



Finland

Sari Sarkomaa
Minister of Education and Science



Ms. Sari Sarkomaa, Minister of Education and Science of Finland, is responsible for matters related to education and research. She was appointed as Minister in April 2007, having been a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1999. She has also been an active participant of the National Coalition Party where she has worked as a social secretary for the Party's parliamentary group during 1996–1999, the vice-chairman of the Party 1999–2004 and the Party council chairman 2004–2008. Ms. Sarkomaa has had a number of municipal confidential posts, such as Chairman of the Helsinki Region Environmental Board, the City Board's Representative in the City Transport Committee, a member of Helsinki and Uusimaa's Hospital District Executive Board, a member of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council (YTV) and member of the Board of Healthcare. She is also a member of the Helsinki City Council since 1997. Ms. Sari Sarkomaa has a Master's Degree in Health Care and she has worked in temporary posts in health care during 1988–1991.

Equal opportunities in education

Good quality pre-primary and basic education is the foundation of life-long learning. Every child in the world should be guaranteed an opportunity for such education. In Finland, the key aim in education policy is to assure a high quality of education and safeguard everyone's fundamental right to education, irrespective of their place of residence, gender, language or socioeconomic standing. General compulsory education and the right to receive pre-primary and basic education free of charge are provided by law. Furthermore, education providers have a statutory duty to organise instruction according to pupils' age and capabilities. In line with our long tradition of equal opportunity in education, the Government allocates resources to quality enhancement in basic education and, in particular, to measures supporting pupils' learning and well-being.

The Government wants to consolidate the right of pupils to receive necessary support as early as possible. In terms of equality, it is important that pupils are able to study in their local school and in their own teaching group regardless of their need for support. It is equally important to guarantee pupils' right to study in a special group in their own school or in a special school when it is in their best interests. The competences of special needs teachers are needed to complement class and subject teachers' work. Each pupil should be able to complete basic education; in Finland already more than 99 per cent of pupils reach this goal.

It is not possible to provide inclusive education and teach heterogeneous groups without competent teaching staff. In Finland, every teacher has the duty not only to teach and guide, but also to help pupils develop their learning skills and plan and assess their own learning. Teachers must be able to differentiate teaching, apply a wide range of methods and use the heterogeneity of pupils as a resource in learning. Teachers must be able both to recognise pupils' need for support and to provide individual support. In Finland, all teachers are required to have a master's level degree. Teachers have at their disposal flexible forms of support that enhance pupils' learning and well-being without stigmatising them. In



addition to remedial teaching and part- and full-time special needs education, the pupil is entitled to guidance counselling and to support provided by the student welfare services.

Our aim is a more planned use of the various forms of support. Cooperation with pupils' parents and with social welfare, youth and health professionals is the key to success. Multi-professional cooperation is increasingly needed - teachers and schools must not be left to tackle their problems alone.

In the development of education, it is vital to have a common line of action, which is expressed in national legislation, strategies and structures. The guiding principle in this work is confidence in the competence of schools and those who work in the municipal educational administration and in their ability to take responsibility for quality education, and the delegation of decision making this entails. What is important is the work carried out in schools and good interaction between the teacher and pupil, which should be open, encouraging and based on mutual respect. In Finland, we consider it an important principle in the development of school culture that children and young people are empowered to participate in the preparation of and decision making on matters that concern them.

Every child and young person in the world deserves to be treated as a valuable, equal individual.