

The Finnish way

Once an also-ran in international comparisons, Finland has soared to the top by building a system based on trust and responsibility.

On the first floor of South Tapiola Upper Secondary School in Espoo, Finland, students have a room that's all their own.

Like many student lounges in American schools, this room has couches and a television equipped with a game unit. Nicknamed "the dungeon" by students, the room, at the end of a short hallway, has low lighting and feels cave-like with no windows. Students are free to visit the lounge

anytime they're not in class. No adult monitors who's in the room or what students do while they're there.

Aside from the lack of adult supervision, what makes the room different from one you'd find in an American high school is its door. From top to bottom, the door is plastered with images of leggy and scantily clad 1940s-style pinup girls. With breasts nearly tumbling out of their lingerie, the women are in suggestive poses, although nothing as provocative as you'd find in American magazines today.

Nonetheless, a group of American educators traveling together on a PDK International visit to Finnish schools was startled by the artwork on the door, each of us remarking that no American high school would tolerate such a display.

After our tour ended, I asked Harri Rinta-aho, the school's head (the equivalent of an American principal), about the lounge and the door. He knew nothing about the door because he said

he'd never been in the student lounge. "I promised to let the students run that room the way they wanted" so he had no need to interfere, he said.

But, since the American visitors asked about it, Rinta-aho said he would go and take a look at the room. "I will talk with the students about this. I trust that they will make the right decision," he said.

Trust and responsibility

Virtually every examination of the so-called Finnish miracle in education has pointed to trust and responsibility as equal partners in the transformation of its education system from being an also-ran into a leader in international rankings.

But a miracle it is not. The nation took a hard look at its education system several decades ago, found it deficient, and set out to improve it. "Today's Finnish education policies are a result of three decades of systematic, mostly intentional, development that has created a culture of diversity, trust, and respect within Finnish society, in general, and within its education system, in particular," writes Pasi Sahlberg in *Finnish Lessons* (Teachers College Press, 2011, p. 105). "The Finnish Way is a professional and democratic path to improvement that grows from the bottom, steers from the top, and provides support and pressure from the sides."

Adds Leo Pahkin, counsellor of education at the Finnish National Board of Education, "We are lucky that our (political) parties are thinking very much the same way about education."

The Finns set their vision on a comprehensive school system in which they would strive to educate everybody. "We would have the same target, the same aims in every subject regardless of student background," Pahkin said.

En route to that goal, Finland also moved from being a highly centralized system to more local governance. Again, the issue of trust emerges. In the early 1990s, the country eliminated national approval of textbooks and annual school inspections. The thin national curriculum — just 128 pages — offers guidance but relies on teachers to flesh it out. The core math curriculum, for example, is only eight pages. "You couldn't teach from that," said Heidi Krzywacki, a professor of teacher education at the University of Helsinki and formerly a secondary math teacher.

Essential to achieving a system of equity and excellence was ramping up the knowledge and skills of all teachers. Quite simply, Finland wanted to drive responsibility down to the classroom and school level. That required leaders to develop a system that would ensure that the public would trust decisions made by teachers and heads. This led to sweeping reforms that moved teacher education programs into universities and upgraded the standards for becoming a teacher.

To teach in Finland now requires a five-year master's degree in education. Admission to a teacher preparation program includes a national entrance exam and a personal interview. Only one of every 10 applicants is accepted; competition to become



JOAN RICHARDSON is editor-in-chief of *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine.



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a primary school teacher is even tougher with 1,789 applicants for only 120 spots, for example, at the University of Helsinki in 2011-12. Only eight universities offer teacher preparation programs in Finland, which allows the country to ensure consistency from program to program. Contrast that with Minnesota, which has about the same population as Finland (5.2 million) but about 30 colleges that offer teacher preparation programs.

Preparation differs depending on which grades teachers want to teach. Primary school teachers major in education and minor in various content areas; secondary school teachers major in their content area (math, chemistry, English, etc.) and minor in education.

Intense preparation is necessary because Finland has no teacher evaluation system — and wants none. “When teachers are not controlled, they want to do their best. I don’t know how it would work if somebody tried to control them,” Krzywacki said.

Said Pahkin, “We trust our teachers. They will find the best solutions, or they will create their

own. They are doing very well without inspections and testing. Actually, we have 25 to 30 inspectors in schools every day. If students are not happy, they go home and tell their mothers, and the mothers call the principal. That’s a fine inspection system.”

Even formal induction programs for novice teachers are absent. “When you get your first job, nobody ever enters your classroom to see how you’re doing. There is no tutor, no mentor. You just start working,” Krzywacki said.

School day freedom

Neither students nor teachers are required to be in the school building unless they must be in class. The school day may be eight hours long but, although the work week is 35 hours long, teachers typically teach only four hours a day. Teachers can remain in the building during their non-instructional time but they’re also free to work from home as long as they get their work done. In other words, Finnish teachers work in conditions more closely associated with being professionals than the highly regulated

work environment of American schools.

Finnish teachers are also on their own to develop assessments. Except for the National Matriculation Exam that all students must pass before high school graduation, there are no other nationwide assessments. The onus is on students to do well on the exams. There is no formal ranking of schools based on these scores. “Finns are not so interested in competition. We don’t know why this is. Somebody could buy all of the results and make a ranking, but why would they do that?” Pahkin said.

Trust permeates the system: The citizens trust elected officials to make good decisions about funding and structuring schools, the officials trust teachers and heads to provide excellent education for all children, teachers and heads trust students to do their best in school. And students? Rasmus Kivisaari, 18, a student at South Tapiola, pulled it all together.

“Trust goes both ways,” he said. “Teachers trust us, and we trust that our teachers are the best that they can be.”

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