slightly discounted rates for community residents, since it's expected that student service might come with a few more hiccups than customers would get at commercial businesses—though I didn't notice any drop in quality at the student-run facilities I visited.

Slovenia, which scored No. 13 in the world in math and science on the most recent PISA exam, has one of the highest percentages of students in vocational programs, with roughly 70 percent of its student population enrolled in these courses. It's far from unique among top-performing countries in offering its students choices at the secondary level between either an academic track, bound for university after high school, or vocational programs in world-class facilities to prepare them for in-demand jobs.

In Singapore, I visited a facility where high schoolers can work on a 747 jet engine FedEx donated from one of its California facilities. In South Korea, I toured a high school where students worked on industrial robots used on assembly lines. In Germany, I toured an automotive program that gives students the training and certificates they need to start full-time careers after graduation.



Marcus Butler

Education professor in Southern California

"This is the medicine many of America's educators don't want to take. Don't blame the messenger for the realistic and honest diagnosis of our educational system."

William Frantz

EdD and retired Canadian educational administrator

"Keith Ballard attacks the myths surrounding 'American exceptionalism' and the myths of American education. ... He gives us workable ideas that improve teachers through emphasis on teacher collegiality, development of higher esteem among teachers, teacher mentorship programs, different work schedules for teachers and more significant involvement in curriculum building. Keith's book provides a genesis for a rebirth of American schools."



About the Authors

Keith Ballard has taught music, and much more, to thousands of public school students over the past 27 years. To reach middle schoolers at his district in southern San Diego County, a couple miles from the Mexican border, he introduced mariachi and steel drum programs that drew national attention, sparking student performances on *The Today Show* and in front of two former U.S. presidents. Keith's efforts to infuse lessons about scales and chords with messages about self-esteem and the importance of education helped him earn more than 25 teaching awards, including the 2003 Milken National Educator Award and 2017 Congressional Outstanding Educator Award. He's also been inducted into the hall of fame at his alma mater, Arizona State University.

Keith's decade-long quest to study the world's best schools has helped him land national TV appearances, a spot on the TEDx Talk stage and a YouTube channel with millions of views.

To bring *Stealing from the World's Best Schools* to life, Keith enlisted the help of award-winning writer Brooke Staggs. Brooke got her start teaching high school English and journalism at a low-income high school. But frustration with the system, combined with a newly discovered passion for journalism, drove her to leave in 2006 to be a student again herself. Brooke earned a masters degree in journalism from New York University and has been a newspaper reporter ever since. Her work covering everything from politics to cannabis to schools has triggered FBI investigations and earned her some of the top journalism awards in the western United States. She's also appeared on major TV and radio programs across the country, including ABC, Fox News and NPR, and has previously ghostwritten three nonfiction books.

Lynn M Barker

EdD

"Mr. Ballard's research, delineation and synthesis of education systems across the globe is presented in very real and very raw truth that should cause us ALL to take up a vigilant charge for change in the United States educational system."

Marc Tucker

Founder of the National Center on Education and the Economy

"[Ballard is] the first school teacher I have met in the United States who has taken it upon him or herself in a serious way to understand what these countries that are vastly outperforming us are doing and to accept the thought that they might actually have something to teach us. I have spent my life trying to help make teaching a profession, and what [he is] doing is what a real professional in education ought to be doing. So I see [Ballard] as a pioneer."

Press Release

***Stealing from the World's Best Schools* is available for purchase on Amazon in digital and paperback formats as of June 28, 2022.**

What happens when an award-winning middle school music teacher who spends his free time skydiving, climbing mountains, and training for the reality TV show *Naked and Afraid* sets out on a self-funded trip around the world in search of strategies to improve public education in the United States? You get *Stealing from the World's Best Schools: What One U.S. Teacher Learned by Visiting Countries that are Doing Public Education Right*.

Keith Ballard—who has won more than two dozen teaching awards, including being named a Milken National Educator—is the first documented K-12 teacher in the world who has visited eight schools in each of the 17 countries that now regularly earn top scores on a key international benchmark test. Now he's taken what he learned from his self-funded trip around the world, through countless hours of research, and after his own 27 years in public school classrooms and used that work to identify eight key elements of successful education systems.

This book is the author's contribution to tackling a problem that has plagued American schools for half a century. Fifty years ago, by common consensus among economists all over the world, the United States had the best educational system and our workforce was the best prepared of any workforce in the world. This propelled the United States' global leadership in one arena after another, from manufacturing to technology. Sadly, our nation has lost that status in recent decades, even though government spending per student has more than doubled after figuring in the cost of inflation.

Consider this:

- **In 10 other countries with top-performing education systems, the average high school student graduates 2.5 years ahead of the average American student.**
- **In the most recent Program for International Student Assessment or PISA test, 22 other countries outperformed American students in science, 35 countries outperformed American students in math and 20 countries did better than the U.S. in reading.**
- **The 10 percent “most disadvantaged” children in Vietnam scored higher than the average American student on the PISA test.**

Everyone in the United States has an interest in the success of our school system, from the tens of millions of parents with kids in school to the millions of educators to the businesses that depend on a qualified workforce. However, surveys show a majority of people in each group is dissatisfied with the current education system.

Fortunately, the answers to fixing our educational system can be readily found by stealing ideas from places like Finland, New Zealand, Singapore, and Switzerland. The intent is not to bash the U.S. system, but to clearly define the problems, to suggest practical solutions, and to inspire sweeping change based on firsthand accounts from inside successful school systems around the world.



Interview Questions

What inspired you to start visiting schools around the world?

I was actually shivering in a tent pitched on the snow near the summit of Mt. Aconcagua, the tallest peak in South America, in 2010 when the idea for this book was born. Though I'd won some of the top teaching awards, I still felt my hands were tied in the classroom by a larger education system that just wasn't helping students get what they needed. I also had a young son at home, and I had deep concerns about whether his education was preparing him to compete for the high-skilled jobs of the future.

Frustrated, I had taken to filling my breaks with daring exploits I felt I could control, from swimming the icy waters of San Francisco Bay to climbing Yosemite's famed El Capitan. But even at the literal highest point, when I was nearing the summit of Mt. Aconcagua, I felt weighed down by the problems waiting back in my classroom. Luckily, I'd taken a book to read on my climb that talked about how China and India had transformed their economies starting with their schools. So on the side of that snowy mountain, I hatched a plan to try to diagnose where the American school system had gone wrong by visiting classrooms in top-performing countries.

Which countries did you visit?

I visited eight schools in each of the 17 countries that regularly perform better than us on a test called PISA, which 15-year-olds around the world take every three years. Those countries include: Singapore, Japan, China, Taiwan, South Korea, Canada, Ireland, Finland, Estonia, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Slovenia, Poland and New Zealand. I also visited schools in Vietnam, India and North Korea as part of this project.

How did you pull off this world tour?

I visited schools during summer breaks from my teaching job from 2011 to 2018. I used most of the \$25,000 prize money that came with winning the Milken National Educator award and paid the rest out of my pocket. I arranged all of these trips myself, sometimes sleeping in my car and bathing in the ice-cold Rhine River before talking my way into meetings with top education officials. Often, even at the top schools in the world, administrators said I was the first American who had ever come to see what they were doing.

Why did you decide to turn this into a book?

During my first trip, when I went to China and India in 2011, I took an \$80 used video camera I'd bought on Craigslist. Over the next eight years, I shot more than 200 videos, which I posted to my YouTube channel, Educator Keith Ballard, just to open people's eyes to what was possible. But I knew I also wanted to try to synthesize everything I'd learned in a way that might offer a blueprint to build real change. That's where this book comes in.

So, what's the secret to fixing U.S. schools?

In some ways, schools in places like Finland and South Korea couldn't be more different. But I identified eight key things countries with top education systems all have in common—and that we are missing. That includes more support for families, having higher standards for teachers, structuring the school year differently, offering high-quality vocational education, reducing standardized testing, changing how we use technology, making arts education part of the core curriculum and focusing on equity. Each chapter in my book deals with one of these areas, with lots of examples, research and steps we all can take to start making a difference today.