

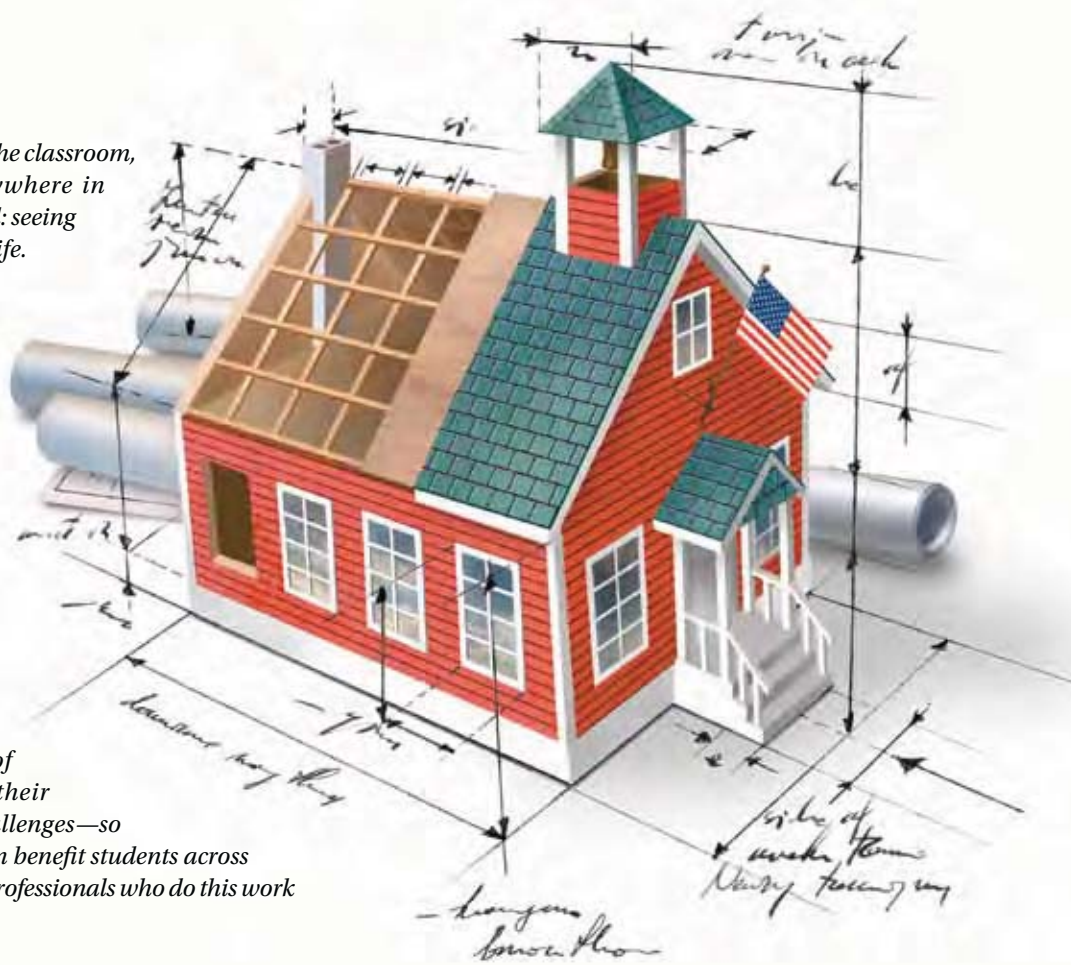
# THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR

## Lessons from Finland

*Professional educators—whether in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: seeing all students succeed in school and life.*

*While they take great pride in their students' accomplishments, they also lose sleep over their students' unmet needs. Professional educators routinely meet with students before and after school, examine student work to improve lesson plans, reach out to students' families in the evenings and on the weekends, and strive to increase their knowledge and skills. And yet, their efforts are rarely recognized by the society they serve.*

*The AFT is committed to supporting these unsung heroes. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—not just their accomplishments, but also their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.*



BY PASI SAHLBERG

Since Finland emerged in 2000 as the top-scoring Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nation on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), researchers have been pouring into the country to study the so-called “Finnish miracle.” How did a country with an undistinguished education system in the 1980s surge to the head of the global class in just a couple of decades?

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Research and experience suggest that one element of the Finnish system trumps all others: excellent teachers and leaders. This article looks at how Finland develops such excellence in its teacher workforce. (This discussion is also relevant to excellence among leaders; in Finland, those who aspire to leadership positions must be effective teachers before they can begin leadership training.<sup>1</sup>)

Until the 1960s, the level of educational attainment in Finland remained fairly low: only one in ten adult Finns had completed more than nine years of basic education, and achieving a university degree was uncommon.<sup>2</sup> Back then, Finland's education level was comparable to that of Malaysia or Peru, and lagged behind its Scandinavian neighbors of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Today, more than 98 percent of Finns attend preschool at the age of six, 99 percent complete compulsory basic education at the age of 16, and three out of five young Finns enroll in and 50 percent complete state-funded higher education after upper secondary school.<sup>3</sup> Finland publicly recognizes the value of its teachers and trusts their professional judgment in schools. The Finnish education system does not employ external standardized student testing

to drive the performance of schools. Neither does it employ a rigorous inspection system of schools and teachers. Instead of test-based accountability, the Finnish system relies on the expertise and professional accountability of teachers who are knowledgeable and committed to their students and communities.

## Recruiting the Best

Among young Finns, teaching is consistently the most admired profession in opinion polls of high school graduates.<sup>4</sup> Becoming a primary school teacher in Finland is a very competitive process. Only Finland's best and brightest are able to fulfill those professional dreams. Every spring, thousands of high school graduates submit their applications to the departments of teacher education in Finnish universities. Usually it is not enough to have completed high school and passed a rigorous matriculation examination. Successful candidates must have not only good scores and excellent interpersonal skills, but also a deep personal commitment to teach and work in schools. Annually only about one in every ten applicants will be accepted to study to become a primary school teacher. Among all categories of teacher education (i.e., not just primary), about 5,000 prospective teachers are selected from about 20,000 applicants.

Candidates are first selected based on matriculation examination results, their high school records, and relevant records of out-of-school accomplishments. Then:

1. Candidates complete a written exam on assigned books on pedagogy.
2. Candidates engage in an observed clinical activity replicating school situations, where social interaction and communication skills come into play.
3. The top candidates are interviewed and asked, among other things, to explain why they have decided to become teachers.

The selected, highly capable candidates then complete a rigorous teacher education program *at government expense*.

Wages are not the main reason young people become teachers in Finland. Teachers earn very close to the national average salary level for all occupations, typically equivalent to what midcareer middle school teachers earn annually in the OECD nations—about \$41,000 in U.S. dollars.<sup>5</sup> (However, the relative difference between salaries of beginning and senior teachers is much larger in Finland than in the United States.<sup>6</sup>) More important than salaries are such factors as high social prestige, professional autonomy in schools, and the ethos of teaching as a service to society and the public good. Thus, young Finns see teaching as a career on par with other professions where people work independently and rely on scientific knowledge and skills that they gained through university studies.

## Preparing Them Well

All teachers in Finnish primary, middle, and high schools must hold a master's degree; preschool and kindergarten teachers must hold a bachelor's degree. There are no alternative ways to receive a teacher's credential in Finland; the university degree constitutes a license to teach.<sup>7</sup>

Primary school teachers, who teach grades 1 to 6, major in education, while upper-grade teachers concentrate their studies

in a particular subject (e.g., mathematics), as well as didactics (i.e., pedagogical content knowledge specific to that subject).

Teacher education is based on a combination of research, practice, and reflection, meaning that it must be supported by scientific knowledge and focused on thinking processes and cognitive skills used in conducting research. In addition to studying educational theory, content, and subject-specific pedagogy, each prospective teacher for primary school and beyond completes a master's thesis on a topic relevant to educational practice. After finishing secondary school and entering a teacher preparation program, successful completion of a master's degree in teaching generally takes five to seven and a half years, depending on the field of study.<sup>8</sup>

A broad-based teacher-prep curriculum ensures that newly prepared Finnish teachers possess balanced knowledge and skills in both theory and practice. It also means they possess deep pro-

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fessional insight into education from several perspectives, including educational psychology and sociology, curriculum theories, student assessment, special needs education, and pedagogical content knowledge in selected subject areas. Each of the eight universities that offer teacher education in Finland has its own strategies and curricula that are nationally coordinated to ensure coherence, but locally crafted in order to make the best use of the particular university's resources.

Subject teachers complete a master's degree in one major subject and one or two minor subjects. Students then apply to a university's department of teacher education to study pedagogy for their focus subject. Subject-focused pedagogy and research are advanced in Finnish universities, and cooperative and problem-based learning, reflective practice, and computer-supported education are common. A higher education evaluation system that rewards effective, innovative university teaching practices has served as an important driver of these developments.

Finland's commitment to *research-based teacher education* means that educational theories, research methodologies, and practice all play an important role in preparation programs.<sup>9</sup> Teacher education curricula are designed to create a systematic pathway from the foundations of educational thinking, to educational research methodologies, and then on to more advanced fields of the educational sciences. Each student thereby builds an understanding of the systemic nature of educational practice. Finnish students also learn how to design, conduct, and present original research on practical or theoretical aspects of education.

Another important element of Finnish research-based teacher education is practical training in schools. Over the five-year pro-

gram, candidates advance from basic teaching practice, to advanced practice, and then to final practice. During each of these phases, students observe lessons by experienced teachers, practice teaching while being observed by supervisory teachers, and deliver independent lessons to different groups of pupils while being evaluated by supervising teachers and department of teacher education professors and lecturers. Practicum experiences comprise about 15 to 25 percent of teachers' overall preparation time. Much of this work is completed within special teacher-training schools governed by the universities, which have curricula and practices that are similar to normal public schools. Some student teachers also practice in a network of selected municipal field schools, which are regular public schools. Schools where practice teaching occurs have higher professional staff requirements, and supervising teachers have to prove they are competent to work with student teachers.

Teacher training schools are also expected to pursue research and development roles in collaboration with universities' departments of teacher education and, sometimes, with the academic faculties that also have teacher education functions. These schools can, therefore, introduce sample lessons and alternative curricular designs to student teachers. These schools also have teachers who are well prepared in supervision as well as in teacher professional development and assessment strategies. Because teacher education is so strong, Finnish teachers are very well prepared to take a teaching job as soon as they are assigned to a school.

### Hiring, Evaluation, and Retention

Because Finland has no centralized management of education, the school staff and the principal, together with the school board, typically make hiring decisions. Small allowances or premiums are offered to attract young teachers to teach in small rural schools, which are generally less popular than those in the urban areas near the universities where teachers have studied. The teaching force in Finland is highly unionized; almost all teachers are members of the Trade Union of Education.

There is no formal teacher evaluation. Teachers receive feedback from their principal and the school staff itself. Because Finland does not have a standardized assessment for evaluating students, there is no formal consideration of student learning outcomes in the evaluation. A good teacher is one who is able to help all children progress and grow in a holistic way.

Universities are the only organizations entitled to issue teacher licenses in Finland. Teachers apply for open positions directly to municipalities (which own the schools). Teaching positions are filled by the head of the school or the local education authority, depending on the administrative regulations in the municipalities. There are two types of teaching posts in Finnish schools: fixed-term and open-ended. With fixed-term positions, teachers are typically hired for one school year, knowing that the need of the school is temporary (e.g., to fill in for a teacher on maternity leave). These posts are quite few and the recruitment procedure

is straightforward. The vast majority of teaching positions are open-ended, and they are filled carefully, with much attention paid to teacher recruitment and selection. Once a teacher is hired, there is no probation period and there are no measures of teacher effectiveness or means for terminating a contract unless there is a violation of the ethical rules of teaching. Finland relies on the strong preparation of teachers, their professional ethic, and their opportunities for ongoing engagement with colleagues in the professional work of teaching, including curriculum and assessment development, to support their effectiveness.

When new teachers are employed in a school, they usually stay for life. An official estimate suggests that only 10 to 15 percent of teachers leave the profession during the course of their career.

Primary school teachers often compare what they do with the work that doctors do in medical clinics. A key characteristic of Finnish teachers' work environment is that they are autonomous,



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trusted, and respected professionals. Unlike nations that have bureaucratic accountability systems that make teachers feel threatened, overcontrolled, and undervalued, teaching in Finland is a very sophisticated profession, in which teachers feel they can truly exercise the knowledge and skills they have learned in the university.

While Finnish teacher education has been praised for its systematic academic structure and high overall quality,<sup>10</sup> professional development and in-service programs for teachers are more variable. In Finland, induction of new teachers into their first teaching position is less uniform than initial preparation. It is up to each school and municipality to take care of new teachers' induction to their teaching assignments. Some schools have adopted advanced procedures and support systems for new staff, whereas other schools simply bid new teachers welcome and show them their classrooms. In some schools, induction is a specific responsibility of school principals or deputy principals, while in others, induction jobs may be assigned to experienced teachers. Teacher induction is an area that requires further development in Finland, as has been pointed out in a recent European Commission report.<sup>11</sup>

Concerns have also been raised recently about the variability of in-service education. Municipalities, as the overseers of primary, middle, and high schools, are responsible for providing teachers with learning opportunities based on their needs. Whereas some Finnish municipalities organize in-service programs for all teachers, in others it is up to individual teachers or school principals to decide how much and what type of professional development is needed and whether such interventions will be funded. Although schools are financed equitably, the



central government has only limited influence on the budget decisions made by municipalities or schools. Therefore, although all teachers' annual duties include three days devoted to planning and professional development, some teachers have more opportunities for professional development than others. In response to concerns about uneven opportunities for in-service professional learning, the Finnish Ministry of Education, in collaboration with municipalities, plans to double the public funding for teacher professional development by 2016.<sup>12</sup>

## Engagement in Curriculum, Assessment, and Leadership

During the course of Finland's education reforms, teachers have demanded more autonomy and responsibility for curriculum and student assessment.<sup>13</sup> Gradual growth of teacher training and professionalism in Finnish schools since the 1980s has made this a legitimate appeal. Teachers' engagement in these areas contributes to teacher status, satisfaction, and effectiveness.

While the *National Curriculum Framework for Basic Education* and similar documents for upper secondary education provide guidance to teachers regarding the content that students must master in each grade or course, curriculum planning is the responsibility of schools and municipalities. Local education authorities and teachers approve the school-level curriculum, and school principals (who must be qualified, experienced teachers) play a key role in curriculum design.

Teacher education ensures that all educators have well-developed curriculum knowledge and planning skills. Moreover, the importance of curriculum design in teacher practice is helping shift the focus of professional development from fragmented in-service training toward more systemic, theoretically grounded school-wide improvement efforts.

Along with curriculum design, teachers play a key role in assessing students. Finnish schools do not use standardized testing to determine student success.\* There are three primary reasons for this. First, while assessment practice is well grounded in the national curriculum, education policy in Finland gives a high priority to personalized learning and creativity as an important part of how schools operate. Therefore, the progress of each student in school is judged more against his or her individual development and abilities rather than against statistical indicators. Second, education authorities insist that curriculum, teaching, and learning—rather than testing—should drive teachers' practice in schools. Student assessment in Finnish schools is embedded in the teaching and learning process and is used to improve both teachers' and students' work throughout the academic year. Third, determining students' academic performance and social development in Finland are seen as a responsibility of the school, not external assessors. Teachers are the best judges of how their own students are progressing in school.

Finnish schools accept that there may be some limitations on

comparability when teachers do all the grading. At the same time, Finns believe that the problems often associated with external standardized testing—narrowing of the curriculum, teaching to the test, unethical practices related to manipulating test results, and unhealthy competition among schools—can be more problematic. Since Finnish teachers must design and conduct appropriate curriculum-based assessments to document student progress, classroom assessment and school-based evaluation are important parts of teacher education and professional development.

Although Finnish teachers' work consists primarily of classroom teaching, many of their duties lie outside of class. Formally, teachers' working time in Finland consists of classroom teaching, preparation for class, and two hours a week planning schoolwork with colleagues. From an international perspective, Finnish teachers devote less time to teaching than do teachers in many

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other nations. For example, a typical middle school teacher in Finland teaches just under 600 hours annually. In the United States, by contrast, a teacher at the same level typically devotes 1,080 hours to teaching annually.<sup>14</sup>

This, however, does not imply that teachers in Finland work less than teachers in other countries. An important—and still voluntary—part of Finnish teachers' work is devoted to the improvement of classroom practice, the advancement of the school as a whole, and work with the community.<sup>15</sup> Because Finnish teachers take on significant responsibility for curriculum and assessment, as well as experimenting with and improving teaching methods, some of the most important aspects of their work are conducted outside of classrooms.

Because teaching is highly professionalized, diverse responsibilities are handled within the teaching role. A peculiar feature of Finnish schools is that all the teachers are equal and are expected to do similar types of things. It is very rare for anyone to be assigned to a strictly nonteaching role. Job portfolios may differ—teachers may have some type of special role in working with the curriculum or in parent-school cooperation or in a business-school partnership—but everybody still teaches.

If teachers have a special role that is particularly time-consuming, they still continue to teach, perhaps with fewer teaching hours. Rarely do these roles receive additional compensation; occasionally, principals may offer a small stipend to teachers who are doing other work in addition to their teaching. This means that there is only a little room for career development in Finnish schools. However, as mentioned earlier, senior teachers do have much higher salaries than beginning teachers.<sup>16</sup>

\*The only external test in Finland is the matriculation examination that students who want to go on to higher education take at the end of general upper secondary school.

**T**eachers' capacity to teach in classrooms and work collaboratively in professional communities has been built systematically through academic teacher education. A smart strategy is to invest in quality at the point of entry into teacher education. The Finnish example suggests that a critical condition for attracting the most able young people is that teaching be an independent and respected profession rather than just a technical implementation of externally mandated standards and tests. Teachers' strong competence and preparedness are the prerequisites for the professional autonomy that makes teaching a valued career. □

### Endnotes

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