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# Could It Ever Happen Here? Reflections on Finnish Education and Culture

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**Cover Page Footnote**

Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, IL

# Could It Ever Happen Here?

## Reflections on Finnish Education and Culture

April D. Nauman

*Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, USA*

The schools in Finland are bright and airy, well maintained, and clean. Children move around them freely, not walking in lines. School environments feel relaxed and casual; schoolchildren are not rushed. Class sizes are small, at 20 to 25 students. There are no standardized tests in Finnish schools—none—except for the international test given every three years (the Program for International Student Assessment, or PISA), on which the Finns score so highly. Lots of physical activity is built into each school day, with 15 minutes of recess required for every 45-minute lesson. Healthy eating is also emphasized: All children receive a free lunch daily, no matter their income level, so children from lower income families do not feel stigmatized. Through elementary school and secondary grades, students engage in hands-on activities and projects as well as seatwork. Preschoolers play. Formal instruction in reading does not begin until age 7, yet the literacy rate in Finland is 100% (“List of Countries,” n.d.). Teens who do not wish to go to college have a well-structured system of vocational schools to attend. Forty percent of students do go to college.

Teachers in Finland have professional autonomy, making their own decisions about how to teach their students. Teachers focus their mental energy on helping each child learn, rather than mastering the latest commercial program purchased by their district. Teachers strive to foster intrinsic motivation and an ability to self-evaluate. In Finland, school is a place for learning and growing, not for obsessively getting points or gold stars or pizza parties. All teachers have master’s degrees and are highly regarded by the public. There are no school inspections, and teachers are not evaluated. Instead, they develop individual work plans to discuss with their administrators. Collaboration—among teachers as well as students—is frequent. And Finnish schoolchildren consistently achieve top scores on international tests.

I was fortunate to learn most of this firsthand. In March of 2017, I traveled with a group of American educators to Finland. Knowing that Finland’s school system was one of the highest achieving in the world (based on PISA, the international test administered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD]), we wanted to see for ourselves how this successful system worked. We toured schools in Helsinki, Jyväskylä, and Turku for eight days, during which time I kept copious field notes.

As a professor of literacy education, I often share my Finland experiences with students and colleagues, as well as with friends and acquaintances who are not professional educators. After I describe the schools I saw in Finland, the response is near universal: That would never work

here. The reasons why people think this vary. Some believe Finland's small population size would preclude applicability to a country as large as the U.S. Some assume that type of public education system—with its small class sizes, well-maintained buildings, and time in the school day for teachers to collaborate and plan—would mean much higher taxes. Some of my well-informed colleagues point out that Finnish schools of education are very selective, accepting only the top 10% of applicants—the best and the brightest. Other people I have spoken with reveal an unconscious bias: Of course Finland scores well on international tests; it's "monocultural"—the underlying assumption being diversity in the U.S. puts us at a disadvantage.

Taking these points one at a time (except for the issue of teacher quality, addressed later), here is my response. First, with its population of about 6 million, Finland is roughly the size of a U.S. state. Thirty-five of our states are Finland's size or smaller. As Sahlberg (2015) suggests in his book, *Finnish Lessons 2.0*, individual states could choose to model their public education on the Finnish system.

Second, as for the cost, it turns out the U.S. spends more money per student than Finland does. In fact, the U.S. spends more than almost every other country in the world ("U.S. Education Spending," 2013). Our spending on education equals about 7.3% of our GDP, compared with Finland's 7.2% ("U.S. Education Spending," 2013). Why, then, are American schools generally not as well-staffed or well-maintained as Finland's? The answer appears to lie in *how* we spend our tax dollars. For example, the cost of standardized testing in the U.S. was estimated to be, in 2012, \$1.7 billion (Ujifusa, 2012). This is an expense the Finns do not have.

Finally, it is true the majority of Finland's population is of Finnish and Swedish descent. However, it is not true that children of a similar heritage are all alike and thus easier to teach. In addition, there are several minority groups in Finland: historically, the Sami and Roma peoples, and more recently, considerable numbers of Estonian, Russian, and Somalian immigrants, along with refugees from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, Ethiopia, Burma, and more. According to Anneli Rautiainen, a former teacher and principal who spoke to us in Helsinki, immigrants comprise about 10% of the Helsinki school population. At Vesala Comprehensive School in eastern Helsinki, with 950 students aged 7 to 16 years, more than 30 languages are spoken.

Although I have great confidence in these counterarguments, I admit that, by the end of our study tour in Finland, I too had serious doubts that public schools in the U.S. could ever look like those in Finland. The most formidable barriers, I believe, are grounded in particular cultural differences between the two countries. Based on my reading and experiences in Finland, I have concluded the key aspects of the Finns' educational success are (a) their emphasis on cooperation and collaboration among all educators; (b) a focus on the whole child and intrinsic motivation; (c) a dedication to equity; and (d) the granting of professional autonomy to teachers, who are all highly qualified. But such practices and ideas would likely meet a great deal of resistance in the U.S. What are the cultural beliefs that would need to shift for us to adopt some of Finland's successful practices? And would such a shift even be possible?

### **Culture: Theirs and Ours**

A dedication to equity underlies Finnish efforts to make all public schools equally good.

The concept of *culture* has been defined in different ways by different academic disciplines, but all concur that culture is something learned by the members of particular groups of people (Birukou, Blanzieri, Giorgini, & Giunchiglia, 2013). Anthropologist Marvin Harris (1975) defined culture as consisting of “the patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting that are characteristic of the members of a particular society or segment of a society” (Harris, 1975, as cited in Birukou et al., 2013, p. 3). This definition resonated most with my reflections on U.S. cultural barriers to adopting Finnish ideas. Although changing “patterned, repetitive ways of thinking” may sound exceedingly difficult, we should bear in mind that cultural shifts occur all the time. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and ‘70s, the conservative backlash of the ‘80s, and the rise of neoliberalism in the ‘90s are major shifts within my own lifetime. The LGBTQ movement has advanced at a surprising pace since 2010, and the current Me Too and Never Again campaigns may be signaling more shifts in Americans’ attitudes. Thus, changing attitudes and assumptions is not impossible. By thinking critically and raising our voices, American educators may be able to reframe issues and dialog in ways that alter the common assumptions impeding our adoption of successful educational practices.

One of those assumptions is about what motivates people. Finns and Americans think differently about this, and it impacts our respective approaches to education. In the U.S., we assume people are motivated primarily by competition and external rewards. Merit pay and school choice, which requires schools to compete, are two obvious manifestations of our belief in the value of competition. By contrast, Finns generally believe in the value of cooperation and collaboration, at times openly eschewing competition. At the Pirjo Pollari Teacher Training School in Jyväskylä, we learned there is no comparison of students to one another in Finland—there are no class rankings. In fact, class ranking is illegal. There is also no ability grouping. Several Finnish educators we spoke with expressed concern over a type of competition that is “unhealthy,” a concept not often discussed by Americans. Ironically, Finland has school choice, and the money follows the student. But, as we learned at the Finnish National Agency for Education, the Finns’ motto is, “The best school is the nearest one to you.” A dedication to equity underlies Finnish efforts to make all public schools equally good. The gap between the best performing and worst performing schools in Finland is the smallest in the world (Sahlberg, 2015).

When American teachers agonize over how to motivate their students to work harder or read more—which American teachers do often—their minds run to external rewards: points, grades, prizes, food. One group of faculty I worked with in a Chicago public high school wanted to raffle off a used car to get students to read more books. Finnish teachers focus much more on intrinsic motivation—a notion that seems naïve to most American educators. Students in Finland do not receive nearly as many grades during the school year as students in the U.S. Teachers there develop thematic units collaboratively with students, taking into account their interests and learning styles. Currently there is a move toward interdisciplinary, or “phenomenon-based,” learning in Finland, the goal being to make thinking more flexible and learning more interesting, to ensure children understand *why* they are learning what they are learning. Finnish educators seek students’ genuine cooperation; schooling there is not coercive.

Our belief in systems of punishment and reward is clearly rooted in behaviorism, which does not appear to have exerted as much influence on Finnish thinking about education. Social constructivism is more evident among the Finns, with their emphasis on learning through interactions—students with students, teachers with teachers. In the 1990s, Finland launched a “national school improvement initiative [to enable] all Finnish schools, principals, and teachers to network with one another...to transform schools into active learning communities” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 45). At the same time, the accountability movement took root in the U.S., based on the assumption that everyone—students and teachers alike—would not perform well unless scrutinized, tested, and “held accountable.”

It bears mentioning that constant scrutiny and frequent testing cause anxiety, which has long been known to interfere with learning (e.g., Levitt, 2016). Our assumption that people will not do what they are supposed to do unless an external agent is driving them with carrots and sticks dominates how we structure education, to the detriment of genuine learning. Connected to this way of thinking is our contemporary mania for data—without objective numbers to show to external entities, we disbelieve learning is occurring. We disbelieve that teachers would do their best simply because the work is intrinsically meaningful, or that children would learn simply because learning is intrinsically interesting.

Finnish views on standardized testing are strong. Helsinki educator Anneli Rautiainen emphasized, “School is not for PISA; it’s for life.” An educator in Jyväskylä passionately proclaimed, “We should measure what matters, not what’s easy to measure.” Sahlberg (2015) explains that the Finns believe student progress should be judged against their respective characteristics and abilities, not against uniform standards and statistical indicators. In other words, Finnish educators do not insist we all be “on the same page.” In sharp contrast to Americans, Finns believe teachers’ practice should be driven by curriculum and their own informed understanding of teaching and learning, not by assessment data. Among Finnish educators’ objections to standardized testing are concerns familiar to us—a narrowing of curriculum, teaching to the test—but also a concern with that “unhealthy” brand of competition. Assessment in Finland remains solidly in teachers’ hands, teacher-made and teacher-controlled.

Finnish teachers also emphasize student self-evaluation. When we visited a school in Jyväskylä, a first-grade teacher proudly showed me a self-evaluative tool she had created for her young students. On a poster board, she had drawn crossed lines, forming quadrants. At the top of the vertical line was written “Easy,” and at the bottom was written “Hard.” On one end of the horizontal line was a smiley face, and on the other side was a frowny face. She gave her students cut-out pictures of different school activities—eating lunch, playing outside, reading, writing, math, working with others, and so on. Each child then thought about each activity and placed it on the chart according to how easy he or she found it and how happy he or she felt doing it. “The main thing to me,” this teacher said, “is how much [the children] enjoy school and enjoy learning.”

By contrast, evaluation in U.S. schools comes from the outside, in the form of adult judgment. American children must worry and hope they are judged to be okay. Rarely do our children get the opportunity to reflect on their own work, understandings, or behaviors so they may draw

their own conclusions and learn to self-regulate. Yet this skill—the ability to self-regulate—is critical for succeeding in college and at any type of job.

### **The Business of Schooling**

Americans' belief in the motivating power of competition and external reward sits squarely in our capitalist worldview, which has intensified in the decades since the end of the Cold War. When the Berlin Wall came down, capitalism appeared to have “won.” For generations, Americans have been taught to think dichotomously about economic systems: If it is not capitalism, it is communism, which obviously is bad. Thus, it has been difficult to argue for the value of cooperation, which seems opposed to competition. But as Sachs (2012) asserts in his book, *The Price of Civilization*, it is possible for a country to have a balance of public and private economies. Virtually all other Western democracies do it successfully, recognizing competition is the right paradigm for some sectors, whereas cooperation is the best paradigm for others, such as education, health care, and public-serving infrastructure (Sachs, 2012).

Unfortunately, in recent decades, an uncritical enthusiasm for free-market promises has heavily shaped public debate about education reform in the U.S., with school choice touted as a panacea by organizations such as the Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute. Business leaders and legislators who are not professional educators often liken education to business, looking at school reform through a business lens. For example, a recent *Chicago Tribune* editorial on what Illinois state universities should do to hold onto students begins this way: “First, retool. If you’re a smart business person and not making sales, you dissect the product, find its weaknesses and re-engineer” (Editors, 2018, p. 26). The repeated use of business paradigms in attempts to reform public education suggests the old adage, “When all you have is a hammer, you treat everything like a nail.” In the absence of nuanced thinking about different ways economies could be structured, all we have is a hammer. We treat everything like a business.

This is one mindset that American educators must stridently argue against. Though a school has aspects of a business, which require the use of sound business practices, public education is not a business and should not be run as if it were. Education is not part of the service industry, in which the customer is always right. Teachers are not there to serve students and parents; teachers are the authority in the classroom and the expert in student learning. Moreover, education is not analogous to the manufacturing industry, with its focus on efficiency, productivity, and uniformity. Children are individuals with different strengths and needs, so standardizing education is not sensible. Moreover, teaching well is a time-consuming endeavor, and time is a finite resource. Despite our optimistic slogans, no one can actually “make” time—there is only a certain amount of it in every day. Heaping more work on teachers with the goal of increasing productivity and efficiency undermines teachers' ability to focus thoughtfully on their practice. Learning is more appropriately thought of as a process; there are no “products” in education. To treat students as products or even as consumers is to reduce them to things used to profit adults, which denies young people their full humanity.

In my experience, most people who liken schools to businesses simply have not thought the analogy through. However, some factions in the U.S. believe schools should be actual businesses, and these groups have been working to privatize education, seeing it as an

opportunity for venture capitalists. In 1995, influential University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman stated, “The privatization of schooling would produce a new, highly active and profitable industry” (Friedman, 1995, para. 28).

The privatization movement is a major source of the escalating attacks on public education. Farstrup and Samuels (2002) point out that before the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, which made a series of hyperbolic claims about the failure of U.S. public education, Americans held a generally positive view of public schools and teachers. The book was followed by a plethora of federal documents making similar claims based on evidence that, on further scrutiny, was suspect (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Berliner and Biddle (1995) call these attacks on public education a “manufactured crisis,” writing:

Hostile and untrue claims [about American public education] were...repeated by many leaders of the Reagan and [George H.W.] Bush administrations. The claims were also embraced in many documents issued by industrialists and business leaders and were endlessly repeated and embroidered on by the press. [W]e began to suspect...that organized malevolence might actually be underway. (p. xi)

Before businessmen can swoop in to rescue public schools through privatization, the public must believe those schools are in peril. Despite strong voices in defense of teachers and public education (e.g., Ravitch, 2013, 2016; Naison, 2014), Americans’ opinions of teachers, the teaching profession, and public schools have been steadily, intentionally eroded (Ward, 2015).

### **Cycles: Failure and Success**

How teachers are treated in the U.S. matters, because it impacts teacher retention and, importantly, our ability to attract bright young people to the profession. Morale among U.S. teachers has been declining, with many experiencing their work as stressful, difficult, and unappreciated (Ward, 2015). In low-income areas, teachers feel pressured to somehow single-handedly counteract the deep effects of poverty (Ward, 2015). Enrollment in colleges of education has declined by 10% between 2004 and 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, as cited in Ward, 2015). In the U.S., young people expressing a wish to become teachers are likely to get reactions such as, “Teachers don’t get paid much, do they?” or, “You’re so smart, why would you want to be a teacher?” The looming teacher shortage will force schools to hire underqualified people, who will likely not succeed in a classroom, which means student learning will suffer, resulting in more belittling of teachers, and the profession will look even less attractive to young people considering career options. We will be stuck in a cycle of failure.

By contrast, Finland is enjoying a cycle of success. Finnish teachers at all grade levels—from preschool through university—are highly revered. This is not because Finnish teachers make big salaries; their median income is comparable to that of U.S. teachers (Gould & Weller, 2016). Nevertheless, the Finns regard teaching as “a noble, prestigious profession—akin to medicine, law, or economics.” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 99). Finland “publicly recognizes the value of its teachers and implicitly trusts their professional insights and judgments” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 99). Ninety-five percent of Finnish teachers say the advantages of being a teacher outweigh the



disadvantages, compared with an OECD average (for 35 economically developed member nations) of 77%. Job satisfaction among Finnish teachers is 91% (Sahlberg, 2015).

Here is how Finland’s cycle of success works. Beginning in the 1980s, Finland required a master’s degree as the basic qualification for teaching. The Finnish teachers’ union (there is only one, representing teachers from preschool through university) negotiated for increased professional autonomy in tandem with this requirement. All master’s degrees are earned from universities—there are no alternative certification pathways to teaching in Finland. This level of education means that scholarly research forms the basis for the teaching profession. Comprising a highly educated, elite workforce, Finnish teachers are viewed as professionals with expertise. Thus they are trusted to do their jobs without intrusive oversight, trusted to be self-regulating (Sahlberg, 2015). As one educator in Jyväskylä phrased it, teachers are “free to teach.” At all levels—from preschool through university—teachers expect to be given “the full range of professional autonomy they need to practice what they have been educated to do: to plan, teach, diagnose, execute, and evaluate” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 105).

As trusted professionals, teachers in Finland are provided with the resources they require to do their jobs well. This includes smaller class sizes.

With fewer students, teachers have more time and energy to devote to individuals, getting to know their strengths and needs, figuring out how to best help them learn. Equally important, teachers are given time during the school day to collaborate and understand how their colleagues teach. Finnish teachers are in their classrooms teaching for about 600 hours per year, which is below the OECD average. In the U.S., teachers are in their classrooms teaching for about 1,000 hours per year (OECD, 2016). With autonomy and enough time to accomplish their work, teachers are able to do their best. As a result, educational outcomes in Finland are impressive, garnering international attention, and positive attitudes toward the profession of teaching are reinforced. Thus, large numbers of young Finns aspire to become teachers, providing a rich pool of talent from which schools of education can select the top 10%. However, as Sahlberg (2015) emphasizes:

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...it is not enough to improve teacher education or to have “the best and the brightest” teaching in schools. The Finnish experience shows that it is more important to ensure that teachers’ work in schools is based on professional dignity, social respect, and collegiality so that they can fulfill their intention of selecting teaching as a lifetime career... Teachers’ work should strike a balance between classroom teaching and collaboration with other professionals in school... This is the best way to create an image of teaching among young people that will attract young, talented professionals to choose teaching as their career. (p. 98)

Sahlberg goes on to make this startling statement: “The question of teacher effectiveness or the consequences of being an ineffective teacher are not relevant in Finland” (2015, p. 125). In such a supportive context, “teacher quality” becomes a nonissue.

### **Breaking Into the Cycle**

Admittedly, it is difficult to see how we in the U.S. might break into this happy cycle. It would help to acknowledge the complexity of the cycle, with its many moving parts. Singling out one aspect for blame is obviously not helpful, nor would focusing improvement efforts on only one piece of it. Although U.S. colleges of education may benefit from studying the process by which Finnish schools select teacher candidates and how they structure curriculum (especially student teaching and classroom experiences), colleges of education cannot just “be more selective” in the absence of sufficient pools of applicants. Teacher autonomy and opportunity for professionalism, coupled with more positive societal attitudes toward teachers, would need to be fostered at the same time to make the job more appealing. Requiring a master’s degree for licensure may be in the purview of individual states, but such a requirement without accompanying financial support for preservice teachers (universities in Finland are free) or enhanced professionalism in the career would probably reduce the applicant pool even more.

However, U.S. colleges of education may lead the way in spotlighting the excellent work of American teachers, celebrating teachers’ courageous advocacy of children, and repositioning teachers from scapegoats to warriors in the battle against corporate overreach. Educators at all levels can join together and raise voices in defense of the profession and public education. The recent statewide teacher strikes in West Virginia and Oklahoma were not only for pay raises; they were for increased state spending on public education to improve schools and classrooms. Oklahoma educators Baines and Machell (2018) write, “More than a movement to raise salaries, the teacher strike [in Oklahoma] is a referendum on respect for a beleaguered profession” (p. 28). Oklahoma, which ranks 49<sup>th</sup> in the nation in funding per student and 50<sup>th</sup> in average teacher salary, had slashed education funding because of the legislature’s massive tax cut to the state’s wealthiest residents (Baines & Machell, 2018). Teachers’ unions across the country can be encouraged to take a stand against such actions; moreover, they should negotiate aggressively for increased state funding to enhance the quality of working conditions in schools, in addition to salary increases.

Obviously, an increased flow of resources directly into schools and classrooms—with the ultimate goal of equity across schools—would improve U.S. teachers’ working conditions and life in U.S. schools. The fact that we currently spend more on education than Finland suggests we may be able to accomplish this without tax increases, but we would have to be willing to critically examine how we use education tax dollars and ask unpopular questions. For example, are the benefits of standardized testing really worth nearly \$2 billion a year? What, exactly, are the benefits of so much testing? Classroom teachers’ views would be critical to this debate. What percentage of our education tax dollars goes to classrooms, and what percentage goes to consultants and layers of administration? What are the costs associated with frequently changing mandates from local, state, and federal governments? What percentage goes to educational publishing companies and other education-related industries? What are the profit margins of these companies, and are Americans comfortable with their education tax dollars being

channeled toward corporate profits? In Helsinki, Vesala Comprehensive School is staffed with a full-time social worker, a full-time psychologist, and a part-time nurse. A doctor and dentist visit the school once a month. Surely taxpayer dollars are better spent on such personnel than on more test booklets. In his article on declining morale among U.S. teachers, Ward (2015) writes: “As a system like Finland’s illustrates, the key to effective schools does not reside in interventionist strategies and think-tank polished ideas, but in the way teachers and schools are supported, both financially and publicly” (para. 18).

### **Values and Purpose: Theirs and Ours**

Finland’s core social values are “social justice, caring for others, and happiness” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 101). A teaching career “is the result of an inner desire to work with people and to help both people and society” (Sahlberg, 2015, p. 105). These values connect to the clearly stated purpose of public education in Finland, as we learned in Helsinki: “Development as a human being and as a citizen.” Related goals radiate from this central purpose. Finnish educators ask, “What kind of citizens do we want our children to become?” Here is their list: active and innovative; creative and able to exploit their competences; multiskilled, lifelong learners; committed in their communities; respectful of others; confident and future-oriented; multilingual; critical and analytic; and cooperative and collaborative. Furthermore, in Finland, education is highly valued for itself. One Helsinki educator commented, “Finns have education in their hearts.”

In the U.S., we do not really have a common purpose for public education. Many Americans would agree with the Finnish goal, but many others feel the purpose of public education is to produce workers to compete in the global economy. Also, we typically link the value of education (especially a college education) to the amount of money a person can make once it’s over.

I believe it is useful to acknowledge that, in the U.S., we really do not value education as much as we claim to. Scholars have long documented an anti-intellectual strain in American culture (e.g., Hofstadter, 1963). In my experience, for the most part, Americans value material wealth above education. We love stories about billionaires who dropped out of college. Spending four years in college to end up working at a Starbucks is considered stupid. Though education and income levels correlate, it is having money, not advanced degrees, that opens the doors to power and prestige in the U.S.

But here again, educators can work to shift attitudes and assumptions, bringing to light the unexamined meanings we attach to wealth. One of our long-enduring cultural beliefs is that wealth indicates superiority—that the rich are rich because they have worked harder and are smarter than the rest of us. But counterexamples are everywhere. The single mom who holds down two minimum-wage jobs is unquestionably working hard. It is easy to think of wealthy celebrities who are not particularly bright. No one argues that Paris Hilton’s fortune is a result of her intellect and strong work ethic. Although advertising and the media show and tell us daily that the goal of life is to accumulate wealth, when asked to think more deeply about this issue, most of us recognize that, as long as we have *enough* money, what makes life truly meaningful is not material, but intangibles such as connections with family and friends, fulfilling work, good

health, creative pursuits, personal growth, and so on. As we push back on the attitudes promoting the culture of wealth worship that has evolved in the U.S., we can emphasize the value of well-resourced public education, with its power to bring stability and well-being to a whole society.

### **Making It Happen Here**

Finnish schoolchildren not only achieve top scores on the international test; they are also happy. In fact, Finland was just named the world's happiest country (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018). The *World Happiness Report* bases its rankings on six variables determined to support well-being: income, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom, trust, and generosity (Helliwell et al., 2018). When we were in Helsinki, one educator proudly told us, "Everything works here."

Given the result is happy, high-achieving children, it is difficult to see why anyone would resist adopting Finnish educational practices and ideas. Yet resistance in the U.S. is plentiful and powerful, buried deep (and not so deep) in our cultural beliefs. What can we do?

First, American educators at all levels, from pre-K through university, can ramp up the fight for equitable funding for all schools, ensuring sufficient resources in *all* classrooms, so teachers'

**We need to demonstrate that collaboration, not competition, is the key to improving education.**

jobs don't feel impossible. Whether we want to redirect current funding or ask wealthy people to pay more in taxes is up to us, but all schools must have necessary materials and personnel, including social workers, psychologists, school nurses, teachers' aides, and enough teachers to keep class sizes manageable.

Second, we need to demonstrate that collaboration, not competition, is the key to improving education. Teachers improve their practice when they share ideas openly and ask one another for insights to help individual students, and teachers need time during the school day allocated for this purpose.

Third, we must fight for teachers' professional autonomy. Too often, bright young teachers begin their careers full of energy, ideas, and love for children, only to learn that teaching in the U.S. is about adhering to mandates from above, following the dictates of nonprofessional educators whose directives do not make sense in the classroom. Professional teachers know that endlessly assessing children is not the same as teaching them. Teachers know establishing relationships with students is key, and building those relationships takes time. Teachers know that students suffering from anxiety do not learn well, and that students traumatized by violence and poverty require extra resources—psychologists and medical attention—not more test prep.

When schools have sufficient resources and working environments that support teacher autonomy and success, teachers will be able to grow professionally. They will be able to do the work they trained to do and want to do: focus on individual learners, understand what motivates them intrinsically, and help them grow. When the teaching profession is again seen as a vital career, essential to the well-being of children and the preservation of our democracy, teachers and their students will thrive.

Many Americans will argue that it is our fierce spirit of competition, our rugged individualism, our drive toward material success that makes us who we are—distinct, unique, American. But taken to the extreme, these values lead to gross inequities—the severe income gap we have today, for example—and vast numbers of people suffer. Human beings are interdependent, social creatures who live in groups. Cooperation is required for basic survival. As Americans, we will always pride ourselves on our self-sufficiency and toughness, but we can also pride ourselves on our compassion and drive toward equality. Embedded in our cultural DNA may be a strand of anti-intellectualism, but we certainly love our children. We want them to thrive in school and grow to be strong, smart, capable adults, both self-sufficient and connected to their community. We want them to achieve, and we want them to be happy. In this, the U.S. and Finland are very much alike.

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