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Finland is #1!

Finland's education success has the rest of the world looking north for answers.

By Wayne D'Orio on the *Scholastic* website

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In this moment of time before the day-to-day rush of students, classes, and problems comes roaring back, every administrator finds him- or herself wondering occasionally about the big picture.

Is there a better way to educate our students? Would tweaking the K–12 system we have now encourage improvement and meet children's 21st-century needs? The biggest what-if, looking-out-the-window question remains: How would you construct an educational system if you could start from scratch?

It turns out that not only does everyone ponder these timeless queries, but more and more groups of educators have been making a pilgrimage to northern Europe to see if the answers lie in a small country of just 5.3 million people: Finland.

For a country that famously avoids competitive, high-stakes tests, Finland has been garnering a lot of acclaim for its students' scores on the most recent Programme for International Student Assessment test. Finland's 15-year-olds topped the science tests given two years ago, besting students from 56 other countries, from Argentina to Uruguay. Combined with its high scores on the most recent reading and math tests, this gives Finland teens the top ranking in the world.

Secrets to Success

With visions of imitating Finland's success back home, educators from 50 countries around the globe have visited the Nordic country over the past few years, including numerous groups from the United States.

What they found was somewhat surprising. Although there are certainly pieces of the Finnish educational system that can be copied over here, the three biggest reasons for the country's success are probably the hardest to replicate.

First of all, "there is a near absence of poverty," says Julie Walker, a board member of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Walker visited Finland, along with Sweden and Denmark, with a delegation from the Consortium of School Networking (CoSN) in late 2007. "They have socialized medicine and much more educational funding," she adds. For residents, school lunches are free, preschool is free, college is free. "Children come to school ready to learn. They come to school healthy. That's not a problem the United States has solved yet."

The second reason is all students' fluency with languages. Most students know three languages: Finnish, Swedish, and English.

“They are way ahead of the game on the language side,” says the National School Boards Association’s Ann Flynn, who made the trip with CoSN. “Nearly every student can communicate in English as well as in their native tongue.

”Although Finnish children don’t start formal schooling until the age of 7, by the end of their first year, they all know how to read and write, says Bryan Luizzi, principal of Brookfield High School in Connecticut. Luizzi visited the country this year with a Connecticut contingent from Education Connection.

The third reason is the degree of respect and trust teachers are given in Finland. Walker compared it to the status that doctors enjoy in the United States.

Flynn agreed, adding, “I was left with the most amazing sense of respect for the teaching profession. It’s how they were viewed in this country 75 years ago.”

One of the reasons for that reverence is how hard it is to become a teacher in Finland. Only one of eight applicants to teacher education programs is accepted; each teacher has a master’s degree. “The best and the brightest want to become teachers in Finland,” says Keith Krueger, CoSN’s CEO. “In our higher education system, the bottom third of the students are becoming teachers.”

A member of the National Education Association on the CoSN trip inquired about the teacher salaries, no doubt expecting that Finnish counterparts would be better paid. But it wasn’t the case. Salaries are roughly comparable, and in total Finland spends about \$1,200 less per student than the United States’ \$8,700 per-pupil average.

Long-Term Turnaround

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Finland’s educational success is the path it took to the top. Thirty-five years ago the country was considered middle-of-the-road or worse educationally. The country eliminated its education inspector and rethought its educational system.

The most impressive part of Finland’s turnaround for many visitors is the patience the country showed. Of course, this is a country that understands that supplying prenatal vitamins to pregnant women will help pay off in a more productive member of society 25 years later, so long-term thinking isn’t unusual.

“They made some changes, and then they waited,” says Luizzi. The United States has more of a Christmas tree approach to education reform, he adds. “We are always putting on new ornaments. Finland thinks more strategically.”

Students start school at age 7 and complete secondary school at 15 or 16. Based on grades, students then go to either vocational school or upper secondary school. Slightly more than half of Finnish students attend upper secondary school.

While Finland famously supports its residents and students, it is notable to mention what’s missing at its schools. There are no sports teams, no marching bands, no co-curricular activities, and no school busing system.

Upending Technology Expectations

The biggest surprise visitors find in Finland schools is a lack of technology. “It was a bit

disarming,” Luizzi says. “I didn’t see a single student with a laptop.” He added that outside of school, most students have two or three cell phones, with many of them boasting better features than Americans see.

Walker says the people on the CoSN trip were disappointed by what they didn’t find. While there are computers available and students searching for digital information, “I would say in any semi-wealthy U.S. school district, you’d see more technology.”

One anecdote that truly illuminates the difference between U.S. and Finnish culture came when visitors asked librarians how they filter the Internet for students. Finnish educators didn’t understand the question, Walker says, because the concept was so foreign to them. Finally, the two responses the group got were, “Students know these computers are for learning,” and “The filters are in students’ heads.”

Aspirational Goals

What parts of the Finnish system might be more easily adopted in the United States? There are some areas that, while they aren’t entirely similar, are certainly close enough not to require a sea change in this country. While there’s much discussion in the U. S. about data-driven decision-making and moving to individualized instruction for each student, Finland seems to have achieved this goal in a more organic way. “Everyone owned each student,” Walker says. “In the U.S., we would be, ‘He’s in Mrs. Smith’s class.’ In Denmark and Finland, the ownership was by the entire faculty. They felt responsible, and the learning was more individualized.”

Flynn says teachers focus less on data-driven decisions and more on differentiated instruction—partly the result of high-quality teachers, and partly because they know their students better. The country’s upper secondary schools have 70-minute classes, echoing the block schedule still used by some high schools here. While the length of the school year is similar between countries, Finland’s courses are split into six-week units, Luizzi says. It’s a modular approach, with students having to pass each section before moving on.

The last major change in education Finland made was to loosen the national curriculum and give teachers more control. “They still give out objectives and expected outcomes,” Luizzi says, “but they allow teachers to determine how to get there.” This, of course, is counter to the direction that the U.S. education system has been heading.

Summing Up

So what’s the big lesson that educators are going to take away from Finland? “We won’t find quick fixes here,” says Krueger. “But there are a lot of lessons to be learned.” Finland’s non-competitive ethos, for example, flies in the face of No Child Left Behind’s high-stakes, high-competition regulations. In Finland, schools aren’t ranked against each other, teachers don’t face formal reviews, and students aren’t under intense pressure to get into college.

Krueger says the care Finland has taken to create a “good learning environment” shouldn’t be lost on policy makers in this country. “Our obsession with testing doesn’t mean we are doing better.”

Singapore, Korea, Finland: Top Education

Building a strong and effective teaching force

As a sovereign state since 1965, Singapore is one of Asia's great success stories. In less than half a century, it has transformed itself from a developing country to a vibrant modern economy. Education has been central to this process and a focus on teacher training and strong school leadership has been one of the key factors in Singapore's success.

A stable government under the same political party has provided a basis for stable education policies. Since the 1990s, Singapore has developed a comprehensive system for selecting, compensating, training and developing teachers and principals to ensure the delivery of high-quality education that in turn would lead to high-quality student outcomes.

Teaching is a greatly honored profession, in part because the standards for selection are high. Prospective teachers are selected from the top one-third of each cohort by panels that include current principals. Strong academic ability and non-academic qualities are essential considerations during the recruitment process, such that only candidates who possess the character, aptitude and abilities to teach and develop students are recruited as teachers.

Once accepted for training, prospective teachers receive full tuition as well as a monthly stipend that is competitive with the monthly salary of fresh graduates in other fields. All teachers are trained at the National Institute of Education (NIE), part of Singapore's Nanyang Technological University. They study either a diploma, postgraduate diploma, or a degree course depending on their level of education at entry, and they must commit to teaching for at least three years.

There is a close working relationship between the NIE and schools. The Ministry of Education keeps a close watch on salaries to ensure that teaching remains an attractive occupation for new graduates, and high-performing teachers can earn significant additional amounts in performance bonuses.

To keep pace with change and be able to constantly improve their practice, teachers are entitled to 100 hours of professional development per year, mostly at no cost to the teacher. Like many other professions in Singapore, teachers are appraised annually. Their appraisal takes into account their contribution to the academic and character development of their students, their collaboration with parents and community groups, and their contribution to colleagues and the school as a whole. It also helps them identify areas of growth that form the basis of personal professional development plans. Poor-performing teachers are also given help and leave the service only if they do not improve.

All new teachers are mentored in their first few years in the service. Teachers with the potential to take up school leadership are continuously assessed for their leadership capabilities and given opportunities to learn and to demonstrate their abilities, for example by serving on committees, by being promoted to head of department and through short stints working in the Ministry of Education. Through these experiences, potential vice-principals are selected for interviews and go through leadership situational exercises. If they pass these, they go on to NIE for six months of executive leadership training — this includes an international study trip and a project on school innovation. Only 30-40 people per year are selected for this "Leaders in Education" course, a milestone program to prepare potential principals. The Ministry regularly posts principals to different schools as part of leadership renewal and talent circulation.

Using ICT to make a successful education system even better

Over the past half-century, Korea has transformed from a developing nation into a leading industrial economy, thanks largely to its success in raising educational standards. In Korea's highly competitive society, families place high value on education and students show strong commitment to learning. A dynamic private sector complements public schooling with rapid responses to students' individual needs.

Government policies support education with above-average spending. After making elementary education mandatory in the 1950s, the Korean government took steps to widen educational opportunities for middle and high school students during the 1960s and 1970s, thus ensuring that more students could benefit from quality public education. In the 1990s, Korean authorities were quick to recognize the potential of ICT in education, launching a master plan to develop ICT infrastructure with one PC per teacher and Internet access in all classrooms. Subsequent strategies have set out to enhance education quality by providing open access to content and by training teachers to integrate ICT into classroom teaching.

A major objective of successive administrations has been to reduce inequalities in access to education, and ICT is seen as key to achieving that goal. In 2005, complementing services provided nationwide by Korea's Educational Broadcasting System, the government launched a Cyber Home Learning System that gives students home access to digital tutoring. In 2011, building on pilot projects launched in 2007, it announced a \$2.4 billion strategy to digitize the nation's entire school curriculum by 2015.

At the core of this ambitious project, dubbed 'Smart Education', is the implementation of 'digital textbooks' -- interactive versions of traditional textbooks that can be constantly updated in real time. Digital textbooks contain a combination of textbooks, reference books, workbooks, dictionaries and multimedia content such as video clips, animations, and virtual-reality programmes that can be tailored to students' abilities and interests. Students can underline sections, take notes, reorganize pages and create hyperlinks to online material.

Taking advantage of Korea's strong digital sector, the project will involve the installation of wireless networks in all schools and the creation of a digitized education system that will run on a range of equipment including PCs, laptops, tablet PCs and smart TVs. Policy makers say it is designed to respond to 21st century education challenges by moving from uniform and standardized education to diversified, creativity-based learning.

Korean students already have extensive familiarity with digital devices for social and recreational purposes, and their aptitude for handling digital material was demonstrated by their top-ranking performance in the PISA 2009 digital reading test. By making access to new learning modes available to all, 'Smart Education' will help to bridge the education divide between families who can afford to pay for private tutoring and those that can't. Pilot tests are said to have shown measurable improvements in the performance of students from less well-off families and students in remote areas.

There are still some areas of uncertainty. Some school administrators express concerns about the cost of installing equipment and the need for additional teacher training. Teachers worry about students' ability to concentrate if smart phones and other digital devices are used in class. Parents express concerns about the effects on students' health of studying materials on a screen for long periods of time.

But education authorities say they are keeping a close watch on the project in its pilot phase and no adverse effects have yet been identified. Students' use of ICT devices for social and recreational purposes helps them to develop reactivity and response capabilities useful in academic contexts as well. To mitigate possible equity issues, the government has promised subsidies for equipment purchases for families that are less well-off.

Maintaining a strongly supportive school system in which teachers and students share responsibility for results

Finland has one of the world's best performing education systems. Thanks to years of steady progress in education reform, its secondary school students regularly achieve high scores in PISA tests. The gap between the highest and lowest performers within schools is small, and there is little variation among schools or among pupils of differing family backgrounds.

One reason for Finland's success is the high degree of personal responsibility conferred on both teachers and students. In the 1970s and 1980s, management of Finland's school system was decentralized and traditional academic structures in upper secondary schools were replaced by flexible modular structures, giving pupils more choice in what they study. Teachers were given freedom to design their curriculum and choose textbooks.

Schools in Finland are focal centers for their communities. They provide a daily hot meal for every student, plus health and dental services, psychological counseling and a broad array of other services for students and their families. They are mostly small in size, with minimal administrative overheads, and are mainly funded by municipal budgets. Principals are expected to take their share of the teaching load, even in large schools.

Teachers share a strong personal and professional commitment to helping students succeed. They assess their students on an ongoing basis, but also focus on helping them to take increasing responsibility for their own learning. Students are expected to work in teams on projects, preferably cutting across traditional subject or disciplinary lines.

A particular feature of the Finnish system is the "special teacher." This is a specially trained teacher assigned to each school whose role is to work with class teachers to identify students needing extra help, and then work individually or in small groups with these students to provide the support they need to keep up with their classmates.

All articles are from the *Pearson* web site found on 1/29/14:

<http://www.pearsonfoundation.org/oeed/singapore.html>

<http://www.pearsonfoundation.org/oeed/korea.html>

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