

Why Are Finland's Schools Successful?

The country's achievements in education have other nations doing their homework

- By LynNell Hancock
- Photographs by Stuart Conway
- *Smithsonian* magazine, September 2011



"This is what we do every day," says Kirkkojarvi Comprehensive School principal Kari Louhivuori, "prepare kids for life."

It was the end of term at Kirkkojarvi Comprehensive School in Espoo, a sprawling suburb west of Helsinki, when Kari Louhivuori, a veteran teacher and the school's principal, decided to try something extreme—by Finnish standards. One of his sixth-grade students, a Kosovo-Albanian boy, had drifted far off the learning grid, resisting his teacher's best efforts. The school's team of special educators—including a social worker, a nurse and a psychologist—convinced Louhivuori that laziness was not to blame. So he decided to hold the boy back a year, a measure so rare in Finland it's practically obsolete.

Finland has vastly improved in reading, math and science literacy over the past decade in large part because its teachers are trusted to do whatever it takes to turn young lives around. This 13-year-old, Besart Kabashi, received something akin to royal tutoring.

"I took Besart on that year as my private student," Louhivuori told me in his office, which boasted a Beatles "Yellow Submarine" poster on the wall and an electric guitar in the closet. When Besart was not studying science, geography and math, he was parked next to Louhivuori's

desk at the front of his class of 9- and 10-year-olds, cracking open books from a tall stack, slowly reading one, then another, then devouring them by the dozens. By the end of the year, the son of Kosovo war refugees had conquered his adopted country's vowel-rich language and arrived at the realization that he could, in fact, *learn*.

Years later, a 20-year-old Besart showed up at Kirkkojarvi's Christmas party with a bottle of Cognac and a big grin. "You helped me," he told his former teacher. Besart had opened his own car repair firm and a cleaning company. "No big fuss," Louhivuori told me. "This is what we do every day, prepare kids for life."

This tale of a single rescued child hints at some of the reasons for the tiny Nordic nation's staggering record of education success, a phenomenon that has inspired, baffled and even irked many of America's parents and educators. Finnish schooling became an unlikely hot topic after the 2010 documentary film *Waiting for "Superman"* contrasted it with America's troubled public schools.

"Whatever it takes" is an attitude that drives not just Kirkkojarvi's 30 teachers, but most of Finland's 62,000 educators in 3,500 schools from Lapland to Turku—professionals selected from the top 10 percent of the nation's graduates to earn a required master's degree in education. Many schools are small enough so that teachers know every student. If one method fails, teachers consult with colleagues to try something else. They seem to relish the challenges. Nearly 30 percent of Finland's children receive some kind of special help during their first nine years of school. The school where Louhivuori teaches served 240 first through ninth graders last year; and in contrast with Finland's reputation for ethnic homogeneity, more than half of its 150 elementary-level students are immigrants—from Somalia, Iraq, Russia, Bangladesh, Estonia and Ethiopia, among other nations. "Children from wealthy families with lots of education can be taught by stupid teachers," Louhivuori said, smiling. "We try to catch the weak students. It's deep in our thinking."

The transformation of the Finns' education system began some 40 years ago as the key propellant of the country's economic recovery plan. Educators had little idea it was so successful until 2000, when the first results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a standardized test given to 15-year-olds in more than 40 global venues, revealed Finnish youth to be the best young readers in the world. Three years later, they led in math. By 2006, Finland was first out of 57 countries (and a few cities) in science. In the 2009 PISA scores released last year, the nation came in second in science, third in reading and sixth in math among nearly half a million students worldwide. "I'm still surprised," said Arjariita Heikkinen, principal of a Helsinki comprehensive school. "I didn't realize we were *that* good."

In the United States, which has muddled along in the middle for the past decade, government officials have attempted to introduce marketplace competition into public schools. In recent years, a group of Wall Street financiers and philanthropists such as Bill Gates have put money behind private-sector ideas, such as vouchers, data-driven curriculum and charter schools, which have doubled in number in the past decade. President Obama, too, has apparently bet on competition. His Race to the Top initiative invites states to compete for federal dollars using tests and other methods to measure teachers, a philosophy that would not fly in Finland. "I think, in fact,

teachers would tear off their shirts,” said Timo Heikkinen, a Helsinki principal with 24 years of teaching experience. “If you only measure the statistics, you miss the human aspect.”

There are no mandated standardized tests in Finland, apart from one exam at the end of students’ senior year in high school. There are no rankings, no comparisons or competition between students, schools or regions. Finland’s schools are publicly funded. The people in the government agencies running them, from national officials to local authorities, are educators, not business people, military leaders or career politicians. Every school has the same national goals and draws from the same pool of university-trained educators. The result is that a Finnish child has a good shot at getting the same quality education no matter whether he or she lives in a rural village or a university town. The differences between weakest and strongest students are the smallest in the world, according to the most recent survey by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). “Equality is the most important word in Finnish education. All political parties on the right and left agree on this,” said Olli Luukkainen, president of Finland’s powerful teachers union.

Ninety-three percent of Finns graduate from academic or vocational high schools, 17.5 percentage points higher than the United States, and 66 percent go on to higher education, the highest rate in the European Union. Yet Finland spends about 30 percent less per student than the United States.

Still, there is a distinct absence of chest-thumping among the famously reticent Finns. They are eager to celebrate their recent world hockey championship, but PISA scores, not so much. “We prepare children to learn how to learn, not how to take a test,” said Pasi Sahlberg, a former math and physics teacher who is now in Finland’s Ministry of Education and Culture. “We are not much interested in PISA. It’s not what we are about.”

Maija Rintola stood before her chattering class of twenty-three 7- and 8-year-olds one late April day in Kirkkojarven Koulu. A tangle of multicolored threads topped her copper hair like a painted wig. The 20-year teacher was trying out her look for Vappu, the day teachers and children come to school in riotous costumes to celebrate May Day. The morning sun poured through the slate and lemon linen shades onto containers of Easter grass growing on the wooden sills. Rintola smiled and held up her open hand at a slant—her time-tested “silent giraffe,” which signaled the kids to be quiet. Little hats, coats, shoes stowed in their cubbies, the children wiggled next to their desks in their stocking feet, waiting for a turn to tell their tale from the playground. They had just returned from their regular 15 minutes of playtime outdoors between lessons. “Play is important at this age,” Rintola would later say. “We value play.”

With their wiggles unwound, the students took from their desks little bags of buttons, beans and laminated cards numbered 1 through 20. A teacher’s aide passed around yellow strips representing units of ten. At a smart board at the front of the room, Rintola ushered the class through the principles of base ten. One girl wore cat ears on her head, for no apparent reason. Another kept a stuffed mouse on her desk to remind her of home. Rintola roamed the room helping each child grasp the concepts. Those who finished early played an advanced “nut puzzle” game. After 40 minutes it was time for a hot lunch in the cathedral-like cafeteria.

Teachers in Finland spend fewer hours at school each day and spend less time in classrooms than American teachers. Teachers use the extra time to build curriculums and assess their students. Children spend far more time playing outside, even in the depths of winter. Homework is minimal. Compulsory schooling does not begin until age 7. “We have no hurry,” said Louhivuori. “Children learn better when they are ready. Why stress them out?”

It’s almost unheard of for a child to show up hungry or homeless. Finland provides three years of maternity leave and subsidized day care to parents, and preschool for all 5-year-olds, where the emphasis is on play and socializing. In addition, the state subsidizes parents, paying them around 150 euros per month for every child until he or she turns 17. Ninety-seven percent of 6-year-olds attend public preschool, where children begin some academics. Schools provide food, medical care, counseling and taxi service if needed. Student health care is free.

Even so, Rintola said her children arrived last August miles apart in reading and language levels. By April, nearly every child in the class was reading, and most were writing. Boys had been coaxed into literature with books like *Kapteeni Kalsarin* (“Captain Underpants”). The school’s special education teacher teamed up with Rintola to teach five children with a variety of behavioral and learning problems. The national goal for the past five years has been to mainstream all children. The only time Rintola’s children are pulled out is for Finnish as a Second Language classes, taught by a teacher with 30 years’ experience and graduate school training.

Read more: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Why-Are-Finlands-Schools-Successful.html#ixzz1mZs4uoY0>