

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Finland

Introduction

1. This note outlines how functions within the schooling system in Finland are organised. To assist understanding of the nature of the Finnish system, relevant contextual information is also provided.

Overall structure of schooling and demographic context

2. Children start school at the beginning of the school year in which they turn 7.¹
3. Schooling is organised into comprehensive basic education from grades 1 to 9 inclusive,² followed by three years of either upper secondary general education or vocational education and training. At the end of the basic education stage, students who have satisfied the requirements of basic education are awarded a Certificate of Basic Education.
4. Upper secondary general education and vocational education and training operate on a modular structure. Upper secondary general education aims at students having a broad based knowledge, with about 60% of the course content compulsory for all students.³ Students receive an Upper Secondary School Leaving Certificate on completion of their studies, with grades determined by their school. In addition, upper secondary general education students complete a matriculation examination, which forms the basis for entry into university.⁴
5. Students undertaking vocational education and training gain a specific qualification relating to their area of vocational training.⁵ All secondary-level vocational qualifications include, however, compulsory common elements relating to communication (literacy) and interaction skills, competence in mathematics and natural sciences, skills required in society, and social and cultural competences.⁶
6. The school system is broadly comparable in size to New Zealand, with total enrolments of some 880,000 across basic comprehensive education, upper secondary general education and vocational education and training.
7. Generally comprehensive basic education, upper secondary general education and vocational education and training are each provided in separate institutions, although in 2017 there were 41 schools that provided both comprehensive basic

¹ In August 2015, participation in pre-primary education from age 6 became compulsory, although this has not involved a major shift in participation levels as 98% of six year olds already participated. Local authorities can decide whether pre-primary education is organised within early childhood education or in conjunction with basic (school) education. In 2015, 68% of 3 year olds were enrolled in ECE compared to an OECD average of some 77 to 78%. Finnish National Agency for Education, Key Figures on Early Childhood and Basic Education in Finland, 2018, www.opi.fi, accessed 31 May 2018.

² If at the end of 9 years of basic comprehensive education, a student does not meet the requirements of comprehensive education they can complete a 10th voluntary year or further preparatory education. 3% of students who completed their basic education in 2015, went on to a voluntary 10th year or further preparatory education.

³ Finnish National Agency for Education, Education in Finland – slide presentation, www.oph.fi, accessed on 1 June 2018.

⁴ Eurydice, Assessment in General Upper Secondary Education, www.eacea.ec.europa.eu, accessed on 3 June 2018.

⁵ All vocational education includes an element of work-placed learning.

⁶ Reforms in 2018 have reduced the number of specific qualifications and broadened the content of individual qualifications.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

education and upper secondary general education. The number of schools and the level of enrolments in each part of the school system is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Structure of schooling system and enrolments 2017.

	Number of schools	Enrolments
Comprehensive basic education schools ⁷	2,349	544,000
Upper secondary general education schools	340	109,500
Combined comprehensive and upper secondary general education schools	41	28,100
Vocational institutes ⁸	96	179,100,

8. There are three types of comprehensive basic education school: primary schools (grades 1 to 6); middle schools (grades 7 to 9): and full grade 1 to 9 schools.⁹ Over the last decade there has been significant consolidation of the network of comprehensive basic education schools. Since 2008, some 700 primary schools have been closed, and the proportion of schools that are full grade 1 to 9 schools has increased from 9% to 19%.
9. In regard to diversity, 6% of students enrolled in basic education in 2016 were Swedish speaking, and a further 6.8% had a mother tongue other than Finnish, Sami or Swedish (up from 5.5% in 2013). At the individual school level diversity is much less, with children having the right to education in Finnish or Swedish, (and Sami in Sami regions).

Achievement

10. Finland has a high achieving and equitable education system, although its performance as measured by PISA has declined in absolute and relative terms since 2006. (See table)¹⁰. The difference in performance between schools and the impact of a student's socio-economic background on achievement has increased over time, although compared to most other countries it continues to be small. The gap in achievement between boys and girls has increased, with this of particular concern to the government of Finland.¹¹

Table 2 Average PISA score for 15 year olds in Finland 2006 and 2015

	2016	2015
Reading	547	526
Mathematics	548	511
Science	563	531

11. Adults and young adults (16 to 24 year olds) in Finland rank among the top-skilled across countries participating in the International Assessment of Adult Competencies.

⁷ Includes 73 special schools.

⁸ Reforms to vocational education are being implemented in 2018. These include the integration of vocational education and training for young people and for adults.

⁹ Specialist subject teaching generally starts at grade 7.

¹⁰ Performance in relation to problem solving has also declined from an average point score of 548 in 2003 to 534 in 2015.

¹¹ In PISA science 2015, boys scored on average 19 score points lower than girls – the biggest gap for OECD countries. It is suggested that a contributing factor to the decline in boys' achievement is the diminished role of reading for pleasure among boys as a result of increased 'screen time'.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Structure of system

12. Finland operates a decentralised schooling system, with responsibility for the provision of schooling sitting with 311 municipalities, which vary greatly in size.¹² Schooling is funded jointly by the national and municipal governments.
13. Most schools and vocational institutes are operated directly by individual municipalities, but in some cases municipalities form partnerships (consortia) with other municipalities to provide schooling, or enter arrangements with authorised private (non-profit providers) or the national level government.¹³
14. Some 2% of students in comprehensive basic education attend private schools and 16% of students in vocational education. Private schools that provide basic comprehensive education are funded at between 90 and 100% of the level of municipal schools.
15. The national level government defines the objectives of the system and sets priorities; steers the system by defining the framework for the provision of schooling by municipalities (and other providers) and by providing information, guidance and funding; and monitors and evaluates system performance.
16. Key institutions at the national level are:
 - The Ministry of Education and Culture which is responsible for preparing and implementing education policy, including legislation. A National Education and Research and Development plan, which outlines system priorities, is developed every four years.
 - The Finnish National Education Agency;¹⁴ an expert agency under the remit of the Ministry of Education and Culture, which is responsible for developing education, enhancing the effectiveness of education, and monitoring its provision. It determines the national curriculum for basic education and for general upper secondary education and the requirements for vocational qualifications, organises continuing education for teachers and provides information to support development and decision making in the education sector.
 - The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre; an independent government agency, which is responsible for the national evaluation of education from early childhood to higher education.
 - The Matriculation Examination Board, operating under the Ministry of Education and Culture, and responsible for the content, development and assessment of the Finnish Matriculation Examination.

Legislative Framework

17. The schooling system operates in the context of a national consensus for an equitable education system and an expectation that all children should successfully complete basic comprehensive school education. This consensus

¹² In 2015, more than half of the municipalities had fewer than 6,000 residents, while Helsinki has 630,000. In 2002 there were 448 municipalities. Finnish municipalities and regions, www.localfinland.fi, accessed 1 June 2018 Previously

¹³ Private providers appear to be authorised by the national level government.

¹⁴ Established at the beginning of 2017. It has taken over the functions of the previous National Education Board.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

underpinned the development of Finland's comprehensive schooling system in the 20th century.

18. The equity objective is set out in national legislation, which also imposes requirements on providers of schooling (largely municipalities) to support this goal, such as the provision of welfare and school health services¹⁵ and a free school lunch.¹⁶ To support the achievement of all students, national legislation also establishes an entitlement for remedial teaching as necessary to support students to achieve, for enhanced support and for special education. There are also nationally set requirements within which municipalities make decisions on the design of their school network, including requirements to meet transport costs and boarding costs in particular circumstances.
19. In terms of teaching and learning, the national level government steers the system by defining a core curriculum for basic comprehensive education and upper secondary general education, and determining the allocation of teaching hours across subjects, including for student guidance. In the case of vocational education it defines the requirements for qualifications. Providers develop a local curriculum within this framework. The requirement for student assessment, its purposes, and the nature of reporting to parents is also defined centrally.
20. The legislative framework also provides for the evaluation of the education system, to support educational development and to improve conditions for learning. It requires education providers to evaluate the education they provide – self review – as well as requiring them to participate in system-level evaluations and monitoring.

The nature of governance and administration by municipalities.

21. The framework in which municipalities govern and organise schooling in their area is determined as much by the legislation for local authorities as by education legislation. Local authorities have considerable flexibility in establishing governance and administrative structures. While local authority legislation establishes a right for residents and service users to participate in and influence the activities of the municipality, it does not prescribe how this is to be achieved.
22. As a result the nature the governance arrangements for schools, including the role for parents, and the administrative structure for schooling varies across municipalities, influenced in part by their size. Some municipalities establish a sub-committee responsible for schooling, and this may involve the appointment/election of parental representatives and also the involvement of school principals. In some cases, boards are also established for individual schools. Fundamentally the precise structure and the nature of decision making powers at each level, is determined by each municipality.
23. Some larger municipalities have an 'education' department and within this have developed an administrative structure of a senior/district level principal overseeing a number of schools, each with its own principal. At the other extreme, the head of the education department within a municipality might

¹⁵ In Finland the provision of health services is also a municipal responsibility.

¹⁶ The legislation also prescribes discipline procedures relating to students, with this including an obligation for the education provider to arrange teaching for any suspended student to avoid him/her falling behind.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

simultaneously be the principal of a school. The municipality is responsible for appointing the principal of each school, but the final design of the selection and decision-making process is determined by each municipality.

24. Each municipality also makes its own decision about the roles and responsibilities of its 'department of education' and the extent to which it delegates autonomy to the school level, for example, the extent to which a common local curriculum applies or each school has its own curriculum, how it meets the requirement for evaluation, and the extent of delegated authority for the principal to appoint staff and manage the school budget.
25. While the level of delegation may vary across municipalities, there is a sense that in practice principals have considerable influence - at a minimum being consulted on key decisions.
26. Commentary gives considerable emphasis to the autonomy of teachers and school leaders within the Finnish system. This most strongly relates to autonomy around pedagogy and assessment. Prior to the 1990s it would appear that the Finnish system had been very prescriptive, with this extending to centralised course content, approved textbooks and an inspection system that focused on adherence to centrally determined processes.

National Core Curricula and Vocation Qualification Requirements

27. As noted above, the national core curricula and the central allocation of study hours are key mechanisms the national government uses to steer the system. The core curricula appear to be updated reasonably regularly. The core curriculum for basic education was most recently updated in 2014, with progressive implementation across grades from 2016 to 2019.¹⁷ An updated core curriculum for upper secondary general schools was implemented in 2016. There were parallel changes to the requirements for vocational qualifications.
28. At this stage, it has not been possible to ascertain the degree to which core curricula are a framework or reasonably prescriptive. Legislation defines an extensive list of core subjects.¹⁸
29. The National Education Agency describes the core curriculum for basic education as mostly being comprised of the objectives and contents for each subject, connected to the description of policies on underlying values, conception of learning and school culture.¹⁹ A feature of the updated curriculum is a requirement for at least one multidisciplinary learning module – a clearly defined theme, project or course that combines the content of different subjects and deals with the selected theme from the perspective of several subjects. It also places emphasis on transversal competences in instruction: thinking and learning to learn; cultural competence, interaction and self-expression; taking care of oneself and managing daily life; multi-literacy; ICT competence; working

¹⁷ The reform is intended to ensure that the knowledge and skills of Finnish young people remain strong in the future, and to help schools to develop their operating methods in order to increase student interest and motivation in learning.

¹⁸ Mother tongue and literature, the second national language, foreign languages, environmental studies, health education, religious education or ethics, history, social studies, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, geography, physical education, music, art, crafts and home economics.

¹⁹ Finnish National Agency for Education, The new national core curriculum for basic education, www.oph.fi, accessed 31 May 2018

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

life competence and entrepreneurship; and participation, involvement and building a sustainable future.

30. The core curriculum for basic education also requires schools to undertake annual assessment in each subject. It emphasises diversity in assessment that guides and promotes learning, with feedback required to the student and guardians on a sufficiently frequent basis. There is also a requirement for a report to parents at the end of each year, providing a numerical grade for each subject.²⁰

Vocational upper secondary education

31. In the case of upper secondary vocational education and training, the National Education Agency determines the requirements for each vocational qualification, including the composition of studies and objectives, and the core contents and assessment criteria for all study modules. This is done in co-operation with stakeholders, including employer organisations, trade unions, providers, and nine industry/sector Anticipation Groups under the auspice of the National Forum of Skills Anticipation.²¹ The requirements shape local curricula and individual student study plans.

Assessment

32. The only external assessment within the Finnish school system is the matriculation exam completed at the end of grade 12 by those students who undertake upper secondary general education. Assessment relating to the basic comprehensive stage of education (grades 1 to 9) is internal to each school, including the grades a student receives at the completion of grade 9 in their Basic Education Certificate. To support fair assessment across the system, national assessment criteria for what constitutes a 'good' level of achievement have been defined for every subject at grades 6 and 9.
33. The Matriculation Examination Board is responsible for the content, development and assessment of the matriculation exam. It is appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture for a three year period, and currently has 38 members. It has the right to appoint assistant members (currently 350) to support its work, and is also supported by a secretariat. The matriculation exam appears to cover only part of the content that students study during their three years of upper secondary education²². Examination papers are first assessed by teachers in the student's school and then then by members or assistant members of the Matriculation Board.
34. Given the nature of the Matriculation Examination Board, it would appear that the teachers have a key leadership role in the development and assessment of the examination. The Board continually and purposefully develops the

²⁰ Again defined in national level legislation so that reporting is nationally consistent.

²¹ In 2018, these groups replaced the previous National Education and Training Boards.

²² The exam consists of a minimum of four tests. Only the test of a student's skill in their mother tongue (Finnish, Swedish, or Sami) is compulsory. The student chooses three other tests from the following groups: the test in the second national language, mathematics at either basic or advanced level, a foreign language test at either basic or advanced level, and a test from a general studies battery which includes tests for Religion - Evangelical Lutheran; Religion - Orthodox Christian; Education on ethics and moral history; Philosophy; Psychology; History; Civics; Physics; Chemistry; Biology; Geography; Health Education. The subject specific tests can have questions that cross the boundaries of different subjects.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

examination in parallel with the national core curriculum for upper secondary education.

35. Assessment for vocational education uses dual assessment by teachers and 'working life' representatives. 'Working life committees' ensure the quality of vocational skills at a national level.

Quality Assurance and system improvement

36. The core elements of quality assurance for basic comprehensive education and upper secondary general education are self-evaluation by municipalities combined with system-level monitoring and evaluation of learning outcomes. System level monitoring and evaluation is well established, having been put in place at the same time as municipalities (schools) were given greater autonomy relating to curriculum and pedagogy.
37. Finland does not undertake ERO or OFSTED type external evaluation of schools or administer national standardised tests for all students. School inspections were discontinued in 1991.
38. The legal obligation for self-review sits with municipalities. Municipalities decide whether they meet this obligation through undertaking an 'external review' of their schools or delegate this to individual schools. To provide clear criteria, raise quality and facilitate evaluation, Quality Criteria for Basic Education were developed in 2010. The Finnish Education Evaluation Centre also appears to provide support to municipalities and schools in self-evaluation. These are examples of how the national level government steers the system through the provision of information/guidance.
39. Separately, international assessments (e.g. PISA) and sample based system-level evaluations of learning outcomes are used to evaluate the performance of basic comprehensive education provision. Matriculation results are used to evaluate the performance of senior secondary general education.
40. The objective of the system-level evaluation is to provide reliable information on achievement against the national core curriculum, the level of student knowledge, and the achievement of quality education. For comprehensive basic education, performance in 'native tongue language' and mathematics is evaluated on alternate years. The frequency of evaluation of other areas of the curriculum is determined by reference to an overall evaluation plan. Experienced teachers and experts are involved in developing the assessment material.
41. Schools and teaching providers receive feedback on their results compared to the national average and reports are prepared for other education stakeholders. Hence the national level evaluation has a feedback loop into self-evaluation by municipalities and individual schools. The Finnish Evaluation Centre also undertakes thematic evaluations, which can also inform municipalities and schools self-evaluation activities.
42. Similarly, for vocational education, evaluation includes thematic, system and learning outcomes evaluations. Education providers are also encouraged to develop quality on a voluntary basis, supported by quality awards and quality recommendations. Since 2015 VET providers have been required to have in place systems for effective quality assurance.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

Teacher and Leadership Quality

43. The Finnish government (and other education commentators) consider that the professional expertise of Finland's teachers is a critical enabler of the success of its school system. Teacher education in Finland was strengthened in the 1970s. Initial teacher education was moved to nine university providers, and teachers are required to have a Masters level teacher qualification²³. Almost all the existing teacher workforce could be expected to have received this training.
44. The higher education institutions decide independently on the contents of teacher education, however, reforms announced in 2016 suggest a policy shift to greater co-ordination between initial education providers. Initial teacher education providers effectively certify teachers as qualified to teach through their award of a teaching qualification. Initial teacher education programmes are evaluated by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre, which is also responsible for system-level evaluation of school education.²⁴
45. Entry into teacher initial education programmes is highly selective, with only 10% of candidates successful. The selection process is intensive. In addition to consideration of the student's school and matriculation record, the prospective candidates complete a written examination, are observed in a 'clinical' context that replicates the classroom situation, and are interviewed. The process assesses the candidate's academic learning skills as well as their disposition to teach, skills, motivation and commitment.
46. Primary level teachers major in education and may specialise in one or several subjects in their minor subjects. Secondary level teachers major in a particular subject and the pedagogy related to the teaching of that subject. Teacher education is heavily research based with a strong emphasis of pedagogical content knowledge. Overall initial teacher education involves a combination of research, practice and reflection. All students complete a thesis related to an area of practice. Students also spend a year in a teacher training school associated with their university before graduation. Overall the programme of initial teacher education can take between five and seven years.
47. There is no teacher registration framework, associated ongoing certification, or clearly defined career pathways. As part of the industrial award, all teachers are required to undertake a minimum of three days professional development each year, with this funded by municipalities.
48. Practice within schools, and teaching schedules, enables teacher collaboration to support their professional growth. Principals are expected to support teacher professional development through ensuring time for teachers to participate in collaborative learning and facilitating professional learning communities of teachers. Most schools have annual review processes for teachers. These are development focussed and involve the collaborative setting of goals for improvement.
49. In 2016, the Finnish government announced a teacher education development programme, which seeks to put in place a systematic and coherent structure for the development of teachers' competence throughout their careers. Education institutions, including schools will be required to prepare competence

²³ This requirement is set in law.

²⁴ Prior to 2014 there were separate evaluation agencies for higher education and schooling.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

development plans in collaboration with their staff. The announcement noted that teachers' competence development is increasingly taking place in teams and networks. As part of the new initiative mentoring is to become a more systematic part of teachers' induction training, especially in early parts of their careers.²⁵

Principals

50. Principals must hold a teacher qualification, have teaching experience and hold a certificate of educational administration. This certificate is gained through university based programmes which candidates normally complete on a part-time basis. For example, the curriculum at the University of Jyväskylä, involves a field practicum with a co-operating school, and discussions guided by senior principals.²⁶

Role of choice

51. The national legislation for basic comprehensive education requires municipalities to assign children to a neighbourhood school (or other education institution) in their native tongue²⁷. Parents may, however, apply for their child to attend another school. Municipalities are required to use consistent criteria in assessing such applications, but in determining admission may give preference to children living in their area (for whom they are responsible for providing education). The selection criteria may include a test showing aptitude if the curriculum of the school has special emphasis on particular subjects. There does not appear to be any requirement for municipalities to adjust provision to 'meet choice', which in practice could be expected to limit its impact at a system wide level.
52. At the senior secondary, students make applications outlining a list of preferred schools and vocational institutes/courses, through a process co-ordinated by the National Education Agency. Students are selected based on their academic record and preferences. The total number of vocational and training places available across the system is set in excess of the number of expected applicants so that most students are able to enter their desired area of study.

Conclusion

53. At the heart of the design of Finnish school system are highly qualified and professional teachers as a result of selective entry and rigorous initial teacher education. Finnish policy makers acknowledge that the design of their system relies on a highly professional teacher workforce.
54. A further important feature of the system is the balance between decentralised provision and pedagogical autonomy for teachers, and national level steering through directions, information and support which is focused on development/continuous improvement. This national level steering is informed by well-developed system-level monitoring and evaluation.

²⁵ Ministry of Education and Culture, A New Teacher Education Development Programme Launched, October 2016, www.minedu.fi, accessed on 3 June 2018.

²⁶ Centre on International Education Benchmarking, Finland: Teacher and Principal Quality. www.ncee.org, accessed on 3 June 2018.

²⁷ A child cannot be assigned to a school that follows a particular ethical or pedagogic system or that charges fees without the consent of the parent.

NOT GOVERNMENT POLICY

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