



International Network for School Social Work

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What School Social Work is like in Finland

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Finland in a Nutshell

Finland, capital Helsinki, is one of the five Nordic Countries and is situated between Sweden, Norway and Russia. Finland became independent on 6.12.1917. The President is Sauli Niinistö and the Finnish parliament consists of 200 congress members, who serve four year terms. Finland has a population of 5.5 million people and is called the “Land of a Thousand Lakes”. Finnish and Swedish are the official languages and Sami, the language of the indigenous people of Lapland, is official in certain municipalities.

The School system in Finland

In Finland free education for all children starts in pre-school at the age of 6 years. Elementary school begins at the age of 7 years and compulsory education lasts from 1st to 9th grade. In 2013 Finland implemented a youth guarantee including guaranteed employment, and further education in upper secondary school, vocational education, apprenticeship training, a youth workshop, rehabilitation or a place in some other form of study. Finnish National Agency for Education (EDUFI) provides more detailed information about the Finnish school system, education and youth guarantee.

https://www.oph.fi/download/146428_Finnish_Education_in_a_Nutshell.pdf

<http://www.koulutustakuu.fi/eng/>

School social work is based on the pupil and student welfare law

School social work in Finland started in 1966. The Finnish School Social Workers Association (Koulukuraattorit ry- Skolkuratorer rf) celebrated its 45th anniversary in 2018. The Association supports Finnish school social workers’ professional development by arranging every second year a two-day seminar and is active in giving statements to the parliament regarding education and student welfare legislation.

The pupil and student welfare law (Oppilas- ja opiskelijahuoltolaki 1287/2013) that came into force 2014 made some changes in ways of organizing student welfare services in schools by focusing on preventive work and school community approach. Shooting incidents in schools in 2007 and 2008 in which students and staff were killed led up to some changes in legislation. After these tragic incidents there was a strong political will and conviction that children and young people with

mental health and social problems should be recognized and offered professional evaluation and support at school.

Student welfare services including school social work are organized and financed by the municipalities for all pre-schools, elementary schools, vocational and upper general schools. The purpose of the law is to promote both individual student wellbeing, learning and health as well as the health, wellbeing and safety of the whole school community.

According to the pupil and student welfare law the school staff must pay attention to students' social, psychological and health issues and guide students to student welfare services. Teachers are encouraged (with permission of the student) to bring concerns about a student to a school professional, school social worker, psychologist or school nurse and to a multi-professional team if needed. The legislation regulates also about support and co-operation with families, the student's rights for privacy and sets a time limit of 7 days for the appointment, or within one day if the student is in crisis.

The whole school approach

The community-based student welfare work is planned and organized by school community welfare groups. These groups are usually lead by the school vice principal and are multi-professional including school social worker, nurse, psychologist, teacher, 1-2 student representatives and one parent representative if possible. The school welfare groups are supposed to plan, take measures and evaluate the outcome in well-being on the school community level. Community-based work can be anything from implementing different intervention strategies to organizing wellness days, student cafes or workshops on different themes.

The national institute for health and welfare (*Terveyden ja hyvinvoinnin laitos [THL]*) organizes every second year a nationwide digital school welfare inquiry for students on 4th and 5th grade and their parents, students at 7th and 8th grades and for upper general/vocational school 1st and 2nd year students. The results for the school are analyzed in the school's welfare group and used in planning action. *EDUFI* and *THL* also gather data of how the pupil and student welfare legislation has been implemented.

School social work

School social workers commonly work on social issues like family and relationship issues, problems with interaction or peer relations, economical or housing questions, addictions, safety issues like family or honor-related violence or sexual harassment. School-related questions like loneliness, school atmosphere, school fatigue, bullying and cyber-bullying, study related stress and lack of coping strategies are also common issues for school social workers.

Besides individual casework school social workers also work in classrooms and facilitate group activities such as practicing social and problem-solving skills. Improving the group dynamics or solving conflicts using restorative circles and mediating is also done by some school social workers. School social workers often work with networks both inside and outside the school including families, child welfare services, youth and adult social work, mental health services and NGO's.

Digital services and more interactive ways of working with children and young students are recent challenges for school social workers. Making Podcasts together with or for students, digital courses (for example for stress management, handling anxiety, time management) and the website for students <http://www.toisenasteenyhteys.fi/fi/> are some examples of using the digital world.

School social work in Finland continues to develop suitable and effective ways of promoting student welfare using local resources to meet the rapidly changing challenges and school culture.