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**Why Are Finland's Schools Successful?**

**15 Reasons Reformers Are Looking to Finland**

**By LynNell Hancock**

With schools failing, poor test scores, and dwindling budgets, there’s no doubt that the American education system is in need of reform, but how to go about doing that has been, and undoubtedly will continue to be, a controversial issue among teachers, students, and parents alike. In recent years, programs like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top have aimed at helping motivate teachers and communities to turn around schools, but unfortunately these reforms seem to have little lasting impact, with some claiming they’ve done more harm than good. So what can work to really reform American schools?

There is no easy answer, but many are looking to Finland as a model of how to build an education system that really works. Over the past decade, Finland’s students have consistently scored near or at the top of international assessments regardless of economic or social background, despite spending fewer hours in school than their American counterparts. Some American reformers are looking to capitalize on that amazing success in their own school districts, but that may be easier said than done: Finland’s education system is radically different than that of the U.S. or even neighboring Nordic countries. Still, many see it as a promising model and it’s not hard to see why. Read on to learn why so many education reformers are enamored with Finnish education and what their system can teach us about reforming our own.

A survey, conducted by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, compares 15-year-olds in different countries in reading, math, and science. Finland has ranked near the top in all three competencies since 2000, on par with South Korea and Singapore. In contrast, the U.S. has received middling scores in math, science, and reading. Despite spending more money, assigning more homework, and spending more hours in school, American students can’t match the academic prowess of Finnish students, which has been one of the primary reasons education reformers from around the world have been so captivated by the Finnish education model.

**Schools don’t assign much homework.**

Finnish students have managed to get to the top of international rankings without bringing their schoolwork home with them, unlike other top performers like South Korea, Singapore, and China. Finnish schools assign far less homework than any of the top performing nations and significantly less than the U.S. as well. In fact, high school students are rarely assigned more than a half-hour of homework a night and students in elementary and middle school aren’t assigned any homework at all. Finland’s educational model is based on the idea that kids should have time to just be kids and doesn’t want to weigh young students down with hours of homework. This is in stark contrast with many American education reforms that have advocated for longer hours and more intensive study for students at all ages and many have struggled to understand how Finnish students can do so much with so little time spent working on assignments and attending class.

**Teachers are in charge.**

At the heart of the success of Finland’s education system are the teachers who, unlike their American counterparts, are given a great deal of autonomy and trust. Finland does have a national curriculum, but it is simply a set of broad guidelines and isn’t a strict outline of what and when teachers have to address certain topics. Teachers are largely responsible for developing their own curriculum within these basic guidelines, assessing student progress, and running virtually every aspect of the children’s educational experience. This sort of professional trust has been a major issue for American teachers who feel they have little autonomy in the classroom, must teach for tests, and aren’t regarded as being true professionals. Few reforms have worked to correct this, but as the Finnish model shows, that might be a big first step to fixing some of the problems with American education.

**Classwork focuses on creativity.**

Instead of working to memorize information or to learn topics that will be covered on standardized tests, Finnish students are encouraged to think creatively and learn simply for learning’s sake. Creative play and problem solving play a central role in the classroom, creating an informal and relaxed classroom setting. This sort of setting, where little appears to actually be going on, is something quite foreign to many educators in the U.S. (though some Montessori schools use a similar model) and may not work with the current system that focuses so intensely on test scores. Yet it seems to be working for Finland, which boasts not only high test scores but extremely high productivity rates among adults.

**All schools in Finland are public schools.**

There is no such thing as a private school in Finland, something that’s in stark contrast to the educational models of many countries, including the U.S. where many parents are focused on school choice. Finland offers school choice, too; the only difference is that all the choices are the same. There are only a small number of independent schools in Finland, but all are publicly financed and are not allowed to charge tuition fees. This prioritization of public schools extends to higher ed as well, as all Finnish universities are public. As a result, all students have access to the same educational resources, regardless of their backgrounds. This couldn’t be more different from the American way of doing things, especially in an era when charter schools (essentially publicly funded private schools) are being touted as a solution to some of America’s worst educational woes.

**There are no standardized tests.**

The American obsession with standardized testing has no place in the Finnish educational system. In fact, most students are only tested once during their school careers, taking the National Matriculation Exam at the end of voluntary upper-secondary school, roughly the equivalent of American high school. Instead of large-scale tests, teachers are trained to assess children in classrooms using customized tests that they create themselves and random samplings of students are tested each year by the Ministry of Education. Why the aversion to testing? According to Finnish education experts, the first years of education shouldn’t be about academic success, instead focusing on teaching children how to live, learn, and find their passions. This may be a particularly hard thing for the American education system to adopt, as testing is deeply entrenched in all aspects of education, both for teachers and students.

**Being a teacher requires a lot of education and training.**

In Finland, the old trope "those who can, do; those who can’t, teach" doesn’t apply. Teaching is regarded as one of the most prestigious and hard-to-master professions. In order to work as a teacher, a master’s degree is required and teacher training programs are among the most selective professional schools in the country. Only one in 10 will qualify and be accepted to teacher preparation programs, where they are trained to work with all types of students, even those with disabilities, language barriers, and other learning-related issues and will learn to develop their own curricula, assess their own pupils’ progress, and continuously improve their own teaching. This focus on teacher education doesn’t end after graduation, however. Teachers are paid to spend two hours a week on professional development throughout their careers. In order to make this happen, the Finnish government helps teachers to finance their educations, something that’s hard to imagine happening stateside.

**Teachers are highly respected as professionals.**

In the U.S., teachers aren’t especially well-respected and in recent years have been vilified and pointed to as the reason the American education system is failing. That’s hardly a fair assessment and if Finland is any indication, it may be doing quite a bit of harm to education. Unlike in the U.S., teachers and administrators in Finland are given prestige, decent pay, and a lot of responsibility. They are highly regarded professionals, akin to medical doctors and lawyers, partly because it’s more difficult to get into education than law or medicine. Only the best and the brightest can be teachers. As a result, teaching is one of the top career choices among young Finns, despite a fairly low average starting salary of $29,000 (compare that with an average salary of $36,000 for teachers in the U.S.). It is far easier to become a teacher in the U.S., and the profession doesn’t carry much respect, personally or professionally, in American society. The most current education reforms seem to be pushing in the opposite direction, in fact, paying teachers less, discouraging additional education, and focusing exclusively on test scores as a measure of teacher performance.

**Finland is all about cooperation in education, not competition.**

American schools are always vying to come out ahead, whether it’s in rankings, tests, or any other measures of success. Ironically, it may be this quest to be "the best" that is holding back the American education system, at least when you compare it to the model used in Finland. Finns believe that real winners don’t have to compete, a completely alien view to Americans, but one that has serious merits when it comes to education. There are no lists of best schools or teachers in Finland and the main driver of education policy is not competition between teachers and between schools, but cooperation. Since schools aren’t worried about trying to vie for the No. 1 position, they can work together to figure out solutions for students that benefit all involved. Current U.S. systems aren’t set up to foster this kind of collaboration, and some worry that competition for top honors in higher ed is having a negative impact of the education those schools offer.

**Finland’s system is about equity, not excellence.**

Three decades ago, Finland’s education system was in dire need of reform. Instead of focusing on creating schools that were the best, Finland’s education policy makers focused on creating a level playing field, where all schools offered equal resources for learning. Since then, the main driver of Finnish education policy has been the idea that every child should have exactly the same opportunity to learn, regardless of family background, income, or geographic location. Finnish schools are funded based on a formula guaranteeing equal allocation of resources to each school regardless of location or wealth of its community and what’s more, higher education is free to Finnish students. This focus on equality has been a hot topic in the U.S. in recent months, especially with the prevalence of the Occupy movement. Unfortunately, this is also part of what makes many of Finland’s most successful policies so impossible to import to the U.S., as the equity embodied by the school system is a product of many other aspects of Finnish politics that would likely prove unpopular in the U.S.

**Educational success in Finland has been about more than just lessons.**

Finland’s students don’t just excel because of the educational resources they have at their disposal. Finnish schools are founded on promoting the total well-being of children, requiring by law that each school also provide free food, access to health care, and on-site counseling and guidance. Every school must have a welfare team to advance child happiness in school, creating a safe, healthy environment for students that’s especially conducive to learning. Some of Finland’s protections start even before students enter school, mandating childcare and preschool access to families within their own communities. American students do enjoy some of these same benefits, but certainly not to the same degree, and with budgets being cut, many disadvantaged students can’t rely on meals or after-school activities at their schools any longer.

**Finland’s increased immigration didn’t change test scores.**

Many education reformers argue that the Finnish model of education can’t work in the U.S. because Finland is much smaller and more homogenous than the U.S. They do have a point, as just 4.6% of Fins are foreign compared with 12.7% in the U.S. Yet that isn’t the whole story. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of immigrants in Finland doubled, yet Finland’s test scores remained among the best in the world, even in schools with heavily foreign-born populations. More telling, when Finland is compared to other similar countries, like Norway, it still shines. Norway is also small and not particularly diverse, but its education system, much more American than Finnish, has resulted in mediocre performance in the PISA survey. The same is true for Sweden, Switzerland, and Denmark. In many places, the U.S. may be more like Finland than we realize, with 18 states with an identical or significantly smaller percentage of foreign-born residents than Finland. The lesson? Educational policy and practice is a far more important indicator of success than a nation’s size or ethnic makeup, a striking lesson for many places in the U.S. struggling to accommodate an incredibly diverse group of students or new immigrants.

**Finland is trying to create a knowledge-based economy.**

The U.S. and Finland have one big thing in common: they want to establish a knowledge-based economy. While the U.S. is struggling to replace its manufacturing core with high-tech industries and services, Finland is having a much easier time. Starting in the 1970s, Finnish policy makers realized that they couldn’t rely on their natural resources or small industrial core to keep afloat economically, instead focusing on building a knowledge-based economy. The education system became part of a public effort and a public mission to improve not just some of the students, but all of them. As a result, Finnish students are better prepared to compete in the international economy, something the U.S. desperately wants and needs to emulate. To do so, policies will need to reflect a key lesson from Finnish schools: having the best schools isn’t enough if not all students have equal access to them.

**Finnish schools offer a positive learning environment.**

Head to almost any school in Finland and you’ll find classrooms that are safe, encouraging, and sometimes even filled with impressive architecture and design. Additionally, class sizes are small, with no elementary classes going over 24 students and most having far less than that number. Students are encouraged to play, have fun, and embrace the arts. Finland’s school system has roughly the same number of teachers as New York City’s but far fewer students — 600,000 compared with New York’s 1.1 million — meaning there are more teachers to go around, so that all get support and attention, especially those with special needs. Some American classrooms do offer a similar experience, but many do not, and access to teachers, resources, and even the arts is largely based on economic privilege.

**The key element to Finland’s success? Trust.**

In Finland, there is a strong sense of trust in schools and teachers to carry out the heavy responsibility of educating children. There are no external inspections of schools or standardized testing to constantly monitor student progress. Instead, parents trust teachers as qualified professionals, teachers trust one another and collaborate to solve mutual problems, and principals trust their teachers because they have all been teachers themselves. It is such a positive system that very few students drop out (less than 1%) and there is almost no teacher attrition.

Thirty years ago, Finland’s education system was in the same sorry state that America’s is today. It was mediocre and inequitable and relied on many of the same measures of success that we use here, like standardized testing and teacher tracking. Teachers had varying degrees of education and students didn’t have access to equal education resources. They’ve managed to change all of that in just a few decades. Regardless of whether the U.S. can import some of what makes Finland’s schools so successful, they can get hope from the rapid changes to the Finnish education system that show the true and lasting impact smart reforms can have on a country’s educational potential.