

# The children must play: What the United States could learn from Finland about education reform <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

While observing recess outside the Kallahti Comprehensive School on the eastern edge of Helsinki on a chilly day in April 2009, I asked Principal Timo Heikkinen if students go out when it's very cold. Heikkinen said they do. I then asked Heikkinen if they go out when it's very, very cold. Heikkinen smiled and said, "If minus 15 [Celsius] and windy, maybe not, but otherwise, yes. The children can't learn if they don't play. The children must play."

In comparison to the United States and many other industrialized nations, the Finns have implemented a radically different model of educational reform--based on a balanced curriculum and professionalization, not testing.

Not only do Finnish educational authorities provide students with far more recess than their U.S. counterparts--75 minutes a day in Finnish elementary schools versus an average of 27 minutes in the U.S.-- but they also mandate lots of arts and crafts, more learning by doing, rigorous standards for teacher certification, higher teacher pay, and attractive working conditions. This is a far cry from the U.S. concentration on testing in reading and math since the enactment of No Child Left Behind in 2002, which has led school districts across the country, according to a survey by the Center on Education Policy, to significantly narrow their curricula. And the Finns' efforts are paying off: In December, the results from the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an exam in reading, math, and science given every three years since 2000 to approximately 5,000 15-year-olds per nation around the world, revealed that, for the fourth consecutive time, Finnish students posted stellar scores. The United States, meanwhile, lagged in the middle of the pack.

In his State of the Union address, President Obama outlined his plans for reforming U.S. public education, including distributing competitive grants, raising test scores, and holding teachers accountable for student achievement. But there is much Finland can teach America's reformers, and the rest of the world, about what outside of testing and rigid modes of management and assessment can make a nation's schools truly excellent.

Finland's schools weren't always so successful. In the 1960s, they were middling at best. In 1971, a government commission concluded that, poor as the nation was in natural resources, it had to modernize its economy and could only do so by first improving its schools. To that end, the government agreed to reduce class size, boost teacher pay, and require that, by 1979, all teachers complete a rigorous master's program.

Today, teaching is such a desirable profession that only one in ten applicants to the country's eight master's programs in education is accepted. In the United States, on the other hand, college graduates may become teachers without earning a master's. What's more, Finnish teachers earn very competitive salaries: High school teachers with 15 years of experience make 102 percent of what their fellow university graduates do. In the United States, by contrast, they earn just 65 percent.

Though, unlike U.S. education reformers, Finnish authorities haven't outsourced school management to for-profit or non-profit organizations, implemented merit pay, or ranked teachers and schools according to test results, they've made excellent use of business strategies. They've won the war for talent by making teaching so appealing. In choosing principals, superintendents, and policymakers from inside the education world rather than looking outside it, Finnish authorities have likewise taken a page from the corporate playbook: Great organizations, as the business historian Alfred Chandler documented, cultivate talent from within. Of the many officials I interviewed at the Finnish Ministry of Education, the National Board of Education, the Education Evaluation Council, and the Helsinki Department of Education, all had been teachers for at least four years.

The Finnish approach to pedagogy is also distinct. In grades seven through nine, for instance, classes in science -- the subject in which Finnish students have done especially well on PISA -- are capped at 16 so students may do labs each lesson. And students in grades one through nine spend from four to eleven periods each week taking classes in art, music, cooking, carpentry, metalwork, and textiles. These classes provide natural venues for learning math and science, nurture critical cooperative skills, and implicitly cultivate respect for people who make their living working with their hands.

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- reprinted from The New Republic

**Region:** Europe <sup>[2]</sup>

**Tags:** health <sup>[3]</sup>

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school system <sup>[5]</sup>  
federal programs <sup>[6]</sup>  
international organizations <sup>[7]</sup>

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/health> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-development> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/school-system> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/federal-programs> [7]  
<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/international-organizations>