

# U.s. education: reaching for the "finnish" line

[Business](#)



Dr. Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator and author, holds numerous discussions on how schools in the United States of America can learn from Finnish public education.

He is the former Director General of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation (CIMO) at Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture in Helsinki. Currently, he is a visiting Professor of Practice at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education (Sahlberg). Sahlberg is adamant about reforming the United States education system and often highlights Finland's education system as a model for how teachers should structure the school day and how administrators should prioritize learning over testing. American schools should structure their education systems based on the Finnish example, with more "playtime," less standardized testing, and more of an emphasis on teacher preparation. The Finnish place a lot of value on free play time, and they have laws to regulate school instructional time.

For example, Finnish students have less homework as documented in a study done by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which stated that Finnish students spend around 2.8 hours a week on homework while their American counterparts spend around 6.1 hours a week (Jackson). That is over double the amount. American students labor under the crushing weight of these extra hours of homework.

Additionally, the study showed that U. S. fifth graders spend about fifty minutes on homework a night, while kids in Finland barely have any homework until they reach middle school (Jackson). With all this extra homework, the U. S.

test scores are higher than Finland's, right? Wrong! Finland consistently outperforms America on international education testing. In 2012, the country placed third in reading, math, and science and the United States placed twenty-first out of thirty-four participating countries. Not only do Finnish students have less homework and higher test scores, but they also have a shorter school day. Students in Finland are given a fifteen minute break for every forty-five minute lesson and a thirty minute lunch break (Sparks). Having breaks throughout the school day enables students to focus more during their classes.

Meanwhile, American schools are cutting recess, which seems so counterproductive. Schools in Finland average around seventy-five minutes of recess a day while schools in the United States average around twenty-seven minutes (Jackson). In addition, Finnish schools give students another way to play by putting less focus on organized sports and more of a focus on building social interactions. Linda Darling-Hammond, author of a book on the Finnish educational system called *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*, emphasized the importance of student collaboration. In Finland, more time is allotted to problem-solving, critical thinking, project-based learning, and the arts and music. American research studies have shown that time spent cultivating these skills undoubtedly increases student performance in the academic subjects.

Although Dr. Sahlberg estimates that eighty percent of the worldwide education research is done by U. S. researchers, the arts are still being reduced in many American schools because administrators feel the need to

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focus on sports teams (Tung; Frank). Although sports are not inherently bad, the organized part of them does not allow for building kids' social interactions as much as it would without the pressure of winning or losing. Social interactions are extremely important in order to form lasting relationships in a person's life, and if students spend all their time in class, doing homework, and participating in organized activities, they will not get the needed social enrichment.

As equally important as social interactions, in Finland, the focus is not on numbers, but on the individual child, which is much more beneficial. For instance, teachers in Finland strive to form well-rounded students prepared for life outside of school. They are all about "creating globally competent, critical thinkers who are ready to be successful in their post-graduation life" (Frank). In order to focus on the "whole child," Finnish schools have classes beyond the traditional core academics. They also teach folklore, cooking, music, art, sports, religion and textile handcrafts (Hancock).

"English begins in third grade, Swedish in fourth. By fifth grade the children have added biology, geography, history, physics and chemistry" (Hancock). Finnish students learn so many subjects in order to create well-rounded people. The teachers support the individual student, and that is part of what makes the country's education so successful. In addition, like a good parent, Finnish teachers are trusted to do whatever it takes for their students to be successful in life.

According to one American teacher who wants to improve U. S. education, "The Finnish education system is founded on the concept of trust" (Frank).

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She means that unlike America, Finland does not seek to strictly measure their students against only cold numbers. The Finnish administrators trust their teachers to know their students' needs and to help the kids in any way they can. This American teacher feels that America's standards are only put in place to measure kids' progress because the higher-ups do not trust teachers to do what they can to help kids achieve success in life (Frank).

Having highly qualified, trusted teachers allows the students to be inspired to succeed rather than belittled for their failures on standardized tests. Finnish students have only one standardized test at the very end of high school called the National Matriculation Examination graded by teachers, not computers, that asks questions about current worldwide issues (Jackson). Lastly, the Program for International Student Assessment (also known as PISA) administered by the OECD analyzes fifteen year-old students' performance from around the world by using economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) indexes examining the wealth, possessions, occupation, education of the parents and family, and home educational resources related to the student's culture (POVERTY). The analysts then graph each country's student population into quartiles based on performance. It is a very complex process that is effective in the long run for demonstrating the quality of education of each country. From 2006-2009, Finland received the top student performance PISA scores and they continually score very high each year.

Obviously, focusing too much on the black and white views of success and failure does not result in top student performance and takes away time from the more important focus on the whole child. In addition, teachers in Finland

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are regarded with a higher level of admiration than teachers in the United States, and it positively impacts their students as evidenced by the country's top PISA scores. In other words, all Finnish teachers are required to have a higher level educational degree and are regarded as professionals. Some teachers in the U. S. are novice and nonprofessional, and the high turnover of teachers certainly does not help.

The nonprofit organization NCTAF (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future) estimates that within their first five years, close to fifty percent of new teachers leave their job for a different career (Omer).

Teachers in Finland are required to have a three-year master's degree in education, and competition is rough. Only ten percent of primary school teacher applicants are accepted according to the Center on International Education Benchmarking (CIEB) (Jackson). Moreover, teachers are more respected because it is shown that the quality of the teacher does impact the student. Dr.

Pasi Sahlberg states that in Finland, teachers are compared to high-society professions like lawyers, doctors, or architects, while in the United States, they are compared to professions that require less training like nurses or therapists (Tung). Teaching is the most desired profession in Finland, largely because of the respect it garners. Sahlberg voices that " it's harder to get into primary school education than a medical program" (Tung). Finally, teachers are paid slightly better than in the U. S.

Based on data from the OECD, in Finland, teachers on average are paid about \$43, 000 a year compared to the average U. S. teacher who makes

around \$41, 000 annually (Jackson). Even though American teachers make less money than Finnish teachers and teachers in many other countries around the world, it is a great shame that they work the longest hours out of everyone. The American teacher has less schooling, a lower salary, and works the most hours compared to the average teacher worldwide, thus it is understandable why the U. S.

' s educational methods may not be as effective as those in Finland. One of the largest concerns regarding why the Finnish school system will not work in the United States is because Finland essentially has no children living in poverty, while in the U. S. about 21% of all children live in poverty. Some people argue that the poor children drag down the U. S.

' s average PISA scores, but that is incorrect because the non-poverty kids also do not perform well on the assessment (POVERTY). The U. S.'s poverty has just become a crutch to lean on when the country's students do not perform as well as expected. Finland does not just outperform the U. S.

, it also outperforms almost all other countries in the world with much less poverty than the U. S. Therefore, poverty is not a factor in why the U. S. underperforms so many countries on international testing. The United States of America is desperately attempting to reform its educational systems, but the reason why they are failing is that extra testing put in to measure student and teacher success is only preventing the students from doing the real learning.

All this is doing is conditioning schools to " teach to the test," a practice that actually only inhibits students from becoming well-rounded learners.

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Students should be able to “ learn to learn.” A reduced homework load and a shorter school day benefit students as well as teachers. Teachers would have the time to prepare what they need for the teaching day, thus reducing stress levels all around. For people interested in pursuing a more effective educational system in the U. S.

, there is a documentary called Waiting For “ Superman,” based on the book of the same title, that provides great insight into how America’s schools are performing against other schools around the globe, particularly the Finnish schools. Also, contacting or writing to school administrators or the Board of Education to let them know how they can revise the educational system to benefit both students and teachers is powerful way to start positive change. The more letters or emails administrators or Board members receive, the more motivation for education reformation. Contact the Pennsylvania State Board of Education. Works Cited Frank, Shannon.

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