

Comparing Schooling in Scandinavia and in the U.S.

SECTION ONE

Why Scandinavian schools are superior (and what we can learn)

By Stephen Noonoo

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Nordic schools (Finland included) captivate American educators. What makes them so strong?

Thirty-five years ago, back when most schools around the world were still preparing students for their 20th century futures, a clutch of Scandinavian countries were reworking their curricula to include more creativity, collaboration, and communication — today’s so-called 21st century skills. It was an effort grounded in the region’s welfare-state mentality, which values inclusiveness and cooperation for the common good, according to Hans Renman, a former educator from Sweden and the founder and CEO of Scandinavian Education, a consultancy and think tank.

While Scandinavian countries generally perform about average in PISA rankings (Nordic neighbor Finland is an outlier), they have made significant strides in creating equitable conditions for all students and were early adopters of technology and one-to-one device programs. Comprising just 0.3 percent of the world population, these countries, and their graduates, have often punched above their weight in music, game-design, and technology innovation (think Minecraft, Spotify, Skype). In advance of his ISTE 2015 talk, “The Scandinavian Miracle,” Renman recently spoke with us about

what schools can learn from Sweden and her neighbors and why America may have won the lottery when it comes to the future of education.

What is education like in Scandinavia? Can you describe some of the differences between the countries?

Renman: That's one thing to bear in mind here — you can't talk about "Scandinavia" at all at a systems level. It's different countries. You have Iceland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and often Finland goes along with it. They're different countries with different cultures and languages. No one understands Finnish even though they're close-by geographically. It's more accurate to say the U.S. education model even though there are differences between the states. However, it's possible to draw some lines connecting the Scandinavian countries.

For one thing, there are national curricula in Scandinavian countries that every school has to follow, and there's no exceptions to that. The school systems are also very student-oriented. There's a lot of talk about inclusion, democracy, and equality. The teachers unions, too, are very strong. Also, the education system is free in all these countries, even the university education, and it's publicly funded. Even if you're born in a very socially tough situation, it's still easy as anything to become a professor from an economic point of view — you don't have to pay anything — which is of course interesting.

In Sweden, we have a much more extensive voucher system than they do in the rest of Scandinavia. Sweden and Chile have the same kind of extreme voucher system — no other nation in the world has that. That's strange knowing that Sweden is a social democratic country. In Denmark, they were early with digital strategies and learning and have a lot of official monetary support for that. While Finland, the PISA superstar, is much more traditional in education, even though they keep saying they're on the brink of something. And then we have Norway, one of the richest countries in the world thanks to oil — kind of the Saudi Arabia of the north — and I'm not impressed by the Norwegian education system at all, especially not from a digital point-of-view. I call it petrol-coma — they have so much oil, they don't need to bother about anything. It's really a strong sense of, "If it's not broken, why fix it?"

What are some of the keys to success in Nordic countries, like Finland?

Renman: There is some research around this. Pasi Sahlberg — he's at an American university right now, Stanford — is the expert on the Finnish education system. He keeps saying that the success story in Finland is due to one thing and that's the equality aspect: In every single class you can find students from any social background. How people live in Finland is not as extreme as in other countries, like England or the United States. You can see research on the effectiveness of school systems that says that if the education system is equal and democratic, it's a good thing for every student, not just the top five percent, like say in Singapore or China.

In general, educating students at the bottom and the top is something that we have done really well. That's why you get people flying in from China and other countries to take a look at these systems, trying to figure out how we took the steps from poor agricultural societies in the late 1840s to industrial societies in just 100 years, without being torn apart from the inside by forces of social instability. We have done a great job the past 150 years, but the problem is what's coming up further on down the road.

I've heard that Finland places a big emphasis on teachers.

Renman: It's a perfectly correct answer to say that Finland has much more of an emphasis on teachers and that the teachers are much more praised and valued than in the other Scandinavian countries. Also, perhaps they lean a bit more on traditional learning. It's interesting that Finland has almost no national tests whatsoever. Compare it to the situation in the States and [testing] policies that have been the trademark of your system for many years now. If you look at the Finnish system, which has almost none of that, they're still much better. One special ingredient is their very early special resources for kids that show signs of underperforming. Students between the ages of 6-8, these kids get more attention and hours with teachers.

This lack of formal testing, does it perhaps put less stress on the system?

Renman: I think it's fair to say that. Especially in Finland, which doesn't have that culture at all. But also in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. For sure there are more national tests, but not at all to the extent as in the U.S. Also, we don't have the need for national testing to the degree of the U.S. The schools aren't ranked or compared in the same way out of the results. It's not at all as important as in the States or in the U.K. or France or Germany. In Scandinavia, the results of the national tests are more the business of the school officials. For a single student, it doesn't matter. It doesn't affect your grade.

There is a view that, if nothing else, the U.S. are extremely innovative in education technology. Have you found that to be true?

Renman: I've been visiting quite a lot of schools in the States, especially in Nebraska, Maine, California, and the New York area and I have to say I'm not impressed at all. I wouldn't say you're superior from a digital point of view. It's all pretty much the same from what I've seen. From talking to researchers and looking at statistics I don't think the difference is that big. I think what differs is how digitization has been rolled out to the schools and the emphasis. You must correct me if I'm wrong, but in the States there's been a focus on the tools and the apps, the iPads and so on. While in the Scandinavian countries, Sweden especially but also in Denmark, there's been a strong focus on leadership and changing the management, and what are the possibilities of this new kind of learning.

That's an important distinction.

Renman: Look at PISA. The Scandinavian countries — you can leave Finland out of this equation — aren't all that different from the States in what students learn and what they know. It's not a huge difference there. On the other hand, the one-to-one trend started out really heavily in Sweden in 2005-06 and we were really on top of things. I worked for Apple at that time and we had people from Cupertino coming over to Stockholm and Denmark to take a look at what we were doing. It was really amazing. That was then. Now, 10 years later, the pace has somewhat gone down, and I don't think people are flying over from Cupertino anymore.

What does it look like now?

Renman: It's the same thing. It's a bit different depending on which of the Scandinavian countries you're talking about of course, but say from a Finnish perspective they haven't done much work at all in the digital arena. Of course you can find schools with iPads, but they've really just started the process. While Sweden I think the latest numbers is that over 50 percent of the secondary schools have one-to-one. And in Denmark, it's about 75 percent coverage of iPads in the classroom. It's really heavily digitized from a device perspective, but the research we can find is rather obvious. I'd say it's pretty much the same all over the world, which is that you're handing out iPads but the teaching and the way students learn haven't changed that much, so we're still early in the process.

The public school system has been around since the 1840s or 50s and from that perspective the one-to-one and the digitization of schools is just a blink of an eye from an evolutionary perspective. Perhaps we should expect only a little bit of development at a time, but that is also a threat I'd say from the school perspective. The pace or the speed of the technology and the development of the world is super high and at the same time we say that education moves slowly. It's going to take time, which, in practice, means that everyday life is running away from education, so education has no way of keeping up with what's going on outside the school building. I think that's a true challenge compared to education from the 1970s, when education was actually leading development in many ways — where parents had no clue at home what was going on in schools. Today, we're not really in the same situation, I'd say.

What kind of emphasis does Sweden or Denmark put on 21st century skills?

Renman: Creativity and collaboration has been written down in the national curricula since about 1980 onward. Obviously, it wasn't connected to digitization at that time, but there's been free music schools and group assignments and peer reviews. Again, that has to do with the student orientation, the welfare state. So it's that we're doing things together. The nation has a common interest. That's reflected all the way back through the classrooms and the curriculums. It's a long tradition going way back, at least 30 years, and it has been given even more emphasis than in the States: creativity, innovation, and so on. I know it's more of a new thing in the States and the U.K. Today, people are talking about entrepreneurship and creativity and innovation all over the world.

Is that paying dividends now that those students are in their 20s and 30s?

Renman: That's the most important takeaway from my talk in Philadelphia. Students have been really focused on these collaborative skills like creativity, project-based learning, and so on since 1980. That means those kids that learned back then are actually professionals these days and that's one of the major reasons behind the fact that 0.3 percent of the world's population has had such a big impact on entrepreneurship, digitization, music, game-design, and so on. I would really say that kind of a curriculum for so many decades has really produced creative, innovative, entrepreneurial-minded people.

What are some of the big education trends in Sweden around technology?

Renman: For students, there are six big trends. One is the cloud computing, Google apps for education cluster. That's one huge thing going on all over the Scandinavian countries right now.

The second is the maker movement, programming, pro-digital thinking, robotics. There's a lot of talk about programming as a new languages. It's super hot. The biggest conference for internet and education in Sweden has two separate [tracks] for education and both of them this October will be about programming.

The third trend would be the flipped classroom. That's really popular these days. The fourth would be gaming, game-based learning driven by the strong culture of the gaming industry here — Minecraft and so on.

The fifth would be kind of a dark horse revolving around cognition, neuroscience and how the brain works. It's also a digital trend because we have discovered that when students are working more digitally they learn different ways, and sometimes you just have to catch up to how people learn inside their brains. Other conferences are becoming big in these countries about what goes on when you actually learn.

And the last one I'd say would be the mobility trend — one-to-one, iPads in education, BYOD — which has been going on for ten years now. It's not that different from the U.S.

Are there lessons to be learned for U.S. administrators?

Renman: I think so. That brings me to the other trends, those about teachers. I think it's a bit of a new thing. For one thing we'll discover that moving in a digital direction means that you become a different person in your role as a professional, as a teacher. Perhaps it means moving away from being a content expert to becoming the guide-on-the-side. It's not saying that content knowledge is not important, but we've added other competencies, like the TPACK model, that has become included in teacher colleges and so on.

And the other thing is that teachers are learning in new ways. We'll use social media, #edchat and Twitter, and social learning in much more advanced ways than before when you were forced to have professional development in two or three conference days a year that the principal decided on. Today, you actually learn just by going to work. That's a really new thing for teachers. Another trend or something we've managed to change is that principals have realized that they can't just manage the status quo anymore; they have to be much more focused on their job as managing change and working as a leader on change and for change. It's a struggle for a lot of Scandinavian principals, since they're not used to that.

That's a management trend in any field, but education is especially vulnerable. Education changes with digitalization and we're just discovering the really huge impacts these days. There's very little research around it. We need to be really observant and share what's going on. We're not super good at it but we're definitely much better at it than in the old days.

However, I'll say it's a catch 22. In the Scandinavian countries, I'm not sure if you have this in the American school system, it says that education development must be based on research and evidence. So those two words, research and evidence, are portals so to speak, but from a digitalization perspective there is no research or evidence connected — at least not very much. So that means on the one hand we want to move in that direction but on the other hand we can't move in that direction because there isn't research in that direction. That's why I call it a catch 22. We're stuck where we are.

There may be less of an emphasis on that in the U.S. Teachers are innovating as they go along.

Renman: Exactly that. I'm quite sure the American mentality is much more open for innovators, doers, adventurers. All the way from the founding fathers you've been very positive around people who are actually doers and build around success. In Scandinavia, we do it together, wisely though political decisions and research. There's absolutely a different kind of a culture. You won the lottery in the future of education. These days the development of education is so rapid that if you're using the Scandinavian way of developing things, slowly and wisely, you will be No. 2 on the ball all the time, while the U.S. has a much more innovative society in general.

SECTION TWO

Teaching In Sweden as an American: What It's Like

By Martha Moore June 13, 2022

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Teaching in Sweden after teaching in the US has been an adjustment. In some ways, things are very similar, but in others, they are totally different. Here are some comparisons based on my personal experience as an American teacher who has taught in both the United States and Sweden.

My Experience

In order to make a fair comparison, it's important to understand my experience. I was born and raised in New Jersey, and all of my experience of teaching in the US took place in the good ol' garden state. (Yes, NJ is actually known as the garden state. It's not all a mini New York.)

During my time teaching in the US, I student taught first grade for a year in one school. Then, I taught first grade for 2.5 years in a different county at a charter school in New Jersey. I then spent 6 months as an educational clerical assistant in another district. If you don't know what that is, I didn't really get it either. Basically, I was the assistant principal's assistant (say that 10 times fast). I was in charge of attendance and truancy, I was the in house sub for pre-k to 8th grade, and I did pull out intervention for 1st-7th grade.

After 6 months, I moved to a new school where I taught 2nd for one year. Then 1st for 6 months before I decided to stay home with my oldest daughter who was a baby at that time. After a few years, I missed teaching very much. I applied to be a reading intervention teacher at another district mid-year. I got the job, and did that for the rest of that school year and the following school year.

Then, we had our third child and our family moved to Sweden. After our move, I took a year to get my International Baccalaureate certification since my only opportunities to teach would be at one of the IB schools in the area. A year later and I decided to apply for a PYP teaching position at my kids' school, and I got the job as a grade 1 teacher.

So, all of that to say, I have taught in many school in New Jersey, but only one in Sweden. I do have friends and know educators in other schools in Sweden, but the following observations and comparisons are based on my personal experiences. I realize things do vary in the US and Sweden, of course. So, that being said, let's get into it.

Dress Code

This was a huge adjustment for me! In NJ where I taught, we had pretty strict expectations for what was and was not okay to wear. And jeans were only allowed maybe once a month if you paid for a jeans pass.

In Sweden, things are much more laid back in terms of dress code. Jeans are common, and sneakers and comfortable footwear are the norm. Since most people are walking and biking to work, it just makes sense. Of course sometimes I decide to dress up more, but I love that it's really up to me! This is not just teaching either. Most people dress pretty casually to work, whatever field they work in.

Lunch Time

In the US, typically children eat in the lunch room either with teachers taking turn monitoring lunch or with teaching assistance or lunch room workers monitoring the kids. In the districts where I taught, kids packed a lunch from home or could buy a hot meal from school. The meals tended to be pre-packaged foods served in packaged containers, so there was a lot of waste. Also, (and think think might have changed since covid in many places) meals had a cost, but some students could qualify for free or reduced lunch to make it more affordable.

Teachers had their own time/ space to eat. I typically would eat in the teacher's room 1-2 times a week and then shovel my food in my mouth while I marked papers the other 3-4 days. In most of my school, teacher's had about 30-40 minutes to have lunch on their own.

In Sweden, lunch is verrrry different and this is something I thought I wouldn't like... but I actually love! Lunch is considered part of the learning day. Teachers and students all eat together. Balanced meals are served on real plates with glasses and silverware (even my 3 year old in preschool does this). Teachers serve the food. Children are taught to scrape their plate into a food waste bag for composting and then clean their spot when they're done. Although eating with 25 first graders can be a bit loud at times, it's also really nice most of the time! It feels like a big family meal.

Teachers also are guaranteed a 30 minute break/ lunch without kids every day as well while the kids are out on the playground.

Nurse Duties

Here's one thing that I don't love the Swedish way, although I have been informed this varies by school and area.

In the US, every school had a school nurse who would handle all sick kids. Tummy ache? Go to the nurse. Headache? The school nurse. Scraped knee? The nurse will fix you up! In fact, in one of my schools, I wasn't even *allowed* to put a band-aid on a student for liability reasons.

In Sweden, there *is* a nurse at the school, but the school nurse is actually an extension of the regular healthcare system. They're there to do health checks and give vaccines, mostly. However, if a child feels sick or bumps their head or scrapes their knee? That's on the teacher to handle. Each teacher has a first aid kit for scrapes and cuts, and if a child is sick, the teacher is the one to contact the parents to pick them up. I will say, I have been told this varies a bit in school, but this has been my experience.

Sick Days

In NJ public schools, we had 10 sick days a year plus 2 "personal days". These could roll over to the next year, but if you ran out, you were out. Also, personal days did not roll over, only sick days.

Everyone, including myself, only took these days if you were REALLY sick because you never know what's going to happen and you didn't want to run out. (Or, you might be saving them so you can have more time off when you had a baby in the future.) If I was out, I did *have* emergency sub plans, but the expectation was that you sent in plans for the time you were out. I've heard of teachers in the hospital trying to put together sub plans or write report cards comments as they're headed in for surgery.

In Sweden things work very differently. First, every worker has the right to take off if they're sick whether you work as a waiter or a doctor or a teacher. Your job can't legally ask you to work when you're sick either. The first day is unpaid

typically (this was not the case from March 2020- for 2 years), and then you receive about 80% of your salary.

The first 7 days that you're sick, you don't need to prove anything. After 7 days, you need a doctor's note.

My FAVORITE thing about teaching in Sweden when it comes to needing days off is VAB or vård av barn (care of child). If your child is sick, you can take off to care for them. Paid.

As a mom of 3, I've only taken a few sick day for myself this year, but I've had to take several days off to VAB for my kids.

Of course, as a teacher, I still feel guilty taking off, and I still DO choose to write sub plans, but it's SO nice to know that I don't have to if I don't want to. It's also so nice to know that I don't have to worry about being with my kids when they're sick.

Parental Leave

Only a handful of US states had government funded maternity leave when I had my oldest. Luckily I lived in one. However, in order to get a much time as possible, I needed every day I could save. So, I worked until Friday and gave birth 2 days later on Monday.

In NJ in 2014, I received 6 weeks of leave at a reduced pay rate. I saved up my magical 10 sick days and used those to add another 2 weeks. Then, I took one more week of unpaid leave that thankfully I was granted because they could have said no. This got me to summer break, so I got another 2 months home (unpaid of course because it was summer). I went back to work when my daughter was 4 months old and still waking several times in the night. I was told over and over how lucky I was to have a full 4 months in the US. When I told Swedish friends about this, they were horrified that I had so little time and that it was mostly unpaid.

I sure wish I had some of my kids in Sweden! In Sweden, parents received 480 days of parental leave to be shared between the parents. (90 days are reserved for each parent, but the rest they can split as they wish.) Both parents (with the

exception of right after a baby is born or adopted) can't take parental leave at the same time. This means, parents can take plenty of time to bond with their new babies, and both parents share the responsibility.

When you're on parental leave, you receive 80% of your pay, and some employers top that up during the first 18 months.

Also worth noting:

- Even if you aren't employed, you still receive parental leave at a lower rate.
- Your parental leave doesn't expire until your child is 8-12 (depending on the year they're born). However, once they turn 4, you can only save a certain number.
- Even if your child wasn't born in Sweden, if you are a resident you are eligible for parental leave after working for 1 year in Sweden. (This is based on the child's age when they moved to Sweden.)

Recess

I'm sure it varies from state to state, but in the schools I taught in in NJ (and I taught in 4) my first graders only ever got ONE recess a day. Typically this was right before or after lunch and usually lasted about 20 minutes. I also was never encouraged to give my students extra recess (and in some schools it just wasn't allowed due to schedules). Also, if it was rainy or below freezing, the kids were inside for indoor recess. This meant either sitting in the lunch room coloring or coming back to my classroom and playing games or doing puzzles. I was not a fan because it meant it was very hard for them to properly get their energy and wiggles out.

In Sweden, at least in my school, my students get 2 breaks outside everyday for a total of 50 minutes. And, it's not unusual at all for teachers to give kids some extra time outside (if they're willing to come out to watch them) on nice days. (Especially in the winter and fall, the sun basically disappears, so you soak up the good weather when you can!) If it's raining... put on your boots, kids! Kids go outside rain, shine, hot, or cold. Some of my kids' favorite recess times are the ones where it's raining and there are puddles all over to stomp in. (They're not my favorite as kids often bring in the water and mud on their outdoor things.) Still, I'll take muddy halls and wet socks over cooped up, antsy kids ANY day!

Working Hours

Here's one that honestly feels almost exactly the same except that my school in Sweden actually acknowledges how much teachers actually work.

In the US, I was contractually obligated to be at school 7 hours a day, so 35 hours a week. Of course I worked many, many more hours at and at home.

As a teacher in Sweden, I'm obligated to be in school for 35 hours, but Sweden recognizes that teachers work more hours than the average worker during the school year and get a longer summer break. (All employees in Sweden are guaranteed at least 25 vacation days a year, not including government holidays, but teachers get a more because summer vacation is longer than that.)

So, teachers in Sweden are required to do 10 "trust hours" each week as well so technically my working hours are a total of 45 hours a week... which is much more accurate to what teachers actually work. The idea is that some weeks you might work a little more and a little less, but it should average 45 hours a week.

In reality, I don't think I've ever worked less than 45 hours in a week, and it was the same in the US. So, at least in my experience, the working hours in both countries have been the same.

It's important to note that I work at an English speaking IB school, so the reality in a regular Swedish school might be a bit different.

Holidays

At my school in Sweden, we start back to school in the middle of August. Then, we have a week off in November for höstlov, or fall break. Then, we have off from mid December through the first week in January for 3 weeks during winter holidays. In February, we have a week break for sportslov where many people either go skiing or escape to warmer weather for a week. We have a week for påstlov, or Easter break as well plus some random single day holidays spread throughout the year. And of course, we have time off in the summer for summer break.

In the US, we started school a bit later in September but ended at the same time. We'd get a couple days in the Fall for Thanksgiving, about a week for Christmas, and a few days to a week for Easter break (but sometimes we lost days from this for snow days). We had some single day holidays sprinkled in there as well.

I absolutely love all of the breaks as a teacher in Sweden. It's so nice to be able to take a week (or more) every season to rest and recharge. I have found it really makes a big difference in my stamina and mood.

Commuting

In the US, I always drove to school. Public transportation was not a feasible option, and honestly, it's just what everyone did. My commute ranged depending on the school I was working in. My shortest commute was 20 minutes each way and the longest was an hour each way with traffic. Of course not every teacher in the US drives to work, but every single one I ever worked with did. I did apply to a walkable school in my neighborhood, but alas, I didn't get an interview. We needed two cars, and we spent a LOT of time driving.

When we moved to Sweden, we sold our two cars since we were moving to a city. Now, instead of driving, we bike just about everywhere. In fact, I haven't driven a car in over 2 years and I can count on one hand the number of times I've been in a car in that time. Since we live in a city, most people get to school by biking, walking, or public transportation. Of course, people do drive as well, but the majority of people use the first 3 options.

You might be wondering, "But what about when it rains?" Welp, you get wet. But really, there's a saying in Swedish "Det finns inget dåligt väder, bara dåliga kläder." Which means, "There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes." So, we wear waterproof clothes, layers, and hop on the bike (rain, shine, wind, snow).

I actually really enjoy biking to school, even with the bad weather. I love starting my day with fresh air, and it really is lovely to bike in the summer.

Addressing the Teacher

In the US, my students only ever called me "Mrs. Moore". It was considered disrespect for them to call me by my first name, and in fact, most of them didn't

even know what my first name was until they saw it in the yearbook. Parents also always called me Mrs. Moore, and I called them Mr. or Mrs. Or Ms. So and so.

In Sweden, my students call me by my first name. This felt SUPER strange to me at first, but honestly now I just love it! It feels so much more personal and so much less formal. Many students call me Miss Martha, and many just call me Martha. Parents and I also address each other by first names.

School Supplies

In the US, students were asked to bring in a lot of school supplies like pencils, crayons, markers, glue, notebooks, folders, and even tissues and hand sanitizer. These things were not provided by the school. If students and parents couldn't or didn't bring them in? I always ended up buying them myself. Normally we'd run out of tissues and glue by about October, so I'd go buy some more. I never loved asking parents for these things, but it was what was required by the school. (And yes, these were public schools.)

In Sweden, those types of school supplies are provided by the schools. In my school we do ask the students to bring in 1 folder to take things back and forth from school, but that's the only "school supply" type item we request. Instead, the school list asks students to make sure they have proper outdoor clothes for the season because kids go out every day, rain, shine, snow, or sleet. This includes a waterproof jacket, overalls, hats, gloves, and rain or snow boots. Students also need indoor shoes (shoes to wear in the classroom that have never been worn outside) and PE sneakers (sneakers that have never been worn outside).

If you're wondering if this is a financial burden on parents, there's few things to know. First, these kinds of clothes are basically everyday needs here because most people walk or bike to get around. So, these aren't unusual items of clothing and can be purchased at varying price points. Second, second hand shops are very big here, so there really are many affordable options.

Class Size

Class sizes vary in the US, but I always had between 15 and 26 students. When I first taught at a charter school, we had smaller class sizes, but very few resources and support. When I moved to regular public schools, the class sizes increased,

but we also had better resources. I never had another adult in the room with me in the schools where I taught. It is common to have a teacher's assistant in some schools, but I was never lucky enough to have one.

In Sweden, class sizes in lower grades range from 20- maybe 30 students. However, there are typically more adults in the room. In regular Swedish schools, there might be 30 students in a classroom, but each classroom might have 2-3 certified teachers. In my school, class sizes are about 25 students. However, I have an SDC (Student Development Coach) almost all day long every day. This person is similar to a teacher assistant. It has been absolutely amazing to have another adult in the room! It definitely makes it much easier, and it's an added bonus to be able to run to the bathroom during class time if needed.

Meetings

In the US, we typically had a staff meeting once a month. This is where the principal would share important updates and announcements. Everything else tended to be shared via email or gossip. I'm kind of kidding about the gossip, but not really.

We also had grade level planning time once a week during the school day, and then I'd say about once a month we'd have a PLC (professional learning community) meeting. Overall, there really weren't too many meetings.

It is a well known fact that Swedes love meetings, and I have found this translates to school as well. As a teacher in Sweden, we have a staff meeting after school two times a week. These vary in purpose. Sometimes it's a meeting with the Vice Principal sharing information and updates, sometimes it's a collaborative meeting for a specific purpose across the whole PYP department. It also could be a planning time for our grade level and specialist teachers as we head into a new Unit of Inquiry. And, there are times that we are given times to write reports or prepare for conferences, or things like that.

We also have two times each week during the school day that my grade partner and I can collaborate and plan together. This time is really nice, and I am so thankful for the shared planning time! Once every two weeks, we meet with the PYP coordinator during the school day to plan as well. Overall, there are a lot of meetings compared to my experience in the US.

Salary

Let's talk money. It's hard to compare salaries across the US because they vary greatly. In NJ, I made an decent teacher salary compared to other states (with the exception of the charter school I taught in). Teaching is underpaid no matter where you live, but compared to some other states, my salary wasn't bad.

It also was easy to predict how much I'd be making in the future since NJ teacher salaries work on a step system. After X years, you make X and then after X more years you make X. According to Google, in 2022, the average teacher salary in NJ is between \$44,463 and \$58,815 a year.

In Sweden, my salary is less than what I made in NJ. However, it's like comparing apples to oranges. In NJ I made more money, but I also had to pay a significant amount of money each month for insurance, childcare and gas to drive to school. The average teacher salary in Sweden is 360,000sek to 480,000sek a year. In US, that's \$35,880 to \$47,874 a year. Also, primary teachers tend to earn less than high school teachers, and certain areas of Sweden have higher incomes (just like any country).

In Sweden, raises work very differently. Instead of having a step system, you typically don't get big raises. Everyone gets a small cost of living raise each year (maybe 2%) but you only get significant increases when you get a permanent contract, when you change positions, or when you change schools.

US vs Sweden

So, those are some of the differences I've noticed between the two countries. There's a lot of great things about teaching in Sweden, but nowhere is perfect. I will say, there's a lot of things that the US could learn from the Swedish way of doing things, and I am so grateful for this experience for both myself and my own kids.