

WHY DO FINNISH STUDENTS DO SO WELL? SOCIAL DEMOCRACY, TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM, AND “JUSSI”

By Nick Gier, President, Idaho Federation of Teachers, AFT/AFL-CIO

*Finnish children come to school ready to learn. They come to school healthy.
That’s a problem the United States has not yet solved.*
–Julie Walker, Partnership for 21st Century Skills

The teaching profession is prestigious and appreciated and therefore draws the best people.
–Steve Plocker, Israeli journalist

*The level of respect the Finns give their teachers is also much higher than any level I have seen
in the states. I only see that respect and awe when an American kid meets his/her favorite
musician or athlete. Perhaps that is why our schools fail.*
–An American after a three-month visit

*Finland, Singapore, and South Korea out-prepare,
out-invest, out-respect, and out-perform the United States.*
–Randi Weingarten, President, American Federation of Teachers

*“In the beginning, there were the swamp, the mattock, and Jussi.” This “Jussi” principle is the
Finnish way of studying and learning: we accept the pencil, and with a prepared mind and with
a stable hand we can open any booklet and get good scores. And this was what we did!*
–Finnish Ministry of Education

According to reigning right-wing ideology, the people of Finland should not excel in anything. They have very high taxes (43% of GDP), strong unions (76% of workforce), paid maternity leave, monthly child support, five-week vacations, universal elder care, and government funded health coverage. Nonetheless, the Finnish go-to spirit Jussi is as strong as ever.

Finland was fifth in the world just behind the U.S. for economic competitiveness in the World Economic Forum list for 2010-11. According to *The Economist*, in 2009 Finland’s score for economic freedom was 75/100, not that far from the U.S. at 81/100. In 2010 Finland’s national debt was 48 percent of GDP compared to the U.S.’s 92 percent. While George Bush dismantled Bill Clinton’s budget surplus during his administration, Finland was racking up surpluses as high as 5.2 percent.

Primarily because of its high-tech industries, it was declared the world’s most innovative economy by the free market *Economist*. Writing for *The New Republic*, Samuel Abrams notes that Finland is “distinguished by Nokia in telecommunications, Orion in medical diagnostics and pharmaceuticals, Polar in heart-rate monitors, Vaisala in meteorological measurement, and VTI in accelerometers.” Significantly, industry makes up 32 percent of the Finnish economy, whereas it has dropped to 21 percent in the U.S.

Finns spend less than half of what Americans pay for health care but achieve much better results. Finnish infants die at a rate of 3 per 1,000 in contrast to America's 7 babies per 1,000. American teens give birth at six times the rate of Finnish young mothers, and only nine out of 1,000 Finnish women choose abortion for every 20 American women who do. Finland's only black eye is the second highest homicide rate among 22 industrialized countries. The fact that Finland has the highest gun ownership among them may have something to do with this.

In the 2011 parliamentary elections there has been a backlash against the established parties. The nationalist "True Finns" went from 5 to 39 seats in the 200-seat Parliament. They support the welfare state, so they wanted to form a coalition with the Social Democrats. Their main complaints are too many immigrants and the bailing out of Greece, Ireland, and Portugal. Finding them too extreme on these issues, the traditional parties have decided to form a new government without them.

Every year since 2000 Finnish students have received some of the highest scores on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). In 2009 they were third (536, 541) in reading and math behind Shanghai (556, 600) and Korea (539, 546), and second in science (554) behind Shanghai (575). In 2006 Finnish students were first in science with a score of 563.

Critics might say that Finland is a much more homogenous society than the U.S, which ranked 17th on the PISA list. But Canada has the highest rate of immigration in the world and it ranked sixth just behind Singapore. (Singapore's math curriculum is so well regarded that it is being adopted all around the world.) Singapore's population is 40 percent foreign born and there are three major ethnic groups embracing five world religions.

Across the world there is a strong correlation between income inequality and educational achievement. On the Gini Scale where 100 is complete inequality and 1 is total equality, the U.S. is 45 and Finland is 27. Except for Hong Kong (53) and Singapore (48), egalitarian countries with an average Gini of 32 placed above the U.S. in the PISA scoring.

The strong correlation between income inequality and educational achievement also holds for the individual American states where pupils in more equal New Hampshire, Vermont, Minnesota, Iowa, Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska, Ohio, Washington, Delaware, Michigan, North and South Dakota, Maryland, and Idaho do much better on math and literacy exams. High school dropout rates are also higher in more unequal states. (See Wilkinson and Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, pp. 106-7.) About 25 out of a 100 Americans drop out of high school compared to just 1 out of a 100 in Finland.

Progressive taxation has dramatically reduced income inequality and poverty in Europe. In the U.S. 22 percent of children still live in poverty while only 4 percent do in Finland. In 2005 the Alliance for Excellence in Education estimated that teacher attrition is 50 percent higher in poor American school districts, where dropout rates range as high as 50 percent. South Carolina has high levels of poverty and since 1984 it has invested heavily in education reform, but today it still is at the bottom for educational achievement. Writing for the *Guardian* (2/4/11), Paul Thomas concludes that "the real dynamic here is that South Carolina remains a high-poverty state and is a non-union state, with no union contracts for teachers and no tenure."

Conservatives have held up teacher unions as the main reason for the U.S. education crisis, but 95 percent of Finland's teachers are members of the Trade Union for Educators. (High achieving Canadian students are taught by teachers who must join the union as a condition of employment.) Finnish union contracts control class size, and one of the reasons why Finnish students do so well in science is that these classes are limited to 16 students. Teachers are then able to assign laboratory experiments in every 75-minute class period.

The old canard about unions and professionalism should have been thrown out decades ago. The Finnish government and the teachers union require a Masters Degree for all teachers and provide the best training available at no cost. Only one in ten applicants is accepted at the teacher colleges and the result is that Finnish teachers come from the top of their high school classes. As a result they attain the prestige that has always honored teachers in Asia. Successful applicants begin at the age of 17 and spend 5-7.5 years (depending on chosen fields) earning their degrees. As in Denmark all Finnish university students receive a monthly stipend if they keep up their grades.

Professionals in all fields of expertise are their own bosses with full autonomy and responsibility. The Finnish Ministry of Education establish broad curricula guidelines, but, just like university professors, Finnish teachers choose their own textbooks and make up their own exams. The only standardized tests Finns take are the PISA exams and the ones for matriculation at institutions of higher education. (Along with 11 other countries Finland has now surpassed the U.S. in college completion rates.) Finnish education consultant Pasi Salberg contends that standardized testing leads to "narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, unethical practices related to manipulating test results, and unhealthy competition among schools." The recent test score scandal in the Atlanta schools is of course a good example of this.

In Finland there are no teacher evaluations, and the post of national education inspector was abolished in 1990. Finnish instructors can be fired only for violating the strict ethical code set by the Ministry of Education. Noting that Finnish has no word for "accountability," Sahlberg explains that "we put well-prepared teachers in the classroom, give them maximum autonomy, and we trust them to be responsible." In December 2011 my union president Randi Weingarten appeared at the same podium as Sahlberg at the Finnish Embassy in Washington, D.C. In Finland all the political parties are on the same policy page for education, and Weingarten bemoaned the fact that it has been politicized in the U.S.

Home schooling is rare in Finland, and a small number faith-based schools are fully funded by the government. The schools, however, must be accredited by the state and their teachers need an M.A. degree and a license from the Ministry of Education. Even though 4.2 million Finns are members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, only 76,000 attend church regularly. Although most of Europe has entered a post-Christian era, a secular Judeo-Christian work ethics still motivates their people. The claim that strong family values can be achieved only on the basis of religious devotion has no foundation in fact.

After visiting Denmark, Sweden, and Finland in 2007, Keith Krueger of the Consortium of School Networking concluded that "Finland's non-competitive ethos flies in the face of No Child Left Behind's high-stakes, high-competition regulations. In Finland, schools aren't ranked

against each other, teachers don't face formal reviews, and students aren't under intense pressure to get into college." At 6.4 percent of GDP Finland spends more on education than the U.S. does at 5.3 percent, but the dollar amount per student is \$1,200 more in the U.S. European schools save a lot of money by not having expensive sports facilities.

The Finns have adopted a child-centered education based on John Dewey's philosophical principles, which that have been wrongly identified as the cause of America's education decline. For the first three years Finnish students are on a first-name basis with the same teacher in small classes and with maximum individual attention. There are no "gifted and talented programs," and no child is ever held back for poor performance. The better students are encouraged to help the slower ones.

Many governments believe that children are so important that they pay mother or fathers to stay home with their infants in the early months, and then provide a monthly allowance for all children through their school years. (Except for the U.S. partial or full salaries are paid to new mothers or fathers in 35 European countries, 24 Latin American countries, Canada, and Turkey.) In Finland parents are paid 80 percent of one salary for 23 weeks, and a child allowance (\$140 per month; \$256 for four children) until age 17. Lower income working parents are offered free child care and there is a maximum charge of \$250 per month for those with high incomes. Over 90 percent of Finnish children attend government funded pre-schools and kindergartens. As in other Nordic countries health and dental care are provided right in the schools. On UNICEF's Index of Child Well Being Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were all at the top.

Surprisingly, Finnish students have little homework and they have 44 percent fewer learning hours than American pupils. They have 600 annual class hours compared to 1,080 in the U.S. Finnish pupils have longer recess periods—75 minutes to 23 for Americans—and they have far more hours of crafts and music. They also have the lowest number of sports hours of any country in the European Union.

The best way to compare teacher salaries is to calculate their rank according to the other professions. As Samuel Abrams states: "Finnish 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." For the most of the 20th Century American young women were restricted to nursing and teaching, but as job opportunities widened the brightest of them have now chosen much better paying positions in medicine, law, engineering, and science.

In a thorough 244-page analysis of their students' success education specialists from the Finnish Ministry of Education drew on a famous statement of national character from the writer Väinö Linna: "In the beginning, there were the swamp, the mattock, and Jussi." The authors explain: "This Jussi-principle is the Finnish way of studying and learning: we accept the pencil, and with a prepared mind and with a stable hand we can open any booklet and get good scores. And this was what we did!"

This reminds me of the 4,200 Danes on Samsø, who have made their island carbon negative, which means that they export more energy than they use. They say that they are just conservative farmers, and if they can do it, then anyone in the world can do likewise. America

still has its own Jussi, and there is no reason why we, putting politics aside and learning from other nations, cannot improve the education of our children.

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