
DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Smartest
Kids in the World



DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Smartest Kids in the World

1

In the initial pages of the *Smartest Kids*, Amanda questions the premise of the book: "Did it really matter if [the U.S.] ranked number one in the world in education outcomes? Or even number ten?" What do you think?

2

In the book, Amanda divided the world's smartest countries into three categories: the Utopia model (Finland), the Pressure Cooker (South Korea) and the Metamorphosis (Poland). Which model does your community most resemble now?

3

Did any of the students or other characters in the book remind you of someone you know? If you've ever lived in another country, how did your experience compare to the stories in the book?

4

The exchange students Amanda followed noticed many differences—positive and negative—between the U.S. and other countries. They admired the interactivity of their U.S. classrooms and the abundance of extracurricular opportunities. At the same time, they noticed that American students were not generally expected to struggle with the kinds of challenging, higher-order work students encounter elsewhere. They also complained that American teenagers had less autonomy. Which of those observations resonate with your own experiences?

5

One of Amanda's biggest realizations was about the signals that schools and communities send to students and parents. These messages convey the true priorities of a community—and matter more than empty words. Of all the messages that went out to parents in your community's school last year, what percentage was directly related to learning—versus fundraising, sports, dress code or other activities?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Smartest Kids in the World

6

In the book, Amanda wrote about the unique role that sports play in U.S. high schools. What is the right balance between sports and academics in your community? How do you know if you are achieving that balance?

7

In your local school, are students allowed to miss class for games? How often do students have a substitute teacher because their normal teacher is coaching? Do local media outlets cover non-athletic student activities and competitions? If you conclude that sports should be secondary to learning in your community, what can be done to illustrate that hierarchy in visible ways?

8

One way other countries raise the prestige of teaching and learning is to make teacher-training programs more rigorous, selective and hands-on. Any idea which education colleges supply teachers to your district? How much time do the teachers-in-training spend in actual classrooms with strong teachers?

9

Another way to boost the prestige of teaching is to show more people what teaching looks like at its best. Does your community offer opportunities for teachers, parents, students, media members and politicians to see great teachers teach—and to talk about what they are doing and why?

10

How else can a community cultivate a culture of rigor and learning? Can U.S. principals, parents and teachers apply some of the best practices, rituals and norms of *sports* to learning? What are other creative ways you could shift some of your community traditions to focus on learning and lifelong curiosity?