



FACULTY ADVOCATE

Dave Delehanty (deledavi@isu.edu), **Randy Berriochoa** (berriochoa@csi.edu)
Bob Dickow (dickow@uidaho.edu), **Joyce Lider** (joyce_lider@nic.edu) **Craig Steenberg** (csteenbe@lsc.edu), **Lynn Lubamersky** (llubame@boisestate.edu)
Brent Faure, K-12 Vice-President (faurebr@d25.k12.id.us)
Nick Gier, President (ngier@uidaho.edu)
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Why Do Finnish Students Do So Well? Social Democracy, “Jussi,” and Teacher Professionalism

By Nick Gier, IFT President

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

Finland, Singapore, and South Korea out-prepare, out-invest, out-respect, and out-perform the United States.

–Randi Weingarten, President, American Federation of Teachers

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, universal elder care, and government funded health coverage.

The Finns, however, do very well by most all standards. They were fifth in the world just behind the U.S. for economic competitiveness in the World Economic Forum list for 2010-11. Primarily because of its high-tech industries, Finland was declared the world’s most innovative economy by the free market *Economist*.

Finnish Students at the Top in PISA

Every year since 2000 Finnish students have re-

ceived some of the highest scores on the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). In 2009 they were third in reading and math behind Shanghai and Korea, and second in science behind Shanghai.

Ethnically Diverse Nations High in PISA

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, whose population is 40 percent foreign born with three major ethnic groups embracing five world religions.

Low Child Poverty and Drop Out Rates

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 attribution is 50 percent higher in poor American school districts, where dropout rates range as high as 50 percent. CNN reports that in 2009 the average dropout rate for the U.S. was 16 percent compared to just 1 percent in Finland.

Finnish Teachers 95% Unionized; Contracts Insist on Small Class Size

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. Finnish union contracts controls class size, and one of the reasons why Finnish students do so well in science is that that

these classes with daily labs are limited to 16 students.

Only one in ten applicants is accepted at the teacher colleges, so Finnish teachers come from the top of their high school classes. Successful applicants begin at the age of 17 and spend 5-7.5 years (depending on chosen fields) earning their degrees without paying any tuition. As in Denmark and other countries, all Finnish university students receive a monthly stipend (\$800 in Denmark) if they keep up their grades.

No Standardized Tests; Fewer Class Days; No Teacher Evaluation; No Competitive Sports

The only standardized tests Finns take are the PISA exams and the ones for matriculation at institutions of higher education. 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.”

In Finland there are no teacher evaluations, and 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.”

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.”

There is a famous statement of national character from the Finnish writer Väinö Linna: “In the beginning, there were the swamp, the mattock, and Jussi.”

The Ministry of Education explains: “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!”

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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The Finns Know How to Do It, But Idaho’s Politicians Do not

Teachers Ignored in Ed Reform

Shawn Vestal, August 31, 2011, Copyright 2011
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If you want to “fix schools,” apparently, there’s one group of people you should ignore. Teachers.

And when, in the course of fixing schools, you ignore this group of people, you should make it clear that you are not really ignoring “the people.” They’re just teachers.

If you want to fix schools and put students first – well, first after taxpayers and “customers” and federal standards and ideological opponents of unions – what you should do about this group of people is remove them from the equation altogether. Make ’em leave the room while kids learn on computers.

Teachers. If only we could have schools – very cheap, very effective schools – without them.

Idaho is going to show us that we can, apparently. If it wasn’t so deeply sad, it would be somewhat hilarious that the Gem State – which has distinguished itself with a miserly approach to education – is pretending to shine a light on the future of schools. And if teachers line up by the hundreds to tell you they think these are bad ideas, well, you know what to do with their opinions.

Last week, a subcommittee of Idaho’s Board of Education adopted a requirement that students take online courses, after being swamped with opposition to the plan. It’s part of the state’s Students Come

First reforms, which include such student-helping provisions as gutting collective bargaining rights for teachers, raiding budgets to buy computers in the name of being forward-thinking, and ensuring that Idaho's salaries make it the state of last resort for job-hunting teachers.

State Sen. John Goedde, a Coeur d'Alene insurance agent and legislative cheerleader for the law, said he wasn't persuaded by all the testimony against the mandate for "asynchronous" online classes – that is, classes without a teacher present – because, "I don't know the makeup of the people that testified."

"I was there for the Coeur d'Alene testimony, and without exception, every person that testified was either an educator or a former educator," Goedde said. "And I think that is just consistent with their insistence that education reform is a bad thing."

Goedde's attitude is of a piece with the entire Idaho approach – devised by non-educator and top education bureaucrat Tom Luna, shepherded legislatively by insurance agent Goedde and insurance agent Bob Nonini, and championed by former-potato-baron-by-marriage Butch Otter. If there's one thing all these non-educators know, it's that you must force teachers to do a good job against their will.

Complaints about extravagant and ineffective school spending are so firmly embedded in the state's political emissions that they've become an article of faith: You can't create good schools by "throwing money" at them.

But how would Idaho know? If not throwing money at schools was the way to fix them, Idaho's schools would be all fixed. The state ranked 50th in per-pupil spending in the latest census figures. It's long been a perennial in the high 40s, along with its ideological neighbors from the Deep South. The state has followed this proud tradition with further cuts in the last two legislative sessions.

Reformers like to talk about making it easier to get rid of bad teachers. But the truth is that Idaho's current path is a way to make sure good teachers leave for greener pastures. It practically drives them to the border and gives them bus fare to, say, Wyoming, where they can earn a mere \$25,000 more green per year.

I called Goedde to ask him if he really considers educators not worth listening to at all. He assured me that wasn't so.

"I don't think anyone knows education better than educators," he said. "I was not trying to discount the testimony of the teachers as much as I was trying to point out that parents did not have enough concern about the online piece to show up and testify."

Still, he did ignore those teachers, no? He said teachers refuse to adapt to new technology, fight any efforts at reform, want to preserve the status quo.

I asked him why he didn't think the problem lay in Idaho's refusal to pay for excellent schools.

"When 40 percent of high school graduates have to take remedial classes before they go to a post-secondary institution, I believe the general public believes they're not getting their money's worth out of public education," he said.

Well, there are problems, for sure. But it's likely that no state gets more for its money than Idaho, whose students post better-than-average results on a range of student achievement measures, all for worst-in-the-nation support from taxpayers and lawmakers. Might teachers deserve any credit for that? Probably not.

The national game of "Fix the Schools" is fraught with complications, and anyone who pretends to know all the answers is a fool. I certainly don't, and neither do those who lay all the blame on teachers unions or those who seem not to have paid attention to the research about charter schools. But crafting solutions from a position of proud animosity toward teachers is preposterous.

Goedde said that there are other ways besides money to attract good teachers. One is to elevate their level of public esteem – to help give "them the public perception that they're more valued, that the community values what they do."

I agree. We should absolutely give them that perception. As soon as we stop not listening to them.

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