

A Finnish education ambassador shares how his country's school system ensures all students have access to quality instruction, sans constant testing

Quality and Equity IN Finnish Schools

BY PASI SAHLBERG

My work for the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation at the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture allows me to visit schools around the world. Based on those visits, I have concluded that schools everywhere vary little with regard to the subjects they teach, the classrooms where students learn and the students' opinions about school.

Schools do differ significantly in one area, however: the way they address the inequalities and diversity their students bring to school.

I recently visited the Hiidenkivi Compre-

hensive School in Helsinki, Finland, to see how the educators provide special education. It is a typical suburban public school that serves 760 students in grades 1-9. More than 10 percent are from immigrant-background homes.

Three special education classes of eight students each were led by a special education teacher and supported by one or two trained assistants. Thirty-nine other students with varying special needs were integrated into regular classes with the help of an expert teacher. The teachers and administrators had designed a curriculum that suggests this school invests

“For a small, agrarian and relatively poor nation, **EDUCATING ALL OF ITS YOUTH EQUALLY WELL** was the best way to catch up to other countries in the industrial world.”

heavily in ensuring all students have access to effective instruction and individualized help.

The Finnish Dream

For a small, agrarian and relatively poor nation, educating all of its youth equally well was the best way to catch up to other countries in the industrial world. Since the early 1970s, education policies have made equality of educational opportunity the key driver in Finnish education reform — an imperative that addresses human rights and economic concerns.

The Finnish Dream, as I call it in my book *Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn From Educational Change in Finland?* (Teachers College Press, 2011), means all children, regardless of family background or personal conditions, have a good school in their community. Because Finnish educators and policymakers believe schools can change the course of children’s lives, these schools must address the health, nutrition, well-being and happiness of all children in a systematic and equitable manner.

This focus has remained unchanged during the past four decades. However, schools have addressed educational equality in two distinct phases over the years.

The first phase, during the ’70s and ’80s, was characterized by strict central steering and external control of schools. Prescribed state curricula, school inspections and detailed state regulations gave the Finnish government a strong grip on schools and teachers. These central directives also required that all schools provide health services, school meals and individualized support for those children with special educational needs. In other words, the central government ensured equality of opportunity.

The second phase of education reform, from the early ’90s to the present, is characterized as a time of increased local control, professionalism and autonomy. Schools became responsible for their own curriculum planning, student assessment, school improvement reflection and self-assessment. State school inspections were eliminated, fiscal control was moved to the districts, and a sample-based educational evaluation system was designed to help monitor the overall performance of the Finnish educational system.

A critical aspect in the transformation of education governance was the requirement of a school-based curriculum. All schools must create their own curriculum, including descrip-

tions of school values, a mission statement and the overarching goals of the school.

Essence of Equity

People sometimes assume incorrectly that equity in education means all students are the same or will achieve the same outcomes. In fact, equity in education indicates all students have access to a high-quality education, regardless of where they live, who their parents are or what school they attend. In this sense, equity in schooling ensures that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions.

Equity is measured in the international student assessments by calculating the strength of the relationship between student performance and home background. According to the latest Program for International Student Assessment study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, commonly referred to as PISA and OECD, Finnish students were among the top performers in reading, mathematics and science and had one of the weakest impacts of socioeconomic background.

Finnish schools use two strategies to enhance equity in schooling: (1) school-based curricula that give teachers and administrators the power to define values, purpose and overall educational goals for their school; and (2) emphasis on and access to professional development to help schools reach these goals.

► **SCHOOL-BASED CURRICULA.** A school-based curriculum is an important strategy to convert system-level equity policies into concrete actions and structures within schools. Teachers and administrators are able to influence the formulation of the values, purpose and goals of their schools based on their professional judgment and the input of parents and the community.

The terminology used in school-developed curricula in Finland is pragmatic, reflecting the moral aspects of education rather than the political rhetoric typical of government-prepared policy documents. During my time as a government school-improvement officer in the 1990s, I read hundreds of school-created curricula. All of the schools, with few exceptions, had formulated their values and goals with equity and equality as central principles of the declared work of the school and used such phrases as “everybody has the opportunity to succeed.”

► **EMPHASIS ON PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.** In Finland, all teachers and administrators must have high academic credentials and are considered professionals. Just like medical doctors or engineers, they must update their knowledge and skills continuously. The Finnish government has maintained professional development as one of the main policy priorities since the early '90s. This year, the Finnish state budget allocated more than \$30 million to professional development of teachers and administrators.

Finnish teachers and administrators each spend, on average, seven days annually in professional development activities; half of that is on their personal time. School districts that are able to provide most of the funding for schools also invest in professional development, which primarily is focused on implementing the school's curriculum.

Overall, Finland invests 30 times more funds in the professional development of teachers and administrators than in evaluating the performance of students and schools, including testing. In testing-intensive education systems, this ratio is the opposite, with the majority of funding going to evaluation and standardized testing.

Assessing Performance

The strong emphasis on equity in schooling gives different meaning to school performance and how it is assessed. In the United States, as in other parts of the world, standardized testing is the most common way to measure school performance. Teachers and administrators are held accountable for their students' learning based on these data.

That's not the case in Finland where, absent standardized tests, schools are responsible for assessing student achievement. A high-performing school in Finland is one where all students perform beyond what would be expected based on their socioeconomic background. In other words, the greater the equity, the higher the school is regarded. In Finland, inequity in the education system demonstrates a failure to use fully students' cognitive and creative potential. As a small nation, we cannot leave any child behind.

We know from research that strengthening equity in education also can be financially beneficial. The OECD, examining the four cycles of PISA data, concluded that the



Pasi Sahlberg's extensive travels for the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture give him insightful points of comparison about public schooling.

highest-performing education systems across OECD nations are those that combine quality with equity. Other research demonstrates that investing as early as possible in high-quality education for all students and directing additional resources toward the most disadvantaged students as early as possible produces the greatest positive effect on overall academic performance. An educational system that is equitable and promotes student learning can redress the effects of broader social and economic inequalities.

Defining Special Needs

How has Finland turned these findings into practices to enhance equity in schools? As one example, all Finnish schools provide for students with special needs and include them in mainstream schooling. Even the definition of special education in Finland is drastically different from that in the United States.

First, in Finland, special education is defined primarily as addressing learning difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics or foreign languages. In the United States and in many other nations, students are identified as having special education needs if they meet criteria for a variety of disabling conditions such as sensory and speech-language impairments, intellectual disabilities and behavioral problems.

“Finnish teachers and administrators each spend, on average, seven days annually in PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES; half of that is on their personal time.”

**“Finland has
INVESTED
FAIRLY AND
MORE HEAVILY
in schools within
disadvantaged
communities and
insisted that the
BEST WAY TO
PROVIDE EQUAL
OPPORTUNITIES
for all is through
public schools.”**

Second, in Finland, special education needs are identified early, and prevention is a common strategy. As a result, a larger percentage of children are identified as special-education students in Finland than in the United States. In Finnish comprehensive schools (corresponding to K-9 education in the United States), almost one-third of all pupils are in part- or full-time special education.

Finally, Finnish special education is called learning and schooling support and encompasses three categories of support for those students with special needs: general support, intensified support and special support.

General support includes actions by the regular classroom teacher in terms of differentiation, as well as efforts by the school to cope with student diversity. Intensified support consists of remedial support by the teacher, co-teaching with the special education teacher, and individual or small-group learning with a part-time special education teacher. Special support includes a wide range of special education services, from full-time general education to placement in a special institution. All students in this category are assigned an individual learning plan.

Together with my Finnish colleagues, I believe Finland’s special education system is a reason for the country’s world-class ranking in recent international studies. My personal view, based on working with and visiting hundreds of Finnish schools, is that most schools pay particular attention to those children who need more help becoming successful, compared to other students. This was my impression of Hiidenkivi Comprehensive School; it is a worthy example of a Finnish school with a strong focus on equity.

Many U.S. teachers and administrators often are stuck in the middle of “excellence versus equity” quandaries because of external demands and regulations. Standardized testing that compares individuals to statistical averages, competition that leaves weaker students behind and merit-based pay for teachers jeopardize schools’ efforts to enhance equity. None of these factors exists in Finland.

Downside of Choice

Finally, a few thoughts about school choice. Advocates for choice argue that the introduction of market mechanisms allows equal access to high-quality schooling for all students. This

is a popular argument in England, Australia, the Russian Federation and Sweden and in much of the rest of the world. In the United States, many think charter schools will unlock educational innovation and increase student access to better schools.

The evidence, however, does not support these views, as the OECD recently reported in “Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools,” published earlier this year. Rather, school choice and associated market mechanisms tend to increase the segregation of students in schools. Sweden is a good example of the impact of placing school choice ahead of equity among education policy priorities. The quality of Swedish schooling remains stagnant, while segregation and educational inequality have increased.

Education reform in Finland has made all public schools good places for children to learn and teachers to teach. There are about 80 independent schools in Finland, but most of them resemble public schools. They have similar educational programs and teacher policies. It is difficult to have an equitable education system that has liberal school-choice policies because choice invariably increases segregation.

Building a System

How should public funds be spent in education? Should more public resources be targeted to those schools that demonstrate good results in standardized assessments? I think we need to invest more heavily in schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods that are overwhelmingly public schools.

Finland has followed the path of fairness and inclusion in building a more equitable school system. The country has invested fairly and more heavily in schools within disadvantaged communities and insisted the best way to provide equal educational opportunities for all is through public schools.

I believe the United States should do the same if it aims to improve its public school system. Perhaps Finland’s determination to elevate equity, not measure excellence, is the reason so many young and talented Finns declare teaching to be their dream career. ■

PASI SAHLBERG is director general of the Centre for International Mobility and Cooperation in the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture in Helsinki, Finland. E-mail: pasi.sahlberg@cimo.fi; Twitter: [@pasi_sahlberg](https://twitter.com/pasi_sahlberg)