

# **The Finnish education model: Highlights, resources and research**



Excellence in K-12 Education:  
Experiences in Finland and Washington State

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# Introduction

Finnish students are among the best in the world. Their success has come through a system that would seem unorthodox here in the United States: no standardized testing, no private schools, fewer hours in school, teacher autonomy, full national funding, and equality in education, among other things.

This document highlights some of the distinguishing characteristics of the Finnish education system, in hopes of catalyzing further conversation and exploration.

## Origins of the Finnish system

Finland was not always the gold standard in public education. After the Second World War, it languished in the middle strata of European countries. Faced with few natural resources, the push to prepare to thrive in the knowledge-based global economy began with a governmental commitment to break away from a class-based system of educational rudiments and advancement toward a system that opened up secondary and tertiary education to all children.

Here's the process as described by Lynnell Hancock in a recent Smithsonian Magazine article:

*“Lawmakers landed on a deceptively simple plan that formed the foundation for everything to come. Public schools would be organized into one system of comprehensive schools, or peruskoulu, for ages 7 through 16. Teachers from all over the nation contributed to a national curriculum that provided guidelines, not prescriptions.*

*Besides Finnish and Swedish (the country's second official language), children would learn a third language (English is a favorite) usually beginning at age 9. Resources were distributed equally. As the comprehensive schools improved, so did the upper secondary schools (grades 10 through 12).*

*The second critical decision came in 1979, when reformers required that every teacher earn a fifth-year master's degree in theory and practice at one of eight state universities—at state expense. From then on, teachers were effectively granted equal status with doctors and lawyers.*

*Applicants began flooding teaching programs, not because the salaries were so high but because autonomy and respect made the job attractive. In 2010, some 6,600 applicants vied for 660 primary school training slots...*

*By the mid-1980s, a final set of initiatives shook the classrooms free from the last vestiges of top-down regulation. Control over policies shifted to town councils. The national curriculum was distilled into broad guidelines. National math goals for grades one through nine, for example, were reduced to a neat ten pages.*

*Sifting and sorting children into so-called ability groupings was eliminated. All children—clever or less so—were to be taught in the same classrooms, with lots of special teacher help available to make sure no child really would be left behind.*

*The inspectorate closed its doors in the early '90s, turning accountability and inspection over to teachers and principals. “We have our own motivation to succeed because we love the work,” said Kari Louhivuori, a veteran teacher and principal, “our incentives come from inside.”<sup>1</sup>*

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## NOTES

# Hallmarks of the Finnish system

## Equality

"THE GOAL OF THE PROGRAM THAT FINLAND INSTITUTED, RESULTING IN SO MUCH SUCCESS TODAY, WAS NEVER EXCELLENCE. IT WAS EQUITY." <sup>2</sup>

"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"<sup>3</sup> The learning difference between the highest performing school in Finland and the lowest performing school is the smallest in OECD.

Finnish schools are funded based on a formula guaranteeing equal allocation of resources to each school regardless of location or wealth of its community. Schools are funded based on the number of students, and given extra money if they have high proportions of immigrants or students with unemployed and/or uneducated parents.

Students are held back only as a last resort, the effects deemed too damaging to self esteem. Instead, struggling students are given extra attention, often through the provision of an extra teacher to work on a particular subject. "Even many of the most severely disabled will find a place in Finland's expanded system of vocational high schools, which are attended by 43 percent of Finnish high-school students, who prepare to work in restaurants, hospitals, construction sites and offices."<sup>4</sup>

## Accountability and Testing

"ACCOUNTABILITY IS SOMETHING THAT IS LEFT WHEN RESPONSIBILITY HAS BEEN SUBTRACTED."<sup>5</sup>

"If I could change one thing in [US education] policy, I would seriously rethink the role of standardized testing," says Pasi Sahlberg. Indeed, Finland's success has come without intensive testing, deemed too costly and stress-inducing by the Finnish Board of Education.

Standardized tests and performance assessments so popular in the US, are seen as intrusive, too narrowly focused, and not as effective as a teacher's knowledge of their student. Finland has no nationwide tests to evaluate teachers, students or schools. Instead, statistically significant samples and observations by principals are responsible for identifying problems

The only mandatory test in Finland, called the National Matriculation Exam, comes at the end of the Finnish equivalent of high school and serves as an entrance exam to university. An optional district-wide test is given at 6th grade, but results are not publicized.

Instead, teachers learn to evaluate children in the classroom using their own tests and measures. Report cards for children are based on individualized grading by each teacher.

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## NOTES

## Quality of Instruction

"IT'S THE QUALITY OF THE TEACHING THAT IS DRIVING FINLAND'S RESULTS. . . THE U.S. HAS AN INDUSTRIAL MODEL WHERE TEACHERS ARE THE MEANS FOR CONVEYING A PREFABRICATED PRODUCT. IN FINLAND, THE TEACHERS ARE THE STANDARD." –ANDREAS SCHLEICHER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR EDUCATION, OECD<sup>6</sup>

Recently, Raija Vahasalo, who chairs the Education and Culture Committee of the Finnish Parliament, told a U.S. delegation of policy leaders and educators that the her government, a coalition of six political parties, has "quite a good consensus over how to improve our education system – because we trust teachers." MP Vahasalo continued, "we know we have so many good teachers; they all have master's degrees in education."<sup>7</sup>

Part of the reason Finland can step away from extensive testing is because of the high level of trust and respect placed in teachers. That trust is well earned; becoming a teacher in Finland is not easy. Teachers go through a five year teaching program with a three year masters degree—funded completely by the state.

"Subject-matter teachers earn their master's degree from the university's academic departments, not—in contrast to the US—the department of teacher education, or in special schools for teacher education. Every candidate prepares to teach all kinds of students, including students with disabilities and other special needs. Every teacher must complete an undergraduate degree and a master's degree in education."<sup>8</sup>

The program is highly competitive – only 1 in 10 are accepted. "In 2008, the latest year for which figures are available, 1,258 undergrads applied for training to become elementary-school teachers. Only 123, or 9.8%, were accepted into the five-year teaching program"<sup>9</sup> "Teachers' preparation includes both extensive coursework on how to teach—with a strong emphasis on using research based on state-of-the-art practice—and at least a full year of clinical experience in a school associated with the university."<sup>10</sup>

The perception of teachers is also radically different. They are accorded status greater than lawyers and doctors, and have salaries to match that status. Finnish high school teachers with 15 years of experience make 102 percent of what their fellow university graduates do. In the US, they earn just 65%.<sup>11</sup> Starting, take-home salaries were about \$29,000 in 2008, compared to \$36,000 in the United States. (This comparison does not take into account elements of social insurance that cover all Finns, such as health care, family leave insurance, and early childhood education costs.)<sup>12</sup>

Teachers work 190 days a year, spending on average 4 hours a day in the classroom<sup>13</sup> They are paid to spend 2 hours a week on professional development.<sup>14</sup> 96% of Finland's teachers are unionized.<sup>15</sup>

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## NOTES

## Curriculum and Pedagogy

“A HANDFUL OF 9-YEAR-OLDS ARE SITTING BACK TO BACK, ARRANGING STICKS, PINECONES, STONES AND BERRIES INTO SHAPES ON THE FROZEN GROUND. THE ARRANGERS WILL THEN HAVE TO DESCRIBE THESE SHAPES USING GEOMETRIC TERMS SO THE KIDS WHO CAN'T SEE THEM CAN SAY WHAT THEY ARE.”<sup>16</sup>

During the recent Finnish study tour, Pasi Sahlberg told the U.S. delegation that “so much of what we do in curriculum and assessment we have learned from American researchers and educators.”<sup>17</sup>

Finland distinguishes itself from other high-achieving countries (like Korea and Singapore) by getting results, not through rote memorization or teaching to a test, but through a curriculum based in cooperation and problem-solving. A national curriculum exists, but it is short (the math section is only 10 pages) and is used more as a guide than a set of rules. The system allows for ample experimentation and cooperation.

Some other distinguishing aspects of Finnish schools include:

- According to the OECD, Finnish children spend the fewest number of hours in the classroom in the developed world. Schooling starts at age 7, with 9 years of compulsory education (until age 16), and school days are shorter than in the US. Finnish elementary schools have 75 minutes of recess a day in compared to an average of 27 minutes in the U.S.
- Teachers spend about 80 percent as much time leading classes as their U.S. counterparts. Ideally, the teacher stays with a class from first grade through sixth grade. An additional teacher is also provided, to help those who struggle in a particular subject – but all pupils all kept in the same classroom.
- “Students in grades one through nine spend from four to eleven periods each week taking classes in art, music, cooking, carpentry, metalwork, and textiles. These classes provide natural venues for learning math and science, nurture critical cooperative skills, and implicitly cultivate respect for people who make their living working with their hands.”<sup>18</sup> Science classes are capped at 16 students so each pupil may do labs each lesson.

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## NOTES

## Beyond the Classroom

“DR. SAHLBERG POINTED TO FINLAND’S LUTHERAN LEANINGS, ALMOST RELIGIOUS BELIEF IN EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY, AND A DECISION IN 1957 TO REQUIRE SUBTITLES ON FOREIGN TELEVISION AS KEY INGREDIENTS TO THE SUCCESS STORY.”<sup>19</sup>

Outside of the classroom, there are significant and important factors beyond the classroom experience that distinguish Finland from the United States. A strong taxpayer-funded system ensures all children show up ready to learn.

Finland provides three years of family leave and subsidized day care for all children.<sup>20</sup> Preschool is provided for all 6-year-olds, and 97 percent of 6-year-olds attend. The emphasis is on play and socializing, with some beginning academics.<sup>21</sup> Higher education is tuition-free.

Schools provide comprehensive health services including medical care and counseling, lunch every day, and taxi service if needed—free of charge for all children. Fewer than 4 percent of Finnish children are in poverty.<sup>22</sup>

The state subsidizes parents, paying around 150 Euros per month for every child until he or she turns 17.<sup>23</sup> And there is a culture of reading with the kids at home and families have regular contact with their children's teachers.

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## NOTES

## Results and Implications for Washington

"I'M NOT TRYING TO CONVINCING PEOPLE THAT IF THEY FOLLOW WHAT FINLAND IS DOING, THINGS WILL BE GOOD. ALL THE EDUCATION ISSUES AND REFORMS ARE DONE SPECIFICALLY TO THE CULTURE AND SHOULD BE DONE LOCALLY... I'M VERY MUCH AWARE THAT AMERICA IS VERY DIFFERENT CULTURALLY. I'M TRYING TO TELL WHAT WE'VE BEEN DOING AND USE FINLAND AS REAL-WORLD EVIDENCE."<sup>24</sup>

International tests such as the Program for International Student Assessment have helped Finland garner so much attention. Finnish students consistently place at the top in measures of math, science, and reading.

In 2009, Finnish students ranked 6th in math, 2nd in science, 3rd in reading. US students ranked 30th, 23rd, and 17th, comparatively. In 2006, Finland's pupils scored the highest average results in science and reading in the whole of the developed world. "Ninety-three percent of Finns graduate from academic or vocational high schools, 17.5 percentage points higher than the United States, and 66 percent go on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union. Yet Finland spends about 30 percent less per student than the United States."<sup>25</sup>

There is reason to believe that it is the Finnish system, in conjunction with the country's culture, which is leading to such great results. While implementation in the United States may not make sense on a national scale, it may be more feasible at the state level.

To those who say that Finland's successes are unique to their size and Nordic culture, the example of Norway stands out as a counterexample.

"How could it possibly offer lessons to a country the size of the United States? The answer is next door. Norway is also small (4.8 million people) and nearly as homogeneous (10 percent foreign-born), but it is more akin to the United States than to Finland in its approach to education: Teachers don't need master's degrees; high school teachers with 15 years of experience earn only 70 percent of what fellow university graduates make; and in 2004, authorities implemented a national system of standardized testing"<sup>26</sup>

When comparing the two countries' 2009 PISA scores, the differences in outcome become stark. While Finland scored near or at the top of the reading, mathematics and science assessments, Norway's students only scored markedly ahead of the OECD mean on the reading exam.<sup>27</sup> Norwegian students scored just higher than the mean in mathematics, and were slightly behind the mean in science.

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### NOTES

## Endnotes

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