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# Education For All

## Student Support Systems

Finnish schools not only provide education, they provide many other important resources and services for their students, including a daily hot meal, psychological counseling and health and dental services. Finland is a fairly homogenous society; only a small minority of students are immigrants or are the children of immigrants. Nevertheless, the Finnish Ministry of Education is committed to providing equitable education, functional bilingualism and multiculturalism in schools. All children between 7 and 17 for whom Finnish is a native language are entitled to instruction in either Finnish or Swedish. Once they have begun comprehensive schooling, students may be educated in small, remedial teaching groups until they are ready to join mainstream classes. By law, students are allowed to complete their education in their native tongue, although they will have to find a school to provide this education for them. Currently, there are schools in Finland that instruct students in Arabic, Somali, Russian, Vietnamese and Estonian as either the sole language of instruction or as part of a bilingual school. Religious instruction in Finnish schools is based on the religious majority in a given locality; if a student elects not to take part in these lessons they may receive instruction in their religion of choice (provided there are a minimum of three students making this request), or fill the time with other supervised academic activities. Finally, a student's linguistic background is taken into account when they are assessed in all core subjects.

Finland invests much time and effort to insure that all students have the supports they need to succeed in school. This is quite clear in the instructional supports provided to large numbers of school children by special needs teachers found in schools across the country. In 2010, 23.3% of comprehensive school students in Finland received extra instruction from a Special Needs Education Teacher in school in the subjects in which the student needed help. Of this group, 12% received aid for a speech disorder; 40.5% received help in reading or writing; 23.7% for learning difficulties in mathematics; 9% for learning difficulties in foreign languages; 5.5% for adjustment difficulties or emotional disorders; and 8.9% for other learning difficulties. Those students classified as having more intensive learning difficulties, including severely delayed development, severe handicaps, autism, dysphasia, and visual or hearing

impairment (1.2% of the school population in 2010) were educated in a special education school.

Special education teachers, are important in the process of diagnosis and intervention, but it is not up to them alone to identify students. Each school has a group of staff that meets twice a month in order to assess the success of individual classrooms and potential concerns within classrooms. This group, which is comprised of the principal, the school nurse, the special education teacher, the school psychologist, a social worker and the classrooms' teachers, determines whether problems exist, as well as how to rectify them. If students are considered to need help beyond what the school can provide, the school helps the family find professional intervention.

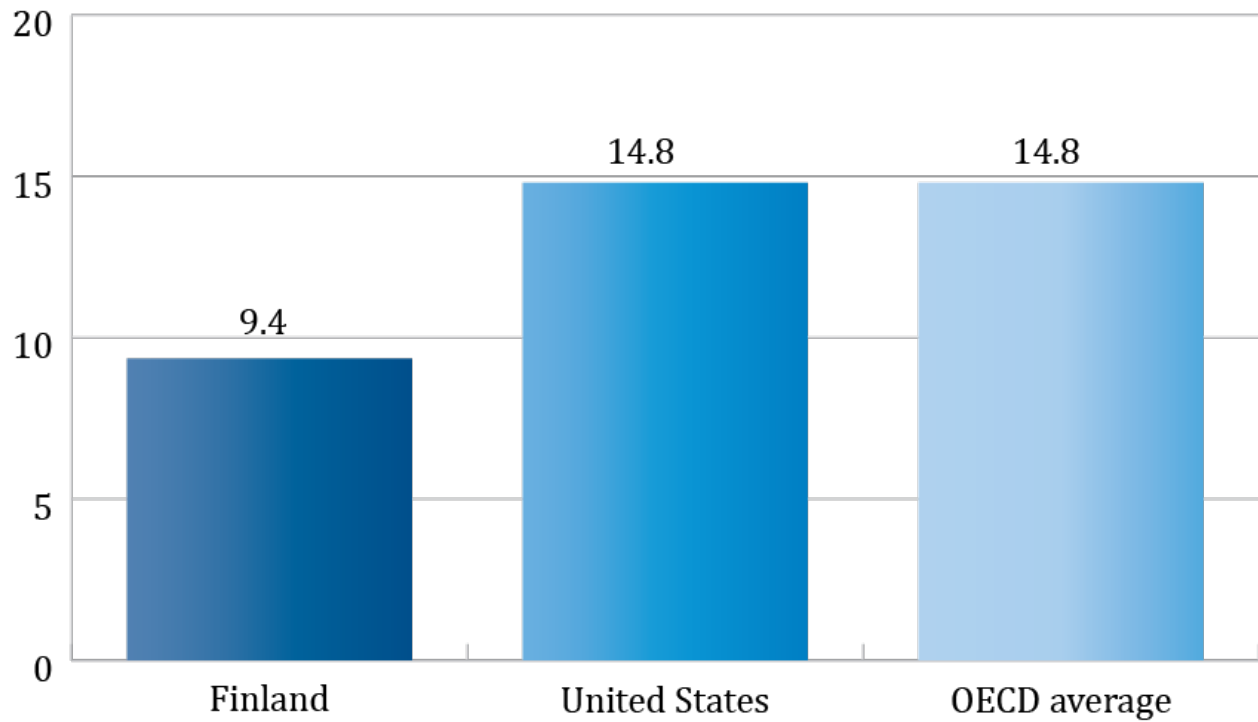
### **Low-Performing Schools**

Prior to the 1970s, Finland's education system was characterized by few high-performing and many low-performing schools. Education was inequitable, and the achievement gap ran across socioeconomic lines. When Finland began its educational reforms, this was one of the central problems it set out to address. By establishing a comprehensive school for grades 1-9 with rigorous standards, improving teacher quality and making school funding based solely on student numbers, Finland has been able to almost completely eliminate what was once a huge disparity.



Video: [“Why do Finland’s schools get the best results?” BBC News](#)

### **PISA 2012: Variation in Mathematics Performance Explained by Socioeconomic Background**



Source: OECD

#### USEFUL LINKS

[European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education. \(2010\). \*Development of Inclusion – Finland\*.](#)

[The Finnish National Board of Education. \(2010\). \*Special Educational Support\*.](#)

[Education and Culture Press Release. \(2007\). "Committee: Shortage of Teachers in Immigrant Education and Training."](#)

[OECD. \(2005\). \*Equity in Education Thematic Review: Finland\*. \(PDF\).](#)

Now, there is little disparity in performance among Finnish schools. Finland had a 7.7% variance in reading performance between schools on the 2009 PISA; this can be compared to an OECD average of 33% in 2006. The country with the second-lowest rate of variance, Canada, still had a rate more than double that of Finland. Within schools, Finland's rate of variance jumps to 80.7%, although the programs outlined above are making great strides in addressing this disparity. Finland has also been successful in uncoupling socioeconomic status from academic success or failure: there is only about a 6.8% variance based on students' socioeconomic backgrounds, and a 23.2% variance based on a school's socioeconomic background. Finland's challenge seems to be addressing disparity within, rather than among, schools, and the overall disparity cannot be accounted for by socioeconomic factors.