

Educators flocking to Finland, land of literate children [FI] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

UUTARILA, Finland - Imagine an educational system where children do not start school until they are 7, where spending is a paltry \$5,000 a year per student, where there are no gifted programs and class sizes often approach 30. A prescription for failure, no doubt, in the eyes of many experts, but in this case a description of Finnish schools, which were recently ranked the world's best.

Finland topped a respected international survey last year, coming in first in literacy and placing in the top five in math and science. Ever since, educators from all over the world have thronged to this self-restrained country to deconstruct its school system - "educational pilgrims," the locals call them - and, with luck, take home a sliver of wisdom.

The question on people's minds is obvious: how did Finland, which was hobbled by a deep recession in the 1990's, manage to outscore 31 other countries, including the United States, in the review by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development last September? The rankings were based on reading, math and science tests given to a sample of 15-year-olds attending both public and private schools.

Finland's recipe is both complex and unabashedly basic. It is also similar to that in other Nordic countries. Some of the ingredients can be exported (its flexibility in the classroom, for example) and some cannot (the nation's small, homogenous population and the relative prosperity of most Finns, to name two).

If one trait sets Finland apart from many other countries, it is the quality and social standing of its teachers, said Barry Macgaw, the director for education at the O.E.C.D. All teachers in Finland must have at least a master's degree, and while they are no better paid than teachers in other countries, the profession is highly respected.

Children here start school late on the theory that they will learn to love learning through play. Preschool for 6-year-olds is optional, although most attend. And since most women work outside the home in Finland, children usually go to day care after they turn one.

- reprinted from Suutarila Journal

Region: Europe ^[2]

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