

Texas school reformers try to learn lessons from Finland

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HELSINKI, Finland – This is the land where no child is left behind.

By the time Finland's children complete the ninth grade, they speak three languages. They have studied algebra, geometry and statistics since the first grade. And they beat the pants off students from just about everywhere else in the world.

In math, science, problem solving and reading comprehension, Finland's 15-year-olds came out at or near the top in international tests given in 2000, 2003 and 2006. Even the least among Finnish students – the lowest 10 percent – beat their peers everywhere else.

This matters to Dallas because so many students are still left behind. Even though Dallas reformers played key roles in the federal legislation named for the goal of bringing everyone a quality education, there are still great disparities in academic achievement between city and suburbs, and in DISD itself between quality schools and poor ones.

Dallas has improved a lot, but there are still lessons to learn from abroad that have whet the curiosity of reformers such as Dallas lawyer Tom Luce and former Dallas school board president Sandy Kress.

Although Finland is a very different place in terms of the racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds of its students, the Finnish experience offers several salient reform ideas.

First, it takes a long-term commitment to bring about a goal as sweeping as "no child left behind." The Finns have been trying to find the right formula for 30 years and continue to fine-tune their approach.

Second, though Texas teachers chafe at the scripted classrooms seemingly dictated by the federal law, Finnish teachers felt the same until the national board of education decided to trust its teachers and let them do their jobs without so many strictures. Freedom came with a price, however. All of Finland's teachers must have master's degrees.

"What is the role and mission of basic education? To give everybody a good start in life," says Reijo Laukkanen, counselor to Finland's National Board of Education.

Educators from across the world have looked to Finland for ideas on improving public education. Dallas reformers are especially intrigued with how Finland gets positive results from all of its schools and nearly all of its students – an equality that has been a chronic problem in Texas since the days of racial segregation. Finland also intrigues with its success in math and science.

Compared with Texas, Finland has a much smaller and much more homogenous school population. Finland is absorbing more immigrants, but nowhere near as many as Texas.

Finland's battles to improve education offer ideas for success in Texas – and ideas for avoiding a decline in living standards for a poorly educated population.

These include:

- Establishing a single, straightforward curriculum for all schools
- Expecting good results from all students and providing extra teaching resources to get those results
- Giving well-trained teachers respect and freedom to teach

State demographer Steve Murdock, now head of the U.S. Census Bureau, has shown that Texas will see a decline in household income of more than \$5,000 a year by 2040 unless the public schools can do a better job of educating minority students.

"We have to demand a hell of a lot more from our schools than we did 20 years ago," said Luce, a leader in the fight for No Child Left Behind and other equity causes in Texas and U.S. public schools for more than 20 years. "The schools say, 'You are being unrealistic, woe is me,' and I understand that. . . .

"But in Finland, they've really had a national buy-in to high standards of public education. I want to know what they're doing to create that environment," Luce said, citing a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on Finland's test results.

Education and innovation are considered crucial to Finland's identity as a knowledge-based economy. Science and math are integral to this consensus. Even in the worst economic times, Finland has maintained spending for education in order to enhance its economic future.

Kress, another adviser on former President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind effort, spoke admiringly of Finland's teachers.

"The sweet spot is the professionalism of teaching," he said. "Teaching in Finland is a true profession. It's honored. It's highly regarded. And it takes a lot to become a teacher."

Teaching carries so much prestige that only one in 10 applicants seeking to major in education are accepted at Finland's universities. Finland's public school teachers are paid less than American teachers, but they have greater classroom autonomy about how to meet the goals of the national curriculum.

The Kallahti Comprehensive School (grades 1 through 9) in northeastern Helsinki works through these principles daily. Of 550 students, 20 percent are immigrants from Somalia, Russia, Turkey and Bosnia.

The students live in a drab neighborhood of beige and gray garden apartments. Teachers and parents complain that some kids get involved with drugs, fight in school or spend too much time with computer games.

"This area is quite low in social and economic status," said Kallahti German teacher Saila Törmälä. "Our main task here is to integrate the students into Finnish society."

The Kallahti students study under the same curriculum as every other school in Finland. Even with these challenges, however, just two to five kids a year are held back to repeat a grade. An average of two or less drop out of school, said deputy principal Kimmo Paavola.

"In past years, we've been a little behind the national average in national evaluations," Paavola said. "But we are quite close to the average. And our goal is to be above the average the next time."

Finland emphasizes creative problem-solving skills. Once students are familiar with the concepts of math, for example, they are expected to solve problems in front of the rest of the class. The goal of math education, in fact, is to equip students with both skills and logic so they can take responsibility for lifetime learning.

Kids having problems with the studies get special attention from tutors and remedial educators from the first until the last day of their education. Educators spend the most time and money on students in the seventh through ninth grades, because that's where they see students having the most trouble with keeping academics a priority.

The system has critics, many of whom complain that Finland doesn't do enough in the early years for its brightest students. And once they graduate from comprehensive school at the age of 15 or 16, some 14 percent of the boys drop out before completing upper secondary school – the 10th through 12th grades. Universities conduct tough entrance examinations, and nearly 70 percent of university students are female.

Katariina Nyman, a chemical engineering student at the Helsinki University of Technology, said she felt constrained when she was a comprehensive school student.

"In grades 7 through 9, I wasn't as able to be enthusiastic about chemistry and math as I wanted to be, because it wasn't cool," she said. "But this was the only time when we were all together, no matter what your background. It opens up your eyes. ... We can't afford to lose some people on the way."

Finland's education reformers came to their work by necessity.

Education has a special role in Finland's national story. Six-hundred years of Swedish rule ended in 1809 when Finland became a Russian duchy. Nationalist philosopher Johan Snellman campaigned to restore the Finnish language to primacy in literature and higher education, and argued that the success of a small nation would be measured in the degree of its civilization.

Finland gained its independence in 1917 under the leadership of teachers more than politicians or soldiers. Yet, by the 1960s, public education was so bad that parents were moving their children en masse to private schools. Laukkanen remembers a forecast that predicted by 1972, only one-fourth of Finland's children would be attending public schools.

Funding inequities, vastly different course requirements and low job expectations with Finland's dominant forest industries left many villages with bad schools.

"The system was not functioning," said University of Helsinki education professor Jarkko Hautamäki. "People were voting with their feet against the schools."

Parties on the left began agitating for a more equitable system. Parties on the right saw their constituents abandoning the countryside for the cities – reason enough for joining the reform movement.

Finland's equivalent of "No Child Left Behind" passed the Parliament in 1968 at the initiative of the conservatives. The law called for a uniform, national curriculum for both public and

private schools. The National Board of Education was tasked with "equalizing possibilities so that, wherever you lived, you got the same quality education," Hautamäki said.

The new system was so rigid that Laukkanen now describes it as "Stalinistic." The detailed national curriculum was more than 700 pages long. A national education inspectorate demanded annual implementation plans from all school districts. Some parents complained the new system penalized the brightest students by moving everyone at the same pace.

In 1979, education majors were required to get at least a master's degree if they wanted to teach in the public schools. In return, the curriculum was pared back to give teachers more control over how they ran their classrooms. The education inspectorate was abolished.

The curriculum was trimmed again in 1994 to just 110 pages. The Board of Education later felt that gave too little direction for educating the brightest students. The latest national curriculum, adopted in 2004, is 319 pages long.

Reformers were also convinced that Finland needed to stop putting students into different career tracks so early. By the end of the sixth grade, students and parents had to decide whether to take classes aimed at attending a university or a vocational school. The vocational track offered much easier math and science courses.

The tracking system was changed in 1985. Students still choose whether to go into university or vocational prep schools, but not until they have completed ninth grade.

The reformers are still busy. The latest major overhaul involves higher education, where Finland hopes to elevate its best universities by combining schools of art and design, economics and engineering.

Evaluation and change goes on throughout the system. "We're trying to improve everything all the time," said Kallahti deputy principal Paavola. "We are a small country. We have to compete with knowledge and technology."