

FINLAND Report

July, 2013

Lori Barnes, Dorothy Cammaert, Michelle Cassidy, Kate Diakiw, Janet Hicks,
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York Region District School Board

Report Summary- This report is the product of the group that visited the Espoo School Board in Finland during May, 2013. Observations included primary and lower secondary schools, discussions with school psychology and central staff. In addition, our staff visited the children's hospital and met with Pasi Sahlberg, internationally renowned author and Finnish educator. The schools we visited included mainstream programming, as well as a special education focused elementary school.

Several themes emerged about Finnish education as reflected in this experience in Espoo. Each of these themes is highlighted in this report. Recommendations from this learning for the York Region District School Board follow.

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Relationships – Culture of Caring

It was immediately evident that students are partners in education in Finland. This partnership includes expected elements such as student participation in assessment and evaluation and student roles in

school life. It goes beyond this to include significant student voice in decision making, and a relaxed, respectful relationship between students and teachers. Decisions are made based on students, with their input. Similarly, parents are included through technology and an advanced electronic system for communication. Students also take care of each other. In a touching example, one student was 'picking on' another in the foyer of a school; another student intervened to deal with the problem and, although adults were present, they did not play a role.

- respect for students as valued and trusted partners
- students have an elevated status as the sole reason for the existence of the system and this status is recognized by all those involved, including parents, teachers, administrators and others
- Student Voice – this is structural as part of assessment, evaluation, decision making – it is fundamental to the system
- relationships between students and teachers are a fine balance of relaxed and respect
- continuity of teachers – teachers stay with students for multiple years
- continuity of administrators – Principals stay for many years in one school
- trust
- culture of caring and proactive approach to school culture so that it is developed
- younger students care for older students; and vice-versa; all students address issues
- more communication with parents
- Wilma technology to keep parents informed
- bullying intervention by teachers only when necessary, solve problems, not lay blame

Physical Space

Schools are seen as homes. Partly as a result, they are designed to be appealing physical spaces that provide flexibility for instruction and a wide variety of spaces for students. Flexible cafeterias, fireplaces, artwork, community centres enliven the educational environment.



- koulu (house)
- respect for school physical environment by authority – trust in student ability to use it and respect it safely and appropriately
- deliberate use of nature integrated into instruction
- all space is learning space – windows set low and cut deeply to allow students to use them as reading areas
- benches in playgrounds, couches in hallways, intimate space for well-being and for relationship building
- small individual bathrooms, gender neutral in many schools
- halls structured to build relationships as part of the learning environment, not just access routes



Autonomy

Principals have significant independence in their approach to learning, professional development and response to student need. Similarly, teachers have a great deal of control over curriculum and instruction, and students personalize their own learning. Both principals and teachers exercise their

autonomy with educational frameworks developed by the National Board of Education and the local Espoo Board.

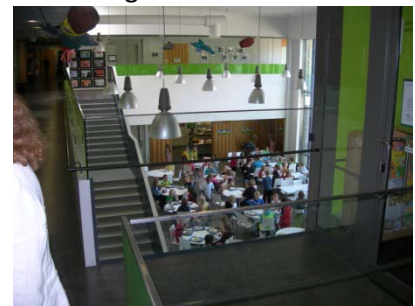
- principals have autonomy over their school leadership
- teacher autonomy regarding curriculum content, design and delivery
- students have more autonomy over time and activity – instruction is much more personalized to enable individual exploration of learning – individual choice in activities

Wellness



Time after time we were told that students had to be ready in all ways to learn before they could achieve. This includes significant early years availability and support, careful transition planning for school, flexibility in class placement, assessment used extensively for multiple years before evaluation, and a healthy integration of the environment in all learning.

- student emotional well-being must be supported BEFORE the child can learn
- in Canada we focus on student achievement; in Finland it is student wellbeing – it is a different starting point
- new law that supports people in higher education or employment until age 29
- recognition that students learn at different rates and support of their learning journey
- teacher wellness is a priority – staff wellness rooms, inviting staff rooms, facilities are extensive, respect, option for teachers to purchase the chair most appropriate for them, technology is evident in all classrooms for teacher use
- technology for students available and integrated into instruction and learning
- school welfare meetings held regularly for students, supports implemented early, eases issues further along – social workers, psychologists, nurses, etc. meet to identify concerns and act early to support students
- early intervention to support students; early triage and individual case management; official documentation and supports come later
- “Break Market” – students organize games for other students, etc.
- “Providing early support means that teachers understand the role of the various specialists and professionals and facilitates early triage case management. Next, these interdisciplinary staff gather together with parents. This requires that the teachers take on the responsibility to problem solve rather than referring problems to the principal.”
- resource teachers come into the classroom to support kids in their regular classroom environment



Curriculum

Curriculum is flexible and tailored to teacher and student interests, needs and abilities. Many topics are woven through schooling, including such things as social responsibility, digital competence, environment, life skills and others to ensure a holistic education for children.



- shifting curriculum from facts to dynamics
- all subjects are equal – it is just as valued to be a dancer or a lawyer – but predicated on brain development and the need to hone all aspects of the mind
- learning to learn
- digital competency
- social and civic responsibilities taught – include responsibilities in the school, including task assignment, cleaning room, loading dishwashers, etc.
- sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- cultural awareness
- diversity of curriculum
- life skills, arts, cooking, sewing, cleaning, weaving, woodwork, handicrafts
- assessment versus evaluation until grade five
- pre-school support – government nurseries or schools, regular age for entering school is age seven
- teach 36 different languages and eight religions
- class seemed to be studying music; it was a math class
- by 2016 it will be law that teachers plan their work with students as an integral part of the process (witness the fundamental nature of student voice in this context)
- ‘Activate’ vs ‘Engage’ students



Teacher Professionalism

Teacher professionalism is accompanied by society respect for the role. Every teacher is highly educated with a Masters degree. Prospective teacher candidates enter teaching from high school and spend 6 years studying the role. They are very highly trained.

- all require masters certificate
- pedagogical independence
- highly respected profession
- leadership with vision at the school level; we are all doing the same thing in a different way
- rarely move teachers or principals; they work it out at the school level
- far less intervention by superintendents to solve problems at the school level

Recommendations

1. Build overt structures to embed student voice at all levels of this organization.
2. Adopt sophisticated technology to significantly enhance communication with parents.
3. Link the York Region District School Board to a Finnish teachers' college for ongoing work.
4. Explore ways to effectively integrate hands-on, technical subjects into the elementary curriculum; consider options for secondary, including school foci.

5. A process be developed to support field tests to assess the effect of teachers remaining with the same students for multiple years.
6. Send team of DECEs, kindergarten teachers and SERTs to Finland as part of a study experience.
7. Build autonomy of choice into system directives, so that schools can more easily design local solutions for implementation – “playing in the meadow”.
8. Plant Services to explore wider, more diverse, inviting and comfortable furniture purchases to enhance and support staff and student wellness.
9. Create teams of speech-language pathologist, psychologist, social worker, PTOT to be assigned to same schools, meeting as teams and not as separate departments.
10. Create a York Region District School Board model for School Welfare teams that bring all students into consideration and provide early intervention to address needs as soon as possible – note, for all students, not just ‘at-risk’ students.

