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Chalk Talk

A glimpse into Finland and Estonia's educational success inspires advocacy for full-day kindergarten

by Linda Dwight

In October 2023, I was part of a delegation of 13 Massachusetts educators to Finland and Estonia, delving into the intricacies of the education systems that consistently rank among the world's best. The expedition, driven by a quest for insight, shed light on the enduring success of Finland, where a pioneering education reform initiated in the 1970s continues to prioritize equity and opportunity for every student.

Since the landmark 2001 PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) scores elevated Finland to the global education stage, the nation's commitment to teacher training and its unique approach to peruskoulu, the comprehensive basic school spanning nine years, has been a subject of international examination. Finland enrolls an impressive 84.5% of all 3-year-olds in free preschool programs, as reported in 2020 by the National Institute for Health and Welfare. Estonia, too, shares in this commitment, investing in teacher training and offering free preschool education.

Central to the prosperity of these Nordic nations' educational systems is their dedication to early childhood education. Pasi Sahlberg, a prominent Finnish educator and researcher, emphasizes their philosophy, which prioritizes children's growth, development, and learning over mere school readiness. Their implementation of play-based learning environments for the youngest learners has proven pivotal.

Drawing inspiration from these global examples, it's time for local reflection. Pointedly, Harvard stands among the 16 Massachusetts districts—**out of 306 districts—still charging** tuition for full-day kindergarten. While half-day kindergarten is free, parents in our community shoulder a \$3,750 burden per child for an entire day of kindergarten education. Despite the collective will of parents, teachers, district leaders, and the School Committee to remove this

financial barrier hindering educational access, budget constraints persistently sideline the initiative.

Consider this: Harvard's commitment to equitable education faces a pivotal moment. Eliminating this tuition fee would increase the omnibus budget by \$200,000—a decision squarely in the hands of the town during Annual Town Meeting. Yet, perennially tight budgets have relegated this crucial matter to the back burner.

To bridge this gap, the school leadership team has recommended a budget that includes a phased approach. Over a three-year period, the plan would be to progressively reduce kindergarten tuition until families are no longer forced into the dilemma of paying for a full day or limiting their child's educational exposure to a half-day.

Our children deserve a community commitment to equity and educational opportunity. The time has come for Harvard to follow the example of most districts in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the world, and ensure that financial barriers don't compromise our youngest learners' access to high-quality education.

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