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Those Finns are on to something: introducing the Finnish model for leisure activities

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ABSTRACT

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) declared that children have the right to engage in play and recreational activities and participate freely in cultural life and the arts. The Finnish Model for Leisure Activities, which is presented in this article is an answer to that call and guarantees a free and enjoyable leisure time activity for every child in grades 1-9. This model has its roots in extensive research on youth out-of-school programming and has since 2021 grown to serve young people in 90% of the municipalities in Finland. In 2024-2025, the model served over 143,000 young people in 11,000 groups. As the model continues to grow it will be positioned to become a great social innovation. This article discusses the development of the model and the future directions it may take as it continues to evolve to serve young people.

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We want you to think back to a moment in your childhood and try to remember the things that brought you joy when you were not in school. What were the things that you chose to do in your free time either before school or after school, before you had to go home for dinner or to get ready for bed? If you were lucky to have the opportunity to participate in any art, culture, music, physical activity, or sport, it is often because of trusted adults who were facilitating these programs and some organization that created a space for youth to play, learn, and to be physically active. Now, unfortunately, there are many young people all around the world who never had this opportunity to play or to have a meaningful activity outside of school that they enjoy. This is the reason why in 1989 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) declared that children have the right to the following that specifically relate to children and young people's access to leisure time (United Nations General Assembly, 1989):

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity. (Article 31)

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In total, 196 countries have signed and ratified this convention which makes it the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.¹ Thus, it seems that all around the world, people care about the welfare of our young people.

Thinking back to that activity you enjoyed whether it was dancing, reading, drama, learning how to play a musical instrument, playing basketball with friends, being on an organized gymnastics team, skating on a frozen pond playing ice hockey, or any of the multiple activities one may have chosen during their free time, we want you going forward in this article to think of these as *hobbies* and to think about that time outside of school before you walk into the place you sleep as *leisure time*. Leisure activities have been defined by others as voluntary non-work activities that people participate in for enjoyment (Hills & Argyle, 1998) and as activities that make life meaningful and give a person a sense of purpose, pleasure and enjoyment (Blackshaw, 2016).

Once we can all get on board with the same vocabulary words like *hobby* and *leisure time*, we think you will find a lot of interesting aspects about the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities which we will introduce later in this article (Spoiler Alert: it begins with listening to young people and acting on that information). Oftentimes in translation, words lose a little bit of meaning. For example, in Finland the word *harrastus* can be equated to playing competitively on an ice hockey team, competing in gymnastics, or being a part of a school club. In some cultures, the word hobby may be downplayed as “wasted time by kids” or “doing things that are not productive to the economy”. But hobbies and leisure time are some of the most precious times where kids can be kids and young people get to experience new things that may inspire them for the rest of their lives to engage in meaningful activity. We see hobbies and leisure activities as a bridge between formal schooling or learning and complete autonomous free time without any structure. By this we mean, that hobbies still are largely about learning and enjoyment, but they also focus on finding oneself, learning about one’s own interests that are not nurtured within formal schooling, as well as providing a place of belonging and participation for young people.

The purpose of this article is to introduce the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities, explain its origins and its alignment with the UNCRC, as well as to briefly share how it differs from the well-researched Icelandic Model of Prevention.

Meaningful leisure time activities for children and youth

Research supports the idea that extracurricular programs in out-of-school settings have a positive impact on the development of the whole child, specifically their socioemotional behavior and school achievement (Metsäpelto & Pulkkinen, 2014), their sense of belonging (O’Donnell et al., 2024; Berger et al., 2020) and can help negate problem behavior (Feldman et al., 2021) and reduce the risk of drop-out among high school students (Thouin et al., 2022). Longitudinal studies suggest that this is particularly true for the social, cognitive, and emotional growth of young people in structured programs that emphasize consistent participation with skilled and competent guidance, and where the cultural context is taken into consideration (Simac et al., 2021; Carbonaro & Maloney, 2019; Mahoney, 2005; Durlak et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies have also demonstrated lasting benefits into late adolescence and adulthood which include higher educational aspirations, increased social connections, and better adjustment psychologically (Pulkkinen, 2017; Simac et al., 2021; O’Flaherty et al., 2022; Mahoney, 2005). Finally, although youth from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to participate in out-of-school programs, they have been shown to experience greater benefits (Heath et al., 2022).

Not all out-of-school programs need to have a physical activity (PA) component to them to be meaningful, educational, and enjoyable to children and youth (e.g., painting, videogame design, playing the piano). However, there are benefits to structured PA programming. A recent meta-analysis showed that participation in structured PA improves intelligence measures in children

¹The United States has notably signed but not ratified this treaty.

and adolescents. The study showed that this IQ jump could be as much as a school years' worth of education (Morales et al., 2024). PA in childhood and adolescence has also been linked with a lower risk of multi morbidities in later life (Souilla et al., 2024, february 7). Leisure time sports could be one way for often marginalized groups like young girls to gain the benefits mentioned above. A study from Denmark of 2,203 girls aged 10–12 showed that the girls who were enrolled in leisure time sports had higher physical well-being, psychological well-being, experienced more peer and social support and perceived a more positive school environment than girls not involved in sport clubs (Madsen et al., 2022).

Obviously, for children to gain the benefits of these programs they must stay engaged in the program. A study by Nielsen and colleagues (2024) examined 7,110 adolescents in Denmark aged 12–20 years old about their leisure time club sport continuation. The results showed that autonomous motivation, satisfaction of the basic psychological needs (e.g., competence, relatedness and autonomy), and an empowering coach who created a motivational climate all had a positive impact on adolescents continuing to participate in the sport and the club in the following season. Another way to keep young people engaged is to ground the programming in models such as teaching personal and social responsibility which can be an effective pedagogical tool in structured out-of-school programs (Shen et al., 2024).

The cost of failing our youth

There is also a cost to *not* providing healthy and safe out-of-school spaces for children to participate in. In Finland there are about 64,000 marginalized or disengaged youth. These young people are marginalized from society due to a variety of reasons like unemployment, low socioeconomic status, poverty, mental health issues, a lack of education, or social isolation (Pyykkönen, 2023). Another 350,000 children and young people have a high risk of ending up marginalized or disengaged (for context, there are about 1.4 million 7–18 yr old children and youth in Finland). This group, which in Finland makes up only about 5% of the population commits over half of all the crime in Finland (Ministry of the Interior, 2021). The cost to society for marginalized and disengaged youth can quickly add up and a recent analysis showed that every marginalized young person in Finland costs €1.2 million to the taxpayers (Hiljanen, 2023). This cost is calculated based on a gap in income tax that is missed of future potential earnings and the different types of welfare support and services that are provided to those who become marginalized from society.

Other western countries face similar issues with marginalized youth. For example, in the USA the term “disconnected youth” is used, and it tracks young people ages 16–24 who are not in school or working. In 2022 the youth disconnection rate was 10.9% or 4.3 million young people (Measure of America, 2024). In the UK, the youth unemployment rate for 16–24-year-olds is 14.5% and nearly one million 16–24-year-olds are not currently in full time education or employment (a term NEET is used for young people not in employment, education, or training) which can lead to mental health issues (Youth Employment UK, 2025). The Centre for Mental Health in the UK (2025) has estimated that the mental health crisis in the UK among youth will lead to one trillion GBP in lost earning across the generation. In Germany, Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024) notes that by the end of 2023 approximately 626,000 young people aged 15–24 were considered NEET, which is an increase of 50,000 from 2022.

Icelandic model of prevention

Before we introduce the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities let's first discuss a similar (but notably different model) that has gained attention around the world. When considering other similar models, the most common one that is referred to in much of the literature is the Icelandic Model of Prevention. This “model” as stated on the main website: “is based on the collaboration of numerous parties, e.g., parents, teachers, community centers, sports clubs and more in the

immediate vicinity of children and young people.” (Planet Youth, n.d. a). In fact, a group of Finnish researchers who visited Iceland to research and learn from this model say they didn’t even find a model to begin with – rather it is a series of different social safety nets that are built to support the wellbeing of children in Iceland (Kiilakoski et al., 2020). The model has been transitioned into Planet Youth in 2017 which very much markets it as a model that claims 20 active countries as adopters of the Icelandic Model of Prevention. Planet Youth now offers services to municipalities around the globe such as a conducting a prevention capacity assessment, and a guidance program which they sell (Planet Youth, n.d. b). The cost of this consultation is 155,000 euros across 5 years (31,000Euro/year for a minimum time commitment of 5 years) (North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit, 2023). There is very little research around the success of the outsourcing of the Icelandic Model of Prevention in other countries, but the success of the steps the Icelandic government took starting in the 1990’s to curb youth alcohol and cigarette use can’t be ignored. In the 1990’s Iceland ranked among the highest in underage alcohol and drug use. The sweeping changes and the actions of the Icelandic government enacted included curfews for children and young people and more access to structured hobbies in addition to myriad other social services which have moved Iceland’s young people to rank among the lowest users of alcohol and drugs in Europe (Kristjansson et al., 2016, 2020). This model began as a way to help prevent alcohol and cigarette use, but has adapted over the years to focus on wellbeing in general (for example, they focus on the avoidance of energy drinks and excessive screentime now). So, as a model of prevention, the aims and methods of the Icelandic model are different cv the goal of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities which we will introduce next.

Introducing the Finnish model for leisure activities

The Finnish Model for Leisure Activities (Harrastamisen Suomen Malli in Finnish) is structured around and begins by listening to young people. All of the funding that the Ministry of Education and Culture provides is contingent on the local municipality (only municipalities can apply for funding), who receives that money to implement programming, first listening to and acting on students’ opinions of what should be offered during their leisure time. This is one thing what makes this model unique. Another thing that makes this unique is that all of the out-of-school activities are free to participate in for every child (grades 1–9 e.g., 7–16yrs old).

The roots of the model are deeply engrained in Finland’s attempts to live up to the promises of the UNCRC. When Finland enacted a new Youth Act in 2017, they embedded UNCRC principles into national law (Youth Act 1285/2016). And as stated in Article 31 of the UNCRC it is the state’s obligation to ensure that every child can rest, play, and participate in cultural and recreational life. Thus, Finland’s move to take action on other articles such as Article 12 (right to be heard), Article 2 (non-discrimination and equal access) have been specifically targeted through the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities. Other articles such as Article 5 which calls for respecting the voice and decision making power of youth as they get older are cornerstones of the model as the young people have a say in what activity they want to participate in, and this can change as they move through the grades.

One specific way the model respects and honors student voice is that once every two years there is a nationwide survey that is disseminated across Finland in all primary and lower secondary schools (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2025). This provides students in grades one to nine an opportunity to choose from a list of 85 activities they would be willing to try or definitely want to participate in before or after school if they were offered in their communities. In 2024 this survey received 122,000 responses. Many municipalities now have their own more specific questionnaires either when the nationwide survey is not present in odd numbered years (e.g., 2021, 2023) or they have chosen to do their own survey because they feel it is more accurate and representative of the community needs and resources. Regardless, municipalities must demonstrate that children’s voices lead the programming, and the budget request must cite how the children’s wishes were considered.

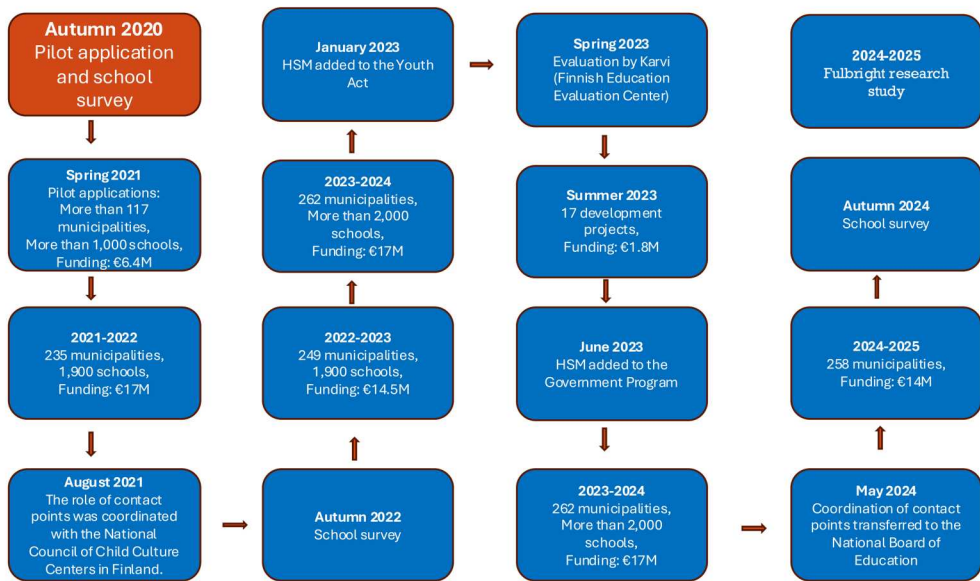
Although in the beginning, coordination was done at the national level during the pilot year, local coordinators in the 258 municipalities across Finland coordinate their local programs. This is beneficial because they understand their community resources and can utilize different county facilities, access to nature, sporting facilities, as well as art and cultural centers much better than a centralized office can in one single city in Finland. In smaller municipalities a coordinator may only do the coordination part time, and in larger cities there may be a full-time coordinator or several coordinators. These coordinators are in charge of hiring staff, scheduling, working with schools for space, applying for the annual funding, evaluating the program, and conducting the student surveys (among many other tasks). Hobby organizers can include sports clubs, cultural actors (such as children's culture centers, museums, art institutions, and heritage associations), youth organizations, municipalities, for-profit companies, and non-profit organizations that organize hobby activities.

In the 2024–2025 academic year there are approximately 11,000 groups that are funded through this model. Approximately 143,000 students participate in free out-of-school programming across Finland which is about a quarter of the 560,000 primary and lower secondary school students in Finland (me. Säätiö, 2025). Municipalities work through a cost share where municipalities must provide 30% of the funding for the programs and the Ministry of Education and Culture provides 70% (this cost share was 20%/80% in the first year). Currently, over 2000 schools have programs, which is quite a large proportion considering Finland had 2014 primary and lower secondary schools as of 2023 (Statistics Finland, 2024).

The model is constantly evolving. The Ministry of Education and Culture seeks feedback from local municipalities who deliver the program across the country and receive feedback from the evaluations that are conducted each year by the municipalities as a part of the grant terms. Through this feedback changes to the following years' funding application have been adopted such as allowing transportation costs to be included to get students in rural communities home after participating in an after school activities and providing access to funds to provide snacks for participants in order for them to be able to continue after a full day in school. Still some key guidelines are followed that remain from the beginning of the program such as: (1) the programs must be continuous, meaning they start in the Fall around when school starts (early September) and end in the late spring (mid-May); (2) municipalities and schools cannot charge for the space being used to conduct these programs; (3) student surveys of interest (or a similar method to listen to youth) must be conducted to ensure the activities align with their interests; (4) municipalities must actively seek to find participants to be enrolled into the programs through actions such as advertising, having a school liaison, talking to youth about their programming, informing parents etc.; (5) municipalities must communicate about the availability of these hobbies to parents and students; and (6) the ministry of education and culture is required to create and maintain a shared knowledge bank which allows for information to be shared about best practices and support mechanisms for hobbies with all municipalities.

Municipalities and hobby organizers are actively developing their activities by utilizing each other's best practices and materials, which have been actively shared since the first project phase. Other key aspects of the model include: (1) Activities must primarily take place on school premises or in facilities close to the school. Hobby activities can also be organized elsewhere if the nature of the activity requires it (e.g., swimming, skiing, horseback riding, art, museum club). (2) Hobbies must occur immediately after lessons or before them in the morning during school working hours, taking into account the well-being and schedules of children and young people; (3) Activities must be regular and weekly. Exceptions can be made for justified reasons, for example, when an instructor comes from a long distance to a rural community. A hobby can consist of several different activities or areas that vary weekly or monthly; (4) Activities must be targeted at some or all students in grades 1–9 of basic education, (including students in private schools). For 1st and 2nd graders participating in morning and afternoon activities (a government subsidized separate care program), participation in hobbies under the Finnish Model can also take place within the

The progress of the Finnish model from pilot to nationwide usage



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Figure 1. The progress of the Finnish model from pilot to nationwide usage.

framework of these morning and afternoon programs, with hobby instructors providing guidance there; and (5) Activities must be either guided or self-directed hobbies in a supervised environment.

The Finnish Model for Leisure Activities grew from a pilot study in early 2021 to a quick adoption of the model in over 1,900 schools within the first full-year funding (see Figure 1). This number has grown to include over 90% of the municipalities in Finland currently (The Finnish Model for Leisure Activities, n.d.). Although this model has been widely adopted, it has not been widely researched. In 2023 a national assessment organization (KARVI) conducted an evaluation of six municipalities that have successfully implemented the model and published this work in Finnish (Laimi et al., 2023). A 2-page executive summary is about all that has been written in English about this model. Outside of the KARVI evaluation, there is a Churchill Fellows report from Amy Woodhouse (2024) who visited Finland and Iceland to compare the models and learn about them. Yet, the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities needs rigorous empirical research to understand the effects of the model, and how young people are experiencing it.

Addition to the youth act (Nuorisolaki)

A crucial step toward the model's formal adoption occurred in 2023 when the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities was introduced and written into the Finnish Youth Act which is legislation that governs youth policy in Finland and promotes equality, young people's participation, and well-being while preventing social exclusion. The Youth Act of 2023 was a doubling down of the Youth Act from 2017 in Finland's commitment to meeting the needs of young people and to align with the goals of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989). The model shows a strong commitment to the right to participate (Article 12) as well as continuing to respect and value the developing decision making power of young people (Article 5).

While being written to the Youth Act better established the model; however, it also fell short of what many advocates had wanted in that it did not *guarantee* funding for the program from the

government, the legislation only suggested that it *should* be funded. Another aspect that increased restrictions in the signing of the legislation was that these activities for young people could no longer be completed during school hours. In grants provided to municipalities prior to the new legislation the activities were allowed to take place during school time, but now that it is written into the Youth Act, the law is interpreted as only before or after school programming (not during). Prior to this restriction, there were some rural communities who innovatively built in one hour of hobbies during the middle of the school day so all students had the opportunity to participate in something and school transportation could occur for all students at the same time, thus reducing the burden on parents to come pick up children after their hobbies end. This was especially important in rural communities where school transport could be 20–30 km away and is guaranteed for all school aged children who live a certain distance away from the school and is a cost that needs to be covered by the municipalities. Thus, having two separate school rides home could effectively double the cost of transportation for a school year or make it so some students simply did not have the opportunity to stay after school. Mid-day hobbies were also found to be successful in engaging lower secondary school students who often have “jump periods” which are long blocks without classes in the middle of the school day and were previously prime times to engage lower secondary school students in hobbies at school.

The foundation of the Finnish model

The current version of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities was not conjured up from thin air or suddenly appear on the scene in 2021 without a foundation (UniArts Helsinki, 2024). It was notably the research and widespread advocacy of Dr. Lea Pulkkinen who has laid the foundation for what the model is now (e.g., Pulkkinen, 2004). In 1996, Pulkkinen was able to convince the wife of Finland’s then President, Martti Ahtisaari’s, Eeva Ahtisaari, to take action. Eeva Ahtisaari, who ran a foundation for youth, was a key supporter in providing substantial support for developing before and after school programming for first and second graders which grew into a law in 2004 that made before and after school programming for 1st and 2nd graders ubiquitous across Finland. Following that, a three-year study (Sitra, 2004) that provided more unstructured morning and after school programming was opened up to grades one to five. Additionally, programming that provided children an option to choose what type of activity they participated in was opened to grades 1–9 and was designed to be integrated into the school day.

The program of government of Prime Minister Sipilä (2015–2019) included several target projects. One of them aimed at making culture and art more accessible to young people and aligning strongly with the UNCRC. As part of this target area a model for leisure activities was developed. It included listening to pupils’ interests and involved collaboration with art and culture areas in Finland (e.g., theater, dance, circus arts, musicals and performance art) as well as physical activity organizations (e.g., Finnish Olympic Committee, Paralympic Committee). In this earlier model, school children were able to participate in after school programming that was interesting to them in the school building directly after their classes had ended. These occurred in elementary and secondary schools all around the country. Instructors consisted of practicing art teachers and other professionals from art and culture. This model was also fitted into early childhood education centers. Within the three years of this program 90,000 young people from 1000 schools and 300 early childhood education centers participated.

During the same time period (2015–2021) University of the Arts Helsinki hosted and coordinated an extensive research initiative entitled The Arts as Public Service: Strategic Steps towards Equality (ARTSEQUAL). It was funded by the Strategic Research Council (Academy of Finland) as part of its Equality program and explored how the arts could meet the social challenges of the 2020s. The ARTSEQUAL project aimed to reinterpret the traditional position of the arts in Finland by regarding them as a basic service that should be available equally for all, contributing to well-being across a wide range of life domains. The project was carried out in close collaboration

with ministries, regional state administration, municipalities, and NGOs. It consisted of six research groups, including the Arts@School group that focused on participatory artistic and arts-educational interventions in schools. In addition to research publications, ARTSEQUAL generated several policy briefs to support political decision-making and consolidate new kinds of arts and cultural services.

One of the policy briefs written by the Arts@School group was entitled: Comprehensive school: Finland's largest cultural center (Anttila et al., 2017). It emphasized how:

Numerous studies have shown that arts and cultural education strengthens the cultural capital of children and young people, and supports their capacities to actively participate in society. Based on this premise, comprehensive schools should be considered as Finland's largest cultural centers, where high-quality, diverse arts and cultural education is equally available to all. (Anttila et al., 2017, n.p.).

Referring to earlier research on after school programs' impact on pupils' well-being, the authors strongly argued for collaboration between schools and providers of arts and cultural education, stating that "Through cross-sectoral cooperation, schools will be able to ensure that equality and cultural rights are realized" (Anttila et al., 2017, n.p.). The authors proposed several policy actions and recommended, for example, that "Municipal education departments should offer providers of art and cultural services the possibility to use school facilities during and immediately after school hours." (Anttila et al., 2017, n.p.). This policy brief was one of the many documents presented to the writers of the next government program for arguing for the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities as it concisely presented a long line of research showing the benefits of after school programs. The argument was solid, and the societal situation was ripe for including the model in the government program, and eventually, into legislation.

How the Finnish model is different

The Finnish Model for Leisure Activities is distinctly different from say the Icelandic Model of Prevention. First and foremost, even as Finland is considered a rather small country by comparison to others it is much larger in population than Iceland. To allow for a comparison, Finland in 2024 had a population of approximately 5.5 million and is approximately the size of Germany which has a population of 84 million. Iceland in turn has approximately 380,000 people living in a country that is one third the size of Finland.

The Finnish Model has not directly focused, as the Icelandic Model has, on keeping kids away from alcohol or other behaviors that have deemed to be of harm to young people. The Finnish Model has chosen to keep the parenting to the parents in that it does not mandate any specific curfew as the Icelandic Model does. Also, the role of student voice and choice is largely absent (at least formally) in the Icelandic Model whereas it is the backbone of the Finnish Model. Further, the way the money is allocated in the two models is very different. The Icelandic Model utilizes a Leisure Card that has a specific amount of money deposited that families can purchase services from local sport clubs or activity providers. Thus, the money moves straight to the families who then decide where to spend their Leisure Card funds. The amount on the card varies from municipality to municipality but in 2023 the Reykjavik card was worth about 445 GBP (Woodhouse, 2024). In the Finnish Model the funding comes from the Ministry of Education and Culture that needs to be applied by municipalities which must cost match at 30%. Once funding is distributed, the municipalities act on student suggestions of programming and the students are able to attend the clubs cost-free. The money therefore, in the Finnish Model, never goes to the families. It is instead realized as free programming (often in school buildings) that the young people have asked for and is delivered through the municipalities in the way they feel is best for all involved while taking into account facilities, instructor availability, and of course, student voice.

We won't take a stand on a "right" or "wrong" way to distribute the money but the arguments for the leisure card would be that "money talks", meaning that the parents or guardians are able to take their money where they want to, and use it to support or subsidize their children's leisure time

activities. Thus, the services that do not attract the leisure card funds (e.g., are not enjoyable to youth) will not continue to be sustainable. The arguments against using a leisure card are that the full extent of the money may not get spent. For example, parents and guardians who are not fluent in the language, or have low digital literacy skills may not understand that they have funds to use and may not use them. Alternatively, parents may be too busy to provide transportation for the child to attend the after-school activity in a non-school location and thus the money is not spent in the way it was intended. Finally, there is a risk that programs increase their costs since they know an influx of money has been provided to pay for services creating market inflation.

We want to be clear, that in no way are we trying to set up the Finnish Model against the Icelandic Model. These two models are simply different from each other and clearly the Icelandic Model has shown a tremendous amount of success, and the Finnish Model is in its infancy and still growing. For more on the Development of the Icelandic Model and its' guiding principles see Kristjánsson et al. (2020). There are over 150 peer reviewed publications on this model available on the Planet Youth website.

Future directions

The Finnish Model is clearly much less researched as the well-established Icelandic Model. As we conclude this article, we want to advocate the further development of the Finnish Model for Leisure Activities through more research surrounding the structure, benefits, and potential barriers to more effective implementation of the model. Future research should also focus on student experiences in the model and to find how marginalized groups (e.g., non-native Finnish language speakers, immigrants, refugees, disabled students) experience the model.

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