

# Macht Bildung klug?

Die PISA-Studie aus finnischer und europäischer Sicht

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finnische Bildungsministerin

**Vortrag**

(im Rahmen der Landesbildungskonferenz der SPÖ Oberösterreich)

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**„Übersicht der aktuellen Entwicklungen des  
finnischen Bildungssystems - Gründe für  
dessen Erfolg“**

**Referat von Maija Rask  
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*Bildung  
Oberösterreich*

# Overview of Developments in the Finnish Education System - Reasons for its success

**Minister of Education and Science Mrs. Maija Rask**

*Linz 1. 2. 2003, Austria*

It is a great pleasure for me to be here and tell you about the principles of Finnish education policy and to present our education system. Especially after the PISA review, people have shown great interest in our education system.

Let me first briefly list the main characteristics of the Finnish education system:

1. Finland has integrated basic education and a unified education system: almost all pupils complete the comprehensive school.
2. Special attention is paid to pupils who have learning difficulties or special needs.
3. Teachers are highly trained.
4. The national core curricula stress skills needed in information society, as well as basic knowledge.
5. We have high-quality learning materials.
6. School personnel and pupil welfare professionals take part in curriculum design and in evaluations.
7. Finland has a network of high-quality public libraries which covers the whole country.
8. Literacy is highly valued as a vital basic skill.

In Finland we want to develop our national knowledge-based strategy further. We are committed to equal opportunity in education and to pupils' rights. We want to ensure good basic environment for teaching and learning and to invest in teachers and in working conditions at school. We need to intensify cross-

sectoral cooperation for the good of pupils. Finally, we must work to prevent children's and young people's exclusion.

There are at least six education policy priorities we are focusing on. I shall now take a closer look at these challenges.

First of all, we want to **strengthen the national knowledge-based development strategy**. Successful education policy entails commitment at the national level. It means that we value education and culture and allocate sufficient resources to education, training and research. This we have been doing for the past four years. Our Government has increased its input into education and research by over 1,300 million euros.

Secondly, we must identify and further strengthen **those parts of our education system which work well**. Cooperation between different levels and forms of education gives a solid foundation for the development of lifelong learning. We seek to encourage institutions of general and vocational education to collaborate in many ways.

Basic educational rights must be realised at all levels of education and training. The Finnish education system rests on the principle of equal opportunity. This means equality in admission to education, in teaching arrangements and with regard to learning opportunities. We are happy that learning outcomes are good throughout Finland. Regional differences in learning outcomes were smaller in Finland than in any other OECD country. We take this to mean that the choices we have made in education policy have been right.

In Finland we favour education policy which prevents the division of schools into good and less good, as well as pupils' exclusion and too early streaming. Education belongs to all Finns. Our aim

is to support children whose parents do not value education and the opportunities it brings. It is important for us to prevent a divide between "the haves and the have-nots".

The third - and perhaps the most important - challenge is to secure **favourable conditions for learning and teaching**. Our education system is built on an integrated nine-year comprehensive school. Education is compulsory for all children living permanently in Finland, including citizens of other countries. Tuition, learning materials and school meals are free of charge. A pupil also has the right to free transportation when the distance to school is long or when the way to school is not sufficiently safe. Almost the whole age group completes compulsory schooling. On the whole, educational services are financed from public funds. There are few private schools in Finland.

In Finland almost all children attend preschool. Preschool is planned, systematic education given in day-care centres or in comprehensive schools for one year before actual school starts. At present we are developing out-of-school activities for children. The aim is to give opportunities for comprehensive school pupils to take part in guided and safe club activities before or after school, according to need. We want to offer all children varied and equal opportunities for hobbies.

As for financing, the government grants statutory state aid to education providers. The government pays about 57% of the educational costs. In Finland, municipalities are self-governing and have the right to levy taxes. They provide the remaining 43% of financing.

In international comparisons, Finland's educational expenditure as a percentage of the gross domestic product is average OECD level.

We have increased our input from previous years, but the GDP has also grown, which explains the OECD figures.

The government decides on the allocation of classroom hours to different subjects. The distribution of different subjects in basic education was revised last year. The number of minimum hours is the same. The reform reduced the share of optional subjects and focused teaching on core knowledge areas. Education providers may exceed the minimum determined by the government, if they wish.

We increased classroom hours in mother tongue and literature, in mathematics and in history and civics. Health education is a new subject. The mother tongue and mathematics constitute the basis for all further learning. Knowledge about health and society is important for individuals, but also for society.

We want to avoid fragmentation in the curriculum. This is why one of our foremost education policy tools is the national core curriculum. In our system, the National Board of Education sets the overall aims for education and for subjects within a framework determined by the government. The actual curriculum is designed at the local level on this basis.

At the moment, we are reforming the core curriculum for basic education. The focus is on a systematically progressing entity of preschool and basic education. The aim is to support pupils' personal growth and learning. The curriculum defines good learning in different subjects at different stages more clearly than before. This also gives a good basis for evaluating different aspects of education.

Fourthly, we want to anticipate **future threats**. The school is part of society. Social problems are reflected in school work as well. More and more children live in blended families. People's lives

are often hectic, and too much is expected from children too early.

We have estimated that about 10% of pupils in basic education run the risk of exclusion. They do not get adequate preparation for life and further training. In response to this, we have intensified remedial teaching, special-needs education and other support for pupils with special needs.

Since children's problems with learning are often social in origin, we are trying to improve pupils' overall mental and physical health and social well-being. Pupil welfare is a multi-professional effort, involving school doctors, psychologists and school welfare officers, as well as teachers. By allocating additional resources to regions and schools in need of support, we can make sure that special needs are taken into account in school.

Changes in children's environment require cooperation between educational and other authorities. We shall have to determine how to address problems at school through cross-sectoral cooperation. We have intensified cooperation especially with social and health authorities in order to give a more valid response to problems encountered by children and young people.

All this costs money, but it is much more expensive to let young people remain untrained and become excluded from active society.

The fifth development challenge in Finland is to **evaluate education**. Reliable evaluation ensures high-quality learning outcome. Evaluation must produce regular, varied and comprehensive information about school work and the achievement of aims.

In 2003 we shall establish an evaluation council for primary and secondary education. It will assist the Ministry of Education and education providers in matters concerning evaluation, organise

external evaluations relating to school operations and education policy, and publish the findings nationally.

Decision-making on education needs to be supported by valid information. It is important to develop channels for producing, processing and managing evaluation findings.

At the moment, only half of local authorities in Finland evaluate their education provision and its impact. Our aim is that in 2003 all education providers will systematically assess their education and its outcomes. To this end, we have trained over one thousand local officials and councillors, headteachers and teachers who are responsible for evaluation at the local level.

Systematic development of education requires expert knowledge. Local authorities need an expert director of education who is capable of analysing educational needs and directing local education provision appropriately. Evaluation must also be an inherent part of teaching and learning.

Up to this point, I have not yet said anything about the most important component, **the teacher**. Finns have always valued the teaching profession. There is no shortage of good applicants to teacher training, and only the best are admitted.

In Finland, we have decided to keep the master's degree as a requirement for all teaching posts. Teachers' salaries are not very competitive, but this is not something we at the Ministry of Education can decide. Another essential thing is to increase the services of school doctors, psychologists and welfare officials. Teachers must have support and help in their important work, and they must also have the authority and right to maintain discipline at school. The Finnish Parliament has recently amended school legislation to increase teachers' disciplinary powers.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These are the main elements of Finnish education policy.

Thank you for this chance to be with you today.

Let me finish with words I have often used during my four years as minister:

The task of basic education is to teach children to read, do sums and write and to educate them into good citizens and happy human beings.