



International Case Study: Real Lessons from Finland

By Kathleen Porter-Magee

Finland: Land of reindeer, snow, and a world-class education system—reached through hard choices that were rigorously implemented.

Finland—the tiny land of reindeer, snow, and more snow—burst onto the scene in the past decade as the unlikely poster child for the antireform movement in the United States. Hardly a week goes by that someone doesn't implore reformers to learn from Finland—a nation with low poverty, high achievement, and virtually no standardized tests—and abandon our support for standards- and accountability-driven reform. After all, Finland's education system today is characterized by loose central regulations, broad teacher curricular and instructional autonomy, and virtually no centralized accountability.

Given Finland's success on international assessments, it must follow that American schools would do better if we Xeroxed the Finland model.

Right?

Not exactly.

First, some evidence suggests that Finland's successes may not be as miraculous as once thought. But more than that, to understand what is going on in Finland, it's perhaps important to start with not a snapshot of their test scores and existing education structures, but rather a November 2010 McKinsey



study entitled, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better*.

As part of their research, McKinsey studied twenty school systems from around the world that had seen “significant, sustained, and widespread gains in student outcomes as measured by international and national assessments.” Among the most interesting findings of the report was the difference between the reforms needed to move a system from fair to good performance and the policies needed to support good systems working to become great. More specifically, systems moving from poor to fair rely far more heavily on policies that “tightly control teaching and learning processes from the center because minimizing variation across classrooms and schools is the core driver of performance improvement at this level.” Systems working to go from good to great, by contrast, “provide only loose guidelines on teaching and learning processes because peer-led creativity and innovation inside schools becomes the core driver for raising performance at this level.”

What does that have to do with education reform in America? A lot, actually.

As the McKinsey study demonstrated two years ago, school systems that aren't working don't magically achieve greatness by merely “trusting teachers” and loosening control and regulations. And Finland is no different. In fact, the autonomy and decentralization we see in Finland today came after more than two decades of tightly controlled, centrally driven education reform

It was only after this top-down systemic reform moved Finland from poor to good that it shifted to a more flexible approach aimed at turning the system from good to great.

that systematically adjusted curriculum, pedagogy, teacher preparation, and accountability. It was only after this top-down systemic reform moved Finland from poor to good that it shifted to a more flexible approach aimed at turning the system from good to great. And so, as we look to emulate Finland, we should more directly ask ourselves whether our state and district school systems more closely resemble the Finland of yesterday or today.

A Brief History of Education Reform in Finland

In the 1960s, Finland's education system looked far different than it does today. Achievement was much more uneven and not all students had equal access to quality schooling. In 1968, as part of a nationwide focus on better preparing students to compete in the knowledge economy, the Finnish Parliament enacted legislation to create a new basic education system that was built around the development of a common “comprehensive” school for grades 1 through 9—a system that spread to every municipality in the nation by 1977. Three things characterized the new Finnish standard:

1. The development and adoption of a mandatory national curriculum that ensured all students were held to the same rigorous standards.
2. Dramatic changes in teacher preparation and certification requirements.
3. A central state inspectorate that evaluated school-level teaching and learning.

National Curriculum

To ensure that every student in the nation was taught the same rigorous content, the Finnish government (working with teachers) developed a national curriculum that was the cornerstone of the comprehensive school system—and that was for many years mandatory for all schools in that system. Cited in a 2010 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, one

high-level education administrator explained how challenging this move from a loosely governed system of independent schools to a system of government-run schools was.

...There were lots of municipalities that were not eager to reform their system, which is why it was important to have a legal mandate. This was a very big reform, very big and complicated for teachers accustomed to the old system. They were accustomed to teaching school with selected children and were simply not ready for a school system in which very clever children and not-so-clever children were in the same classes. It took several years, in some schools until the older teachers retired, for these reforms to be accepted.

That's hardly the story of a reform system built on teacher autonomy and professionalism. Instead, it sounds a lot like the debates we are having right now over Common Core and state accountability systems.

Teacher Certification and Preparation

A critical part of the comprehensive school reforms in Finland was a nationwide effort to improve teacher quality. Policymakers understood the importance of teacher quality in driving student achievement, and they invested heavily in it. In the early years, that investment included professional development aimed at existing teachers in the classroom, but Finland wisely took the long view and spent even more time improving its talent pipeline. For starters, they made it far more difficult to get a teaching job—the government now requires all teachers to earn a master's degree as a condition of employment.

However, perhaps even more importantly, teacher education in Finland is highly content driven. Even primary teachers majoring in education need to minor in at least two content areas—and their content-specific education is delivered by not the teacher preparation program but rather the content department in the university. (A math minor, for instance, takes her math courses in the math department.)

Second, courses devoted to pedagogy are grounded in content as much as in theory. As the OECD report explains, "Traditional teacher preparation programmes too often treat good pedagogy as generic, assuming that good questioning skills, for example, are equally applicable to all subjects. Because teacher education in Finland is a shared responsibility between the teacher education faculty and the academic subject faculty, there is substantial attention to subject-specific pedagogy for prospective primary as well as upper-grade teachers."

This clear focus on ensuring that teachers are content experts is critical.

Emulating Finland

Of course, a quick look at the existing Finnish education system tells a different story. That is because in the mid-1990s, partially in response to an economic crisis, the government loosened many of its regulations. In particular, the national curriculum was pared down, becoming more of a guide than a script, and the inspectorate was eliminated, thus giving schools far more autonomy. The teacher certification and preparation reforms, however, remained strong as ever.

These changes represent an evolution. Yes, Finnish educators now enjoy broad autonomy over curriculum and instruction, and schools are largely self-governed. But this happened only after decades of reform aimed at raising standards for both students and teachers and ensuring that teachers had the capacity to thrive under a more decentralized system. Finland followed the McKinsey playbook, whether or not by design. When it had a greater number of struggling schools and teachers with weaker training, their reforms were characterized by tighter control with an emphasis on standards and outcomes. Once the teacher work force—over more than two decades—was better prepared and trained to teach the content articulated by the curriculum, and once student learning had improved, the state loosened its control.

More than that, though, Finnish leaders had the patience to see the reforms through. The national curriculum took five years to develop, and the teacher work force took even longer to prepare. But the state didn't waver from its resolve to get it right.

Ultimately, Finland's success is built atop a series of hard choices, rigorously implemented. And these choices were grounded in a unique set of value propositions that favored the overall welfare of the group instead of maximizing the success of the most naturally talented. The closer you look, the more you realize that Finland's approach works not because it is a universal template of success but, instead, because it was a Finnish solution to which they were committed. Americans shouldn't be looking to slavishly copy these exact hard choices; rather, we should be looking to the spirit with which they were made and their resolve to see these decisions through. ■

Kathleen Porter-Magee is the Senior Director of the High Quality Standards Program at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute and a Bernard Lee Schwartz Policy Fellow, where she leads the Institute's work on state, national, and international standards evaluation and analysis.

Ten Things You Should Know about Union Membership Numbers

The Bureau of Labor Statistics released its annual report on union membership last week and the news was pretty grim. While the economy added almost 2.4 million jobs in 2012, union membership was down by almost 400,000. Digging through the data led to several more interesting discoveries.

1. Since 2008, private sector unions have lost more than 1.2 million members—almost equivalent to losing the entire rank-and-file of the Teamsters.
2. All of the government jobs lost since 2008 had been added in the three-year period 2005-2008.
3. Almost half of all union members work in just seven states—California, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan, New Jersey, and Ohio—although these states employ only about one-third of the U.S. work force.
4. Union membership increased in fourteen states and the District of Columbia. Of these, only five added more than 10,000 members (California, Georgia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Texas).
5. Local government (teachers, police officers, firefighters, et al.) is by far the most unionized sector of the American work force.
6. Members of the two national teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, comprise more than 25 percent of all union members in the United States, and just under half of all public sector union members.
7. About 42 percent of U.S. workers are 45 years of age or older. Almost 52 percent of union members are.
8. If unions were able to organize all the workers at Wal-Mart, by far America's largest employer, it would only raise their share of the private sector work force to 8.5 percent—less than the share they had in 2002.
9. If the trends recorded since 2000 continue, by 2051 there will be 8 million union members in the United States—6.6 percent of the total work force—and they will all work for the government.
10. Five million of them will be teachers. ■

Mike Antonucci runs the Education Intelligence Agency. Visit his website eiaonline.com.



Music educators have a wealth of information available to them on the Internet to keep the music classroom on the “cutting edge.”

Music in Schools Month: Online Resources for Music Teachers

Being a good music educator requires more than just teaching the notes on a page. Music is a subject that is likely to be labeled as “old school” because—let’s face it—playing the violin does not involve a username or password. Nevertheless, in this age of MP3 players and online radio, music educators are finding great ways to engage music students by bringing technology into the classroom. Music educators have a wealth of information available to them on the Internet to keep the music classroom on the “cutting edge.”

Teachers looking to teach students about the symphony orchestra, composers, and instruments have an invaluable resource in the Dallas Symphony Orchestra for Kids (DSO Kids) and the New York Philharmonic for Kids (NY Phil Kidzone). On the DSO Kids page, teachers can refer students to music history trivia games, music theory mini-lessons, and even

instructions on how to build homemade instruments. The NY Phil Kidzone page allows students to write their own music, hear the music of many different composers, and gain an understanding of what the orchestra is. Although these websites are fun for students while at home or in the computer lab, they are great resources for interactive classroom learning, too!

Another great resource for music educators to consult in teaching students (particularly young students) about musical instruments is Color Me Good. This website has other topics available, but it’s great for music teachers because of the variety of musical instruments that can be printed and colored. DSO Kids also offers a virtual tour of the orchestra hall, which is a great way for students to see where the various instruments are situated in the orchestra. Teachers might even entertain showing students a clip of a symphony orchestra playing

so that students can see the orchestra in action.

Classics for Kids is another great tool for music teachers who are looking for a little bit of everything to share with their music students. This website provides a composer timeline, a musical dictionary, and a tremendous music listening room. New teachers might appreciate this website because it provides sample lesson plans that could easily be modified to suit different classrooms. In addition to “meeting” composers like Mozart, students can also “meet” conductors and performers to learn what it’s like being a professional musician.

At the Suzuki Association website, educators can learn a little bit more about the Suzuki Method of teaching music. As teachers are aware, good teaching requires reflection, and looking at the teaching philosophies of other pedagogies, like the Suzuki Method, might enable a teacher to be more effective. On the Suzuki Association website, teachers can read topics on the Suzuki Association blog, seek out trainings, and find good summer music programs to recommend to interested students.

Originally posted on the AAE blog. ■

Federal Update:

Department of Education Issues Guidelines on Accommodating Special Needs Students in Extracurricular Activities

When the Founding Fathers wrote that “all men are created equal” and deserve the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of the happiness, they may not have foreseen an issue with regard to special needs students and public school sports. However, a recent 13-page document from the Department of Education’s civil rights office offers guidance about clarifying a school’s responsibilities in providing extracurricular activities to disabled students.

While the guidelines are new, the guidance stems from Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. The need for clarification was spurred from a 2010 report from the Government Accountability Office, showing students with disabilities participated in athletics at consistently lower rates than students without disabilities. The consensus among many districts was that a lack of information and clarity regarding responsibilities to disabled students caused their lack of participation.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan eagerly endorsed the new guidelines. “Students with disabilities are no different – like their peers without disabilities, these students benefit from participating in sports.” said Duncan. “But unfortunately, we know that students with disabilities are all too often denied the chance to participate

and with it, the respect that comes with inclusion. This is simply wrong.”

Although disability-rights groups, students, and many schools support the new guidelines, many federal officials protest the legislation, saying it is overreaching and unfunded. Many schools worry about the high cost to already sparse athletic budgets.

In St. Paul, Minnesota public schools, for example, only 3 percent of disabled students play sports. Yet adapting sports for disabled students takes up 10 percent of the schools’ athletic budget.

Linda C. Hilgenbrinck, the national adapted physical education teacher of the year for 2012 and an employee of the 23,000-student Denton Independent School District in Texas, commented on the new guidelines: “I know one of the very first questions is, We know that we need to be doing this, but where are the funds going to come from? What about liabilities? Those are good and valid questions,” she said. “But those questions should not stop districts from moving forward.”

An example of Section 504 mandates is schools must ensure equal opportunity for participation, which means “making reasonable modifications and providing those aids and services that are necessary to ensure an equal opportunity to participate, unless

the school district can show that doing so would be a fundamental alteration to its program.” Also, schools that provide services during the school day to students with health problems or disabilities are also required to provide those services during extracurricular sports activities. Equal opportunity to participate does not mean equal access to teams; a student with a disability is not guaranteed a spot on a team based solely on his or her interest. Lastly, school districts should create additional opportunities for students with disabilities if the existing athletic program, even with modifications, cannot meet the needs of such students with disabilities.

Seth Galanter, the assisting secretary for civil rights, stated that these mandates are not new, but have just now been specified in greater details. “The guidance does not say that there is a right to separate or parallel sports programs,” he said. “Instead, the guidance urges, but does not require, that when inclusion is not possible, school districts find other ways to give students with disabilities the opportunity to take part in extracurricular athletics.”

Specific modifications and adaptations for disabled students include, “A coach who bars a student with a learning disability from lacrosse competitions because of generalized beliefs about such disabilities violates Section 504; providing a visual cue, in addition to a starter pistol, so a deaf runner can participate in track meets is a reasonable modification; providing health services, such as blood sugar monitoring, is a part of a school’s responsibility during after-school activities if it provides that same service for a student during the school day.”

In a country where everyone has the right to happiness, disabled students celebrate the evolving plethora of opportunities available to them. Disabled students have ample opportunity to learn within the classroom. While it will take some time for schools to fully adapt, disabled students know they have the opportunity to learn discipline, collaboration, and hard work in sports programs outside the classroom. ■



The Most Effective Professional Development: Professional Learning Communities

While a lot of emphasis is being placed on teacher's pursuing traditional professional development, there is more and more evidence that for teachers looking to perfect their craft, the answer may not lie in traditional workshops or conferences but instead within Professional Learning Communities (PLC).

Traditional professional development for teachers has many shortcomings. It often seems to be disjointed and falls into a one-time category. Teachers who attend a workshop on a certain skill receive very little, if any, follow-up on using that skill in the coming months. Traditional professional development is often ineffective for this reason. The situation becomes especially

confusing when you add in the “whiplash effect” of having one conference push a certain way of doing things while another later conference tells teachers to do the complete opposite. It's no wonder that teachers often view professional development workshops as a waste of time.

Recent research suggests that teachers grow the most when they develop a Professional Learning Community. PLCs are formed when educators meet to regularly discuss their craft. In a school, these can be grade-level or subject teams although they don't have to be. PLCs can be formed from any group of teachers as long as they focus their discussions on the act of teaching. Furthermore,

teachers can belong to more than one PLC at a time.

Although we've written about Professional Learning Communities and their online cousins, Professional Learning Networks (PLN) before, the strength and support of these communities are worth reiterating. PLCs and PLNs put an end to the idea that teaching is an isolating profession by providing a support network for teachers both emotionally and intellectually. These are places where teachers can share their frustrations and get feedback about how to improve. They also give teachers an outlet to share their ideas and help hone them. Effective PLCs will often share lessons or activities, and may even involve teachers demonstrating and practicing skills with other teachers.

Teachers who participate in a Professional Learning Community report greater feelings of collegiality with other teachers. Evidence has shown that PLCs don't just make teachers feel more content in their jobs but that they grow at a greater rate than those who do not participate in Professional Learning Communities.

Recent research suggests that teachers grow the most when they develop a Professional Learning Community.

With such strong and clear evidence that building and participating in a PLC improves the teaching profession, we hope to help teachers find, build, and use their PLCs to their utmost in the upcoming months. ■



The Association of American Educators Foundation
 27405 Puerta Real, Suite 230
 Mission Viejo, CA 92691-6388

Presorted Standard
 US Postage Paid
 #400
 Laguna Niguel, CA

Education Matters is a publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation (AAEF)

aaeteachers.org • editor@aaeteachers.org • 800.704.7799

Gary Beckner, *Executive Editor*
 Alexandra Schroeck, *Managing Editor*
 Ruthie Borrelli, *Coordinating Editor*
 Debbie Brown, *Editorial Assistant*
 Diane Meyer, *Editorial Assistant*

National School Choice Week Wrap-Up

AAE members and staff enjoyed celebrating National School Choice Week in January. Hundreds of AAE members attended events celebrating this exciting week in various locations across the country. Thanks for participating! ■

