



Late start, strong Finnish

Although children in Finland don't start school until the age of seven, their performance puts them on top of the world. **Dan Murphy** reports.

One of the first things I learned about Finns is they are not big on self-promotion.

Finnish schools continue to lead the world, according to the latest results from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) released in December. Their students topped the science ranking with a record score, and came a close second in reading and maths. While the national media noted the success, there was none of the triumphalism one might expect.

Finland has been at or near the top of every performance measure since PISA's inception in 2000. This sustained high performance has generated great interest among educators and policy makers who are flocking to Finland to learn more.

They find a school system with a number of distinguishing features:

- A relatively late starting age of seven;
- High quality training, with all teachers required to complete a five-year masters degree;
- All students provided with a hot meal daily, free health and dental care and all learning materials;
- All students receive the same comprehensive schooling for the first nine years.

Teacher Marja Peedo is in a good position to comment on these policies. Born in Finland, she grew up in Adelaide and later lived in Mt Isa. She now teaches sixth grade at Oulu International School, in Finland.

"My own children went to school in Australia at five, and when I saw children starting at seven, I thought

that's really old," she says. "But after seeing the system here, I really believe in it. It allows children to be children and doesn't put pressure on them to learn maths at an early age.

"The students get all their pencils and books, and that gives an equal basis for everybody. Someone who isn't well off or who can't afford the books isn't disadvantaged."

Based on equity

Comprehensive schools and a commitment to equity are the bedrock of the Finnish system. PISA results show very little difference between schools and areas. Moreover, the relationship between parents' socioeconomic status and student achievement is one of the weakest of all countries.



Muijala School, in Lohja. The building has a “star” shape with wall-less open class rooms and satellite-type wings.

Students are benefiting from open and interactive classrooms, plus the provision of a hot meal daily and all learning materials.

Real care is taken to make sure no child is left behind. Migrant children receive intensive Finnish language instruction at specially equipped schools, with the aim of integrating them into mainstream classes as early as possible. Also, many teachers have impressed upon me the importance of their school’s remedial teaching program.

The commitment to equity doesn’t come at an exorbitant cost. At 5.9 per cent of gross domestic product, Finland’s education spend is below the international average. Class sizes can vary considerably, but often number less than 20 in primary schools.

Visiting delegations soon learn that Finland doesn’t much care for the dominant global education agenda. Over the last 20 years, school reform in much of the world has been influenced by a similar policy prescription:

- An emphasis on teaching the ‘basics’ of maths, reading and science;
- Compulsory standard tests;
- Schools ranked against each other, based on test performance;
- Teachers’ pay determined by their students’ performance;
- Control over schools decentralised to governing councils;
- Promotion of private schooling.

Finland facts

- Established as an independent republic in 1917 (previously part of Sweden)
- Population:** 5.3 million
- Capital city:** Helsinki
- Main industries:** mobile communications technology, electronics, forestry
- European Union member:** since 1995

Finland's PISA ratings			
	Reading	Maths	Science
2000	1	4	3
2003	1	2	1
2006	2	2	1

None of these ideas have gained traction in Finland. Private schools, for example, are effectively non-existent, such is the level of support for the comprehensive system.

Model alternative

I recently discussed the significance of Finland’s schooling achievements with Dr Pasi Sahlberg, education advisor to the World Bank and European Union. A former teacher and education ministry bureaucrat in Finland, he believes the international trend to standard testing has passed its

peak, in part because Finland provides an example of a successful alternative.

“Before this trend became global, Finland had built a strong professional foundation for teachers,” he says. “Schools and parents have for a long time believed that teachers know better than external assessors how well their pupils are learning.”

Respect for teachers reflects the broad consensus in support of the school system.

This is part of the cultural context that needs to be understood by those looking to learn from the Finnish example. Education is held in high regard as one of the values—along with hard work—responsible for helping the country rebuild from its ruins after World War II.

Notably, Finns borrow more books from libraries than anyone else.

Finland’s success in PISA has been sustained at such a high level since 2000 that it can’t be considered a fluke, and lessons can be drawn. “Public education is the key,” says Sahlberg, “and to lift learning overall, give resources to those who need them most.”●

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