Education Reform That Works:
What the United States can Learn from Finland

Introduction

Education reform is currently a hot topic for politicians and policy makers in the United States. Recent international assessments have shown that the United States ranks in the middle among more than 60 countries in reading, mathematics, and science education.\(^1\) A recent study by McKinsey & Company found that if the United States could close this gap between its educational achievement and that of countries that consistently score highest on such assessments, it could add $1.3 - $2.3 trillion to its GDP.\(^2\) This represents 9% - 16% of current GDP.\(^3\)

There are many education reform efforts currently being discussed by politicians, special interest groups, and others interested in reforming the American education system. The most controversial of these include abolishing teachers’ unions and implementing merit pay for teachers. Less controversial ideas involve increased spending or increased instructional time. Rather than arguing for or against any of these particular policies in the isolated context of the United States, this paper looks to Finland – a country that

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\(^3\) Id.
Christopher Hines

consistently scores at the top of international assessments. In Part I, I describe the education results in Finland and compare those to results in the United States. In Part II, I give a brief history of the Finnish education system and describe its current structure. Part III examines seven current education reform initiatives in the United States and examines if and to what extent any of them are in place in Finland. Part IV looks at the unique aspects of the Finnish education system and identifies four key elements that are largely responsible for its success. Finally, Part V discusses the paper’s findings and suggests implications for policy makers in the United States.

Part I: Finnish Education Results

The Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) was founded in 1961 to “promote policies that will improve the economic and social well-being of people around the world.” It currently has 34 member countries, an annual budget of €328 million, and an output of 250 new publications each year covering topics ranging from agriculture to urban development. One of the OECD’s contributions to the education sector is its Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

PISA is a standardized assessment for 15-year-olds that was developed jointly by OECD member countries. It was first administered in 2000 and has been administered

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5 About OECD. OECD. Web. http://www.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_36734052_36734103_1_1_1_1_1,00.html
6 Id.
7 PISA. OECD. Web. http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_32252351_32235907_1_1_1_1,00.html
every three years thereafter to between 4,500 and 10,000 students in each of 43-65
countries.\(^8\) PISA covers the subjects of reading, mathematics, and science and aims to
assess "how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the
knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society ... not merely in
terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of important knowledge and skills
needed in adult life.”\(^9\)

Since PISA was first administered, Finland has continued to rank in the top tier of all
countries across all three subject areas.\(^10\) Additionally, Finland has the least variation of all
countries in outcomes between schools.\(^11\) By comparison, the United States’ average scores
consistently rank in the middle range of all countries, and its gap between schools due to
socio-economic background is among the highest in the world.\(^12\) This disparity between
scores in Finland and the United States corresponds to approximately 1-1.5 school years.\(^13\)

Finland is also successful by measures of school enrollment and graduation. It has
enrollment rates in primary, secondary, and tertiary education of 95.5%\(^14\), 87.2%\(^15\), and

\(^8\) Id. And http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_32252351_32236225_1_1_1_1_1,00.html
\(^9\) PISA. OECD. Web. http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,3417,en_32252351_32235918_1_1_1_1_1,00.html
\(^10\) OECD (2011), Lessons from PISA for the United States, Strong Performers and Successful
\(^11\) Id.
\(^12\) Id.
rates of ages 5 to 14 as a percentage of the population aged 5 to 14 (year of reference –
2008). http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en
rates of ages 15 to 19 as a percentage of the population aged 15 to 19 (year of reference –
2008). http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en
42.6%\textsuperscript{16}, respectively. Furthermore, its upper secondary graduation rate is 93%.\textsuperscript{17} By comparison, the United States has primary, secondary, and tertiary education enrollment rates of 98.6%\textsuperscript{18}, 80.8%\textsuperscript{19}, and 23.2%\textsuperscript{20} with an upper secondary (i.e. high school) graduation rate of 77%\textsuperscript{21}.

A country’s level of educational attainment is often correlated to its economic performance. Finland’s impressive education attainments have had positive economic consequences for the country. Over the past decade, Finland’s average GDP growth has been 2.22% per year, compared with 1.9% per year in the United States.\textsuperscript{22} When the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008-2009 are not included, Finland’s average annual GDP growth between 1999 and 2007 was 3.54%; it was only 2.6% in the United States.\textsuperscript{23}


\textsuperscript{18} OECD (2010d), \textit{Education at a Glance 2010}, OECD Publishing. OECD average net enrolment rates of ages 5 to 14 as a percentage of the population aged 5 to 14 (data from 2008). http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en


\textsuperscript{22} Economist Intelligence Unit. U.S. Country Data 2009. www.eiu.bvdep.com

\textsuperscript{23} Id.
Part II: Finnish Education System

Legislative Background

Education has always been an important aspect of Finnish society. When they first gained their independence from the Russia in 1917 and adopted a Constitution in 1919, Finns guaranteed the right to education. Specifically, Section 13 of the Finnish Constitution states:

(1) Everyone shall have the right to primary education free of charge. Provisions on compulsory education shall be prescribed by Act of Parliament.

(2) In a manner more precisely prescribed by Act of Parliament, public authorities shall secure for everyone an equal opportunity to obtain education other than primary education which accords with their abilities and special needs and to develop themselves without hindrance due to lack of means.

(3) The freedom of science, the arts and higher education shall be guaranteed.24

While the right to education was guaranteed from the outset, the Finnish education system has slowly evolved over the past few decades. As recently as the 1950s, most students left school after only 6 years of basic education.25 Only children living in large cities had access to further education, most of which was run privately.26 This began to change when in 1968, the Finnish Parliament enacted legislation that created a new public education

26 Id.
system and a comprehensive school program run by municipal governments for all students in grades 1-9.\(^{27}\)

Since then, Parliament has been involved in setting up and structuring all aspects of the Finnish education system. It has provided the right for students to attend and the objectives of upper secondary school\(^{28}\), the mission and autonomy of universities\(^{29}\), and the establishment and mission of polytechnics\(^{30}\).

*Current Structure*

Education is compulsory in Finland beginning at the age of 7 and lasting for 9 years of 190 days each year.\(^{31}\) One year of pre-primary education is made available for all students before compulsory schooling begins but is voluntary.\(^{32}\) Prior to this year of optional pre-primary education, parents have day care options that run the gamut from home care offered by stay-at-home moms to nursery schools run by teachers with master's

\(^{27}\) Id.


degrees. All of this compulsory and optional pre-primary education is provided free of charge by the government.

During students’ 9 years at a comprehensive school, almost all of which are public schools (only 1.4% of students attend private schools and they are still not charged tuition), students are taught in heterogeneous groups and not tracked by ability level. The curriculum is based on the national core curriculum and includes mother tongue and literature (Finnish), foreign languages (often Swedish and English), environmental studies, health education, religious education or ethics, history, social studies, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, physical education, music, art, crafts, and home economics. While the core curriculum is prescribed by the central government, it is given as a broad framework. Local governments, schools, and individual teachers are given a great deal of freedom and independence in determining what, when, and how specifically to teach.

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Upon completion of the basic education syllabus, students are granted a school-leaving certificate, which grants them access to upper secondary education.\textsuperscript{40} Approximately 55\% of students go on to upper secondary school.\textsuperscript{41} This generally lasts for three years and ends in a matriculation exam that qualifies students to continue their studies at universities, polytechnics, or vocational schools.\textsuperscript{42}

Universities provide undergraduate and postgraduate education based on scientific research conducted at the schools.\textsuperscript{43} There are 16 universities in Finland\textsuperscript{44} where students can earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees, as well as postgraduate licentiates and doctoral degrees at the university level.\textsuperscript{45} Most of this education is provided free of charge or for a nominal fee.\textsuperscript{46}

Upon completion of compulsory schooling at grade 9, most students who do not continue on to upper secondary education pursue vocational training.\textsuperscript{47} This branch of secondary schooling includes 119 study programs that can lead to 53 different vocational qualifications.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{42} Id.
\textsuperscript{48} Id.
When students graduate from vocational school, they are qualified to work in various occupations. They also have the option of continuing their education, either immediately or after gaining some work experience, at polytechnics, which form the second branch of Finland’s tertiary education system. There are currently 25 polytechnics in Finland that offer bachelor’s and master’s degrees.

Part III: Comparisons to Current U.S. Education Reform Initiatives

The concept of “education reform” has been growing in popularity in the United States recently. This section examines seven reforms that are commonly, though not universally, sought in the United States (abolishing teachers’ unions, teacher merit pay for performance, increased standardization & frequent assessment, more money, tracking students, universal early childhood education, and increased instructional time) by looking to see if similar reforms may have contributed to Finland’s strong educational results. Nothing in this section is meant to imply that these solutions are right or wrong for the United States; this section merely attempts to briefly describe the arguments for and against each reform effort and examine if these reform efforts are happening or have happened in Finland.

Abolishing Teachers’ Unions

One of the more controversial ideas for education reform in the United States is the abolishment, or at least the draining of power, of teachers’ unions. Common reasons given for this position usually follow one of two lines of reasoning. The first is that powerful teachers’ unions make the successful running of schools nearly impossible by either preventing school leaders from firing low performing teachers or by wreaking havoc on a school’s finances by mandating salary increases, small class sizes, and/or large pensions. The second line of reasoning is that teachers’ unions distort accountability at the school system level. This argument reasons that teachers’ unions hold considerable sway in local elections and can therefore wield a disproportionate amount of power over the school system, threatening it as a democratic institution that responds to multiple constituencies.

53 Id.
The view that teachers’ unions are inherently bad for education is not universally held. Proponents of teachers’ unions argue that they protect teachers’ dignity, which allows them to be more effective teachers, help teachers remain satisfied in their jobs longer leading to better instruction for students, and have themselves been advocating for effective reform.

While there is still disagreement about the need to abolish or limit the power of teachers’ unions within the education reform dialogue, it is an idea that has been growing in popularity. Originally a cause championed by conservatives, it has recently been gaining popularity with liberal groups as well.

It is interesting to note that Finland has not abolished teachers’ unions, nor has it worked to decrease their power. In fact, Finland has one of the strongest and most politically powerful teachers’ unions in the world. School leaders in Finland have echoed complaints heard in the United States about how difficult it is for them fire underperforming teachers.

58 Id.
59 Id.
63 Dana Goldstein. No Education Silver Bullet. The American Prospect. (2008)
64 Id.
Pay for Performance

Another controversial education reform idea is tying teacher pay more closely to student performance. Proponents of this effort argue that offering higher compensation to effective teachers will help schools attract and retain the best teachers. Some school leaders and superintendents in New York City and Washington D.C. have offered or proposed to offer compensation packages of up to $120,000-$130,000 to highly effective teachers – an average salary for a teacher in either city is currently around $65,000. Arguments against instituting pay for performance for teachers include that there is no reliable and objective way to judge a teacher’s performance and that merit pay for teachers will not actually lead to higher student achievement.

Finland does offer some forms of merit pay for exceptional performance by its teachers. Individual teachers can earn bonuses based on their performance. And if an entire school performs exceptionally well, the teachers can all earn small salary increases and even Mediterranean vacations.

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Frequent Assessment & Standardization

Standardized testing, while for many years a part of formal education in the United States, has increased in frequency and importance in the United States with the introduction of No Child Left Behind legislation. Public schools in the United States currently administer over 100 million standardized tests each year. While proponents of standardized testing say that it allows the government to accurately assess schools’ results as they work to ensure all students are achieving high academic standards, opponents claim that these tests are biased against low-income and minority students and that since they are limited in scope they lead to inaccurate decisions and judgments about a child’s education.

Coinciding with the movement for frequent standardized assessment has been the movement to unify learning standards across the states. The Common Core Standards Initiative was created in 2009 by 49 states and territories to create learning standards for grades K-12 that would “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn...reflecting the knowledge and skills that our young people need for success in college and careers.” These standards were developed and have been adopted in 41 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Advocates of the common core of standards state that they help ensure that all students, regardless of where

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they live, receive a high quality education that will prepare them for college or the workforce. Others are opposed to national standards because they fear states and communities losing control over what is taught in their homes and classrooms.

Finland has largely avoided both increased standardized testing and a centrally developed core curriculum. The Finnish government decided in the 1990s that heavy standardized testing consumed too much time and resources. Instead of testing all students every year, the Finnish government assesses a statistically significant sample of students each year and requires all students to pass an examination to graduate from upper secondary school. Additionally, while Finland does have a national syllabus, it operates more as an overarching guiding framework and allows individual municipalities, schools, and teachers to fill in many of the specifics of the curriculum.

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77 Id. http://www.corestandards.org/frequently-asked-questions
81 Id.
occurs at the local level, and individual municipalities are granted a great deal of freedom
and autonomy in providing education.\textsuperscript{84}

\textit{More Money}

Few people involved in education reform in the United States would argue against
giving more money to schools. Polls have indicated that as many as 67\% of Americans
would be willing to pay higher taxes to improve public education.\textsuperscript{85} Politicians have
listened, and per-pupil real inflation-adjusted spending on public primary and secondary
education has increased by over 260\% since 1961 and by 12.5\% in just the first half of the
2000s.\textsuperscript{86} While there are few people who argue for decreasing spending on education,
many opponents of increasing education funding claim that just throwing more money at
the problem will not solve it.\textsuperscript{87}

Finland has also been increasing its per pupil spending on public education. It
increased by about 18\% between 2000 and 2005.\textsuperscript{88} But even with this increase, Finland
still spends about 1/3 less per pupil on primary and secondary education than the United

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of
Education (May 19, 2011).
flags/more-money-schools
\item National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education Institute of
\item Bill Walker. \textit{U.S. Education: Show Us the Money!} lewrockwell.com
http://www.lewrockwell.com/walker/walker41.1.html and More Money for Schools?
\item OECD. Table B1.5. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2008) and
http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/download/fulltext/9609011ec021.pdf?expires=1299171891&id=0
000&accname=guest&checksum=806155DC15F754F2068D6436BBDA0865
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States does. This percentage continues to hold when tertiary education expenses are included for both countries. It is also relevant to note that Finland’s per pupil spending is roughly equal at all schools across the country and does not have the high variance associated with the socio-economic status of the community that is often found across school systems in the United States.

Tracking Students

Tracking refers to the practice of group students by ability level and providing different classes, teachers, and curricula to different “tracks” of students. Schools that use tracking may identify classes as “honors,” “advanced placement,” or “remedial.” Those who support tracking argue that it produces more advanced students and keeps students engaged in learning by giving them coursework that is appropriate for their ability level. Opponents of student tracking claim it deepens inequalities in our society because the remedial tracks are disproportionately composed of students from racial minorities, low socio-economics backgrounds, and families where English is not the first language. They also argue that tracking can reinforce low expectations and that moving between tracks is

90 Id.
nearly impossible for students, hence once a student is labeled as a slow-learner he/she will always be considered slow.\textsuperscript{94}

Finland does not engage in student tracking – at least not for the first 9 years of education.\textsuperscript{95} The basic curriculum for grades 1-9 is the same for every student, and it provides the necessary prerequisites for all upper secondary education to every student.\textsuperscript{96} This is a relatively new policy for Finland. As recently as the 1980s, some schools grouped students into basic, middle, and advanced levels in mathematics and foreign language courses.\textsuperscript{97} However, this was abolished in favor of a comprehensive curriculum that all students are expected to master.\textsuperscript{98} A form of tracking does occur later. Once a student graduates from comprehensive school (around the age of 16), he/she typically goes on to either upper secondary education that will likely lead to a university education or vocational school that will likely lead to work or polytechnic school.\textsuperscript{99} While the decision of whether to attend upper secondary school or vocational school is largely the student’s choice, if more students apply for a particular school than there are positions available, students’ school reports are used to grant entry.\textsuperscript{100} Both upper secondary and vocational schools are often oversubscribed and, as with elite secondary schools in the United States,
the more popular schools are able to have higher admissions standards for applicants.\textsuperscript{101}

However, this form of tracking is not rigid. Students can move from upper secondary school to vocational school and vice versa, and both schools prepare students for tertiary

education at either the university or polytechnic level.\textsuperscript{102} (See figure below.)

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{diagram.png}
\caption{Diagram of educational pathways.}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{102} OECD (2011), \textit{Lessons from PISA for the United States, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education}, OECD Publishing. \url{http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en} \url{http://www.pisa.oecd.org/dataoecd/34/44/46581035.pdf}
Universal Early Childhood Education

Many education reform activists believe that starting formal schooling earlier, through universal early childhood education programs, will build necessary educational foundations for young children. In addition to better preparing students for kindergarten, they claim these programs will lead to increased school completion and better job preparedness in the long-term. There is also a cost-saving argument. President Obama recently claimed that, “For every $1 we invest in these [pre-k and other early childhood] programs, we get $10 back in reduced welfare rolls, fewer health care costs, and less crime.” The idea of early childhood education is less controversial than many other current reform efforts. Those who oppose such programs typically do so because of a fear of increased taxes or the lack of empirical evidence that universal preschool programs improve student performance later in life.

Compulsory school in Finland does not begin until children are 7 – one year older than most Americans are when they start the first grade. A year of pre-primary education is available, and approximately 96% of six-year-olds are enrolled in it. Many Finnish children younger than six also have pre-school programs near where they live, but

106 Id.
only 48.2% of children are enrolled in them.\textsuperscript{109} While the government may not mandate early childhood education, it certainly does encourage it. It sets high standards for pre-primary education regarding the number and qualifications of adults who provide the education.\textsuperscript{110} Whenever a Finnish woman has a baby, she is sent a gift bag from the government that includes a picture book.\textsuperscript{111} Some shopping malls have libraries attached to them, and a book bus travels through rural neighborhoods in the same way an ice cream truck travels through many American towns and cities.\textsuperscript{112} While not formal early childhood education, these are examples of the informal early education that the Finnish government supports.

\textit{More Instructional Time}

Another reform effort often undertaken in the United States is to increase instructional time. Many successful charter schools have increased the length of both the school day and the school year.\textsuperscript{113} Schools designated as in need of improvement are often given the choice to increase instructional time as one option for turning the school

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\item[112] Id.
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around.\textsuperscript{114} And Hawaii recently mandated that all of its schools increase instructional time.\textsuperscript{115} However, public school administrators often have difficulty increasing instructional time because of collective bargaining agreements with teachers’ unions.\textsuperscript{116} Additionally, some education organizations and individuals point out that it is the quality, not the length, of instructional time that is most relevant to student learning.\textsuperscript{117}

Finland’s school year of 190 days is longer than the school year of 180 days that most American children have.\textsuperscript{118} However, their school day of 4-7 hours is shorter than that of a typical American school day.\textsuperscript{119} In fact, Finnish students spend less time in the classroom on an annual basis than do the students in any other developed country in the world.\textsuperscript{120}


\textsuperscript{116} Id.


\textsuperscript{120} Tom Burridge. \textit{Why Do Finland's Schools Get the Best Results?} BBC. (2010). http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8601207.stm
Part IV: Finland’s Silver Bullet

Of the seven popular, though somewhat controversial, U.S. education reform initiatives described in the previous section, Finland employs only one of them wholeheartedly – merit pay for teachers, although even this activity seems muted in comparison to recent U.S. proposals of paying effective teachers up to double the current average teaching salary. Three of these policies are applied in a limited way. Per pupil spending on public education has increased, but it is still well below U.S. levels. Students are placed into academic tracks, but not until after they have mastered the first 9 years of the comprehensive curriculum. And early childhood education is encouraged through availability of early learning and other government programs, but it is not universally mandated. The final three reform ideas are not in place at all. Finland has strong and powerful teachers’ unions, it does not mandate frequent standardized testing or curriculum standardization, and it has not increased instructional time.

This presents the question of why Finnish schools are so successful. Does Finland have a silver bullet that could fix education elsewhere? This section describes the four separate, but interrelated, qualities of the Finnish education system that I believe are largely responsible for its success: exceptional teacher quality, decentralized authority, universal high expectations, and professional accountability.

Another possible explanation for Finland’s academic success is small class size. The OECD claims that data on average class sizes in Finland is unavailable, and an Internet search reveals widely disparate figures. OECD is able to identify student/teacher ratios of
15.9 for primary schools, 13.2 for secondary schools, and 15.5 for tertiary schools.\textsuperscript{121} The United States has a lower student/teacher ratio for every level except lower secondary education.\textsuperscript{122} It is therefore likely that there are other substantial reasons for the success of the Finnish education system compared to that in the U.S.

\textit{Exceptional Teacher Quality}

One of the most important qualities in a child’s education is almost certainly the quality of his/her teachers. It has been estimated that having a teacher one standard deviation above the mean level of effectiveness can generate a present value of $400,000 in additional lifetime earnings for a student.\textsuperscript{123} Another study found that over the course of just one year of teaching, a teacher in the 60\textsuperscript{th} percentile of effectiveness can raise a student’s lifetime earnings by over $5,000.\textsuperscript{124} Finland has taken steps to ensure that its public school teachers are of the highest quality.

Prior to 1979, teacher training consisted of two or three years of teachers’ college after completion of upper secondary school.\textsuperscript{125} Parliament changed this in 1979 and moved teacher preparation programs to the university level; all public school teachers are

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{121} \textit{OECD Briefing Note for Finland}. OECD. (2007). http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/24/52/39315711.pdf
  \item \textsuperscript{122} OECD (2011), Lessons from PISA for the United States, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Id.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} OECD (2011), Lessons from PISA for the United States, Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education, OECD Publishing. http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264096660-en
\end{itemize}
now required to have a master’s degree.\textsuperscript{126} Prospective primary school teachers are expected to major in education and to minor in at least two subjects from the primary school curriculum.\textsuperscript{127} These minors are studied in the respective department of the university, not the education department.\textsuperscript{128} For example, an education major with a minor in history would take his/her history classes in the history department at the university, not in the education department. Prospective secondary school teachers major in the subject they intend to teach but also do substantial work – sometimes an extra year - in the education department.\textsuperscript{129}

Teacher education programs in Finland also have four important and unique qualities. They are research-based; teaching candidates are expected to engage in research and must complete a research dissertation to obtain their master’s degree.\textsuperscript{130} Special attention is given to subject-specific pedagogical techniques for prospective teachers of all levels; that is prospective science teachers learn teaching techniques specific to the effective teaching of science, math teachers learn specific math teaching techniques, etc.\textsuperscript{131} All teachers are trained to diagnose learning disorders and to differentiate their instructional styles to meet various learning needs.\textsuperscript{132} And there is a strong clinical component where teaching candidates spend at least one full year working, teaching, and problem solving in a public school that is affiliated with the university.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{126} Id.
\textsuperscript{127} Id.
\textsuperscript{128} Id.
\textsuperscript{129} Id.
\textsuperscript{130} Id.
\textsuperscript{131} Id.
\textsuperscript{132} Id.
This is in sharp contrast to teacher training in the United States. Most teachers in the U.S. are trained in 4-year undergraduate programs, although an increasing number are also coming from alternative certification programs (such as Teach for America). A recent study conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences’ National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance for the U.S. Department of Education revealed both the variance and the ineffectiveness of these current teacher training programs.\textsuperscript{134} The total hours required by the training programs varied from 75 to 1,380, there was no statistically significant difference in performance between students of teachers from different training programs, and there was no evidence that the content of the coursework was correlated with teacher effectiveness.\textsuperscript{135}

In addition to the extensive initial training that all teachers receive, Finland benefits from the high prestige afforded to the teaching profession.\textsuperscript{136} Currently, only one in ten people who apply to teacher preparation programs at universities is accepted.\textsuperscript{137} This allows universities to be very selective and choose only from among the top quartile of upper secondary school graduates - candidates that are likely to be highly effective


\textsuperscript{135} Id.


teachers. By contrast, in the U.S., most teachers come from the bottom third of graduating college seniors.

There are likely several reasons for the highly desirable nature of the teaching profession in Finland. An advisor at The Finnish National Board of Education credits several factors. “Teachers are respected experts...Additionally, the working conditions for teacher[s] are very good: relative[ly] small class-sizes, relatively small school sizes, stability of teachers and students, not outer control.”

One further reason is likely the cycle of the high exclusivity of the profession reinforcing its desirability among the top students, which in turn reinforces its exclusivity, etc. This is similar to how the high exclusivity of elite colleges and universities in the United States reinforce their desirability among top students, which heightens their exclusivity.

Teacher pay in Finland may also be a factor. Finnish teachers with 15 years of experience make 102% what their fellow university graduates do; in the United States, they make just 65%. This pay parity is heightened by the lack of income inequality in Finland.

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140 E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of Education (May 19, 2011).

while Finnish teachers do not make significantly more than American teachers, Finnish doctors and lawyers make significantly less than their counterparts in the United States.\textsuperscript{142}

Another factor may be the relatively light teaching load that allows teachers time for professional development, research, and planning. The average Finnish primary teacher teaches 677 hours per year, compared to an average of 803 in other countries.\textsuperscript{143} The average secondary teacher in Finland teaches 560 hours per year, compared to an average of 664 hours in other countries.\textsuperscript{144}

Additionally, as described further below, Finnish teachers are granted a good deal of independence, autonomy, and authority. This likely attracts highly motivated, entrepreneurial, and successful people to the profession. An advisor with The Finnish National Board of Education sums it up by saying: “High status and good working conditions create [a] large pool of applicants leading to selective and intensive teacher preparation programs.”\textsuperscript{145}

\textsuperscript{144} Id.
\textsuperscript{145} E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of Education (May 19, 2011).
Decentralized Authority

The education system in Finland has evolved slowly and steadily over the past few decades. Rather than spending large sums of money on radical reform initiatives legislated by politicians, Finland has given its teachers the freedom and authority to develop the skills and knowledge they need to be more effective teachers. Government policies have continuously invited schools and individual teachers to develop their own programs and strategies to ensure students are well educated.

While the national government of Finland has developed a national core curriculum, it has become increasingly less specific over the past two decades. Teachers have a lot of power to shape the curriculum for their students. They are like entrepreneurs; they use the national curriculum as a blueprint and fill in the details – everything from deciding when to teach topics to selecting the specific textbooks they wish to use to designing their own formative and cumulative assessments.

Finland also does not have mandated professional development requirements for teachers as many school districts in the United States do. Yet with their increased authority and sense of responsibility, teachers in Finland have become critical consumers of

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147 Id.
148 Id.
151 Id.
professional development services. Attending professional development programs has changed from being an obligation that teachers must fulfill to being a right that they diligently pursue.

This method of decentralized authority likely helps explain why teaching is an attractive profession for the high-achieving and entrepreneurial applicants who currently flood the teacher preparation programs at Finland’s universities.

*Universal High Expectations*

When Finland did away with its tracking system for grades 1-9, it implemented a curriculum that set high standards for all students. The comprehensive schools enroll students of all socio-economic levels and abilities creating heterogeneous classes with diverse needs and learning styles. While there was initially some skepticism that all students could achieve at a high level in this setting, Finland’s high international PISA test scores and consistency among students and across schools have drowned out these

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153 Id.


skeptics. The principle of inclusion has been an important guideline, and they aim to provide each and every student with the same basic education.

These high expectations also extend to students with special education needs. Approximately 8% of children in Finland are diagnosed as having special education needs, but only half of them are taken out of the mainstream school system. Educators in Finland focus on early diagnosis and intervention with the belief that proper support systems will allow these students to succeed at the same high levels as their peers in regular education classrooms. Each school has a dedicated and specially trained special education teacher who works with classroom teachers to help identify students with special needs and provides support to these students. Additionally, each school has a “pupil’s multi-professional care group,” which consists of the principal, the special education teacher, the school nurse, the school psychologist, and the teachers whose students are being discussed, that meets at least twice a month to discuss students with special needs and focus on ways to ensure they are achieving at high levels.

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157 E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of Education (May 19, 2011).
159 Id.
160 Id.
161 E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of Education (May 19, 2011).
Professional Accountability

Finland does not hold students or teachers accountable by using standardized tests as much of the rest of the world currently does.\textsuperscript{163} The only high-stakes test that all students must take is the matriculation examination upon the completion of upper secondary school.\textsuperscript{164} The lack of standardized testing allows teachers freedom to use instructional time for lessons other than test preparation.\textsuperscript{165} Virtually all assessment of student learning is done using teacher-made assessments.\textsuperscript{166}

Accountability for student learning happens from the bottom up. Teacher candidates are selected in part based on how they convey their belief in the core mission of public education.\textsuperscript{167} They then receive training at the university level that is designed to give them a strong sense of individual responsibility for what their students learn.\textsuperscript{168} At the next level are schools. Communities extend a great deal of trust to their schools, which seems to create a strong sense of responsibility in the school for the success of each

\textsuperscript{163} Pasi Sahlberg. A Short History of Educational Reform in Finland. (2009). http://192.192.169.112/filedownload/芬蘭教育/A%20short%20history%20of%20educational%20reform%20in%20Finland%20FINAL.pdf
\textsuperscript{164} Id.
\textsuperscript{166} Pasi Sahlberg. A Short History of Educational Reform in Finland. (2009). http://192.192.169.112/filedownload/芬蘭教育/A%20short%20history%20of%20educational%20reform%20in%20Finland%20FINAL.pdf
\textsuperscript{167} E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of Education (May 19, 2011).
student. At the top level is the national government. The Finnish government places a
great deal of trust in its schools, teachers, and principals. Its responsibility lies in ensuring
that schools have the freedom and resources they need to achieve high levels of student
learning.

At all levels of Finnish education, there is a much greater focus on professional
accountability than direct and potentially punitive accountability. Students are responsible
for their own learning without a strong focus on grades – in fact grades are not even given
in the lower primary years. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that their students
learn without being rated based on student assessment scores. And schools are
responsible for ensuring that all students achieve at a high level without being rated or
compared based on student test scores.

Part V: Discussion and Implications

Can the United States learn from Finland? Naysayers are quick to point out the
differences between the two countries. They point out that Finland is relatively small,
about the size of two Missouris, and has a population of just 5.2 million residents, which is smaller than the population of metropolitan Washington, D.C.\textsuperscript{174} Additionally, the Finnish population is relatively homogenous with a very small immigrant population compared to the United States.\textsuperscript{175} In fact, an advisor at The Finnish National Board of Education has claimed that “The success of [F]innish education lies first and foremost on a societal level.”\textsuperscript{176}

The politics around education are also very different in Finland compared to the United States. Every major political party generally supports the high taxation rate and the existence of the welfare state.\textsuperscript{177} Both the liberal and conservative parties support increased education funding – both given directly to schools and given as living subsidies to college students.\textsuperscript{178} During the 1970s and 1980s, the time when many Finnish reform initiatives were first being enacted, the ministry of education had two ministers from the major parties working together to create reform.\textsuperscript{179} This limited polarizing debates on different reform initiatives and led to cooperation and consensus building.\textsuperscript{180}

\textsuperscript{176} E-mail interview with Erja Vitikka, Senior Advisor, Ph.D., Finnish National Board of Education (May 19, 2011).
\textsuperscript{180} Id.
Despite these differences between Finland and the United States, there are still implications for American policy makers to be found by examining Finland’s educational success. The success of the Finnish education system can not be attributed solely to its small size, homogeneous population, and cooperation among political parties. Proof for this can be found in Norway. Located adjacent to Finland, Norway has a small and homogeneous population with politicians that generally support the idea of the welfare state. But Norway’s educational outcomes on PISA are more similar to those in the United States than to those in Finland – that is to say they rank in the middle of the international community rather than at the top. There must be differences in how the education system works in Finland compared to Norway, and by identifying these differences we can find implications for U.S. policy makers.

The implications for U.S. policy makers are more likely to come from examining what I’ve described as “Finland’s Silver Bullet” in Part IV than from looking at whether or not the U.S. reform efforts described in Part III are in place in Finland.

As mentioned in Part IV, Finland’s educational success is largely because of four interlocking pieces. Teachers are of exceptional quality, there is decentralized authority throughout the system, there are universal high expectations for all students, and there is a system of professional accountability for everyone involved in the education process. If policy makers attempt to apply the lessons from Finland in the United States, it is

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183 There is conflicting evidence in the U.S. about whether or not these efforts are or will be successful. The fact that none of them are utilized to any great extent in Finland indicates that we will not find support for or against them by studying the Finnish education system.
important that they work to implement all four pieces; if any one piece is missing, it makes the others less effective. For example, decentralized authority only works if we can afford our educators the highest levels of trust because they are extremely competent educators. Similarly, in order to attract the highest quality teachers to the profession, we need to give them the freedom and the authority to be entrepreneurs in the classroom.

An argument could certainly be made that the United States is already working to ensure that its public teachers are of the highest quality. The No Child Left Behind Act mandated that all teachers be “highly qualified.” One way to prove that a teacher is highly qualified is for him/her to have a master’s degree. However, studies in the United States have shown no correlation between a master’s degree and teacher effectiveness. This would seem to undermine the importance of the Finnish policy requiring all teachers to have a master’s degree before they even begin teaching. However, as described in the previous section, the type of training a Finnish teacher receives is very different from that received through a teacher training program in the United States. In order to ensure teachers are of the highest quality, it is not enough for policy makers merely to require a master’s degree; teacher training programs in the United States must first be revamped so

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185 Id.


that they are more akin to Finland’s programs that can adequately prepare teachers to be highly effective in the classroom. Specifically, teacher training programs should be more research-based, have curricula that are specific to grade levels and subject areas, and have a stronger clinical focus.

If teacher training programs are redesigned in the Finnish mold to produce highly effective teachers, schools in the United States will become populated with teachers who are highly knowledgeable in both their content area and in pedagogical techniques, have the skills to diagnose learning disabilities, and are skilled at problem solving and differentiating instruction to ensure that all students are learning at high levels. Policy makers should then begin to decentralize authority and give these teachers and the schools where they work the autonomy to make decisions about how and when to teach their students the core curriculum (which is currently decided at the state level).

This pair of policies – the redesign of teacher training programs and more autonomy for individual teachers and schools – will hopefully produce a virtuous cycle that encompasses all the important aspects of Finnish education. As redesigned teacher training programs produce more effective teachers, governments can give them more autonomy in their classrooms. As teachers have more autonomy and are seen more as entrepreneurs, more effective teachers will be attracted to and remain in the profession. As more successful people with entrepreneurial spirits enter the teaching profession, more teachers will feel personally accountable for the success of every student. This feeling of accountability will lead to higher expectations for all students. High expectations and increased personal accountability will allow the government to decentralize more
authority to teachers. This will attract more effective teachers to the profession. And the cycle continues.

The preceding paragraph may be too simplistic and optimistic. The United States is unlikely to radically change its teacher training programs and education system overnight to become more like Finland. It seems unlikely that this would even be possible with the United States’ system of federalism. Each state determines what qualifications are needed to license a teacher, and education schools plan their training programs accordingly. A serious dismantling and reassembling of the training programs to make them similar to Finland’s would require the agreement and cooperation of the over 800 teacher training institutions in the country as well as state and local governments.

Even if it did, there are doubtless other factors that influence educational outcomes in both countries. But there certainly are lessons to be learned from Finland, and American policy makers would be wise to use these lessons as they craft education policy. It seems very likely that at least part of Finland’s success at educating its citizens comes from its highly effective teachers that are trained in a very particular and comprehensive way in Finnish universities. It seems a good first step for United States policy makers would be to work to redesign American teacher training programs modeled after Finland. It also seems that when highly effective teachers and schools are identified, it would be a wise decision to grant these teachers and schools the autonomy to design and implement the curriculum in the way they determine will most effectively facilitate high levels of student learning. These two steps, or even modest progress towards them, could cause impactful results for American schoolchildren.

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Conclusion

By international measures, public education in the United States lags behind much of the world. By contrast, Finland consistently ranks at the top. While policy makers, advocates, and lobbyists fight over different controversial education reform initiatives in the United States, we could learn a lot instead by looking to how Finland has been so successful. The Finnish education system’s combination of exceptional teacher quality, decentralized authority, universal high expectations, and professional accountability account for much of its success. American policy makers would be wise to learn from this system and work to implement these ideas into their reform initiatives. A good place to start would be to revamp teacher training programs in the United States to make them more like Finnish programs and to grant more autonomy to highly effective teachers and schools.