

Finland's secrets to educational success ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Kids don't start school until they're 7. The school day is shorter than in most developed nations.

The country does little standardized testing, and only on a sample of schools. Educators don't talk "literacy" and "numeracy" - instead, the buzzwords are "citizen skills."

So how is Finland at the top of world rankings when it comes to international testing?

"We emphasize the teaching profession," said Timo Lankinen, director general of the Finnish National Board of Education, who spoke Tuesday at Ontario's first-ever education summit held here in Toronto.

At first joking "we don't know how we did it," he went on to talk about how teaching is a prestigious profession in Finland - although the pay is average - with just 13 per cent of applicants snagging a coveted teacher-training spot.

All teachers hold master's degrees as they progress through their careers, and they are well supported, he said. Class sizes are small, usually less than 20 students, with schools generally no more than 300 kids.

"It helps teachers give individualized attention," he said in an interview after his speech, and they also focus on giving students experiential learning to keep them interested in school.

With little diversity in Finland's population - by language, race or even income - Lankinen said there is also little variation among schools on international test scores. In other words, they all do well.

But the country is not sitting on its laurels and is now planning reforms "to go from good to great."

And, he noted, "we are not talking literacy and numeracy" - as has been the focus in Ontario. Instead, the country wants more arts and physical education in the curriculum, and a longer school day in order to fit them in.

It also plans to emphasize "citizen skills," ideas like thinking, self-expression, personal responsibility, participation and leadership.

The big idea "is to have every student or stakeholder say 'I love school and am doing well in school,' or that 'schools put 21st century skills in the spotlight.' "

Annie Kidder, of research and advocacy group People for Education, said she appreciated the vision articulated by the Finnish government, which she says is lacking in Ontario in its drive to improve literacy and numeracy standardized test scores.

"It's not like education is a business, with everything being done to improve the business," she said. "I like this idea of moving forward with the idea that 21st century skills are citizen skills."

The summit also heard from Singapore's minister of education, Ng Eng Hen, whose country also performs well on international comparisons. In fact, he said, Singapore's lowest performers are still at or above international averages.

He too spoke of a focus on arts and physical education, and said the government funds trips abroad for each student.

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- reprinted from the Toronto Star

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