

Primary and lower secondary education in Finland



Photo: Liisa Takala

School education begins in the year a child turns 7 and lasts 9 years. Before that, all 6-year-olds have one-year pre-primary education. Pupils usually go to the school nearest to home. Schools and teachers have a lot of autonomy in deciding how to organise schooling in practice.

ENROLMENT TO PRE-PRIMARY, PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION

Parents or guardians enrol their children to education by contacting the local education department of the municipality where they live. Information about school enrolment can be found on the municipalities' websites

PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATION

Pre-primary education is mandatory for children aged six and lasts one year. Pre-primary education is provided both at schools and early childhood education centers – sometimes called daycare centers or kindergartens. Pre-school activities usually take 4 hours a day. Holidays follow the same schedule as in comprehensive schools. In pre-primary education children develop learning-to-learn skills through play and joy.

PRIMARY AND LOWER SECONDARY EDUCATION CONSIST OF GRADES 1–9

Primary and lower secondary education follows pre-primary education and is provided in comprehensive schools. Comprehensive schools have grades 1–9. Education starts the year a child turns 7 and lasts until pupils are 15–16 years old.

Almost all schools are public and there are very few private schools in Finland. From the pupil's point of view there are no differences between public and private schools as they differ only administratively.

EDUCATION IS FREE

Pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education are free in Finland. Textbooks and other learning materials are also free of charge. Pupils get a free school meal every day. Healthcare and welfare services are also free. School nurses, dentists, school psychologists and social workers are available through schools. If pupils live far from school, they get free school transportation.

COMPULSORY SUBJECTS AND TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES

There are 18 compulsory subjects in total during primary and lower secondary education. In grades 1 and 2 there are 9 subjects, and the number of subjects increases in upper grades. At which grade individual subjects are taught and which subjects can be studied as optional studies, varies between schools.

In grades 1–6 the same class teacher teaches most of the subjects

and in grades 7–9 there is a subject teacher for each subject.

Subjects in comprehensive schools:

- mother tongue and literature (Finnish or Swedish)
- the other national language (Swedish or Finnish)
- foreign language
- mathematics
- biology
- geography
- physics
- chemistry
- health education
- religion/ethics
- history and social studies
- music
- visual arts
- crafts
- physical education
- home economics
- guidance counselling
- optional subjects

In addition to individual school subjects, pupils learn broader skills and transversal competences which are considered important topics in today's society and in pupils' future life. These competences cross subject boundaries.

Finnish primary and lower secondary education emphasises the following skills and competences:

- thinking and learning to learn
- cultural competence, interaction and self-expression
- taking care of oneself and managing daily life
- multiliteracy
- ICT Competence
- working life competence and entrepreneurship
- participation, involvement and building a sustainable future

Facts about Finnish primary and lower secondary education:

- 2,210 comprehensive schools
- 555,000 pupils
- average school size 250 pupils
- education compulsory since 1921
- free school meal since 1948
- 2 official languages: Finnish and Swedish
- 90% of schools Finnish-speaking, 10% Swedish-speaking

FINNISH PUPILS HAVE SHORT SCHOOL DAYS

The school year has 190 working days. It is divided into autumn and spring semesters. School term begins mid-August and ends at the end of May or beginning of June. The summer holiday is approximately 10 weeks. In addition, schools have autumn, Christmas and winter breaks and there may be local variation concerning holidays.

The minimum number of lessons per week varies from 20 to 30. Optional subjects may increase the number of lessons. Daily and weekly timetables are decided in the schools. Many schools also organise activities before or after the school day for pupils in grades 1–2.

The length of the pupils' school days is amongst the lowest in the world in Finland. Also, the amount of homework is low compared to other countries.

Grade	Minimum lessons per week
1–2	20
3	22
4	24
5–6	25
7–8	29
9	30

The length of one lesson is 45 minutes.

PUPIL ASSESSMENT

There are no national tests in Finnish comprehensive schools. Instead, all pupil assessment is done by teachers. Assessment is not only done at the end of semesters, but also throughout the school year. Teachers give feedback regularly and help pupils notice their strengths and challenges. Teachers as-

sess pupils' learning in various ways, for example through exams, class work and participation in class activities. Pupils also self-assess their learning. Parents or guardians are regularly updated on their children's progress.

Pupils get a school report at least once every school year. In lower grades the assessment is written and descriptive. At the latest in the grade 4 the assessment is numerical. The scale used is 4–10.

10	Excellent
9	Very good
8	Good
7	Satisfactory
6	Moderate
5	Adequate
4	Fail

FOCUS ON SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE

All pupils have the right to individual guidance and support for learning.

This support can include, for example, modified teaching materials, additional teaching, or support for the pupil's special needs. There is a special education teacher in every school. Private teaching after the school day is uncommon. Repeating a grade is rare in Finland. Only 0.3% of pupils repeat a grade each year.

SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS ARE TRUSTED WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF AUTONOMY

Municipalities are responsible for arranging pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education. They have a lot of autonomy and can decide independently how to arrange schooling in their area, as long as they follow the law and regulations. Because of this, there are variations between schools.

Teachers also enjoy a high level of autonomy. They can independently choose their teaching methods and the materials they use. The teaching profession is traditionally well respected in Finland.

Many schools provide special services for pupils with migrant and multilingual background. If the pupil's native language is not Finnish or Swedish they can participate in

- **Preparatory education for primary and lower secondary education.** The aim is to learn basic language skills and to become familiar with the Finnish school and school culture. Preparatory education lasts one school year. Pupils can move on to a regular class as soon as they can the language of instruction well enough. However, integration to a regular class begins earlier, first in subjects such as physical education and music, where knowledge of the language of instruction is not as important as in some other subjects.
- **Finnish/Swedish as a second language teaching.**
- **The pupil's mother tongue teaching.** Also Finnish returnees who have learnt their mother tongue skills while living abroad can participate in the teaching.