

Is it Time to Give Teachers More Autonomy in the Classroom?

In a recent [article](#) for *The Atlantic*, author and teacher Timothy Walker ponders the question of what happens when Finnish teachers are placed in American classrooms.

Long the poster child of modern western education success stories, the Finnish education system attributes part of its success to more recess and greater teacher autonomy.

It is this latter component, Walker reveals, that Finnish-turned-American teachers especially miss. One teacher explained that she:

“[M]isses that feeling of being trusted as a professional in Finland. There, after receiving her teaching timetable at the start of each school year, she would be given the freedom to prepare curriculum-aligned lessons, which matched her preferences and teaching style. ‘I wanted to do my best all the time,’ she said, ‘because they trusted my skills and abilities.’ I encountered something similar when I moved to Finland from the U.S., where I started my teaching career.”

Walker goes on to imply that many U.S. teachers would love to have more control over the curriculum they choose and the content they teach. But as Walker notes, autonomy might not be the “silver bullet” we all think it to be. Quoting education policy expert Marc Tucker, Walker explains that teacher autonomy might lead to more problems:

“‘You give people more autonomy when you’re confident that they can do the job if they have it,’ he said. ‘And the countries that give [teachers] more autonomy successfully are

countries that have made an enormous investment in changing the pool from which they are selecting their teachers, then they make a much bigger investment than we do in the education of their future teachers, then they make a much bigger investment in the support of those teachers once they become teachers. If you don't do all those things, and all you do is give more autonomy to teachers, watch out.'"

Over the years, many have claimed that America is simply not recruiting the best and brightest to serve in her classrooms. Recent evidence of [low scores](#) for education majors on the SAT seems to back up this observation.

But is it possible that the way we train our teachers really isn't stretching them and challenging them to a level which will enable them to do the same to their future students? Instead of focusing so much on training future teachers in education theory, would we be better off training them to be experts in math, history, or science, and then giving them the autonomy they need to pass that on to their students?

Image Credit: U.S. Department of Agriculture bit.ly/1ryPA8o