

5

DAYS

Exploring Finnish student success

By Colleen Ireland

In May 2011, I had the opportunity to accompany a York Region District School Board (YRDSB) group visiting Finland for five days. Key interests for me were the role of the union in Finland, reasons for such high PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores in that country and approaches to education that might serve us well in Ontario, given the opportunity and the will to adopt them. Recent accolades by international journalists and education pundits made the opportunity to do some hands-on observations all the more appealing.



IN FINLAND





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Clockwise from top left: Panorama of Helsinki, entrance in the Sveaborg sea fortress in Helsinki, ordnance caches, Sveaborg sea fortress

The YRDSB has had a working partnership with the Finland educational authorities for some time but this was the first occasion that plant managers and union representatives were also invited by the Board to travel to Finland to share ideas with our Finnish colleagues. My goal was to look at union and school system structures as well as school environment and curriculum practices that might explain and inform such success on the PISA.

Our delegation visited nine schools in the municipality of Espoo, just west of Helsinki. We all visited the first school together to give us an opportunity to experience a comprehensive school. Subsequently, we were able to select schools, facilities or organizations that reflected our particular interests. I visited five schools with the secondary administrators and

other YRDSB personnel who were interested in specific school programs.

UNION RELATIONSHIPS AND SYSTEM STRUCTURE

In Finland, teachers and administrators are in the same union, and while membership is voluntary, 96 per cent of teachers opt into the organization. Those who do not join have no protection such as seniority, support during conflict or other work-related conditions. Principals belong to both a teachers' union and their own dedicated administrators' union.

Finnish schools are divided into Comprehensive Schools (Grades 1-9) and Upper Secondary Schools (Grades 10-12). It is noteworthy that none of the schools I visited has a student population over 500, with only one projected to have 750 students in the next couple of years.

In Finland, administrators are hired by Boards and teachers are hired by principals. Quite unlike our process, the teachers' union is part of the interview process. Teachers must work a minimum of 24 hours per week with an additional three hours of mutual meeting time for peer planning and discussion. Every effort is made by system principals to ensure the requisite number of hours are available to permanent contract teachers. This can result in educators needing to travel between two to three schools. Principals work together to find spots for staff if their subject area is not chosen by enough students. There is no wholesale abandonment of staff if their courses are not chosen but the root cause will be examined and ways will be found to increase the attractiveness of a course.

Municipalities own the schools and

allot monies for running them. Custodial, secretarial and maintenance support for facilities are, in general, contracted out to private companies, with this becoming the norm throughout Finland. Principals have the autonomy to set the particular theme for a school and receive money from the municipality for various initiatives.

In every school I visited, it was made clear that principals and school officials view teachers as facilitators and knowledge workers. The concept of five-year Teacher Performance Appraisals such as we have in Ontario seemed counterintuitive to both administrators and teachers. To quote one administrator, “Why create such a bureaucracy?” We should not assume from this that expectations are low in Finland—in fact, quite the contrary. Obviously the Finnish PISA scores indicate educators must be doing something right, with the support of school boards. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that there is an inherent and absolute trust that educators know their subject, know their job and will take responsibility for their own professional development to enhance and improve their practice.

Random testing is done every five years with students, though, as several administrators pointed out, “No one, teachers and students, really enjoys testing.” The testing is done primarily for diagnostic purposes to inform curriculum practice. Individual principals may choose to test all or just a portion of the student body. Notably, while lacking the rigidity of Ontario testing purportedly designed to improve achievement and increase accountability, the Finnish system still manages to show the highest achievement of most countries.

At the root of the faith and trust in teacher competence is the teacher education process. At the very least, teacher candidates attend five to seven years of educationally focussed university. Prospective teacher candidates must write an entrance exam and, if selected for the second phase, they must take part in a group interview and demonstrate they possess group leader skills needed for the classroom. Elementary candidates can choose to go directly into an education degree, which takes about five to

six years. Supports are in place for new teachers who struggle with classroom management, communications with parents or working with colleagues in planning units. As one leader put it, “The passion for teaching is there, but the knowledge of how to handle day-to-day upsets may not be there.” Those interested in teaching secondary school may take a subject-specific degree and then select the stream in education they prefer. There is no tuition fee for any post-secondary schooling.

While taxes are very high in Finland, we were told the citizenry understands the need. They prefer to have high-quality health care, child care and educational services than lower taxes, but there are those who lobby against such a high level of taxation. Daycare costs approximately 100 Euros (\$130) per month, with students up to age six attending child-care day programs and after-school programs based at schools. At age seven, students may attend school and/or go part-time while attending a daycare outside of school. At the other end of the spectrum, students between 16 and 18 years of age must participate in one year of compulsory military service.

Every child, at every level, receives a hot lunch, with vegetarian, gluten-free, vegan, lactose-free and any other option readily available. There is a five-week rotating menu that is available in every school in the country. The simple reason given is that we all know children learn best on a full stomach and if they cannot get a hot meal at home, they are assured of one at school.

OTHER KEY DIFFERENCES

A second key difference is the fact that schools in Espoo offer common schedules, enabling students to move between schools if a desired course is not available at one school.

The third major difference is the fact that administrators remain in the union and many are teaching principals for at least one period per day. They may also supervise clubs. As mentioned earlier, principals also belong to their own union.

A fourth key difference is evident with the segregation of students with special needs. While consistent supports exist

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within the segregated schools I visited, there appears to be a strong desire to learn from our experiences in meeting needs of special-needs students. Whether that means the Finnish system will adopt all our strategies remains to be seen, but there is a keen interest in serving students with special needs effectively and in integrating students into all schools. In addition, with the current increase in

immigration there is an ever-increasing need to support new Finns and their acquisition of language skills.

Religious studies courses are treated very differently in this largely Lutheran country. Some schools hold faith-based classes and only if a student/family expresses concern will the student be excused from the class. In other schools, the matter of faith is treated as a World Reli-

gions course, which examines the philosophy of all faiths. However, the concept of accommodating various faith requirements in schools did not seem to hold any interest for municipal leaders.

All Finnish schools utilize an attendance/communications system called WILMA. This is a real-time program that allows teachers to log into the system and report student attendance immediately, period by period. There is various colour coding that assists parents/staff in identifying the cause of an absence. Every effort is made by staff and the school administration to communicate effectively with parents who do not own computers or do not have easy access to technology. And it was clear upon questioning that all efforts are made to protect students' and families' privacy when using this program.



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SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES AND OBSERVATIONS

Numerous strategies are employed to ensure student success. Failure to leave Comprehensive School and move on to



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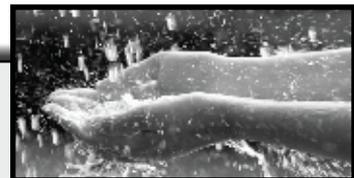
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Upper Secondary is rare. Some examples of methods (which may sound familiar) are listed below.

- **Looping** of elementary classes, whereby students may have the same teacher for two to three years. Problematic if there are personality conflicts, but every attempt is made to solve those issues because fostering a sense of belonging is deemed paramount.
- **Units of study** that allow for a longer period of time, as compared to our credit system.
- **Student-led conferences** with the complete involvement of the students in the process; requires ownership by the students for their learning.
- **Common schedules** that allow for movement between schools.
- **Cross-curricular planning**, which is practised faithfully in Finland. It was common to see students building instruments in shop (compulsory at Grade 7), writing a score for the instrument, writing lyrics, building props and performing, all within the school year.
- **Entrepreneurial focus** with a view to making students self-sufficient is a major element within the system. For some schools, that is the main theme of the school, and students are able to experience partnerships not only with businesses that support their communities but with other countries and student populations.

What was evident across the entire system was the inherent trust in teachers, the sense that students need to have a true voice in the running of schools and there is a respectful collaboration between schools, students and parents to make this work. Teaching for inquiry is the general practice, with a national curriculum that allows for significant local autonomy.

Professional Development is split between three compulsory days; teachers make their own decisions for the rest of the days, depending on their assignments. New teacher education is more focussed and there are significant differences in the Finnish entrance process into education. Most Finnish students leave school able to speak Swedish, French and English with varying degrees of fluency.

While testing is random for students

and teacher appraisal takes the form of a collegial conversation, Finland has been able to achieve some consistently high PISA scores over a span of several years.

Whether any or all of these strategies or system practices can be duplicated in Ontario is almost an unanswerable question, given the marked differences in school population numbers and community/municipal supports. In many

cases, the key factor in Finland's success seems to be a strong belief in teachers and their competence, and the understanding that the bond between student, teacher and family is essential to educational success. ☺

Colleen Ireland is the District and Teachers' Bargaining Unit president in District 16, York Region.

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