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Seven characteristics of great education systems

Canadian parents should be reassured that Canada's education system is actually quite good by international standards, and performs at a much higher level than that of the United States. But there's always room for improvement

As children return to the classroom, this is a good time to consider what makes a great school system.

In her recent book *The Smartest Kids in the World*, the American journalist Amanda Ripley delves into the highly reputed education systems in countries such as Finland, South Korea and Poland, and surveys the latest literature on why kids learn or don't.

The book contains many fascinating revelations and a number of prescriptions that can be boiled down to seven key lessons for educators, parents and students.

Mathematics is vital. Math is even more important than we knew. Math skills correlate highly with future income, and with academic success, research shows. Most academic superpowers forbid elementary and high school students from using calculators. They also tend to offer a far more challenging curriculum than schools in North America. The best education systems in the world focus tightly on key concepts, teach them in depth at an early age, and ensure that students master the basics from which to build.

Teachers should be highly prized. It should be difficult to become a teacher, and the job should be socially prestigious. In Finland, admission to an education program is as demanding as medical school; graduates must earn a master's degree and conduct original research to obtain it. Students, parents and bureaucrats respect teachers, because they know how hard it is to become one.

Classroom technology is a waste of money. There's no indication that fancy pedagogical doodads such as electronic whiteboards and tablets have a tangible effect on student performance. Rather, the systems that spend their money on teachers and curriculum development tend to do better.

School should be about school. Rigour is key, and the standards must be high. The best systems take learning extremely seriously, an attitude that is reflected in the broader society. In Finland, there are few extracurricular activities; if children play sports, they do it on their own time. In Poland, students wear their best suits and dresses to their annual exams. In Korea, police issue tickets to drivers who honk outside test centres and kids spend their evenings in private study facilities. Top countries also make it clear to students that learning can sometimes be hard, and includes drudgery.

Extra help is widely available. There's a recognition that students often need specialized assistance. Roughly half of all Finnish students receive some level of remedial or special education by the time they turn 17, whether it's extra

attention from teachers or a specialized curriculum aimed at improving language, reading or math skills or overcoming learning difficulties, which are treated as temporary. The extra help is almost always provided in-school, and generally takes up only a portion of the day.

Critical thinking is emphasized. That means essay questions rather than multiple-choice exams, explanations rather than straight answers, and students working collaboratively on problem solving.

No system is perfect. There are union squabbles, dissatisfied parents, policy shortcomings and rampant inefficiencies in even the highest-performing education systems.

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