

ENSURING ACCESS TO EDUCATION: SUPPORT MEASURES FOR UKRAINIAN REFUGEE PUPILS IN FINLAND

This article deals with the participation of Ukrainian refugees in education in Finland and the support provided for them. The focus in the article is on comprehensive school education (ISCED 1&2 in international classification). The following terms refer to the same level of education: primary and lower secondary education; basic education; comprehensive education; comprehensive school education.

Introduction. Since the outbreak of the war in February 2022, many people have fled from Ukraine because of the Russian invasion. More than 70 000 Ukrainians have applied for a temporary protection in Finland since the beginning of the war two and a half years ago.

In general, Finland supports all immigrants and refugees in the same way in many areas of life, but there are, however, some support measures targeted especially for Ukrainians. For example, government provides funding for several purposes which aim to help and alleviate the lives of Ukrainians in a new country.

As for educational support, the state has granted education providers additional earmarked funding. This special funding has been allocated to the following education levels:

- early childhood education and care;
- pre-primary, primary and lower secondary education;
- general upper secondary education;
- vocational education and training;
- higher education;
- adult education.

For instance, Finland has also supported by producing information. There are two types of information: information targeted at Ukrainian pupils, students, and their guardians – and much of it can be found in Ukrainian. The other type of information is aimed at Finnish education providers because the situation was new for them as they had to organise a place of study and the needed support measures for several Ukrainians at quite short notice.

Refugees from Ukraine participate in education in Finland at all education levels. In 2024, a total number of approximately 15 500 Ukrainians participated in various forms of education at all levels, excluding higher education. The figures at different levels have mainly increased during the year 2024.

The status of Ukrainian refugees in Finland. People who fled from Ukraine can have two kinds of status:

• *Pupils with residence permit:* People fleeing the war in Ukraine can apply for temporary protection when arriving in Finland and will receive a residence permit immediately as agreed among the EU countries. School-aged children who have a residence permit have the right to go to school, but they are not obliged to education. However, it is recommended that Ukrainian school-aged children would attend a Finnish school while living in Finland. Schools aim to create a safe and supportive environment for all pupils, and everyday life and its routines provide security and continuity for children who have fled the war. In addition, they will learn the language of school, meet their peers, and make new friends at school.

• *Pupils with municipality of residence:* People who have fled Ukraine and have a residence permit and have lived in Finland for a year, can apply for a municipality of residence. When a person has received a municipality of residence, they have the same rights, services, and obligations as people permanently resident in Finland. For example, municipalities offer integration services to immigrants, such as language courses, and regional well-being areas provide health and social services.

With the municipality of residence, all children between the ages of 6 and 18 are subject to compulsory education. Therefore, they need to take part in pre-primary, primary and

lower secondary as well as upper secondary education or preparatory education for an upper secondary qualification (TUVA).

The majority of Ukrainians living in Finland have lived there for over a year and have a municipality of residence in Finland. Also, most children in early childhood education and care as well as compulsory school-aged children have a municipality of residence. In August 2024 almost 80 % of Ukrainian pupils in comprehensive schools had a municipality of residence, in other words, were obliged to schooling.

There are some Ukrainian pupils who attend both a Finnish school and participate in distance education at a Ukrainian school, but however, we do not have data on the number of such pupils.

Primary and lower secondary education in Finland

Background information

The administration of primary and lower secondary education is organised as follows:

- education policy is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Culture,
- the Finnish National Agency for Education, a national agency, is responsible for implementing the policy aims and, for example, developing the national core curricula,
- regional administration monitors that the actions of education providers are based on legislation,
- municipalities (the expression municipality also include cities and towns) are responsible for arranging primary and lower secondary education for all 7–15-year-olds living in a municipality. There were 309 municipalities in Finland in 2024.

Finland has approximately 400 education providers for primary and lower secondary education. Some 95% of the providers are municipalities, but a provider can also be a joint municipal authority, the state or a private community or foundation. As a municipality is by far the most common provider of primary and lower secondary education, the term municipality will be used in the text to refer to the local education provider.

Decentralised system of education

In Finland we have so called culture of trust as a common ethos in our society. That can be seen, for example, in that we have very decentralized system of education. While national laws and regulations set the framework for primary and lower secondary education, much of the decision-making power lies with municipalities. Municipalities have high-level autonomy to arrange education in practice as long as they follow the law and other regulations.

The national administration level is rather thin and there is not much control by top-level. Instead, national level steers municipalities mainly through information and funding.

There is variation in how municipalities and schools implement the national core curriculum. The Finnish National Agency for Education draws up a national core curriculum for basic education. It includes, among other things, the main contents, and goals for education in general and for each school subject. Municipalities draw up their own more specific local curriculum according to these national lines.

Teachers also have high-level autonomy. They have freedom to choose the teaching methods and materials. Teachers are highly educated with a master's degree. There is a general thought that a teacher is the one who knows best what works for their school, their class, and their pupils. Teachers are considered highly trusted professionals in society.

Due to the high-level independency of municipalities, schools, and teachers, there may be differences between schools and teachers in the way they teach, what material they use, and which contents of the subjects are emphasized.

Compulsory education

All 6–18-year-old students participate in pre-primary, primary and lower secondary, upper secondary education, or preparatory education for an upper secondary qualification.

Children start comprehensive school education in the year they turn 7 years and finish that level education in the year they turn 16.

Before comprehensive school education there is one-year compulsory pre-primary education for all 6-year-old children. After comprehensive education pupils must continue to upper secondary level – either to general upper secondary or vocational education and training – or preparatory education for an upper secondary qualification in-between lower and upper secondary education.

Compulsory education ends when a student has completed an upper secondary qualification or turned 18-year-old (In Finland a person becomes legally adult when they turn 18).

All compulsory school-aged children have the right to pupil welfare services. They support pupils' physical health and mental well-being. School nurses, dentists, school psychologists and social workers are available through school. There is also free school transportation for those living far from school. One special feature of the Finnish education system is free school meal for everyone in compulsory education. The free school meal system has existed since 1948.

Funding of primary and lower secondary education

The funding for primary and lower secondary level comes mainly from municipal budgets (75%) and is supplemented by government transfers (25%). This government funding is not earmarked so municipalities can decide independently on the allocation of the funds.

In addition to government transfers to municipalities, municipalities can apply for special government grants earmarked at different purposes.

Pupil assessment

There are no national examinations in Finnish comprehensive schools. Instead, the assessment is done by teachers. Assessment is not only done at the end of semesters, but also during the school year. The aim of continuous assessment is to guide and support pupils in their learning process. Teachers give feedback regularly and help pupils notice their strengths and challenges.

The structure of primary and lower secondary education

In 2023, there were approximately 2 100 comprehensive schools in Finland, with a total of 552 000 pupils.

As Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish, the teaching language in a school is either Finnish or Swedish. The majority of the population is Finnish – speaking (85%), therefore also most of the schools are Finnish-speaking, some 1900 schools. The number of Swedish – speaking schools is 200 (around 5% of the population is Swedish speaking).

Comprehensive school education covers grades 1-9. It is divided into two grade groups: grades 1-6 at primary level and grades 7-9 at lower secondary level. There is typically one class teacher for grades 1-6, and for grades 7-9 a separate subject teacher for each subject. Despite of this division into two grade groups, this level of education has a single structure; the two levels combine administratively one school.

In practice there are different kinds of individual schools as it is up to municipalities to decide on the practicalities. There are schools with grades 1-9 in one unit, schools with grades 1-6 in one and grades 7-9 in another unit. Or, for example, there can be a school with grades 1-2 and another school with grades 3-9.

In autumn 2024 there were approximately 6 200 Ukrainian pupils in Finnish comprehensive schools. The number has increased as a year earlier the number was 3 800.

Support forms for immigrant pupils in primary and lower secondary education.

Pupils with immigrant background attend the same mainstream education and are given the same general support services as other pupils such as support in learning. The level of education and the year grade for an immigrant pupil is defined according to her/his age.

There are also targeted support measures; municipalities can apply for special discretionary government grants earmarked for example for the support of pupils with an immigrant background and for improving the conditions for learning by:

- teaching the national languages, Finnish and Swedish as a second language;
- teaching immigrant pupil's own mother tongue;
- support for learning difficulties arising from language-related problems;
- providing remedial instruction for immigrant pupils.

Preparatory education for basic education. Municipalities and schools may provide instruction that prepares immigrant pupils for basic education. Municipalities are encouraged to arrange preparatory education with special state funding; they get double state grant per pupil in preparatory basic education for one year.

Preparatory education is for pupils aged 6-16 who do not yet have skills in Finnish or Swedish well enough to begin their education in a Finnish or Swedish speaking school. The aim is to learn sufficient language skills so that a pupil can manage everyday situations in Finnish or Swedish. In addition, one of the aims is that pupils become familiar with the Finnish school system.

Preparatory education for basic education is seamlessly linked to comprehensive school education and is offered in comprehensive schools. Municipalities have two options for how to organise preparatory education.

Pupils can participate in class-based preparatory education alongside other pupils with an immigrant background. In this model, they are integrated into comprehensive school education in some subjects, such as arts and physical education. In these subjects, language skills are not that important than in some academic subjects, and therefore it is possible for preparatory education pupils to participate in teaching together with Finnish or Swedish speaking pupils.

Another option is to organise preparatory education inclusively in a comprehensive school in a Finnish or Swedish speaking class. This approach is especially in use with younger pupils in grades 1 and 2. Preparatory education can be arranged in this way also for only one individual pupil.

In preparatory education every pupil gets an individual education plan. The pupil's age and skills determine the content and aims of preparatory education she/he will receive.

In preparatory education pupils get around 25 hours of teaching in a week for a one year. Preparatory education may end sooner, and a pupil can be removed to general basic education as soon as she/he can follow teaching in Finnish or Swedish. The teacher assesses the pupil's skills and decides whether she/he can transfer to general education.

There were almost 1 500 Ukrainian pupils participating in preparatory education for basic education in August 2024. The number have decreased significantly as in August 2023 the number was near 2 800. The decline may be explained by the issue that the number of new school-aged children coming from Ukraine has not grown as rapidly as before, as preparatory education is the first stage at where education begins for most pupils with immigrant background.

Instruction in languages

Finnish/Swedish as a second language. Pupils with immigrant background receive special instruction in languages. Learning Finnish/Swedish language is considered an important way for immigrants to integrate into Finnish society. Finnish speaking schools provide lessons for Finnish as a second language, and Swedish speaking schools for Swedish as a second language. Second language instruction is provided for pupils whose skills in the language of instruction are insufficient for functioning as an equal member of the school community in daily social situations and interactions.

Municipalities receive extra state funding for second language teaching. The funding covers 3 lessons per week for a group of a minimum of 4 pupils. Pupils can have second language lessons up to six years from the start of participation in comprehensive school education.

In the school year 2023/24 a total amount of around 53 200 pupils in Finnish comprehensive schools received lessons for Finnish as a second language, and 1150 pupils

for Swedish as a second language. Data on the number of Ukrainian pupils receiving second language lessons is not available.

Teaching immigrants' mother tongue. In Finland, it is considered important to also maintain immigrants' own language and culture. This is prescribed even in the Constitution of Finland; according to it, everyone living in Finland has the right to keep and develop their own language and culture.

Many municipalities and schools provide lessons in pupils' mother tongue. Municipalities are recommended to do so by providing them with special funding; municipalities receive a special earmarked state grant for that purpose.

In 2023, there were pupils' own mother tongue lessons in total 59 different languages for over 20 000 pupils. Around 1 200 Ukrainian pupils participated in Ukrainian language teaching in that year.

Concluding remarks. This article described how comprehensive education is organised in Finland and what kinds of support measures are available for Ukrainian pupils.

This overview describes the main types of support provided for Ukrainian learners in Finland. Finland wants to help and support Ukrainian children, pupils, and students who have had to leave their homes and adapt to a new country. Every child should have the right to learn, grow and develop without fear or uncertainty, but unfortunately this is not always possible. Finland wants to provide Ukrainian children with a safe and peaceful environment and quality education and give children faith, and hope for a good future. Finland wants to support Ukraine as long as the war continues and there is a need for a help like this.

Useful sources: Information at the sites of the Finnish National Agency for Education and Ministry of Education and Culture:

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7. Finnish education in a nutshell. URL: <https://www.oph.fi/en/statistics-and-publications/publications/finnish-education-nutshell>.

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