Choosing the Ideal Educational Model: Lessons from the Education Systems of the U.S., Finland, Estonia and Singapore

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Abstract: John Goodlad's monumental study, "*A Place Called School"*, conducted over four years in more than 800 American schools, remains one of the most valuable analyses of modern education. Goodlad highlights structural imbalances, the decline in the quality of teaching, and inequities in access to knowledge, while also offering an optimistic vision for the renewal of schooling. His principles—student-centered education, personalized teacher attention, cooperation, democratized access to learning, and the cultivation of independent thinking—remain fundamental to any genuine reform. Building on this perspective, a comparative analysis of three high-performing educational systems—Finland, Estonia, and Singapore—shows that success is not the result of chance but of coherent policies consistently implemented over many years. Whether referring to equal opportunities, deep digitalization, school autonomy, investment in teachers, or curricular flexibility aligned with societal realities, these models demonstrate that educational reform is possible and effective where vision and continuity exist. In this context, it is entirely appropriate for Romania to study and adapt elements from internationally successful education systems. Intelligent borrowing—understood as critical, contextualized, and adapted adoption—represents a realistic and necessary path for rebuilding Romanian education and offering all students genuine opportunities for success in a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: John Goodlad; A Place Called School; Educational reform; Equal opportunities; Education systems (Finland, Estonia, Singapore)

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1. Introduction

The question of how to build a high-performing education system remains one of the most pressing challenges of contemporary societies. At the core of this challenge lies a fundamental dilemma: should education be primarily teacher-centered, emphasizing authority, structure, and content transmission, or student-centered, focusing on individual needs, engagement, and autonomy? While this debate is often presented as a dichotomy, international experience suggests that sustainable educational performance emerges not from choosing one extreme, but from coherent reforms that redefine the relationship between teachers, students, and learning itself.

A critical starting point for understanding the need for reform is John I. Goodlad's landmark study "*A Place Called School"*, one of the most comprehensive investigations ever conducted into American education. Based on extensive classroom observations and dialogue with all stakeholders in the educational process, Goodlad[1] demonstrated that the central problems of schooling are not merely technical, but structural and cultural. His work revealed declining instructional quality, widening inequalities in access to knowledge, student disengagement, and a growing sense of boredom—symptoms of systems that prioritize routines over meaningful learning. Goodlad's diagnosis remains strikingly relevant today, as many education systems continue to struggle with similar challenges.

Goodlad rejects superficial reforms and argues that schools cannot be improved unless they are first deeply understood. He emphasizes that effective education must address the development of the whole person and ensure equitable access to rich learning experiences for all students, regardless of ability or background. Central to this vision is the idea that both teachers and students are "educable" and mutually engaged in the learning process. Teaching, therefore, is not a rigid, teacher-dominated activity, nor is it a fully unstructured, student-led one, but a humanizing process that combines professional guidance with active student participation.

The comparative analysis of high-performing education systems further reinforces this perspective. Finland, Estonia, and Singapore—despite their cultural and structural differences—share a commitment to long-term, coherent reforms, high-quality teacher preparation, and equity across schools. Finland and Estonia have

[1] John Inkster Goodlad – a researcher and educational theorist, President of the Institute for Educational Inquiry in the United States, and founder of the Center for Educational Renewal at the University of Washington.

deliberately shifted toward student-centered learning environments that emphasize autonomy, joy of learning, formative assessment, and equal opportunities, while maintaining strong teacher professionalism. Singapore, by contrast, illustrates how a more teacher-led, structured approach can also produce exceptional results, provided that teaching quality is continuously developed and reforms are carefully evaluated. Importantly, Singapore's recent reforms signal a growing recognition of the need to reduce excessive competition and stress, and to place greater emphasis on creativity, well-being, and values.

Taken together, these models demonstrate that educational performance cannot be reduced to test scores alone. Instead, it depends on how well systems balance structure with flexibility, authority with care, and knowledge transmission with skill development. This article explores how the lessons derived from Goodlad's work and from successful international systems can inform meaningful educational reform, particularly in contexts where change has been fragmented or inconsistent. Ultimately, it seeks to answer a crucial question: how can education systems design reforms that place students at the center of learning while empowering teachers as the key agents of quality and transformation?

2. U.S. Educational Model

To understand where American schooling stood in 1980, we must analyze the most comprehensive study ever conducted in the history of American education, presented in the book "A Place Called School" by Dr. John I. Goodlad. Spanning four years, the study examined 800 American schools and high schools and 1,000 classrooms visited by education specialists who spoke with teachers, students, pupils, administrators, parents, and other members of the respective local communities. The book was written 35 years ago by the most important and experienced American educator, John Goodlad, who does nothing less than convey a message of optimism for future generations, and whose educational improvements grow in importance even as we move further and further away from the year of its first publication, 1984.

In order to talk about the most important book on American education, I believe the first thing we must do is get to know the author. Dr. John I. Goodlad was not merely a researcher and educational theorist, but the author of more than 30 books, 80 book chapters, and over 200 articles that brought a breath of fresh air to the field of education. He was president of the Institute for Educational Inquiry and founder of the Center for Educational Renewal at the University of Washington. As president of

the American Educational Research Association, John Goodlad received the Award for Distinguished Contributions to Educational Research.

The book "A Place Called School" received the "Outstanding Book of the Year" Award from the American Educational Research Association after its first edition, as well as the Distinguished Book of the Year Award from the Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society in Education[1].

The year 1983 was, in the United States, a year of important reports evaluating the American public school system. Numerous newspaper and magazine articles, as well as media reports on education, offered a wide range of opinions. At one extreme there was panic and outrage. In the middle was the belief that there existed a solid solution. Another group was represented by older, traditional philosophies such as "back to the basics". At the other extreme were those who supported free, open schools.

Goodlad sounds the alarm in a manner that comes as a cold shower. American schooling is a problem. The study is a challenge to educators, who cannot help but feel encouraged to bring about change, a new meaning to the place called school. What he reproaches is the fact that the wave of criticism directed at schools lacks "the diagnosis necessary for the reconstruction of education."

The first step is for educators to understand what needs to be changed. A school cannot be improved without first being understood: "Every school has its own ambiance, which can suggest to the attentive observer useful approaches for making the school better" (Goodlad, 2004). Goodlad does not support a return to the basics. On the contrary, by analyzing a vast amount of data, he argues that students, teachers, and parents agree that the major purposes of schooling involve social, intellectual, personal, and vocational development.

Goodlad's message is powerful and rejects cosmetic solutions. He does not rely only on extensive data carefully analyzed and applied. Goodlad argues that schools have the duty to present humanity's knowledge and intellectual tools in such a way as to make them accessible to everyone—these being the central requirements of teaching. The "humanizing" process of knowledge must have two central components. The first consists of the teacher's personal attention—interest both in the learner and in the subject being taught, which is offered and understood by students. The second

[1] Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society in Education – An honorary educational society founded in 1911, and one of the earliest honor societies dedicated to a specific academic discipline. Membership is limited to the top 20 percent of students in the field of education.

consists of pedagogical features—all those techniques intended to keep students directly engaged in the learning process. This appears to be the central issue in the teaching process. Both the educator and the educated are educable ("Both are educable").

Goodlad emphasizes that there are two wrong directions during the progression from kindergarten through twelfth grade. First, desirable teacher traits and instructional methods (the use of diagnostic tests, praise, personal attention, early feedback, active student participation, etc.) steadily decline from elementary school through high school. Second, where students are grouped in the upper grades of high school, the most capable students benefit from better teaching techniques than weaker students. The result is that the gap between ability, learning, and curricular opportunities experienced by different groups of students grows rather than shrinks. Schools become even more culpable when teachers observe that groups of students with more modest abilities do not have access to the knowledge available to capable students. Weaker students must learn more mechanically, while stronger students benefit from richer content.

Goodlad denounces the existence of a steady decline in the variety of teaching methods, teacher support, feedback, and corrective guidance necessary for progress throughout schooling.

Access to knowledge is also disproportionate when it comes to minorities, especially poor minority students, compared to white students. Despite reports claiming that American education is available to all, in practice availability or accessibility no longer exists. As Goodlad stated, "effective instructional practices were found to be more characteristic of upper-track classes than of lower ones" (Goodlad, 2004).

In his study of teachers, Goodlad concludes that most teachers are more inclined to return to old methods rather than adopt progressive ones. Nevertheless, he reinforces the idea that teachers hold both traditional and progressive beliefs, which they apply simultaneously. He also stresses the fact that teachers work in isolation, having too few opportunities to dialogue and interact with colleagues.

After surveying teaching practices across all major subjects, Goodlad identifies two major deficiencies. "The first is a failure to differentiate and to see relationships between facts and the more important concepts that can help us understand. The second is a general failure to see subjects and subject matter as the turf on which to experience the struggles and satisfactions of personal growth" (Goodlad, 2004).

In a particular area, Goodlad exposes a serious misunderstanding. He states that "for years schools and teachers have been criticized for neglecting the fundamentals." But his research shows that teachers are very concerned with teaching students exactly what is essential. On the other hand, Goodlad becomes incisive in condemning the fact that "a small percentage of students receive a large percentage of the grades indicating failure year after year." The most serious accusation leveled at schools is that "boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions, the natural question being: Why are our schools not places of joy?"

Ways to improve schools are analyzed through a process of identifying the people, levels of government, and institutions responsible. After identifying the goals of each level, he concludes that "the school must become largely self-directed. This decentralization does not imply a complete break from districts and the state; it merely emphasizes the school's major importance within the secondary education system" (Goodlad, 2004). Goodlad's proposals for curriculum change may have negative results if they are not accompanied by a substantial improvement in pedagogy.

He supports general education as it appears in the Harvard Report, in which the "five fingers" of human knowledge are presented as follows: (a) mathematics and science; (b) literature and language; (c) society and social studies; (d) the arts; and (e) vocations. The "five fingers" plus physical education should not represent more than 90% of a student's program. More specifically, he suggests 18% for mathematics and science, up to 18% for literature and English, up to 15% for the other fingers, and up to 10% for physical education.

Goodlad also argues that two-thirds of all students' programs should be studied in common, so that a basic general education is available to all students.

The remaining 10% should be devoted to areas of individual interest and personal talent development. This time should not be used to remediate deficiencies related to the five fingers. How this domain should be handled would depend directly on the resources of the school and community, a good approach being the provision of vouchers for students.

The most difficult proposal to accept is Goodlad's suggestion to divide the 12 years of schooling into three levels of four years each. He proposes an earlier beginning and ending: the primary phase from ages 4 to 7; the secondary (elementary) phase from ages 8 to 11; and the third phase from ages 12 to 15.

As Goodlad sees it, many children attend school for 14 years (including daycare and kindergarten). He thus eliminates "soft spots" by offering real opportunities for personalized instruction. His idea that students should begin school on their birthday rather than waiting until the fall might discourage teachers. However, he argues that the entry of two or three students in a given month and the exit of a comparable number could be easily managed by schools capable of planning such transitions.

Goodlad also suggests that grading should not be used in each elementary and secondary unit. His argument is that learning outside school is not organized by years and grading levels.

The way Goodlad concludes the book is surprising: "And, indeed, education is still more imagined than practiced" (Goodlad, 2004). The principles underlying a greatly improved education are as follows:

- Education of the whole person;
- Cooperative learning, in which the more capable student teaches the less capable one;
- The teacher's primary concern for each learner;
- The right of all children to the best education;
- Teaching students to think for themselves, to be able to solve problems, make decisions, learn how to learn, and transfer experiences into the realities of a vibrant, meaningful life.

Three decades ago, after conducting highly influential studies on public schools and teacher education, Dr. John I. Goodlad initiated a national project to support educational quality and renewal. Unlike other reform initiatives that focused narrowly on academic standards and test scores, Dr. Goodlad emphasized the essential role of education in sustaining the social and institutional foundations of democratic life, as reflected in a four-part mission for schools:

- Providing equal access to quality, school-based learning for young people;
- Promoting responsible governance of schools and universities;
- Improving teaching and learning through pedagogy that nurtures and challenges all learners;

- Teaching students the knowledge, skills, and disposition to become fully engaged participants in a democratic society.

To better understand what performance means, what reforms are necessary, and especially how much time is needed to reach this level, I will next present three education systems that compete each year for the top three places in the world: Finnish, Estonian, and Singaporean education.

3. The Finnish Education System

Like John Goodlad, who advocates equitable education for all students, the Finnish education system is based on equality of opportunity for all learners.

Children begin preschool education at age 6 and then continue for nine years of primary and lower secondary education (ages 7–16). Students may choose an academic or vocational track (equivalent to vocational schools in our country) or discontinue their studies. However, 95% choose to continue to upper secondary education, which requires passing the national matriculation examination.

3.1. School Development

In Finland, education is guided by legislation, research and development plans, the national curriculum, municipal education policy programs, school-based curricula, and the school's annual plan. The degree of school autonomy is determined by local authorities. Municipalities can develop their own innovative approaches to implementing the curriculum. The absence of school inspectorates allows schools to personalize education according to their own administrative decisions. The Finnish National Agency for Education collaborates with municipalities, schools, and teachers, as well as with trainers, researchers, parents, and students through surveys.

3.2. School Year Structure

The school year is divided into five periods lasting 38–40 days, depending on the subject matter. Lessons of 75 minutes take place three times per week. Each subject organizes between 16 and 20 lessons. Exams are held for eight days after each teaching period, assessing competencies acquired during lessons.

3.3. Education Funding

Finnish legislation guarantees students the right to free meals during school days until the end of upper secondary education. Approximately 830,000 pupils and students receive free school lunches. High-quality school meals are viewed as an investment in the future.

There are few private schools; most students attend public schools with modern facilities. Each classroom is equipped with ICT tools: interactive whiteboards, projectors, computers, tablets, and educational software. Students and teachers receive teaching materials free of charge.

Because social and work competencies have changed, more jobs now require digital skills, assertive communication strategies, and practical skills. In December 2014, Finland approved a National Curriculum Reform for pre-primary and compulsory basic education. School is thus seen as a learning community that promotes the joy of learning in a collaborative atmosphere and encourages student autonomy and responsibility.

3.4. The Core of the Reform

Learning based on memorization and reproduction is replaced by practical, applied tasks that activate higher-order cognitive processes: thinking (analysis, synthesis, comparison, abstraction, generalization), imagination, memory, and problem solving. The new Finnish curriculum is based on transversal competencies and transdisciplinary collaborative projects, while maintaining school subjects as common for all students. Each subject contributes to all seven competency areas. Subject boundaries are less rigid, with greater emphasis on practical collaboration projects. Formative assessment promotes the competence of learning how to learn, enabling students to gradually assume responsibility for their own learning.

Innovation plays a key role, with digital skills becoming essential. Effective learning environments are developed through:

- The physical classroom;
- The social environment;
- The virtual (digital) environment;
- The psychological environment.

Finnish society aims to remain innovative and successful, with lifelong learning and teachers serving not only as instructors and evaluators, but also as guides to knowledge.

3.5. Excellent, Highly Trained Teachers

Teaching in Finland is regarded on par with professions such as law and medicine, granting teachers prestige and respect. Compared to other countries, Finnish teachers enjoy greater classroom autonomy and can test innovative approaches, collaborate with colleagues, and work in teams. While a U.S. teacher teaches about 1,080 hours per year, a Finnish teacher teaches around 600 hours, leaving more time for planning, evaluation, and addressing students' needs.

3.6. Substantial Funding for Weaker Students

Finland does not face poverty constraints; all children have access to food, housing, and healthcare. Equality among schools and students is respected nationwide. Special-needs populations receive additional "positive discrimination" funding for extra teachers and counselors. All teachers are trained to help students reach their peers' level. Studies show this policy works: Finland has the smallest gap between its lowest- and highest-performing students.

3.7. Absence of Standardized Testing

Finland has no standardized tests, yet Finnish students achieve top international scores in mathematics and reading. The only mandatory test is at the end of upper secondary school. The absence of standardized testing allows greater flexibility in lesson structure and assessment. Teachers' evaluations are more personalized, and standardized test results are not used to evaluate teachers.

3.8. Joy and Play in the Curriculum

Finnish education follows the saying: "What you learn without joy, you will easily forget" (Tănase, 2022). Each school has a well-being team dedicated to student happiness. The curriculum includes second languages, physical education, arts, crafts, ethics, and music. Children have four 15-minute breaks per day outdoors,

regardless of weather. Finnish students have less homework than their peers in developed countries, allowing more time for enjoyment.

The future of Finnish children is promising due to comprehensive upper secondary education. Ninety-three percent graduate from vocational schools or high schools, about 43% choose vocational paths, and 66% continue to higher education—one of the highest rates in the EU.

3.9. Equality among Schools

A key reason for Finland's success is equality among schools. All schools are equally strong, avoiding the "death spiral" of weak schools. Unlike market-based systems such as in the U.S., where parents "buy" quality, Finnish parents can choose schools that offer the same quality everywhere. Competition disappears, and schools in wealthy and poor areas serve students equally well.

Countries that have implemented innovative education programs include Poland, Estonia, and Portugal in Europe, as well as Singapore. These governments developed coherent programs over six to eight years.

4. The Estonian Education System

Estonia's education system is based on the principle: "The best school for your child is the one closest to you" (Archip, 2021).

When the pandemic struck, Estonia already had digital platforms in place and could even assist other countries. The secret lies in equal facilities and equally well-trained teachers across all schools, from remote villages to downtown Tallinn. Learning is viewed as lifelong.

Although a small country with only 13 million inhabitants, Estonia achieves the best results in Europe in the PISA tests, outperforming Finland, whose reputation in this field is already well known. Estonia is now the most digitalized country in the world and has the highest number of companies valued at over one billion dollars per capita.

The explanation for this success can be traced back to a child's earliest years of life. Children attend kindergarten from the age of 18 months until the age of 7. The underlying idea is that they must understand where they live, and this does not

necessarily happen in the classroom but rather outdoors, in fields or forests. Between 80–90% of children attend optional courses, and parents can influence school decisions regarding the curriculum. In Estonia, the electronic kindergarten system is already 15 years old. Children are registered electronically from their very first day. Parents can see online what the child is doing, when they sleep, when they wake up, and what they eat—fruit, milk, meat, and so on.

4.1. All Schools Are Equal

All parents can choose from three assigned schools. If the chosen school does not have a swimming pool, the municipality provides the student with a free subscription to a local spa. This is not the family's problem. The penetration of the education system is uniform throughout the country. Consequently, there are no differences in PISA test results between the best schools in Tallinn and the best schools in southern Estonia, regardless of whether Russian, Swedish, or Ukrainian is spoken in those areas. As in Finland, only 10% of schools are private, and they are not particularly popular. After regaining independence, Estonia adopted the Finnish system, which at the time ranked first in Europe, encouraged by the fact that the languages spoken were similar—Finno-Ugric. They transformed the perspective from teacher-centered education to student-centered education, and this is how they managed to make an enormous difference.

4.2. The Accumulation of Knowledge Has Become a Thing of the Past

Nowadays, all information is available on Google. Children no longer need sets of information; instead, they need the skills required to use existing mechanisms, both in real life and online. Today's child needs a compilation of knowledge, skills, values, and opinions about everything that is happening. Only in this way can they be prepared for the demands of our constantly changing world.

4.3. The Right Job Is the Criterion of Performance

The entire Estonian education system is designed to meet the needs of the labor market. The sole performance criterion for most universities and vocational schools in Estonia is the number of graduates who find their preferred job within the first year after graduation. Success is based on the great flexibility of the curriculum. Everyone studies Estonian, mathematics, geography, and history, but beyond that,

there is flexibility. The school decides what is best for the student and for the community. Schools attract the business environment to help equip schools and adapt curricula to local specificities. The technical equipment of all schools is a major priority, as practical training is of the greatest importance. Young Estonians are prepared for life in society from the age of 16, when they are allowed to participate in local elections. At 18, they have the right to vote in parliamentary elections.

5. The Singapore Model

According to the most recent statistics conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Singapore is the country with the best student performance worldwide. While Finland and Estonia, with their alternative education models, continue to rank highly in student performance, Asian countries appear to be winning the gold medal in the hierarchy of the world's best-prepared students. Singapore's high schools have demonstrated in PISA tests that they possess the best skills across a range of subjects, particularly mathematics, science, and reading literacy. While the United Kingdom reached 14th place in this year's ranking, China claimed 10th place, losing the top position it held in 2009 and 2012. Canada, together with the Scandinavian countries, dominated the rankings among non-Asian countries in reading. The United States ranked a modest 25th, while Romania placed 48th out of 72 participating countries.

What is the secret of Singapore's educational success? Experts tasked with studying the effectiveness of the education system discovered that excessive focus on exams and assessments, rankings and league tables based on grades, and the classification of students according to scores has negative medium- and long-term effects. The emphasis should instead be placed on developing skills and values that help young people in the workplace and in the choices they will have to make. Starting in 2019, exams and grades in primary school are being replaced by discussions, assignments, and questionnaires—methods through which information on primary school students' performance is collected. Assessments no longer record aspects such as class rank, a student's position relative to the class average, progress reports, or subject-specific averages. Only the final exam result is reported, rounded to a whole number, without highlighting scores, comparing them, or emphasizing failures. Student placement is no longer based on grades; instead, classes are formed of students with all kinds of abilities, mixed randomly. Scholarships are awarded based

on classroom attitude, student involvement in the learning process, and family income. These measures are gradually being applied to higher grades as primary education undergoes reform.

What is certain is that many countries have much to learn from the island state. Singapore favors traditional pedagogy, in which teachers lead the classroom, in contrast to the preferences of reformers who encourage more progressive education, where students can and should learn independently. Critics of the Singapore system argue that this model of "killer drills" produces uncreative and unhappy mathematical geniuses.

Although the results are exceptional, and it is claimed that students are happier than in Finland, specialists are now introducing reforms to improve creativity and reduce stress. By attempting to view the system as a whole, Singapore introduces tested reforms, and results are carefully monitored before implementation. This is the first lesson offered to the rest of the world. Practices often considered outdated in the West are used to introduce expertise into classrooms. The result is strong alignment between assessment, accountability, and teaching styles. The second lesson concerns teaching, especially mathematics: the curriculum is narrower but deeper and ensures progress for the entire class. Children who struggle benefit from mandatory additional classes. The third and most important lesson is the focus on developing excellent teachers. Each teacher receives 100 hours of training per year to stay up to date with new teaching techniques. Classes have up to 30 students (not 24 as per the OECD average), because it is better for classes to be led by excellent teachers than for smaller classes to be taught by mediocre ones. The best teachers receive positions within the Ministry of Education and substantial bonuses. All teachers are rigorously evaluated annually.

The Singapore system is not perfect. Many criticize the separation of students with poor academic results from high-performing students starting at the age of 12. The benefits or drawbacks are not yet fully known, and this practice contributes to increased stress. Centralization is another debatable point, although judging by the results, the system may be easier to manage in this way.

6. Conclusion

Debates about educational performance increasingly revolve around a fundamental question: should schooling be organized primarily around the teacher or around the student? This question lies at the heart of contemporary educational reform and

remains as relevant today as it was several decades ago. Understanding how education systems can become both effective and equitable requires not only measuring outcomes, but also critically examining the structures, pedagogies, and values that shape learning experiences.

For Romanian education, the challenge is not to mechanically replicate a single foreign model, but to selectively adopt and adapt the reforms implemented in high-performing systems to Romania's own social, cultural, and institutional realities. Drawing on the experiences of countries such as Finland, Estonia, and Singapore, Romania can design a balanced education system in which teachers are supported as highly trained professionals and students are engaged as active and responsible learners. This approach requires contextualizing curriculum reform, recalibrating assessment practices, strengthening teacher education, and ensuring equitable access to educational resources across both urban and rural schools. As John Goodlad emphasized, education must focus on the development of the whole person and uphold the right of every child to receive high-quality learning opportunities, regardless of background or ability.

With an uninterrupted reform lasting 7 to 10 years, free from constant changes, and with a team of top specialists that the country can offer, extraordinary performance can be achieved. Romanian students are capable of reaching top positions worldwide, and they have demonstrated this countless times. Without diminishing the achievements of students who excel in international olympiads and competitions, Romanian education as a whole needs guidance, proper conditions, and high-quality teachers. What we do now will be reflected in the not-too-distant future, and Romania must secure its future—because the future depends solely on quality education.

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