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Some of America's Top Teachers Went to Finland. Here's What They Learned

By [Madeline Will](#) on July 22, 2016 11:52 AM

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Last month, six of the best teachers in the United States traveled to the country known for its top-performing education system: Finland.

The teachers—who are the state teachers of the year for Texas, Virginia, New Jersey, Colorado, Georgia, and Kentucky—were in Finland for three full days, where they visited a school and went to lectures and workshops on education trends. Then, they traveled to the Netherlands for EF Education First's [Global Student Leaders Summit](#), which lasted for two days and was centered around human rights.

EF, an international educational tours company, and the Council of Chief State School Officers had partnered to bring the teachers abroad (five received EF-CCSSO scholarships and one received a scholarship through a different EF program). The teachers were chosen because of an essay they wrote on preparing students for success in a global society.

Finland has long been held up as a model for successful education, but it's worth noting that Finland's high test scores on international comparison tests [have slipped](#) in recent years. The country is working to reverse course (and is [rolling out new curriculum](#) this fall which [emphasizes interdisciplinary learning](#)), but some U.S. educators have developed a bit of "[Finland fatigue](#)."

I spoke to two of the winning teachers—[Revathi Balakrishnan of Texas](#) and [Leticia Ingram of Colorado](#)—about their experiences in Finland and the lessons they will take back to the United States.

Finnish Teachers Are Trusted, Seen as Experts

Both Balakrishnan and Ingram remarked on the high level of trust afforded to teachers in Finland. They're seen as true professionals, they said—a perception that is often lacking in the United States.

This is perhaps a result of the rigorous [teacher preparation programs](#) in Finland, Balakrishnan said. The application process is extremely selective—candidates have about 250 pages of articles to read in a month, and then are tested on the application (not just the facts) of the articles. About 70 percent of candidates are weeded out that way, Balakrishnan said, and then the rest are interviewed to see if they have a "teacher personality"—communicative, engaging, et cetera. In 2015, there was only about a 10 percent acceptance rate, she said.

"As far as I could see, I don't think they have a teacher-evaluation system," Balakrishnan said, noting that when teachers asked Finnish educators about evaluations, they responded with, "We trust [teachers] to do their best." (Finland [appraises teachers](#) against the national core curriculum and school development plans; there is no standardized testing to evaluate teachers by.)

Ingram said that seeing this cultural mindset in action reinforced her belief that it is critical for U.S. teachers to also feel trusted and valued.

"I think teachers don't realize the importance of their jobs ... they change lives," she said. "Automatically, you see that [understanding] over there. Here, we tend to forget the importance of educators. I think it would help a lot [with burnout] if teachers realized how important they are."

Diversity Is Important—and Finland Doesn't Have Much

Finland has a relatively homogenous student body, and the teachers noted that they appreciated the benefits and opportunities of teaching a diverse student body in the United States.

Finland is [facing an influx of refugees](#), so the demographics could soon change—Ingram said Finnish educators asked her for her advice in teaching a diverse population.

Ingram, who teaches in a school where the majority of students are English-language learners, said she came away from the trip thinking: "I'm so excited to be a teacher in the United States—our biggest gift is diversity; my biggest inspiration is my students."

A Well-Rounded Education Is About More Than Grades

In Finland, a holistic approach is emphasized, Balakrishnan said—for every 45 minutes of instruction, children have 15 minutes of [play](#).

And even young Finnish students take home economics classes, making "incredible projects," Ingram said. "[That was] one of the things that really hit me—some of my high school students don't know how to sew a button or change a tire. We're so focused on teaching STEM lessons that we forget about life skills."

She said she is bringing the emphasis on "life skills" back to her school—her English language development students will now work on woodwork projects every Friday.

Inspired by the Finnish, Balakrishnan said she wants her students to want to learn for the love of learning itself—not because it's for a grade.

"How do I get students to get excited about learning? That's the biggest question I'm going to grapple with," she said. "I think students are not excited about learning because we have made education boring. The way I evaluate my class is, 'Would I be happy to sit in this class for one hour?' If I'm not, how can any child be happy?"

Balakrishnan said during a panel discussion, someone asked a Finnish principal how the school handled discipline. The principal didn't understand, asking, "Why wouldn't students listen to their teachers? They're excited about coming to school."

"That resonated with me. I teach gifted students," Balakrishnan said. "By nature, they're excited about what they're learning, they're gifted in that. [But when] there's so much stress on them, they shut down. I can't afford for gifted students to shut down because they're the future leaders."

Incorporate Global Education into the Curriculum

Ingram said the trip reinforced to her the importance of global education—it's the key to understanding other cultures, she said. Ingram has done globalization projects with her students and other group cultural activities (like a Thanksgiving feast intended to immerse immigrant students and families into her Colorado community; [read a story about it here](#)).

During the Global Student Leaders Summit, about 1,300 high school students from around the world worked together using design-thinking and project-based learning strategies to come up with solutions to human rights challenges in their communities. The U.S. teachers talked with some of these students and their teachers, sharing their educational experiences and insights.

"We're so hungry to learn from each other," Ingram said, adding that she has plans to Skype one of the international teachers she met on the trip. "It's vital—in all of our curriculum, no matter what content, you can incorporate global education to enhance our understanding of what's going on in the world."



The six 2016 State Teachers of the Year who traveled to Finland and The Netherlands with CCSSO and EF Education First pose in the Hague's downtown district while attending the EF Global Student Leaders Summit. From left - Chelsea Collins (New Jersey), Leticia Ingram (Colorado), Ernest "Ernie" Lee (Georgia), Ashley Lamb-Sinclair (Kentucky), Natalie DiFusco-Funk (Virginia), and Revathi Balakrishnan (Texas).

Source: First image of a Finnish kindergarten by Flickr user [Ville Miettinen](#), licensed under [Creative Commons](#). Second image courtesy of Leticia Ingram.

More on Finnish Education:

- [An American Teacher's Thoughts on the Finnish Education System \(Opinion\)](#)
- [Happy Teaching, Happy Learning: 13 Secrets to Finland's Success \(Opinion\)](#)
- [Finland to Reduce Role of Academic Subjects Through 'Phenomenon' Teaching](#)
- [A Different Kind of Lesson From Finland \(Opinion\)](#)



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