

Op-Ed Why Finland has the best schools



A teacher works with seventh-grade students at a school in Helsinki, Finland in 2011. (Erin Richards / MCT)

By **William Doyle**

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The Harvard education professor Howard Gardner once advised Americans, “Learn from Finland, which has the most effective schools and which does just about the opposite of what we are doing in the United States.”

Following his recommendation, I enrolled my 7-year-old son in a primary school in Joensuu, Finland, which is about as far east as you can go in the European Union before you hit the guard towers of the Russian border.

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OK, I wasn't just blindly following Gardner — I had a position as a lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland for a semester. But the point is that, for five months, my wife, my son and I experienced a stunningly stress-free, and stunningly good, school system. Finland has a history of producing the highest global test scores in the Western world, as well as a trophy case full of other recent No. 1 global rankings, including most literate nation.

In Finland, children don't receive formal academic training until the age of 7. Until then, many are in day care and learn through play, songs, games and conversation. Most children walk or bike to school, even the youngest. School hours are short and homework is generally light.

Unlike in the United States, where many schools are slashing recess, schoolchildren in Finland have a mandatory 15-minute outdoor free-play break every hour of every day. Fresh air, nature and regular physical activity breaks are considered engines of learning. According to one Finnish maxim, “There is no bad weather. Only inadequate clothing.”

One evening, I asked my son what he did for gym that day. “They sent us into the woods with a map and compass and we had to find our way out,” he said.

Finland doesn't waste time or money on low-quality mass standardized testing. Instead, children are assessed every day, through direct observation, check-ins and quizzes by the highest-quality “personalized learning device” ever created — flesh-and-blood teachers.

In class, children are allowed to have fun, giggle and daydream from time to time. Finns put into practice the cultural mantras I heard over and over: “Let children be children,” “The work of a child is to play,” and “Children learn best through play.”

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The emotional climate of the typical classroom is warm, safe, respectful and highly supportive. There are no scripted lessons and no quasi-martial requirements to walk in straight lines or sit up straight. As one Chinese student-teacher studying in Finland marveled to me, “In Chinese schools, you feel like you're in the military. Here, you feel like you're part of a really nice family.” She is trying to figure out how she can stay in Finland permanently.

In the United States, teachers are routinely degraded by politicians, and thousands of teacher slots are filled by temps with six or seven weeks of summer training. In Finland teachers are the most trusted and admired professionals next to doctors, in part because they are required to have master's degrees in education with specialization in research and classroom practice.

“Our mission as adults is to protect our children from politicians,” one Finnish childhood education professor told me. “We also have an ethical and moral responsibility to tell businesspeople to stay out of our building.” In fact, any Finnish citizen is free to visit any school whenever they like, but her message was clear: Educators are the ultimate authorities on education, not bureaucrats, and not technology vendors.

Skeptics might claim that the Finnish model would never work in America's inner-city schools, which instead need boot-camp drilling and discipline, Stakhanovite workloads, relentless standardized test prep and screen-delivered testing.

But what if the opposite is true?

What if high-poverty students are the children most urgently in need of the benefits that, for example, American parents of means obtain for their children in private schools, things that Finland delivers on a national public scale — highly qualified, highly respected and highly professionalized teachers who conduct personalized one-on-one instruction; manageable class sizes; a rich, developmentally correct curriculum; regular physical activity; little or no low-quality standardized tests and the toxic stress and wasted time and energy that accompanies them; daily assessments by teachers; and a classroom atmosphere of safety, collaboration, warmth and respect for children as cherished individuals?

Why should high-poverty students deserve anything less?

One day last November, when the first snow came to my part of Finland, I heard a commotion outside my university faculty office window, which is close to the teacher training school's outdoor play area. I walked over to investigate.

The field was filled with children savoring the first taste of winter amid the pine trees. My son was out there somewhere, but the children were so buried in winter clothes and moving so fast that I couldn't spot him. The noise of children laughing, shouting and singing as they tumbled in the fresh snow was close to deafening.

“Do you hear that?” asked the recess monitor, a special education teacher wearing a yellow safety smock.

“That,” she said proudly, “is the voice of happiness.”

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