

*Here are notes from my visit to Finland August 20-24, 2012. I was part of an American delegation assembled by the National Public Education Support Fund. The meetings were arranged locally by Pasi Sahlberg from CIMO. – Ted Kolderie*

ooo

## FINLAND: Their system; their schools

This country's schools, its education system, clearly reflect the economic and demographic imperatives that lie on this small nation -- which is in terms of size, location, geography and economic activity so much like Minnesota.

### Early Childhood

Cf Rich Laine's observation: A great child-care system, on top of which they have built a fairly conventional school system.

Parental leave. Child care. Law requires municipality (about 330 in Finland) to provide this care. Municipality can decide how. The allowance system is less expensive. (Hennepin County conclusion, too.)

Both centers and family care. Some private providers. Parent can request placement; usually granted. Staffing ratio 1:3 up to age four; then 1:7 up to age six. It's 'open enrollment'; a voucher system. Will give the family money if care for child at home; also if hire help. The number of parents who stay home to provide care themselves is tied to the employment situation. Parents who elect to stay home keep their jobs, so they do that if they're concerned they might be laid off.

Hours 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. Some open 24 hours. Most close in summer, but some year-round. Staffing the main issue. Hard to get workers here in Espoo, for example; a high-income suburb where housing is expensive.

Finland now moving early-childhood from ministry of social/health to ministry of culture and education. At municipal level, had been integrated already.

### Pre-school

Also by the municipality. Age 6; just before start of basic/compulsory school.

New 2011 curriculum. Set goals for individual student: ways of playing, physical ability, artistic ability, exploration-and-curiosity,



<http://www.educationevolving.org>

orientations. Develop an individual plan, with parents. These to be reevaluated annually.

Try to keep same teacher, but see some virtue in child knowing several adults.

## **Governance**

The ministry. Education/science + culture/sports. Broader mission than almost anywhere. Trying to broaden even more. About 300 persons; about half of them educators. Has various related agencies; including CIMO.

Most employees are permanent-party; career civil service. Only three or four political appointees. So the ministry is independent of 'political pressures'.

Policy action begins with the government; multi-party. (cf the Netherlands etc, where the voters elect parties and the parties elect the government.)

State contributes about 40% of total cost; municipalities about 60% on an average. [See notes later about the equalization program.] There are some 'private providers' (perhaps the 'charters' Pasi told us about).

At the municipal level: No elected board of education. The municipality may create an education board, or 'committee', appointing municipal officials and others, including teachers.

Also, an individual school might have a board; members usually named by the municipality. Functions/powers minimal.

National Board of Education oversees the policy of the ministry. Not much through regulations, though: Regulation was withdrawn during the '90s. Really only four things specified in the law; the rest is left to the local school institutions. Pasi: Up to '94, specified inputs; then shifted to outcomes. It's a 'steering' concept now. Outcomes say where a student should be at the end of Grade 9 (age 16); It's up to municipality to decide when to do what.

It's a culture of trust --contrasting sharply with the American obsession about 'accountability'. Pasi: We're not so fond of measurement. Ministry does a sample. Basically we ask the teachers how the students are doing. We look more at this evaluation than at PISA.

Some issues now. A concern about boys. Question about class size (currently a municipal decision). Pasi says Finland is now increasingly concerned about more variation appearing among schools, in outcomes.

## **Teachers Union**

OAJ was formed in 1973; a merger. OAJ has staff of about 125. About 120,000 members; 95% of all teachers belong. Voluntary. OAJ not related

to any political party; works with all -- tho individually teachers can be active politically. In Parliament there are 27 teachers.

Ninety per cent of the teachers are employed by municipalities. Job is to safeguard the teacher interest. Try to be reasonable. We work with the ministry. Get teachers involved in implementation.

Bargaining is at the state/national level. But not with the state. Rather, with confederation of municipalities. (It's the system we use here for the building trades; the union/s bargaining with the 'Associated General Contractors'.) There might be minor additional provisions bargained locally. There was one strike, about 25 years ago. Over salary.

All teachers have master's degrees. This required also for work in the ministry. This degree also the admission to the 'principal' role. The career structure is flat: There is in truth not much of a 'career'; not much concept of teachers leading other teachers.

Q: How become a principal? A: Usually selected by the education board of the municipality. There is consultation with the school. Most principals teach; at least one hour a week. Specific 'certification' required that is specified in legislation. Municipality may provide some in-service training, principals on average have more than 10 days professional development each year.

## **'Basic'/compulsory school; ages 7 to 16 (grades 1 to 9)**

Municipality has attendance-areas. School must take students living in its attendance-area. But student can apply to attend elsewhere. In the school I visited:

- This school was picked up in PISA sample; so the principal conscious of its scores. (PISA samples schools; then if the school selected is large, samples students within that school.)
- He would like to lengthen some class periods. Would require OK from board of education.
- School has about E5 million for 500 students. As principal he controls about E1,000.
- Younger students remove their shoes outside classroom door. Asked why. A: Cleaning ladies want it. (Older students, not.)
- Classroom doors locked on hall side while class in session. Unk why.
- One of our guides was Sara Bekkouche. From Algeria. Fluent in Finnish, English; also French and Arabic. Unsure where she go next. Anxious about the decision. "Maybe be a kindergarten teacher." Must work hard to get to upper-secondary: "We have to make our points". Wonder: Will Sara be able to realize her potential?

Q: Are students grouped by age? Is it possible for a student to move faster based on competency? A: First two years with same teacher; then basically grades. Grades also at secondary level. But is possible to move faster in some subject. Rare, though.

## 'Third Sector' involvement: Associations, parents, community

Rich ecology of organizations for activities. Maybe 125,000 such, since 1970. Built on volunteers. Operate under law, so increasingly regulated bureaucratically. Still a concern youth should be active physically. Some concern about obesity (tho not much obesity visible).

Q: How organize youth sports? A: The ministry handles this. But most of it is about 'leisure time' more broadly. The competitions are done more through the 'sports associations'. Q: When the soccer team runs onto the field is the school name on the jersey? A: No. Very few schools have teams.

Parents League. Started early 1900s. Works for good education; equal opportunities. About 1,400 member organizations; financed by the ministry (with lottery monies). Currently feel too much squeeze on the time of young people; families. Student leaves school 1 to 2 p.m.; then home or with friends. Parents still working. Parents return 5 to 6 p.m.; then three hours of driving; activities. Some significant loneliness. A debate now about this.

Q: Are students employed after hours A: May work at 15. Some do. But it is hard for young people to get work, especially in the summer.

Sensing more pressure now for testing; as people want to know school rankings. This driven by parent choice; desire to know quality. Also, pressure from the media.

## Upper Secondary

This is competitive. Students apply; are admitted based on academic record. Buy own books. A choice system, for the students. At school I visited it was mentioned some travel an hour to this school. Also, this school (in Vantaa) loses students to schools in Helsinki that are larger and offer more courses; more choice of teachers.

Pasi says about 5% do not go on from 'basic' school to upper-secondary. Means about 100,000 just disappeared cumulatively during the course of last 15 years. Bad: No way to get work if in school only through 16. Youth workers trying to reach these.

Classrooms seemed pretty conventional. Don't see many students carrying books. Saw a stack of iPads. "Replacing our old laptops". Training teachers on these, now. Unclear what use for student academic work. Q: Do most students have computers at home? A: Yes; probably 95%.

At 18, when finish upper-secondary, student has national-service obligation. Can be military or non-military (civil) service. May defer until the age 29 (so attend university).

Q: Is there opportunity to take college courses while in upper-secondary? A: Some maybe; but limited; possibly science courses where need access to lab.

## Business Community perspective

Confederation of Finnish Industry (EK) tries to give feedback from the export industries re: the skills needed. There are challenges and needs involving all age groups; not just youth.

Stress need for greater flexibility; for some change in the 'content' of school. For greater connection between workplace and school. For more personalization.

Need "foresight"; forecasting, to see what's coming. Country needs to broaden language skills in Russian. Think about how to educate more youth to be self-directed learners; more adaptable.

The EK has an Economic Information Office, providing young people information about career choices, and about retirements (which took a big jump in 2010). Two big projects currently. First is to bring teachers inside the companies to see what's needed; providing internships. Business/school partnerships. A website for teachers, about all this. Second is to build concept of an 'enterprise society'. Targeted on 5-6 grades. Involves visits to firms.

Chamber of Commerce tries also to relate business with schools and universities. For a small nation everybody is needed; everyone must be educated. Need to raise quality of our universities. Can't afford even 10% 'lost'. We see opportunity to develop an 'export industry' in Finnish education: re teachers, equality, the less-is-more.

Liisa (Economic Information Office) said now not satisfied with the schools' ability to generate top-talented students. CoC agreed: Need more world-class expertise at university level.

Q: What expertise is most needed next? A (Chamber/Commerce): Not know for sure. Complicated. Certainly not forestry, minerals, Nokia. (Jaana/EK): Adaptive, flexible. And, yes, there is a growing issue about not moving the ablest up further, faster. Also, want/need them to be good citizens. (Interesting dimension of student 'performance'.)

Q: What's your attitude toward teacher unions? A: [Pasi answers): Not an ideological organization; very pragmatic. Teachers union not affiliated with trades/industrial unions; rather, connected into a federation of professional organizations along with doctors, attorneys, university professors.

## Teacher Education

There're eight such universities. Each owns/runs schools; co-located with the university. (Minnesota closed its university-related 'lab schools' decades ago.) These are not for university faculty. Just general schools. These get from the state the financial contribution a regular school would get from its municipality. And get some extra payment (25%?) from the state for handling teacher-training function.

Teacher education came into the universities in 1974. Then higher education was reorganized in 1979. (A side conversation clarified that before this teacher-education was handled in seminars organized by teachers in the profession. It was not an apprenticeship system.)

They distinguish between 'class teachers' (elementary levels) and 'subject teachers' (secondary). So do still divide knowledge into disciplines in the old-fashioned way. Combine theoretical studies and practical studies. The master's degree is in education for the 'class teachers'; in the subject for the 'subject teachers'.

Clear same concept as in USA: Learning comes from teaching.

A student interested in a teaching career would declare early. Finland needs only about 3,000 teachers annually. The ministry provides the 'estimated demand'. It's three years to a BA; two more to the master's. There's some attrition because not all who get the degree do go into teaching; some go into other fields. Candidates must combine commitment with suitability. They first screen for commitment. It's not enough to say, "All my relatives have been teachers". Those not deemed committed are 'scanned-away'. Screening then for suitability. Go to interviews with perhaps three times as many as will ultimately select.

There is research; some in the universities and some under the ministry. Here they understand that much learning is outside school; perhaps two-thirds. (One reason Finnish youth read well is because Finnish television uses subtitles rather than dubbing. So in watching American shows Finnish children seeing, learning, English. Most of the English you hear them speak is American, not British, English.) There's work currently on game-based learning. There is work on 'student-activated learning' and 'new knowledge practices'. They do see 'technology' (digital electronics) as changing knowledge and learning practices -- with multi-tasking, gaming, screens, social media.

In the related 'lab school' I visited I sat in on a class in a computer lab. The lesson was to make a PowerPoint. So as the dozen or so students worked there was a chance to visit with the teacher. I asked about peer-teaching. She pointed to some students at the moment asking other students. But in general, that's only informal; is not treated as a pedagogy. Games? Some, but more for language than for math.

At the University of Helsinki school of teacher education . . .

Posters (in English): "Designing Society Through Thinking"; "Designing Finnish Education for the Future".

(The dean speaking): At the end of the '90s we were seeing more boys failing comprehensive school. Then came PISA, showing that, even so, we were almost top in the world.

After he finished, Dean Scheinin was standing near where I was sitting. I asked what Finland would have done if PISA had not come along. He gave an answer (to the group) roughly like this:

No nation has eliminated the 'home effect' that children bring to school. The former Soviet-bloc countries are particularly weak at this.

Today we have boys doing about as well as girls, but have significantly fewer boys going on into upper-secondary. 'Research-based policy' aims to educate *all* children well. 'Discussion-based policy', dominated by the advantaged, would be aimed at education *their* children well.

Later, perhaps feeling this was too indirect/obscure, he leaned over to me and said: "We would have done away with comprehensive school". "So PISA saved the Finnish system?" "Yes".

## The Political Level: Parliament

A unicameral; 200 members. Four-year terms; non-staggered. On the floor, the French system: parties of the left on the (speaker's) left.

It has the pluses and minuses of any parliamentary system. It works to obscure the issues, suppress open debate, since the duty of an MP belonging to the majority party is to support the government's proposals.

If a committee bill is not approved on the floor a "grand committee" of about 50 members is created to re-work the measure for floor approval.

Finnish education began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with a requirement that people must be able to read (the Bible) in their own language in order to marry. So they had to become literate.

Parliament does not appropriate money specifically for education -- save for some categorical for buildings (and that budget line for the teacher-training schools). The state makes a bloc grant to the municipalities, and the allocation among education, child care, public safety etc. occurs at that level. The effect in the current situation of financial stress is to de-centralize the difficult decisions about priorities. This also complicates the work of the education interests in protecting money for schools.

It appears there is some equalization factor in this 'overhead' financing. The best explanation is one I got at the ambassador's reception from one of the officials of the teachers union. Finland taxes income (personal and business) rather than property. Disparities exist in this base, too. So the state assures each municipality a certain per-pupil amount. There is, though -- as in Minnesota -- the local option to 'go beyond' with an excess levy on its own residents.

The child-care program is simply pragmatic. Finland needs its women working. The right runs to the child; to have care.

There are some issues active, clearly.

There will be some revision of the school curriculum in 2016. There is pressure to broaden the range of languages taught, to include more Russian, Spanish, German.

There is discussion about restructuring 'high school', between the comprehensives and the university. The interest in doing more with the high-achieving students was clear, too, in what we heard from the MP

from the Conservative party. Also, greater use of digital electronics in learning.

There is a strong sense about the scale of the competition; as, that "China and India will graduate each year a number of engineers equal to Finland's entire population".

[The other MP we met with -- Astrid Thors -- came up at lunchtime to ask me about Minnesota's reorganization of local government in the metropolitan area. Finland is about to take up this question and her husband is on the committee. I have now sent her some of the material we used at a comparable stage in our discussion, in the 1960s.]

[Words confuse. Someone said the deregulation of the '90s was the result of "experimental" legislation. Can that mean 'enabling'? And there was talk about the 'mayor' appointing, say, members of the municipal education board. It turns out there is not -- except, as MP Thors told me, in maybe two cities -- an elected mayor. They're talking about what we'd call the 'city manager'.]

In the final Friday afternoon discussion . . .

The Finns are acutely conscious of the 'uncertainty' about the Euro and the European Union. And of the challenges they face demographically. [The Economist reports that only Japan and Italy have a lower replacement-rate, and that there're now 1,000,000 Finns over age 65 in a nation of just over five million people.]

Also, uncertainty about the future of school and learning. Pasi: Our basic school design is now over 40 years old. To keep each school a quality school we will need to put more into the schools that have the expanded immigrant population. And reduce class size. We must get every student to go on from basic/comprehensive to upper-secondary.

The OAJ (union) official agrees. But the use of resources is an issue. Since state aid to the municipality is not earmarked, health care and social services are cutting in. And as an aging population increases the pressure at the local level we have to move more money into elderly care.

(A university person): Our curriculum is basically similar across the country, re: both content and form. Slight variations. We are "highly synchronized".