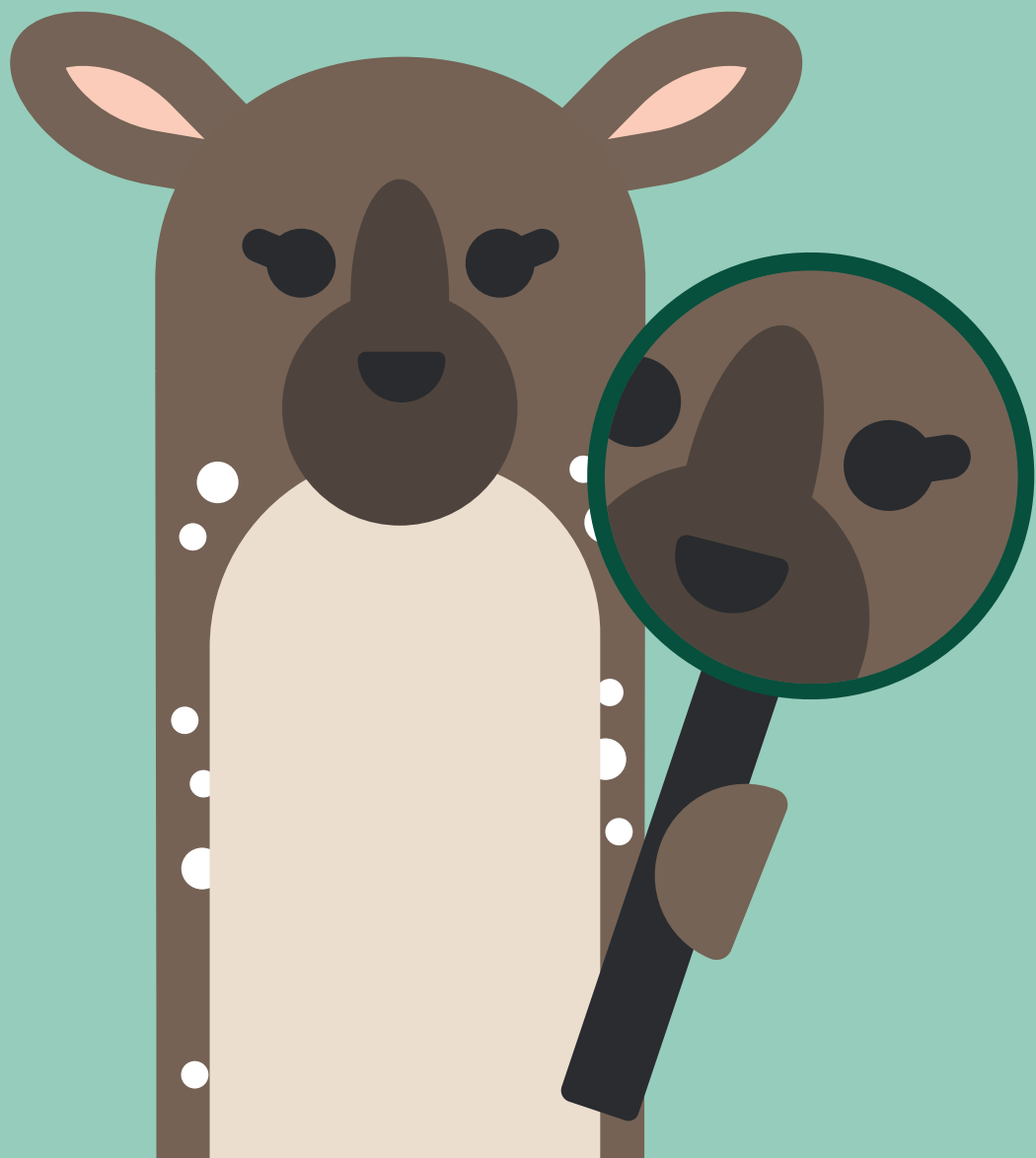




“IT RENEWED MY PASSION AS AN EDUCATOR”

How the HEI Schools Toolkit
transformed a school in Texas

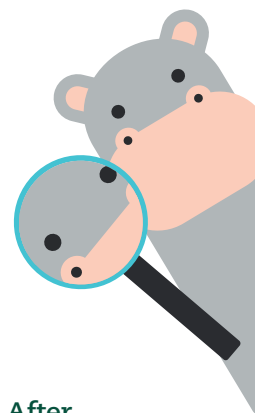


Finding a Solution

We recently had the pleasure of speaking with our partners at Beta Academy who subscribed to the Toolkit several months ago. Working at a charter school in Texas, they have more flexibility than most American public schools in choosing their curriculum. As such, the school was founded with the mission of taking a progressive approach to education.

Unfortunately, their preschool scholars and teachers were stressed because of high expectations to perform. To address this problem, Helen Abernathy, the Director of Research and Development, sought a solution. She was inspired by Finland's play-based approach, as discussed in the book *Let the Children Play*, and she started to do some research.

Want to learn more about Finnish education? [Check out our list of resources.](#)



She soon discovered the [HEI Schools Toolkit](#), an online curriculum enrichment tool. After discussing it with her team, she decided to subscribe Beta Academy to the HEI Schools Toolkit for three main reasons:



Finnish origins:

"Its partnership with the University of Helsinki was a big draw."



Dedication to research:

"You can see their passion for research through their website, webinars and products."



Effective design:

"It's simultaneously simple and beautiful, so it's not overwhelming for teachers."

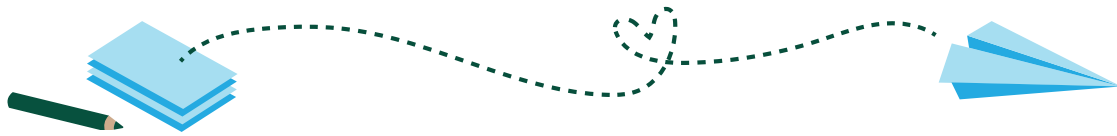


Want to read more about the reasons behind their decision? [Read the first part of this case study.](#)

Putting it into Practice

Enrolling in the late spring of 2021, Helen and her colleagues decided to introduce the Toolkit to the teachers during their professional development sessions prior to the next academic school year. Their sessions were engaging and exciting for the educators. They got to participate in activities similar to those in the Toolkit and engage with the material. While some teachers felt a bit hesitant about implementing an alternative approach, they quickly saw the benefits of the simple, outdoor-focused style.

Parents also took some time to adjust to the new outdoor approach, but their children's happiness proved that it worked. Children became more confident and courageous thanks to their increased time outside, teachers enjoyed the straightforward activities and parents enthusiastically followed their children's outdoor learning via social media.



One clear benefit of this new approach: there was no more need for pen and paper activities. Helen and her team decided not to buy their typical package of scientific worksheets this year. Instead, they're meeting the academic standards through literature, inquiry, exploration and application of different concepts. It's more engaging and hands-on for the children and "you can see their joy of learning," Helen says.

It even does a better job than the worksheets. Pre-kindergarten teacher Heather Velasco reports: "The state laws require us to give the children tests, and **we've seen learning gains even though we're no longer focusing on the specific subject areas.**" In other words, the holistic approach is working well and the children are much happier.

The Toolkit also benefits the teachers. The curriculum materials "fills in all the gaps that were in my curriculum. It gives me the freedom to do all these things that I wanted to do but couldn't do because of the previous curriculum standards. **It has also restored and renewed my passion and energy as an educator,**" Heather shares.

The Toolkit's professional development section, paired with HEI Schools free resources, contribute to this enthusiasm. The webinars, for example, have been a huge help. Helen said, "We shared the outdoor pedagogy webinar with the educators and they were so inspired by it. It was a good reminder for them about why we're doing this and the importance of keeping it simple."



"It has restored and renewed my passion and energy as an educator."

**- Heather,
PreK teacher**

Beta Academy, Texas

**Want to see the webinar for yourself?
Watch it on-demand!**



Another clear benefit of the approach: Children are more courageous and confident. Heather witnessed one example on the playground a few months ago. Originally filming another child, she noticed a little boy in the background on the ‘big kids’ playground, which was built for children ages 6 to 10 years old. He was attempting the monkey bars and she started filming him instead. The four-year-old fearlessly clambered all the way across and he was so proud of himself when he succeeded.

Heather attributes moments like these to the Finnish approach. Indeed, she sees such bravery in her whole class: “They’re no longer afraid of bugs. We even brought a snail inside at one point because everyone wanted to look at it more closely. It didn’t stay for long, but we did have a class pet for an afternoon!” she jokes.



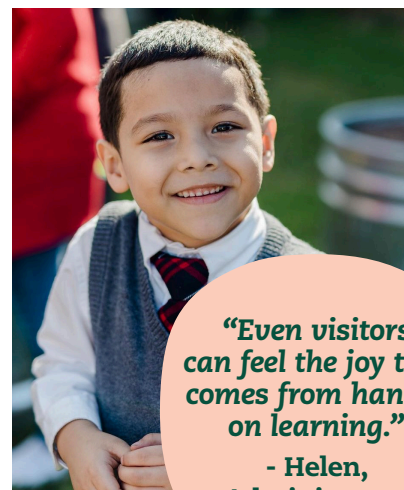
Beta Academy, Texas

Rippling across the school

It’s not just the preschoolers who feel the effects of the Toolkit. The Finnish approach has inspired learning moments across grade levels. The first and second grade students enjoy more outdoor time too, and even the secondary school students have benefited from the changes.

To encourage outdoor learning, the administrators decided to implement a garden program for all of the preschoolers. They led the lessons to give teachers a break, and they asked upper secondary school students to join in supporting roles. At first, the older students simply assisted with the activities. But as time went on, they were increasingly more engaged. Inspired by what they saw, the students asked if they could teach the lessons themselves. Since then, the upper secondary students lead the garden activities, planning in advance and executing them with enthusiasm. Helen cites the Toolkit as the inspiration for this positive, unexpected outcome.

Even school visitors can feel the unique joy that permeates the school. Helen shares: “Our new photographer said that he loves his job because he gets to capture magical, joyful moments. A reading coach who travels all over the state also told us that she loves coming to visit Beta Academy because she can feel the joy that comes from hands-on learning too.”



“Even visitors can feel the joy that comes from hands-on learning.”

- Helen, Administrator


Beta Academy, Texas

More to come

The team is thrilled with the progress they've made so far, and they look forward to the years ahead. "Word of mouth has been very positive and I think this would definitely attract teachers of different grade levels," Helen shared.

Heather is also excited about the years ahead: "This year was our test and I think we can do a lot more in the next few years."

To bolster the teachers' professional development, the team has also subscribed ten teachers to the HEI Schools Teacher Diploma, which is an online certification program for educators around the world. Based on Finnish teacher training, it will give Beta Academy's teachers deeper insights into the play-based pedagogy.



HEI!

Want to learn more about the HEI Schools Diploma?

[Read about the program content on our website.](#)

The biggest lesson learned from this entire experience? Learning should be joyful!

"Through the Toolkit, we've learned that the joy of learning, curiosity and exploration can be simple. You just have to change the way you're thinking, and the Toolkit has helped us do that," Helen says.

And we can't wait to see where they go next!



Beta Academy, Texas