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Finland's Secret Sauce: Its Teachers

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By Joan Richardson, Editor-in-Chief of [Kappan](#) magazine ([PDK International](#))

In the 1980s, educators and policy makers swarmed across Germany to examine its two-tier education system that separated college-bound students from vocational ed students, all in an effort to boost the national economy. In the 1990s, Japan and its unique lesson study model attracted American attention.

Along came the 2000s, and Finland has the starring role. A country that once didn't warrant much attention, Finland has zipped to the top in international measures of education, and American educators in particular want to know its secret.

"It was a surprise to us that we were so high on the PISA in 2000," said Leo Pahkin, councillor of education at the Finland National Board of Education who spoke to a group of American educators visiting Finland last month in a trip sponsored by PDK International. "We knew we had good readers but maths and science, that was a surprise to us."

The possible reasons for the Finnish success are many and complex, and it seems unlikely that the United States as a whole could or would ever embrace the deep changes that make possible Finland's success. But, a single state could embrace some of the Finnish components. One of those is teacher education.

"Stated quite plainly, without excellent teachers and a modern teacher education system, Finland's current international educational achievement would have been impossible," writes Pasi Sahlberg in his book, [Finnish Lessons](#) (Teachers College Press, 2011).

Finland's teacher education scheme is the result of the nation's overhaul of its entire system, a process that began in the 1970s and proceeded uninhibited in spite of political changes. "We are lucky that our parties are thinking very much the same way about education," Pahkin said.

What has resulted is a skilled teacher workforce that is consistently rated one of the most admired professions in Finland, ahead of medical doctors, architects, and lawyers. Being a teacher even seems to improve your marriage options: In a recent national opinion survey, Finns were asked to choose five professions that would be preferred for a partner or spouse, and 35% included teacher among the top five preferred professions for the ideal spouse.

Becoming a teacher in Finland is as competitive as getting into an Ivy League school, and Finland offers no other route into the profession. So, there is no Teach for Finland. To teach in Finland requires a five-year master's degree in education. Admission to a teacher preparation program includes a national entrance exam and a personal interview. Only one of every 10 applicants is accepted into a teacher preparation program in Finland; competition to become a primary school teacher is even tougher, with 1,789 applicants for only 120 spots, for example, at the University of Helsinki in 2011-12. Only eight universities offer teacher preparation programs in Finland, which allows the country to ensure consistency from program to program. Contrast that with Minnesota which has about the same population as Finland (5.2 million) but about 30 colleges that offer teacher preparation programs.

Sahlberg speculates that the Finns can attract the top quintile of all high school graduates to teaching because the rigors of the master's degree, which includes a thesis with substantial scholarly requirements, makes the program challenging enough to appeal to the top students.

A bonus is that earning a master's degree costs the student nothing since Finland funds education from preschool through graduate school.

Preparation differs depending on which grades teachers want to teach. Primary school teachers major in education and minor in various content areas; secondary school teachers major in their content area (math, chemistry, English, etc.) and minor in education.

Regardless of which level they'll teach, future teachers study theory in class and quickly practice applying what they've learned in designated field schools. Teachers at the field schools must have had university coursework in supervising student teachers. By graduation, a student has done at least 120 supervised teaching lessons, all in conjunction with a supervising teacher.

This depth of preparation is essential because, when teachers are hired, they're expected to hit the ground running. "When you get your first job, nobody ever enters your classroom to see how you're doing. There is no tutor, no mentor. You just start working," said Heidi Krzywacki, a professor of teacher education at the University of Helsinki.

For all their effort, Finnish teachers are not highly paid. But they are highly respected and treated far more like professionals than American teachers. Finnish teachers are on their feet in front of students for fewer hours every week, teaching only three to four hours per day. The rest of their work time is spent in preparation, working with colleagues, marking papers, and doing other duties assigned by their heads. Unless they have to teach a class, they are not required to be at the school.

Just as Americans had lessons to learn from Germany and Japan, now it's time to consider Finland's success and determine what we could learn from that tiny nation. In the words of Leo Puhkin, "Money is not the secret of good results. The secret lies somewhere else."

Views expressed in this post are strictly those of the author and do not reflect the endorsement of the Learning First Alliance or any of its members.

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