

The Shanghai secret



Thomas L. Friedman

SHANGHAI Whenever I visit China, I am struck by the sharply divergent predictions of its future one hears.

Lately, a number of global investors have been “shorting” China, betting that someday soon its powerful economic engine will sputter, as the real estate boom here turns to a bust. Frankly, if I were shorting China today, it would not be because of the real estate bubble, but because of the pollution bubble that is increasingly enveloping some of its biggest cities.

Optimists take another view: that, buckle in, China is just getting started, and that what we’re now about to see is the payoff from China’s 30 years of investment in infrastructure and education. I’m not a gambler, so I’ll just watch this from the sidelines. But if you’re looking for evidence as to why the optimistic bet isn’t totally crazy, you might want to visit a Shanghai elementary school.

I’ve traveled here with Wendy Kopp, the founder of Teach for America, and the leaders of the Teach for All programs modeled on Teach for America that are operating in 32 countries. We’re visiting some of the highest- and lowest-performing schools in China to try to uncover The Secret — how is it that Shanghai’s public secondary schools topped the world charts in the 2009 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) exams that measure the ability of 15-year-olds in 65 countries to apply what they’ve learned in math, science and reading.

After visiting Shanghai’s Qiangwei Primary School, with 754 students —

grades one through five — and 59 teachers, I think I found The Secret:

There is no secret.

When you sit in on a class here and meet with the principal and teachers, what you find is a relentless focus on all the basics that we know make for high-performing schools but that are difficult to pull off consistently across an entire school system. These are: a deep commitment to teacher training, peer-to-peer learning and constant professional development, a deep involvement of parents in their children’s learning, an insistence by the school’s leadership on the highest standards and a culture

In doing the things that educators know work, its schools are world leaders in reading, science and math.

that prizes education and respects teachers.

Shanghai’s secret is simply its ability to execute more of these fundamentals in more of its schools more of the time. Take teacher development. Shen Jun, Qiangwei’s principal, who has overseen its

transformation in a decade from a low-performing to a high-performing school — even though 40 percent of her students are children of poorly educated migrant workers — says her teachers spend about 70 percent of each week teaching and 30 percent developing teaching skills and lesson planning. That is far higher than in a typical American school.

Teng Jiao, 26, an English teacher here, said school begins at 8:35 a.m. and runs to 4:30 p.m., during which he typically teaches three 35-minute lessons. I sat in on one third-grade English class. The English lesson was meticulously planned, with no time wasted. The rest of his day, he said, is spent on lesson planning, training online or with his team, having other teachers watch his class and tell him how to improve and observing the classrooms of master teachers.

“You see so many teaching techniques that you can apply to your own

classroom,” he remarks. Education experts will tell you that of all the things that go into improving a school, nothing — not class size, not technology, not length of the school day — pays off more than giving teachers the time for peer review and constructive feedback, exposure to the best teaching and time to deepen their knowledge of what they’re teaching.

Teng said his job also includes “parent training.” Parents come to the school three to five times a semester to develop computer skills so they can better help their kids with homework and follow lessons online. Christina Bao, 29, who also teaches English, said she tries to chat either by phone or online with the parents of each student two or three times a week to keep them abreast of their child’s progress. “I will talk to them about what the students are doing at school.” She then alluded matter-of-factly to a big cultural difference here, “I tell them not to beat them if they are not doing well.”

In 2003, Shanghai had a very “average” school system, said Andreas Schleicher, who runs the PISA exams. “A decade later, it’s leading the world and has dramatically decreased variability between schools.” He, too, attributes this to the fact that, while in America a majority of a teacher’s time in school is spent teaching, in China’s best schools, a big chunk is spent learning from peers and personal development. As a result, he said, in places like Shanghai, “the system is good at attracting average people and getting enormous productivity out of them,” while also, “getting the best teachers in front of the most difficult classrooms.”

China still has many mediocre schools that need fixing. But the good news is that in just doing the things that American and Chinese educators know work — but doing them systematically and relentlessly — Shanghai has in a decade lifted some of its schools to the global heights in reading, science and math skills. Oh, and Shen Jun, the principal, wanted me to know: “This is just the start.”