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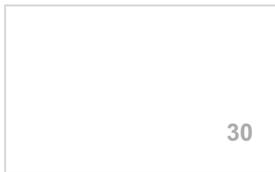
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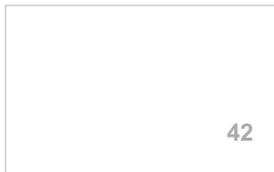
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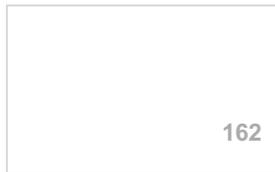
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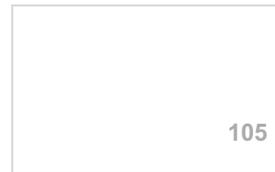
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# How Finland's Education System Succeeds, and America's is at War

by [Zoe Weil](#) | February 29, 2012 | 10:30 am

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A Fireside Chat with George Takei



Is 9th Grade Too Soon To Start the College

Last year, three things happened almost simultaneously in the world of education reform: the films "Waiting for Superman" and "Race to Nowhere" came out, and [Finland's success](#) at achieving the number one spot in educational outcomes (as measured by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] PISA report comparing the academic achievements of 15-year-olds in 57 countries) gained widespread attention.

What these three things have in common is this:

- 1) They all concern education;
- 2) They were each in the news generating conversation and controversy.

What's interesting is what they *don't* have in common. That two documentaries on schooling that came out within months of one another each garnered significant media attention and were widely viewed by the general public is interesting in and of itself. What is more interesting, however, is that the two films – each addressing the challenges in our current education system – not only came to radically different conclusions; they identified nearly opposite problems.

"Waiting for Superman" is a documentary that addresses "failing schools," in which students are not acquiring the basic, foundational skills of literacy and numeracy. The film describes the problem of poor

teaching and is critical of unions that protect incompetent teachers. It pulls on the viewers' heartstrings as it highlights a few good charter schools that don't have room for all the kids who want to attend. Following the plight of a handful of children desperate for a good education and whose hope lies in winning these charter school lotteries, we watch most of these children lose what is depicted as their one and only chance at a good education. The film is a tearjerker.

The premise underlying "Waiting for Superman" is this: the purpose of school is to successfully fill our children's brains with knowledge. The way to do this is with good teachers and new school models that are not beholden to union rules (i.e., get rid of bad teachers, fill children's brains efficiently and effectively, and their high stakes assessment tests will improve).

"Race to Nowhere" identifies a completely different problem: stressed out, overworked kids who are expected to be superman, who are layering extracurricular upon extracurricular, AP course upon AP course and who are striving to get into colleges for which they are still unprepared because of grade inflation, rampant cheating, and lack of true skills in writing and critical thinking.

The underlying premise of this film is: we are stressing our kids to the breaking point and need to let up so that they can actually get a meaningful education.

As education writer John Merrow said in a review of "Race to Nowhere" in The Huffington Post, "[Waiting for Superman] portrays our schools as undemanding; 'Race to Nowhere' says the opposite – that we are killing our kids, figuratively and sometimes literally." How can two films, coming out simultaneously during a year in which education may have been the most consistently newsworthy topic, have such divergent premises and come to such dramatically different conclusions?

Enter Finland. Finland's successful education system offers a corrective to both premises, and given Finland's phenomenal success at educating its children, it's worth looking at Finland's approach carefully to see what we can learn in the U.S. It's also important to remember that Finland's school system wasn't always this good. In the 1970s, Finland's education outcomes were like ours – smack in the middle in comparison with other nations. They addressed their "failing schools" and turned them around. What's their secret?

Here are some of the salient features of today's Finnish schooling:

1. While all pre-schools (nursery and kindergarten) are fully funded and most children attend, academic education does not begin until children are 7 years old.
2. There are *no* standardized tests in Finland until a single matriculation exam at 15 years old (to determine the higher education options available to students).
3. There are fewer school days in Finland than in the U.S., with shorter school days and more outdoor/recess time.
4. Education is not competitive. There are no valedictorians, rankings, or tracking. Most schools do not grade students until 6th grade.
5. Teachers' salaries are comparable in the U.S. and Finland, though because Finnish teachers work on average about half as many hours as U.S. teachers, they are actually paid twice as much for their time.
6. Less money is spent per pupil in Finland than in the U.S.
7. Students are required to complete very little homework, averaging 30 minutes/day.
8. There are no school sports teams. Instead there are community sports, and a couple of sports schools for Olympic-bound athletes.
9. All teachers receive a master's degree that is *content*-based (rather than theory-based) and the acceptance rate into teacher training programs is less than 10%. (In the U.S. only 23% of new teachers scored in the top third of SAT and ACT tests.)
10. Finnish teachers have high vocational status in their country; teaching in Finland is extremely prestigious.
11. The Finnish curriculum is "thinking-based," and the guiding principles include equity, creativity, and prosperity.

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12. Finnish teachers work collaboratively as well as autonomously. They choose their own teaching methods and materials and assess their students accordingly. Schools are not compared to one another for achievement.

13. Teachers often stay with their class and teach the same students for several years.

14. The variation in Finnish schools' successes is minimal. Whether rural or urban, in wealthy or poor regions, Finnish children do well no matter what school they attend.

When we carefully consider this list, it's difficult not to conclude that the solutions to "failing schools" that we've been pursuing in the U.S. may be completely off the mark. While Finland has eschewed standardized testing and competition, we've ramped them up. The charter schools portrayed in 'Waiting for Superman' have increased school days, school hours, homework, and teacher hours, yet Finland's successful schools have fewer hours for students and teachers alike and far less homework.

We teach children to read earlier and earlier, making formerly play-centered kindergartens a place where children sit most of the day and learn their letters and numbers. Finland doesn't begin academic education until age seven, yet their students are far more proficient at 15. By taking the opposite approach on so many educational initiatives as Finland, and seeing few if any gains (plus the negative repercussions of the stress-inducing approaches that 'Race to Nowhere' depicts), we may have been seriously undermining our own goals and working at cross purposes.

Some argue that Finland does not face the same challenges as the U.S., noting that it has a less diverse culture, fewer immigrants, and less poverty, but these arguments don't hold up very well. Why, for example, do Finnish children do so well while students from other Scandinavian countries with similar demographics fall in the middle of the comparison charts?

In some schools in and around Helsinki, 30% of the students are immigrants, and in some urban Finnish schools nearly 50% of the students have a different mother tongue than Finnish. That Finland still has such equity among student outcomes indicates that it is still possible to educate a diverse population well. In Finland, non-native speakers (and any child falling behind) are given extra attention and help until they, too, are achieving at the national level.

Finland simply doesn't have the problems identified by "Waiting for Superman" and "Race to Nowhere." They have created a school system and culture with the highest global achievements but without the stress that so many kids in the U.S. feel today. There is such equity in Finnish education that it is hard to imagine that in Finland two disparate and divergent films on educational challenges could ever be produced simultaneously.

So what can we learn from Finland? Above all else, the Finnish educational model reminds us that the greatest asset for learning outcomes is teachers. Until and unless the U.S. populates its schools with teachers who we can claim are our best and brightest, and who are well trained in content areas, and until and unless we give these valued professionals the responsibility and trust they deserve to carry out their noble profession and assess their students based not on national, standardized bubble tests, but rather on the teachers' own meaningful assessments of their students' skills, knowledge and critical thinking capacities, we should not expect to see our standing among the world's schools increase very much.

Finding such teachers won't be easy if we continue to demand twice the time Finnish teachers put in for the same pay; if we continue to undermine teachers' intelligence and professionalism by dumbing down their curricula and forcing them to teach to standardized bubble tests, leaving them little autonomy in their teaching; if we persist in denigrating their profession and reducing the benefits that supplement their modest salaries; and if we fail to educate them well enough so that they, in turn, can educate the next generation in a changing, complex world.

There is still one more problem, which I believe is the most important issue we must address in education. It was not addressed in "Waiting for Superman" or "Race to Nowhere." It was not even identified as a question worth considering. Even Finland, with its wonderful and working approach to education, its thinking-based curriculum, and its commitment to develop the humanity of each child, has not sufficiently answered what I think is the most important question of our time.

What is the purpose of schooling? In the 21st century, we need a bigger purpose for schooling than coming out on top of the OECD PISA tests so that our graduates are better prepared to "compete in the global economy."



250 comments

You're right Lee, the finger thing is weird. Kind of gay actually - both men.



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Gee, thanks GOP for imposing your pseudo-Christian-values on everyone else.



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This is a sad day.



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Cynthia S. Cynthia Samuels, currently Managing Editor of Care2, Causes, has been working with blogs and... [more](#)



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Our children will face unprecedented problems when they graduate from school. It is not simply that jobs are hard to find and debt is piling up. Our planet is warming at a rate faster than the worst predictions from scientists. Species are become extinct so quickly that we may lose half of all species on Earth by the end of the century. The human population is over 7 billion, with more than 1 billion with no access to clean water or enough food. We're approaching an energy crisis we are completely unprepared to address.

To meet these, and many other challenges, we need an educated populace that has been properly prepared in school for such a world that has been provided with the knowledge of interconnected global issues, the skills and tools to become problem-solvers and changemakers in whatever fields they ultimately pursue, and the motivation to address the challenges they will face with resolve and creativity. We will only educate such a generation if and when we decide that the very purpose of schooling must be to [graduate a generation of solutionaries](#).

Zoe Weil is the president of the [Institute for Humane Education](#), which offers the only graduate programs in comprehensive humane education, as well as online courses, workshops, and dynamic resources. She is the author of Nautilus silver medal winner *Most Good, Least Harm: A Simple Principle for a Better World and Meaningful Life*; *Above All, Be Kind*; *The Power and Promise of Humane Education*, and Moonbeam gold medal winner *Claude and Medea*, about middle school students who become activists. She has given a [TEDx talk on humane education](#) and [blogs](#). Join her on Facebook and follow her on Twitter [@ZoeWeil](#).

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Julie W.

2:32am PST on Mar 7, 2012

Re 14: ALL schools are state funded - there are no exclusive private schools. Equality is very important in Finnish education.



Perri L.

3:03pm PST on Mar 5, 2012

...maybe it' time for change? I think so. The ye olde schoole system isn't working in the 21st century world. Let's wake up and smell the roses.



Bette M.

2:39pm PST on Mar 4, 2012

Dummitru.....In other words Finnish familys are saner & much more stable because most of their population is of the same nationality. The U.S. is a real hodgepodge mess of disconnected & unrelating nationalities. This stableness within the Finnish families is also true of the Norwegians & other Scandiavian countrys.

Must be the cold weather that keeps them sharp!!

Wherever you go there once was a forest.

Plant & protect Danny's trees for life.

Trees are the lungs of the earth.



Dumitru Z.

2:02pm PST on Mar 4, 2012

Maybe you're focusing in the wrong direction. Finnish educational system doesn't only rely on a scholar model, but also on basic primary education gained in family. Finnish families are well balanced, compared to mostly tempestuous american ones. And this also is part of the way of living, culture, politics, and all the factors that builds the harmonious environment for Finnish children. For a small nation isn't so hard, but for a wide one, it's hard to attain all those elements.



Chari S.

9:29am PST on Mar 4, 2012

I think the things that Finland does could be applied to our schools. I started reading when I was 3 and could read on a 3rd grade level before I went to 1st grade but my parents didn't "teach me to read" they allowed me to learn to read, a big difference. The big problem with American schools is the political climate and the fact that the government and the 1% really don't want our kids to learn to think for themselves. Look at the difference in taxation in Finland. Are we willing to change?



Bernard C.

3:32am PST on Mar 3, 2012

Finland has a small and stable population and a longer history of democracy than any other country in the world that gives it a head start on education. Education in most parts of the world is seen by authorities and politicians mainly as an opportunity to drive through their favorite version of Social Engineering rather than a means of producing creative, thinking socially integrated adults. The old definition of education as "a process leading to the ability to think for oneself" has been almost totally politically subverted. Even educators and their organisations are more concerned with politics than education.



Danuta W.

2:39am PST on Mar 2, 2012

Thanks for this article.



Billie C.

10:23pm PST on Mar 1, 2012

to bad we won't learn from them. all we do is teach kids how to take tests. they learn nothing about the real world. we need to change since we keep slipping further behind the world.



Martha E.

10:15pm PST on Mar 1, 2012

But the great America cannot learn anything from little Finland.



Lyn B.

10:14pm PST on Mar 1, 2012

Until we change the belief that exists of the supposed truth in the statement " those who can, do - those who can't, teach".

Which is why, in my opinion, the best and brightest do anything but teach. Additionally, the salaries for teaching are all over the place and typically so much lower than what they can make as the best and brightest in any other arena than teaching.

I have pages and pages I could write about this topic but I have to remind myself how pointless it is to bother. Pointless to write, to post, even to care. It's not going to change. It's just going to get worse. I have seen proof of that damn near daily since I graduated high school.

I don't know WHAT it's going to take to wake people up or to change it.

So I personally have to step back and step away because I can at least change MY situation. Which is not creating more anxiety in my life, I have enough with the stuff that I care about, that may have answers. But either way, I know I can't fix or change this one so other than the occassional and short(for me) comment here and there, I have to accept that nothing I do or say matters.

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