



# Education around the World

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Feel free to add your own comments from the reading about the countries listed below or any other country of interest:

## Finland



Finland is continuously ranked the highest in education around the world. After initiating huge education reforms decades ago, Finland has abandoned the centralized model of education that is based on testing and evaluation. Now, high-quality teachers and a positive culture of learning are at the center of Finnish education. Critics argue that the US and others cannot learn from Finland because of how much their contexts differ. Finland has a tiny economy, a low poverty rate, a homogenous population — 5 percent are foreign-born — and socialist underpinnings (speeding tickets are calculated according to income)<sup>1</sup>. Additionally, the average worker in Finland in 2012 paid 42.5% of their income in taxes<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, Finland consistently ranks highest in reading, math and science levels.

- Finnish children start school after age 7, and are not measured for the first six years of school. There is only one mandatory standardized test in Finland, taken at age 16.
- All children, clever or not, are taught in the same classrooms. Elementary students in Finland get 75 minutes of recess a day versus an average of 27 minutes in the US.
- 93 percent of Finns graduate from high school (17.5% higher than the U.S.).
- Teachers spend 4 hours a day in the classroom, and take 2 hours a week for "professional development." Teachers are selected from the top 10% of graduates, and are given the same status as doctors and lawyers
- The school system is 100% state funded<sup>3</sup>.

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## South Korea



South Korea is ranked alongside Finland as one of the best countries for education, yet the educational methods employed are starkly different. South Korean students and families participate in the “world’s fiercest competition for a top-of-the-line education,” with many children beginning English tutoring in kindergarten. By the time they reach their teens, they’ve become sleep-deprived study-holics, staying at school well after dark. Furthermore, many families split up in order to get the best education for their children: “Government data [from 2012] showed that 10 percent of married couples now live apart, twice the rate of 2000. Families who separate for the sake of education have become so commonplace, they even have a name: *kirogi kajok*, or goose families, because their reunions require a migration.”

Education experts say Koreans have mixed emotions about their education system. On one hand, Koreans are among the world’s elite students: they have the top reading and math

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<sup>1</sup> New York Times, “From Finland, an Intriguing School-Reform Model”

<sup>2</sup> OECD, “Tax policy analysis-Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development”

<sup>3</sup> Business Insider, “Why Finland's Unorthodox Education System Is The Best In The World”

scores, as well as the highest rates for high school and college graduation, among 37 countries ranked by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. But Korean students also rank among the world's unhappiest, and for the last three years, suicide has become the top cause of death for young Koreans.<sup>4</sup>

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## USA



The OECD's annual education report in 2012 ranked the US 14th in higher education attainment at 42% of 25-34 year olds with a degree, 20 points behind the leader, South Korea. The US ranks 26th in early childhood education (69%), and 6th *worst* in terms of high school graduation, with 23% failing to attain a diploma<sup>5</sup>.

The US faces widening opportunity and income gaps between rich and poor students. More successful countries provide comparable opportunities to all students regardless of wealth and prioritize teacher pay over smaller classes, according to the report. In addition, while most US education decisions are made by school districts, most OECD countries leave those decisions to the people closest to the students — the professionals in each school<sup>6</sup>.

While America has never ranked at the top of international education tests and comparisons, international students continue to flock to the US for degrees in higher education. The US holds roughly 17% of the world's international students, compared to 2nd-place Britain (12%) and far more than education powerhouses, Korea, Switzerland, and Sweden (all below 5%)<sup>7</sup>.

At the same time, many experts agree that the US has the leading institutions for higher education, even attracting students from countries who rank higher in the OECD calculations to study within the US. How will our country balance the exceptional nature of our universities, with our difficulties surrounding primary education?

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## Discussion Questions

How do Finland and South Korea differ? What is more important, the “ends” of the two systems (strong education, graduation and employment rates), or the means and methods by which they are reached?

What are some underlying causes of strong teacher and student performance? How can we improve those strategies here in the United States? What role do parents play in education?

What is school culture? Is it important? Why or why not?

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<sup>4</sup> Washington Post, “In S. Korea, the best education means a sacrifice for parents”

<sup>5</sup> OECD, “Education at a Glance 2012”

<sup>6</sup> Bloomberg, “U.S. Teens Lag as China Soars on International Test”

<sup>7</sup> TechCrunch, “Why it's Never Mattered that America's Schools 'Lag' Behind Other Countries”

What elements of your education are similar to those in other countries? Are you learning what you want to learn? What parts of your education do you think are valuable?

What country's education system would you most like to experience?

## **Assignment**

After answering all the discussion questions with your group, take a look at the current A-G requirements<sup>8</sup>, as defined by the UC system.

To be considered for admission, students must complete 15 "a-g" courses with a grade of C or better — at least 11 of them prior to the senior year.

### **A) History/social studies**

- one year of world history, cultures and geography, and
- one year of US history or one-half year of US history and one-half year of civics or American government

### **B) English**

- Four years of college-preparatory English that include frequent writing, from brainstorming to final paper, as well as reading of classic and modern literature. No more than one year of ESL-type courses can be used to meet this requirement.

### **C) Mathematics**

- Three years (four years recommended) of college-preparatory mathematics that include the topics covered in elementary and advanced algebra and two- and three-dimensional geometry. Approved integrated math courses may be used to fulfill part or this entire requirement, as may math courses taken in the seventh and eighth grades if the high school accepts them as equivalent to its own courses.

### **D) Laboratory science**

- Two years (three years recommended) of laboratory science providing fundamental knowledge in two of these three foundational subjects: biology, chemistry and physics.

### **E) Language other than English**

- Two years (three years recommended) of the same language other than English. Courses should emphasize speaking and understanding, and include instruction in grammar, vocabulary, reading, composition and culture. American Sign Language and classical languages, such as Latin and Greek, are acceptable.

### **F) Visual and performing arts**

- One yearlong course of visual and performing arts chosen from the following: dance, drama/theater, music or visual art

### **G) College-prep elective**

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<sup>8</sup> University of California, A-G requirements

- One year (two semesters), in addition to those required in "a-f" above, chosen from the following areas: visual and performing arts (non-introductory-level courses), history, social science, English, advanced mathematics, laboratory science and language other than English (a third year in the language used for the "e" requirement or two years of another language)

As a group, re-write the A-G requirements based on what you courses you believe are necessary for entering college. Please create a poster on the paper provided using the following outline:

Subject	Required Semesters/Years	Courses Offered
History/ Social Studies		
English		
Mathematics		
Laboratory Science		
Foreign Language		
Visual/Performing Arts		
Electives		

Be prepared to share your proposed curriculum with the group.