



How Finland Ensures an Equitable Foundation of Supports for Learners

Background

When the first PISA results became public in 2000, Finland topped the league tables. Since that first PISA administration, Finland has remained among the top-performing countries, though it has slipped in all three subjects on the last two rounds of PISA.

It was only in 1970 that Finland established a basic comprehensive school for all students through grade 8 and the mid-1980s before it created a common curriculum for all students in the basic school. It coupled this reform with a restructuring of teacher education to move it into research universities, which resulted in a more prestigious status for the teaching profession. A shift in authority for managing schools and teaching followed in the 1990s, alongside an expansion of secondary and post-secondary education, including efforts to raise the academic rigor of vocational education for secondary students. Many believe the key to the success of the Finnish education system is simply the quality of their teachers and the trust that the Finnish people have vested in them. But the Finnish focus on teacher quality is only one element in a carefully designed system that has been adapting to changes in society and the economy for the last half century.

Despite its success, Finland faces some challenges. The recent decline in PISA scores was matched by a decline in performance on national exams, suggesting that the nation is struggling to maintain its high levels of student performance. Moreover, while Finland remains one of the most equitable nations in the OECD, both in terms of performance on PISA by socioeconomic background and economically, both PISA results and national sampling test results show a slight increase in inequality, which also reflects a growing economic inequality in the nation. Further, although Finland remains largely homogeneous, the country, like other European countries, has seen an influx of immigrants in recent years. Immigrant students performed significantly below their non-immigrant peers in reading on PISA 2018, after accounting for socioeconomic background. An anti-immigrant party, the Finns Party, narrowly lost a national election in 2019; it has also led among all parties in many recent opinion polls, and public surveys show widening polarization on a range of political issues.

The national government formed in April 2019, led by the center-left Social Democratic Party, pledged to strengthen the education system and address inequality. The government proposed reversing funding cuts to education enacted in the past few years

(that were part of across the board cuts due to a tight economy), and raising the school leaving age from 16 to 18, thereby making upper-secondary education—general and vocational—compulsory. A new prime minister, also a member of the Social Democratic Party, was appointed in December 2019 following her predecessor's resignation.

In addition, like many countries, Finland has tried to find ways for the education system to address the changes in the economy and in society wrought by digitalization and artificial intelligence, as well as to capitalize on the opportunities artificial intelligence offers to improve teaching and learning and social supports for young people. A new national curriculum, released in 2016, attempts to take on that challenge by explicitly emphasizing cross-curricular competencies such as learning to learn, cultural competence, and ICT competence.

Supports for Young Children and Their Families

Finland offers a wide range of supports to families with young children. Since the 1930s, every mother of a newborn baby receives a box filled with clothes, sheets, toys, diapers, and other essential items. The country also provides mothers with four months of paid maternity leave and fathers with nine weeks of paid paternity leave, followed by eight months of paid parental leave, which can be taken by either parent.

Health care is a right guaranteed to all Finnish citizens under the constitution. The health care system is managed by municipalities, which fund and provide primary care and, usually in concert with other municipalities, provide specialized health care in regional hospitals. Under the National Health Insurance system, all prenatal and perinatal care, along with annual checkups for children up to age 7, are free of charge. In 2019, the government proposed consolidating health care into regional authorities and allowing more private providers, but that plan was defeated and the entire government resigned.

Finland has very generous maternal and parental leave, which was just extended to 14 months for either parent. Finland also makes direct cash payments to families with children under age 17, which they can use with no restrictions. In 2018, the benefits totaled €113.78 per child, with larger amounts for additional children. Single parents also received additional bonuses.

Prior to age 6 when compulsory school starts, all children from birth have a universal right to subsidized ECEC services. Parents who chose to care for their children at home rather than in center-based child care also can receive a child care allowance. In 2016, a new law ended the principle of children's equal access to ECEC regardless of their family's economic position or engagement in the labor market. Now, children whose parents are not students or working full-time have only a 20-hour per week entitlement to subsidized ECEC, and have no right to subsidized part-time ECEC to supplement

half-day pre-primary education. Children are more likely to participate in ECEC as they grow older. As of 2017, 1 percent of those under the age of 1 participated in ECEC, while 31 percent of 1-year-olds participated, 59 percent of 2-year-olds participated, and 79 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds participated (as of 2016; 6-year-olds' participation is now compulsory).

Supports for School-age Children

Finnish schools not only provide education, they provide many other important resources and services for their students, including a daily hot meal, psychological counseling, and health and dental services. Schools have dedicated, full-time counseling staff who meet regularly with students and their teachers to ensure that students and their families have the supports they need. Finland supports also extensive recreational activities and extra-curricular activities for Finnish students, at little or no cost.

Every school has a doctor and a nurse assigned to it, and there are community-based child health centers for school age children, as well. The nurse checks the children's health at school. Pupils can go and see the nurse themselves if they have a problem, but the nurse also administers periodic checkups and first aid. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health coordinates school health care in partnership with the Ministry of Education and Culture.

The Ministry of Education and Culture allocates additional funds for immigrant students who have been living in Finland for less than four years, for low-income students, for students in single parent families and for students with parents who are unemployed or undereducated. Municipalities can distribute these funds to schools as they wish. The government has also invested significant additional funds to since 2016 in developing more supports for new immigrants, including better professional learning for teachers to enable them to support immigrant learners.

Finnish law also requires instruction in Finnish, Swedish, or Sami, depending on students' native language. Students with hearing disabilities are given instruction in sign language.