



Finnish Schools Have a Lot to Teach Us. Here's One More Lesson to Be Learned



Finland is a longstanding [poster child](#) for educational success. The nation has been earning kudos for years for its [performance on international assessments](#). Its “[secret sauce](#)” has variously been credited to factors such as smaller class sizes, a lack of emphasis on standardized testing, and high levels of teacher preparation and professionalism.

In a [recent piece](#) in the *Fulbright Finland News Magazine*, NEPC fellow [Samuel E. Abrams](#) of Teachers' College, Columbia University, offers another lesson that other nations might learn from the nation's approach to schooling: its thoughtful use of vocational education, paired with a national approach to vocations that makes this education valuable.

Relative to U.S. students, Finnish students are much more likely to attend vocational schools. Nearly half do, as compared to five percent in the United States, Abrams writes. Finland also devotes a higher portion of its Gross Domestic Product to job training—one percent as compared to .1 percent in the United States.

In his commentary, Abrams describes the “sparkling” equipment of the Finnish vocational programs he visited as well as the apprenticeships that students participate in as part of their learning process.

“The world has as much to learn from Finland's robust vocational system as it does from the country's progressive pedagogical philosophy and rigorous approach to teacher preparation,” he writes.

In the United States, however, Abrams concedes that this could be a tough task, due to differences between the two nations that transcend education:

The wage and benefit penalties for someone in the U.S. with a diploma in auto maintenance or culinary arts, for example, can be severe. Not so in Finland. Because of income compression, the salary of a garage mechanic or baker will not, as in the U.S., be dwarfed by that of a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Because of everyday equity, the garage mechanic or baker will not, as in the U.S., have to worry about maternity/paternity leave, solid health-care coverage, affordable daycare, paid vacation, and decent retirement funding.

While Abrams' commentary implicates major changes to formal schooling as well as the national economy, it also points to the consequences of ignoring the need for change. Abrams writes:

[W]hile the passage of a trillion-dollar infrastructure bill in 2021 marked an important victory for President Joe Biden, we don't have the skilled labor to meet the bill's goals to build solar and wind farms, expand broadband, and upgrade mass transit. . . . More fundamentally, without a strong vocational school system, we don't have the foundation for a healthy middle class.

In a 2020 NEPC policy brief, [Emily Hodge](#), [Shaun Dougherty](#), and [Carol Burris](#) took a fresh-eyed look at the nation's troubled history with vocational education as well as its importance and potential (now generally framed as Career and Technical Education). One of the possibilities they explain is [Linked Learning](#), an approach that was also explored in a [2011 NEPC policy brief](#). The Linked Learning approach is grounded on the key understanding that career and technical education can and should be academically rigorous. It then proceeds with [three research-based propositions](#):

- Learning both academic and technical knowledge is enhanced when the two are combined and contextualized in real-world situations;
- Connecting academics to such real-world contexts promotes student interest and engagement; and
- Students provided with both academic and career education are more likely to be able to later choose from the full range of postsecondary options.

Even Finland might find this approach something to learn from.

NEPC Resources on Education and the Workplace

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