



## **COMPARING FINLAND AND THE U.S. EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM**

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### **Comparing Finland and the U.S. Educational Systems**

Finland's students have been consistently ranked at the top of international scores since the 2000s, such to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Finnish students have some of the highest math, reading, and science scores. In contrast, U.S. students linger around the middle benchmarks, scoring slightly above the average on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) rankings. (OECD, 2022) Many ask

what Finland is doing that the United States educational system is not. On close inspection, Finland's education system operates quite differently than the U.S. education system in that it doesn't give students homework, has fewer school hours, values teachers highly, trains them vigorously, and focuses less on testing and more on learning.

## **Teachers**

### **Required Skills and Training**

Part of Finland's high test scores can be credited to their effective and skilled teachers. Research and studies have shown that students with more proficient and qualified teachers "were more likely to attend college, attend higher-rank colleges, earn higher salaries, live in higher socioeconomic neighborhoods, and save more for retirement." (Chetty, Friedman & Rockoff, 2011)

The difference in teachers' personal life, work life, job status, and skills all factor into why Finland has higher

quality educators than the US. One of the characteristics that contribute to Finland's success in education lies in teacher preparation and training, which is quite extensive and rigorous. Only one out of 10 applicants for teacher training is admitted. Considerations such as a candidate's examination results, school records, and social and moral competence are carefully considered.

Finnish teachers are required to have a master's degree, pedagogical studies, and teaching practice. Teaching preschool and kindergarten requires a bachelor's degree. The program for becoming a preschool and primary school teacher takes three years. However, in The U.S., one only needs a bachelor's degree to be admitted into a credential teaching program. From there, the focus shifts to pursuing a teacher's certification or licensure. With more skills and training required to become a teacher in Finland, it's understandable why the Finnish teaching profession is more highly regarded than in the U.S. In contrast to the

U.S., Finland recognizes the influence a teacher has on student achievement. Finnish teacher training focuses on producing high-quality educators skilled in independent problem-solving and exploring different approaches to their job.

### **Social Status: How teachers view their profession**

Teachers in Finland are as highly valued and trusted as medical doctors and lawyers. Pasi Sahlberg, a Finnish educator, writes, "Many young Finns select teaching as their primary career because work in schools is perceived as an autonomous, independent, highly regarded profession." (Sahlberg, 2014). Consequently, Sahlberg says that the Finnish teaching workforce has become filled with more skilled and qualified people. Simply put, in Finland, the job status of a teacher and its role in society attracts skilled people to the job. In the U.S., teachers think less of their profession. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, only 33.7% of

U.S. lower secondary teachers agree that the teaching profession is valued compared to 58.6% of their Finnish counterparts. In multiple case studies and reports, teachers in the U.S. often voice that they feel undervalued, stressed out, and underpaid.

Salary and pay also factor into why young people in Finland consider working in schools. Annie Hemphill, a research analyst and Ph.D. student in education policy, writes, "Finnish teachers at all levels are paid closer to what a similarly educated professional makes, in contrast to U.S teachers, whose salaries lag far behind comparable professions. Both countries pay more for teaching older students, but the difference between pay for each grade level increases more in Finland so that the gap is widest for upper secondary teachers." (Hemphill 7) The higher teacher salaries in Finland attract a larger pool of applicants from which to choose and maintain teacher morale, resulting in greater performing teachers.

## **Professional and Personal Life**

Teachers' personal and work lives in the U.S. differ from their peers in Finland. Finland teachers spend fewer hours working and are 100% funded and supported by their government. Stanford Social Innovation Review reports that ninety percent of Finnish teachers are satisfied with their jobs, according to the Finnish National Agency for Education. (Wilkins & Corrigan, 2019). This is in contrast to American teachers, 40 to 50% of whom resign from their profession within the first five years of teaching. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) data shows that U.S. teachers spend considerably more time working than Finnish teachers and the OECD average. Hemphill writes, "Other teacher responsibilities identified by TALIS include hours spent grading student work, working with other colleagues, counseling students, participating in school management activities, completing administrative duties, communicating with parents,

engaging in extracurricular activities and 'other' tasks.

Finnish teachers report lower-than-average hours on all duties except for hours spent teaching. However, they still report fewer hours than their U.S. colleagues

do" (Hemphill, 2018). The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development discloses that U.S. teachers spend 26.8 hours a week teaching while Finnish teachers spend 19.3 hours; the OECD average is 20.6 hours.

(Hemphill, 2018)

U.S. teachers spend longer hours teaching, so why does the U.S. educational system lag so far behind Finland?

One can argue that while Finland has shorter school hours, teachers spend more time preparing lessons, teaching, and meeting with parents and students than teachers in the U.S.

This is because U.S. teachers spend much of their time grading, counseling students, doing administrative work, and participating in extracurricular activities. Thus, Finnish teachers spend more time planning and teaching than

performing non-teaching work. US teachers' short time to work on lessons and prepare for classes explains why Finnish students receive higher-quality lessons.

The encumbering workload and long hours U.S. teachers spend on the job can intrude into their personal lives. Thus, U.S. schools struggle to recruit and maintain teachers. Teachers in the U.S. are quick to quit their jobs due to being underpaid, overworked, stressed, burned out, and often lack support from administrators.

## **Curriculum**

### **Teacher Autonomy**

One of the significant differences between U.S. and Finland teachers is the greater decision-making power, and autonomy Finnish teachers have compared to their American counterparts. The Finnish government has laws that require school boards to include teachers, students, parents, and staff in policymaking. "Teachers in Finland have a larger part in their school's decision-making process.



On three questions—selecting learning materials, course content, and courses offered—Finnish teachers claim to have more decision-making power in their schools compared to teachers in the U.S. and the OECD average. Finnish teachers reported similar rates of autonomy as the OECD average for creating student disciplinary and student assessment policies, but both were higher than American teachers” (Hemphill, 2018).

### **Testing**

Unlike in the U.S., Finland does not give students standardized tests except the matriculation exam that upper secondary students take in their final year. This allows teachers to approach teaching that caters to the student's abilities rather than following certain curriculums that cater to national assessments. Conversely, the US emphasizes student performance on national assessments and evaluates students based on tests, homework, and class assignments. American teachers create lesson plans based on the school

district's curriculum, which they must follow by the book. Finland's education system focuses on developing skills, and as Matias (2019) puts it, Finland emphasizes "how to learn it [rather] than what to learn." Schools in Finland follow a national core curriculum and trust their educators to implement it as they see fit. It is built around the student's abilities, school-made diagnostic, project-based learning, and utilizing parent and student surveys. Finland has no ranking system or comparisons to other schools and regions. In the United States, student performance on standardized testing is compared to other students, schools, and regions. The performance of these assessments can also affect the government's funding for that school. This explains why schools in the U.S. stress the importance of standardized testing.

Free access to education may relieve students and parents' stress. In Finland, education is government-funded from primary to higher education. Meanwhile, young adults

in the U.S. stress over the student loan debt they amass to attend higher education.

## **Student Life**

### **Free Time and Play**

Finland allows for free time and play in students' lives. Students aren't assigned homework, which allows them to spend more time at home and explore their interests. Also, by law, students are given 15 minutes of break for every 45 minutes of instruction. Providing that space allows children to focus and do better in their assignments, according to Salhberg (2010). In contrast, homework is considered essential in the U.S. Parents in Finland don't need to worry about the lack of homework because they expect and trust that teachers provide that learning for their kids. In the U.S., homework is important for parents, as they are expected to help their child to complete homework assignments. Students in Finland, on average, spend 5 hours at school with 3.5 hours of actual

instruction. U.S. students spend around 7 hours at school daily. Finnish students have fewer school hours and more time to develop their interests and abilities, while US students spend much time practicing for standardized assessments.

### **Conclusion**

In analyzing the Finnish and American education systems, some important themes emerge. One key observation is that in Finland, the value and trust put into the teaching profession and quality education produce superior results in student achievement. Although the education system in both countries differs in other aspects, inputting trust, value, and higher teacher training has been shown to provide better education for students. Secondly, teachers' autonomy and decision-making power in Finland allows them to focus on developing students' abilities. This contrasts with America's didactic, by-the-textbook teaching methods and emphasis on standardized testing.

Lastly, students in Finland are allowed more time to develop their interests and work on their academic weaknesses than to focus on a standardized curriculum as in the US.

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