

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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El Dorado High School Teacher Receives Fulbright Award

Tiffany Larson, an English teacher at El Dorado High School, has been offered a Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching grant to Finland by the United States Department of State and the J. William Fulbright Foreign Scholarship Board. As stated in a press release from Fulbright, Larson is one of approximately 45 U.S. citizens who will travel abroad through the Fulbright Distinguished Awards in Teaching Program in 2016-17. Recipients of Fulbright grants are selected on the basis of academic and professional achievement, as well as demonstrated leadership potential.

Larson, born and raised in Marlette, Michigan, moved to California in 2005 for a teaching job at Upper Lake High School. She taught there for two years before taking a teaching position at El Dorado High School where she has now been for nine years. She was first introduced to the Fulbright opportunity by a colleague who had previously participated in the Fulbright teacher exchange program.

"I looked in to it but they had stopped doing the exchange program several years prior," Larson said. "But they started doing this other grant program which is more research based and way more 'up my alley' and the opportunity to do sustained research without having to teach at the same time was very appealing to me."

Larson took nearly a full year prepping an inquiry project she hoped would stand out from the nearly 8,000 other applicant projects. She chose to focus on Finland specifically because of their high scores of literacy – the country tends to outrank the majority of other countries despite spending less actual time in school.

"How is it that they are out-performing everyone while at the same time they aren't pounding away like everyone else is?" Larson questioned.

Narrowing her focus even further, she plans to look at second language acquisition for non-native speakers, specifically immigrant students.

"Finland has such a huge emphasis on equity across the board and I guess my biggest query for my project when I go over there is the equity for everyone. Is it accessible for migrants and refugee students, or is the equity isolated to native speakers? The reason I chose this particular topic is because of the high number of English language students we have here in California and in our district, and it seems to be increasing."

Larson's first month in Finland will be spent doing as many classroom observations in as many schools as possible (in addition to adjusting to only two hours of daylight). She will then identify which schools have the highest language learning population. From that group, she will select two or three schools and within those schools select five focus students to follow and conduct interviews of their families. In addition, she will audit two different graduate level courses at a university.

“Ultimately, what I would like to come back here with is some best practices that they are employing because I have a feeling that with their emphasis on equity and their high literacy scores that their non-native speakers are probably progressing in the language of core instruction faster than our students are,” she said. “My goal is to learn what it is they are doing to see if we can implement the same ideas at my school site specifically, and at the district level is possible. My end game is to make sure that our English language learning students have more access to core curriculum.”

Larson finds out this August where exactly her placement in Finland will be, though she guesses she will likely end up in either Helsinki or Jyväskylä. She will embark on her journey in early January, 2017 and will have through June 9 to conduct her research. She will also have the opportunity to stay for one additional month to travel, which she plans to take full advantage of.

“The program itself is very prestigious and a difficult placement to get,” she said. “Hopefully I will be a better teacher as a result of it. So often we don’t get the opportunity to see anyone else teach; we have so much to learn from how other people are doing things, but we can’t do that if we can’t get out of this space [classroom] for a little bit.”

As stated in the Fulbright press release, the Fulbright Program is designed to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries. Since its establishment in 1946 under legislation introduced by the late U.S. Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas, the Fulbright Program has given approximately 360,000 students, scholars, teachers, artists, and scientists the opportunity to study, teach and conduct research, exchange ideas and contribute to finding solutions to shared international concerns.

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