


What we can learn from Finland's education system

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Schools in Finland include music, visual arts and crafts.

Summary

Finland is consistently near the top of international rankings when its students are tested in reading, science and math. The Finns arrive at that success in surprising ways.

We've all heard plenty about how students in several Asian nations continually outperform their U.S. counterparts on international tests for science, reading, and — especially — math. There is only one Western nation near the top of those rankings year after year, and Finland is an intriguing case. The Finn's don't approach education with the drill-and-kill ferocity employed in Korea and Singapore, nor with the emphasis on endless testing familiar to U.S. students.

"Compared with the stereotype of the East Asian model — long hours of exhaustive cramming and rote memorization — Finland's success is especially intriguing because Finnish schools assign less homework and engage children in more creative play," said an article in [Atlantic Magazine](#). "All this has led to a continuous stream of foreign delegations making the pilgrimage to Finland to visit schools and talk with the nation's education experts, and constant coverage in the worldwide media marveling at the Finnish miracle."

"Every [Finnish] school has the same national goals and draws from the same pool of university-trained educators. The result is that a Finnish child has a good shot at getting the same quality education no matter whether he or she lives in a rural village or a university town," [Smithsonian Magazine](#) said. "The differences between weakest and strongest students are the smallest in the world."

A "whatever-it-takes" attitude drives Finnish teachers, who are drawn from the top 10 percent of the nation's graduates and accorded the same social status as doctors and lawyers, the Smithsonian story continued.

Music, visual arts, and crafts education is compulsory for students up to age 16 in Finland, as part of an effort to promote creativity and problem-solving skills and boost learning in other subject areas.

"In terms of students' abilities in other subject areas, based on cognitive studies, it seems that the arts promote our capability to learn other subject areas too. For instance, learning music in early childhood seems to develop one's linguistic capacity," said Finnish educator Eija Kauppinen in an [Education News](#) article.

[The New York Times](#) notes that formal education doesn't start in Finland until age 7, and testing students and assigning homework is scorned until they are in their teens. Classes are kept small in Finland, and the nation emphasizes teacher quality.

"Its school system has roughly the same number of teachers as New York City's but far fewer students, 600,000 compared with New York's 1.1 million. Finnish students speak Finnish and Swedish and usually English," the New York Times said.

There are obvious challenges to adapting what works in a racially-homogenous, prosperous little country to the United States, but the New York Times story suggests that Finland could be an excellent model for individual states.

"The fact that we have more race, ethnicity and economic heterogeneity, and we have this huge problem of poverty, should not mean we don't want qualified teachers — the strategies become even more important," said Stanford professor Linda Darling-Hammond in the story. "Thirty years ago, Finland's education system was a mess. It was quite mediocre, very inequitable. It had a lot of features our system has: very top-down testing, extensive tracking, highly variable teachers, and they managed to reboot the whole system."

The reboot included paying all teachers to get master's degrees (mandatory); ensuring that struggling students get intense, early intervention; and giving all students access to the best the system can offer.

The [Atlantic Magazine](#) finds significance in the fact that there are no private schools in Finland. Competition, school choice and engaging the private sector are not priorities in Finland.