

## CELEBRATING EDUCATION AS A CIVIC IDEAL

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

Autumn is back-to-school season, with sales of backpacks, notebooks, new shoes, and clothes dominating advertisements and our daily lives. Every student starts the school year with high hopes, and most look forward to seeing their friends and teachers back in classrooms as our annual academic journey begins. The first days and weeks are shiny and new, and wise teachers know that these beginnings set the tone for all the days, months, and seasons ahead. It's a time of excitement and nervousness, a precious opportunity to celebrate the promise of teaching and learning.

Earlier this year, I visited Finland, a country regarded as an academic superpower, with some of the highest test scores and graduation rates in the world. My visit coincided with the holiday Vappu, celebrated on May 1 as a combination of May Day and Labor Day, and it gave me a close-up view of Finns' commitment to the value of education.

In Helsinki, Finland's capital city, university students fill the sidewalks on the day before Vappu, each dressed in colorful coveralls decorated with commemorative patches and corporate sponsor logos. Each color represents a different academic department at a Helsinki university, and the streets are a rainbow of students, all gravitating toward the Havis Amanda statue near the city harbor on the Baltic Sea.

There, leaders of the student union assemble for a coronation ceremony of sorts, as they adorn the statue not with a crown, but something much more valuable: a high school graduation cap, a white canvas hat with a short black visor. In response, tens of thousands in the surrounding crowd place their own graduation caps on their heads, including local government leaders, who watch the festivities from the balcony of City Hall.

The following day, the city is a sea of white hats, as everyone wears their graduation cap to celebratory picnics in Kaivopuisto Park, where people young and old gather to spend Vappu together, accompanied by live music, games, and other activities.

Finland's financial and social commitments to education are much vaunted, and Vappu is a visible manifestation of the joy Finns take in celebrating their academic achievements. I wondered whether, in the United States and other countries, we could similarly celebrate education year-round. Imagine if people wore their mortarboards annually to commemorate their graduation rather than flinging them in the air at commencement ceremonies, to be swept up afterward and discarded.

I have long believed that first-year students in high school and college should

be required to attend commencement to witness the joy that rewards four or more years of commitment, hard work, and perseverance. Surely, dropout rates would fall if all students could share in the celebration that awaits. So, this year, start the school year as you mean to continue. Carry the spirit of commencement with you throughout each academic season, and celebrate education every day.



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