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An interview with Henna Virkkunen, Finland's Minister of Education

Posted By [Justin Snider](#) On March 16, 2011 @ 3:55 pm In [High School, International, News, Policy & Reform, Pre-K to 8, Teaching](#) | [23 Comments](#)

The following interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

The Hechinger Report: *It's well-known that Finland's teachers are an elite bunch, with only top students offered the chance to become teachers. It's also no secret that they are well-trained. But take us inside that training for a moment – what does it look like, specifically? How does teacher training in Finland differ from teacher training in other countries?*

Virkkunen: It's a difficult question. Our teachers are really good. One of the main reasons they are so good is because the teaching profession is one of the most famous careers in Finland, so young people want to become teachers. In Finland, we think that teachers are key for the future and it's a very important profession—and that's why all of the young, talented people want to become teachers. All of the teacher-training is run by universities in Finland, and all students do a five-year master's degree. Because they are studying at the university, teacher education is research-based. Students have a lot of supervised teacher-training during their studies. We have something called "training schools"—normally next to universities—where the student teaches and gets feedback from a trained supervisor.

Teachers in Finland can choose their own teaching methods and materials. They are experts of their own work, and they test their own pupils. I think this is also one of the reasons why teaching is such an attractive profession in Finland because teachers are working like academic experts with their own pupils in schools.

The Hechinger Report: *How are teachers evaluated in Finland? How are they held accountable for student learning?*

Virkkunen: Our educational society is based on trust and cooperation, so when we are doing some testing and evaluations, we don't use it for controlling [teachers] but for development. We trust the teachers. It's true that we are all human beings, and of course there are differences in how teachers test pupils, but if we look at the OECD evaluation—PISA, for example—the learning differences among Finnish schools and pupils are the smallest in OECD countries, so it seems that we have a very equal system of good quality.

The Hechinger Report: *How does Finland incorporate immigrants and minorities into its educational system?*

Virkkunen: We haven't had so many immigrants in Finland, but we are going to have more in the future—and we need more because we have an aging population. In some schools, in the areas around Helsinki, more than 30 percent of the pupils are immigrants. It seems that we have been doing good work, also with the immigrants, if we look at PISA results. Normally, if children come from a very different schooling system or society, they have one year in a smaller setting where they study Finnish and maybe some other subjects. We try to raise their level before they come to regular classrooms. We think also that learning one's mother tongue is very important, and that's why we try to teach the mother tongue for all immigrants as well. It's very challenging. I think in Helsinki, they are teaching 44 different mother tongues. The government pays for two-hour lessons each week for these pupils. We think it is very important to know your own tongue—that you can write and read and think in it. Then it's easier also to learn other languages like Finnish or English, or other subjects.

The Hechinger Report: *What roles do teacher unions play in Finland? In the U.S. right now, unions are seen as a big problem standing in the way of reform. What's it like in Finland?*

Virkkunen: It's a totally different situation in Finland. For me, as Minister of Education, our teachers' union has been one of the main partners because we have the same goal: we all want to ensure that the quality of education is good, and we are working very much together with the union. Nearly every week we are in discussions with them. They are very powerful in Finland. Nearly all of the teachers are members. I think we don't have big differences in our thinking. They are very good partners for us.



[1]

Henna Virkkunen, Finland's Minister of Education

The Hechinger Report: *What do you think the U.S. can and should learn from Finland when it comes to public education?*

Virkkunen: It's a very difficult question. An educational system has to serve the local community, and it's very much tied to a country's own history and society, so we can't take one system from another country and put it somewhere else. But I think that teachers are really the key for a better educational system. It's really important to pay attention to teacher training, in-service training and working conditions. Of course, the teachers always say we also have to pay attention to their salaries. But in Finland, it seems that the salaries are not the main reason it's an attractive profession. Teachers aren't very badly paid. They earn the average if you look at other academic professions.

The Hechinger Report: *In the U.S., it's estimated that 50 percent of new teachers quit within five years. I suspect it's different in Finland. Is teaching seen as a lifelong career in Finland?*

Virkkunen: Teaching is a lifelong career in Finland, but right now we are doing an evaluation of why some teachers leave their jobs. The rate isn't very high. It's often men who leave, as they find jobs with higher salaries. We have to develop some kind of mentoring system because the new, young teachers need support. Often the feedback I hear from young teachers is that it is not easy to cooperate with parents, for example, so that is one of the areas where young teachers need support from their colleagues.

The Hechinger Report: *What's something important but not widely known or well understood about public education in Finland?*

Virkkunen: We teach all pupils in the same classrooms. We don't have really good, top schools and very poor, bad schools. We are quite good at giving special support to students with learning difficulties. About 25 percent of our pupils receive some kind of special support, but in regular classrooms—often the teacher has an assistant in the classroom. We also think it is very important that there aren't too many pupils per teacher. We don't have legislation limiting class size, but the average class size for all grades is 21. In first- and second-grade, it's 19.

We think we can have equality and good quality at the same time—that they are not opposites.

Our students spend less time in class than students in other OECD countries. We don't think it helps students learn if they spend seven hours per day at school because they also need time for hobbies, and of course they also have homework.

23 Comments To "An interview with Henna Virkkunen, Finland's Minister of Education"

#1 Comment By [leonie haimson](#) On March 16, 2011 @ 6:18 pm

Thank you for not editing out her remarks on class size. According to Sam Abrams, Finland turned their educational system around in the 1970's when they reduced class size, and eliminated tracking at the same. I think her remarks on inclusion of special needs students is very important as well. I do not believe that this can be done w/out small classes. Unfortunately, that is exactly what the NYC DOE is trying to do, with the misguided support of Bill Gates and Arne Duncan.

#2 Comment By [John Bennett](#) On March 16, 2011 @ 7:35 pm

There a number of characteristics of the education systems, the teachers, and their education / training that are both different from ours in the US. Most importantly however I believe would be everyone and every effort working in concert. Not surprisingly then, I believe the status in the US shows prescriptive solutions, questionable union positions, and lots of finger pointing.

#3 Comment By [Tricia Hallson](#) On March 16, 2011 @ 11:48 pm

Great interview. I have been to Finland and was able to appreciate beautiful Helsinki, and the standard of living is very respectable there.

I can draw many parallels to teaching where I live in Central Canada, and in many ways I think we also have a school system to be proud of. Two of the things that stand out that we could learn from I think are the smaller class sizes and teaching children in their mother tongue that immigrate from other cultures. We have a rapidly growing immigrant population here and I can't help but think after reading this of what a sensible strategy this is to employ.

I also admire Finland's socialist strategy in regard to education. We have a great deal of social and educational problems that can be traced back to child poverty rates that are not addressed by our government. There lunch and supplies are

included in a free education. If you go on to higher education the fees are paltry (although in our province through tax incentives we have thoroughly improved on this). This is a great strategy to provide hope that there is a better life that is attainable through education, because education is highly attainable.

One last thing, with union breaking in the United States making educators fear for their livelihoods, how do they expect intelligent, well educated individuals to stay in the teaching profession? The measures undertaken in Wisconsin and being considered in like minded states are beyond measured cuts. They speak of a total lack of respect for the professionals that are responsible for educating the future of their country. How unfortunate.

#4 Comment By [Ellen Valle](#) On March 17, 2011 @ 8:04 am

I'm an American who has lived in Finland for many years; my daughter has been through the whole educational system, from kindergarten through university. I've also myself taught university students who were training to become English teachers. I thus have a fairly good overview of the system, and I can say that by and large it works beautifully; very few children fall through the cracks. There are two factors, however, which have made the system relatively painless to apply: first of all the implicit and explicit egalitarianism of the society as a whole (the famous Scandinavian "welfare state"), and secondly the relative ethnic homogeneity, until quite recently, of the population. The first is of course anathema to Americans (unfortunately); the second is becoming obsolete everywhere in the world. I'm happy to have had the chance to live here — this is a good way to live. There have been an increasing number of studies lately showing that societies with the smallest inequalities of income and standard of living are the happiest; I would refer American readers to the series of articles published last year by the late Tony Judt in the New York Review of Books. And without this kind of egalitarianism you can't have an educational system like the Finnish one. Education doesn't exist in isolation from the rest of the society; it's an integral part of it, and both reflects and shapes its values.

#5 Comment By [Sandra Stotsky](#) On March 17, 2011 @ 10:15 am

1. Did the Hechinger Institute interviewer find out what percentage of grade 9 students leaving compulsory education enroll in the upper secondary general studies high schools for 3 years? What percentage enroll in upper secondary vocational schools?
2. Did the interviewer find out what the difference in academic training is between prospective elementary and secondary content teachers?
3. Did the interviewer find out what the content of the academic coursework is for a BA degree for the prospective elementary teacher who is admitted to the department of educational sciences (education program major) after graduation from an upper secondary general studies program and passing the matriculation exam?
4. Did the interviewer find out what the content of the academic coursework is for a BA degree for the prospective teacher of a subject in grades 7-12?

#6 Comment By [Kari Rajala](#) On March 17, 2011 @ 3:47 pm

For Sandra:

1. In hole Finland about 50-50. In bigger towns maybe 60 to general high schools but some parts of Finland 60% to vocational schools.

[2]

- 2.-4.

Teacher training in Finland (in English)

[3]

#7 Pingback By [Education in Finland | Hokowhitu School](#) On March 17, 2011 @ 5:27 pm

[...] Australia, Canada and USA? Here's an interview with the Finnish Minister of Education. (link here) An interview with Henna Virkkunen, Finland's Minister of Education By Justin Snider The [...]

#8 Comment By [Patrick Groff](#) On March 17, 2011 @ 7:44 pm

I notice in the interview with Finland's education minister that she never indicates that this country is different from the U.S. in that it does not lump its children into schools that service either children from upper-income families, as versus ones living in low-income homes, as is the case in the U.S. The horrific effect of this U.S. practice is that many more teachers are fired from the first schools above, than from the latter ones. In short, teachers in the first group only rarely are said to be ineffective. To the contrary, the second type of teachers are regularly accused of this dereliction. The U.S practice of blaming these latter teachers of failure of duty supposedly is compensated for by applications of much federal money to their school districts. Unfortunately, that has been a noticable failure, much to the agony of the teachers in question since it is yet another means to degrade them.

#9 Pingback By [Teaching in Finland](#) « [Center for Teaching](#) On March 18, 2011 @ 5:49 am

[...] Snider wrote a recent story in the Huffington Post and Hechinger Report based on an interview with Henna Virkkunen, the Minister [...]

#10 Comment By [Russ Coles](#) On March 18, 2011 @ 8:15 am

What is truly astonishing is the success of English as second language training in Finland. English-speaking schools in Canada need to figure out this secret so that they can adopt the strategies for their French as a 2nd language education so that they can actually create a bilingual (French/English) population.

#11 Pingback By [A World Out of Balance – Do We Still Value Our Children? | Antipandemonium](#) On March 18, 2011 @ 9:13 am

[...] We certainly don't treat them with the esteem they are getting in Finland! ^[4]. [...]

#12 Comment By [Els Heijnen-Maathuis](#) On March 18, 2011 @ 9:13 am

Finland is in this regard not so different from some of the other European mainland countries and their education systems. In the Netherlands there are hardly any private PRIMARY schools, which means that children from all different backgrounds (whether the child of a minister or of a street-sweeper) go to the same public school. This creates responses to education that acknowledge and respond to difference and diversity of learners and learning, while teachers are trained to be creative, out-of-the-box thinkers, reflective practitioners and using a lot of inclusive formative assessment methods (versus standardized tests and exams).

#13 Comment By [robert fazio](#) On March 18, 2011 @ 2:10 pm

Class size to me is the key less is more. If we can get our teachers to understand that you can't teach one way we will become a better organization. Rigor, relevancy and relationships also are very important. Principal 24 years featured on 60 minutes news program in 1996.

#14 Comment By [TLD](#) On March 18, 2011 @ 8:05 pm

The quoted figures that high schools in NYC average 23 to 27 students per class makes the teacher-denigrators stand up and say, how is that crowded? I've often wondered exactly how those figures were derived – and have come to the conclusion that the only feasible method was to take the number of students in the high school, and then divide by the number of teachers. That artificially reduces the number of students per class for a variety of reasons. For one, students usually attend 7 class periods, whereas teachers teach 5 (one class period is for prep work, the other is for an administrative duty, and everyone gets a duty-free lunch period). Classes in NYC high schools have more like 30 to 35 students per class.

With the current demonization of teachers as part-time, derelict, overpaid, incompetent, ineffective dolts, you are correct in asking, why would anyone want to devote their lives to it these days?

#15 Comment By [Jane](#) On March 19, 2011 @ 1:46 am

Good article about how Finland handles teachers and public education, and they are tops in student achievement!

Lise

#16 Comment By [Lise](#) On March 19, 2011 @ 1:48 am

Interesting how the Fins, who are #1 in student achievement treat teachers.

#17 Comment By [Margaret Lewis](#) On March 21, 2011 @ 2:33 am

How wonderful it must be to be so valued by your community as a teacher. I am a trained foreign language teacher and

the comments about immigrants continuing with their own language is supported by world wide research. Well done Finland!

I love my job. I have been teaching since 1974 and have seen a lot of changes. I have learned much from my peers and my students. I have also learned because of being a parent. Ausralia, my country, needs clever, exciting people to teach the clever, exciting students!

#18 Comment By [Tracey Breese](#) On March 22, 2011 @ 11:34 pm

I agree with all the above from Margaret. I also think that a question needed to be asked about the number of hours face to face that the Finnish teach. This far outweighs the debate around class sizes. I went to a John Hattie Presentation yesterday and the number of hours that we teach is about 1500 whilst our finnish counterparts teach about 800 hours face to face. This is the significant aspect on any teacher effectiveness debate. How much time to teachers have to plan and track individual student achievement? If we want individual excellence, we must demand more time.

#19 Comment By [Charles R. Cooper](#) On March 23, 2011 @ 12:59 am

Finnish teachers will bask in the glow of this report. International comparative assessments of school achievement confirm the consistently high effectiveness of Finnish teachers and schools. American public school teachers will justifiably lament their comparably less favorable situation. I know an experienced high school English teacher in the Sacramento CA region who must teach a total of 200 students in five classes each day. This onerous workload is not unusual. He and his colleagues have scant time for coordinating and planning. Their time with individual students is severely limited. California public school teachers are well represented by a statewide teachers' union, yet further draconian school funding cuts are coming soon as the state tumbles into deeper economic decline. New resources are not likely to come for several years. Cry California. Cry teachers. Cry students.

#20 Pingback By [Reformation of Kannada Script: A brain-dead idea borrowed from the "Dravidians" | Sanskrit-Animus Begotten of Sin](#) On April 3, 2011 @ 9:41 am

[...] ^[4]. [...]

#21 Pingback By [A National Education That Beats the Tiger Mom Approach | Strollerderby](#) On April 5, 2011 @ 3:30 pm

[...] recently came across this interesting (but short) interview with the Minister of Education, Henna Virkkunen. Attributes success to small class sizes, a good working partnership with the [...]

#22 Comment By [Lari](#) On April 20, 2011 @ 9:55 am

3. Did the interviewer find out what the content of the academic coursework is for a BA degree for the prospective elementary teacher who is admitted to the department of educational sciences (education program major) after graduation from an upper secondary general studies program and passing the matriculation exam?
4. Did the interviewer find out what the content of the academic coursework is for a BA degree for the prospective teacher of a subject in grades 7-12?

In Finland, teachers need a minimum of a Masters Degree to be qualified.

#23 Pingback By [Leren van de VS en van Finland | Wonderijs.](#) On August 23, 2011 @ 8:18 am

[...] van de VS en van Finland Posted on August 23, 2011 by hminkema Finse minister van Onderwijs Henna Virkkunen (klik op de foto voor een [...])

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[2] : <http://www.oph.fi/english/education>

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[4] : http://hechingerreport.org/content/an-interview-with-henna-virkkunen-finlands-minister-of-education_..

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