

Learning from Finland's Education System

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Introduction

Finland has one of the best education systems in the world.(1) Ever since the OECD started testing 15 year olds all around the world to see how well they were learning through their PISA exams, Finnish students have always been near the top. When the first results came out in 2000, Finland had the top reading scores. By 2003, Finnish students led in math. By 2006, they had the best science scores in the world. This led to a surge in attention given to Finnish schools around the world and how best to learn from them. Pasi Sahlberg, the former director of the Finnish Ministry of Education and Harvard visiting professor, wrote his first of several books on how the Finnish education system works so well in 2011, and Amanda Ripley profiled the Finnish education system in her own book, *The Smartest Kids in the World: And How They Got That Way*, that was published in 2013. Since then Finnish schools continue to do well, even if they might not reach the top ranking like they did before. In the most recent PISA test in 2018, Finland tied for second place among the 37 OECD countries in reading, while in math, Finland came in between 7th and 13th among OECD nations. For science, they came in third overall among OECD countries.

Unlike some other school systems around the world, Finland does not achieve these incredible results through a ton of standardized testing or extreme pressure to study harder. The only standardized test in Finland is the nationwide exam at the end of a student's senior year of high school. As a result, teachers are not evaluated based on how well their students perform on tests, but are instead given a lot of autonomy and flexibility in their classroom as well. Finnish teachers spend less time in the classroom than American teachers and students are not overloaded with homework either. Finnish schools put a strong emphasis on fairness and making especially sure that the struggling students do well too.

Finnish schools then have a lot of attractive qualities. They teach their students well without making them miserable in the process, and the more you look into them, the more you see features that you want to emulate. Based on my own understanding of the Finnish education system, their approach to schooling seems to have five key advantages that the US could adopt in their own schools that would likely make them better over the long run.

First Advantage: Extremely High Quality Teachers

One of the pillars of Finland's extremely successful education system is the high quality teachers they manage to attract and train. Finland started along this road by making their system of teacher education extremely rigorous, including requiring all teachers to get a Masters Degree, which in turn led to better students being attracted to the program. As a result, Finland's teacher training schools are

now extremely selective, accepting only about one in ten of all applicants. Finnish teachers do not do this because of high teacher salaries, but because they are given a lot of time and autonomy to create their own curriculum, while also enjoying a great deal of respect due to the selectivity and rigor of their career choice. In Finland, opinion polls have shown that teaching is the most admired profession, and becoming a primary school teacher is the most sought after career. This means Finnish students are being taught by the best Finland has to offer, and then accentuates this by training them extremely rigorously and thoroughly.

Second Advantage: Generous Amounts of Leave to Care for Young Children

According to the OECD, Finland offers a relatively normal four months of paid maternity leave, but then adds on an extremely generous amount of child care leave so that in total, Finnish mothers received about 3 years of paid leave in total in 2018. While the maternity leave includes generous benefits that replaces about 75% of their income, the extended amount of child care leave only pays about 20% of their previous wage. Among OECD countries, only Estonia, Hungary, and the Slovak Republic comes close to Finland's period of paid leave, and virtually all other countries offer only a year or less for new mothers. One interesting thing to note is that in the 2018 PISA tests, Estonia was the only OECD country to do better than Finland on reading scores, and they were also one of the few countries to also offer extremely generous amounts of paid maternity and child care leave. This suggests that encouraging mothers to stay at home with their young kids can help with their language development and improve reading scores throughout their entire time in school. In comparison, the US was the only OECD country to not offer any paid maternity or child care leave, so clearly the US has a lot of room for improvement, and US states should experiment with much longer periods of paid maternity and child care leave to see if that improves school performance for students in those states as well.

Third Advantage: Offering Intensive Interventions as Soon as Students Start Falling Behind

Another key feature of Finnish schools is their unusual approach to special education. In Finland, teachers keep a close eye on their students and as soon as someone starts falling behind in school, they send them to special education for an intensive intervention from a dedicated team of professionals. The goal of these efforts is not to permanently separate them from the normal classes like they do in the United States, but instead to offer temporary help until the student turns their performance in school around. Once that happens, they are reintegrated back into the normal classrooms as soon as possible. As a result of this approach, about 30 percent of students in Finland end up in some sort of special education at some point in their first 9 years of school, but very few end up in that system long term. This system works well because if students do start having problems learning, then these problems are identified early and quickly reversed, where students learn very early in their school careers that if they do not continue to work hard and end up falling behind, a lot of attention and effort will be put in by adults to make sure they do perform well in the future. This avoids issues where a student does not put in the effort early on, and learns they can get away with it just fine since nobody seems to care, so every year they keep falling further and further behind.

Fourth Advantage: Making Every Class a Gifted Class

One interesting feature of Finland's education system is that until students reach high school, there is no tracking in any of the earlier grades. All the students are combined into comprehensive schools where the lowest and highest performing students are taught in the same classrooms. In Finnish schools there is a strong emphasis on equity, and, during their training program, teachers are given extra help in learning how to teach to a wide variety of skill levels at the same time. A complete ban on tracking might be a bit much for the US since we do not have the extremely high quality education set up for all their students like Finland does, however, there is a valuable lesson to be learned in that the best teachers, rigorous instruction, and high expectations should not be limited to the very best students. By putting a well trained and highly talented teacher in every classroom, and setting expectations very high for all their students, Finland essentially provides a level of instruction for every student that in the US would only be reserved for gifted classes. By not just focusing all the best resources on the highest performing students, Finland provides a very high quality and broad based education system that does well for a very large percentage of their students overall.

Fifth Advantage: Make High School More Like College and Less Like Middle School

Another unusual feature of the Finnish education system is that their students receive relatively little instructional time and enjoy a great deal of autonomy and flexibility in their education. Among OECD countries, students in Finland actually go to school for the least number of hours every year, and these short days with frequent breaks allow both students and teachers to focus on making sure the time they do have is as productive and useful as possible. This makes Finnish high schools look more like colleges in the US, where students have a lot of time for themselves and have more control over what they want to study, while sitting in class for fewer hours compared to US high schools or middle schools. The US could follow in this example by slowly reforming their own high schools to operate more like colleges do in the US and less like an extension of middle school.

Conclusion

Finland then, because of their own educational success, could serve as a useful model for the US to follow. Finland does an excellent job teaching their students in all the different subject matters without making their lives miserable by pressuring them to study all the time. Finland does not do this through a detailed national curriculum supported by high stakes standardized tests, but instead by giving teachers a lot of autonomy and control over what they teach, which makes the field more attractive to enter. Combined with a rigorous and thorough teacher training system, this has allowed the teaching profession to become an elite, well respected, and highly sought after field that allows schools across the country to attract highly talented individuals to teach their students. Add in an extraordinarily generous system of maternity and child care leave, and this helps all students excel in school, especially in reading, by facilitating intellectual development early on in their life.

By intervening early when students do fall behind, this addresses any educational difficulties quickly before they accumulate for many years, which also tells students they are expected to stay motivated in

school and if they do not, then this will lead to extra attention from a team of professionals. Finnish schools also have a strong emphasis on equity, which ensures that every student gets the highest quality education, essentially giving everyone an education that would normally be reserved for gifted students in the US. High school students in Finland also get a great deal of autonomy and flexibility in their education, along with lower amounts of instructional time, which makes them more like colleges in the US rather than middle schools. In many of these areas, the US is far behind in adopting the successful approaches used by Finland, but this does provide the country with a series of goals to aspire to that will likely improve education in the US over the long run.

End Notes

#1 – For more information on the Finnish education system, there is a short profile in the Smithsonian Magazine (Hancock 2011), or if you want greater detail Finnish education expert Pasi Sahlberg has a series of books on the subject (Sahlberg 2011, 2015, 2018). I was first exposed to the Finnish approach to education by reading Amada Ripley's book, *The Smartest Kids in the World* (Ripley 2013), which profiles a foreign exchange student who studied for a year in Finland along with students in South Korea and Poland.

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