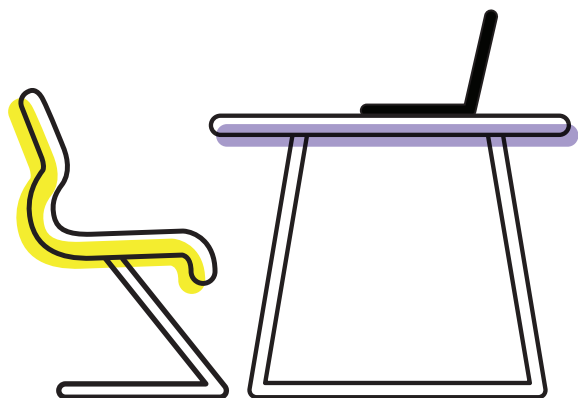


Finnish Education Design: Bring Joy to Learning



The world of education is always looking for new and innovative ideas. Often countries that rank near the top of international education assessments—countries like Finland—are looked to for inspiration. From shorter school days and more frequent breaks, to an increased amount of teacher autonomy and lack of standardized testing, the Finnish educational system has many different strategies to offer.

In 2018, Dr. Russell Booker, who was Superintendent of Spartanburg County School District 7 at the time, toured the Scandinavian country on a trip organized by the Riley Institute at Furman University. Few North American educators are able to see first-hand what a typical school day in Finland looks like, but Dr. Booker was lucky enough to experience that for himself. He visited schools around Finland with a group of South Carolina educators, legislators, and non-profit leaders who were seeking inspiration on how to promote teacher retention and student academic achievement. That same year Dr. Booker was also working with architecture firm McMillan Pazdan Smith as a design consultant. He and the firm collaborated to implement the ideas from his trip into the design of a new facility for Spartanburg High School. TEACH recently connected with Dr. Booker to find out more about the application of Finnish education design in his school district.

The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

WHAT WERE YOU HOPING TO DISCOVER FROM FINLAND'S EDUCATION SYSTEM?

I've always wanted to learn more about Finland, so when asked if I'd be willing to take part in the trip, I immediately said yes. As an educator I'd heard about how wonderful their education system was—they always rank in the top five of international assessments (PISA)—but the thing that stuck with me was hearing stories of how the teachers were treated. I was once told that teachers earned the same salary as doctors in Finland—it turns out they don't, but they are as greatly revered as physicians. This makes teaching an attractive profession to go into. As a result of that, there's high teacher retention.

I'd also heard that they don't give homework in Finland—which isn't entirely true, although students do have a significantly smaller amount—but I wanted to go there to see for myself what was fact and what was fiction.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM THE TRIP? WAS THERE ANYTHING THAT SURPRISED YOU?

We toured schools in different settings, from Helsinki, which is a larger, more cosmopolitan area, to some of the most rural areas—Oulu, for example. We must have toured five to seven schools from early learning all the way through to post-secondary institutions. We also spent time with their department of education and some of the education leaders there. We talked about their national curriculum. It was a pretty comprehensive view of Finland's education system.

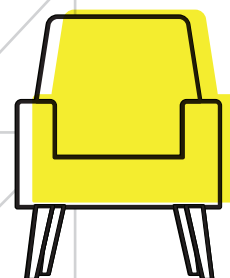
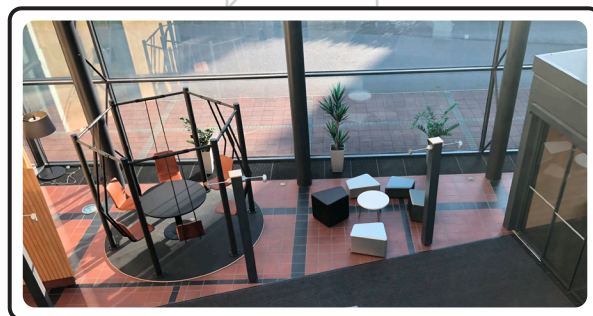
I'd heard that Finland was a very homogeneous community, mostly Caucasian and affluent, which isn't necessarily the case. Finland is dealing with some of the same immigration issues that we're dealing with. Their approach to immigration, as far as the education system is concerned, is something that really blew my mind. When Finland looked at ways to create equity in their country, they looked towards education to do that. To me, education is a basic human right, and I was pleased to learn that Finland's leaders feel the same way.

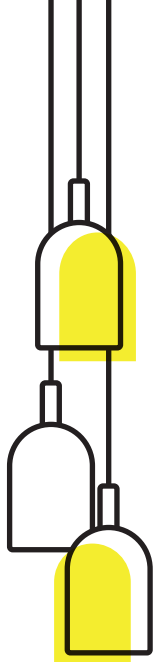
Here in North America, children start school around age four; in Finland they're seven years old. So, what's happening from birth until then? The Finnish take seriously what happens in the home. Maternity leave policies give families that time to spend with their children early on. When we talk about parents being the first teachers, that's what you see over there. They make sure there's a way for that to really happen.

HOW DO YOU THINK THE FINNISH PRACTICES WILL HELP IMPROVE SCHOOLS AND LEARNING?

The big takeaway that I brought back from Finland was that their learning environments are referred to as “joyful learning.” When you go into their schools, you see the setting is very relaxed. The way the schools are set up with furniture and equipment plays into that. I saw a variety of spaces created to foster collaboration between students and teachers. Students choose where they sit each day and are allowed to sit, stand, and lay on furniture that's designed with flexibility in mind.

Prior to going to Finland, I was in the midst of building Spartanburg High School with McMillan Pazdan Smith. Cost overruns were coming, as they typically do, and I had scaled





back on furniture and equipment. But after spending a day in some of Finland's schools, I picked up the phone and called our chief financial officer. I said, put every dime of that money back into the budget, because I was able to see the role learning environments play in creating collaborative and shared learning experiences.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE WHICH FINNISH EDUCATION DESIGN ELEMENTS TO INCORPORATE INTO SPARTANBURG HIGH SCHOOL?

Some of the schools in Finland were beautiful on the outside and some were more plain, but schools aren't just about the exterior building. When I walked inside each one and saw how the learning environment was situated, how the space was created, I saw equity. So, the firm and I began with the physical exterior environment of Spartanburg, but then we really started imagining how we could create an interior environment that would lend itself to cooperative learning, innovation and flexibility.

I knew if we were really going to get Spartanburg High's teachers teaching the Finnish way and the students learning that way, then the physical environment would have to allow for that to happen. If you walk into Spartanburg High School on any given day, every crevice of that school is now a learning space.

If there was room to create different types of tiered seating, we created it. We added a variety of creative and stimulating furniture options, including the use of convertible standing desks, as well as workstations where students can ride stationary bikes during study. The school has a media center that seats a number of classrooms and which has open conference rooms without walls for collaborative learning. There's now an outdoor Amphitheatre and even a student center designed with a higher education influence—including furnishing, lighting, and a coffee shop—to prepare students for the next steps after graduation. We also made sure to add plenty of flexible multipurpose spaces within common areas and several soundproof acoustic pods for private student collaboration throughout the school.

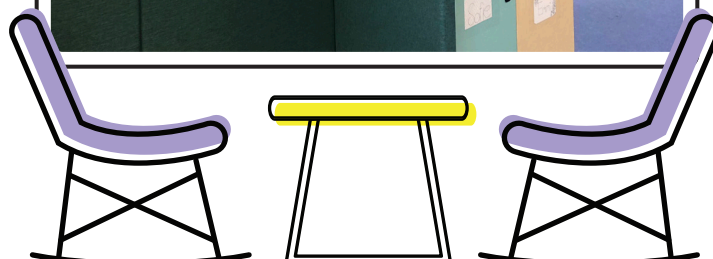
HAVE THE FINLAND-INSPIRED ELEMENTS RESULTED IN CHANGES TO STUDENT LEARNING OR TO THE OVERALL HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE?

We completed the Spartanburg High School building in the fall of 2019. I was afraid the students wouldn't take advantage of the new spaces, but what ended up happening instead was the spaces became so popular that sign-up sheets had to be used for them! Students are social creatures. They desire to have spaces where they can come together and share. Our high school students really enjoy that. I was especially pleased that a high school that holds 2,000 students was already built to socially distance when the COVID-19 crisis hit.

HOW WOULD YOU RECOMMEND IMPLEMENTING THESE ELEMENTS AND PRACTICES IN OTHER SCHOOLS?

First, you need to have the mindset where principals can give teachers the freedom to take advantage of those spaces. That's the challenge we have in America, we can't be afraid to do that. We can't let standardized tests get in the way of allowing teachers to be creative and have freedom. Finland doesn't believe in teacher evaluations because they trust the teachers to be the authority. They believe in giving them autonomy.

In Finland, children will be in class for 45 minutes, a soft bell will ring and they'll put on their shoes to head outside and play for 15 minutes. Then they come back in





and pick up where they left off with their learning. This happens continually over the course of the entire school day because Finnish educators want kids to have time to be kids and play. Kids learn through play as well. So, I had conversations with the elementary principals in my district about creating space during the day for students to do that. A colleague of mine who is the Superintendent of Pickens County, Danny Merck, took that a step further and instituted what is now called “Finnish Fridays.” Every Friday in Pickens, the schools set their day up like the elementary schools in Finland. That’s had a very positive impact on the kids.

I think we need to revisit how we are looking at our educational system. There needs to be testing, but testing just to compare schools or to put in punitive measures is not helping us at all. For change to happen, we need to start by looking at other possibilities. I actually began sending teachers to Finland after my own trip, so they could see some of these alternative teaching practices for themselves. I hope that after the pandemic ends, we can continue what we started and keep exploring new techniques to better assist our students and teachers.

DR. RUSSELL BOOKER served as superintendent of Spartanburg County School District Seven for 10 years, where he directed many innovative initiatives. Most notably, he is credited with eliminating the District’s digital divide. He holds a B.Sc. from Wingate University and a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. He and his wife Sheryl are founders of One Acorn, which works to address diversity and equity in organizations and communities. Through this agency, Dr. Booker continues to work closely with McMillan Pazdan Smith.

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