

# Finland raises the compulsory school age to 18 years

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OLLI KANGAS – EUROPEAN SOCIAL POLICY NETWORK

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*Almost 10% of Finnish youngsters leave school at the age of 16 (i.e. when compulsory schooling ceases) with only basic education. In order to combat social exclusion caused by low educational attainment, the Finnish Government has decided to extend the upper age limit for compulsory education from 16 to 18. The aim is to increase the chances for everyone to complete at least secondary level education.*



## Description

On 15 October 2020, Prime Minister Sanna Marin's centre-left Finnish Government submitted to Parliament a bill on extension of the compulsory education age from 16 to 18 years. The President promulgated the Act on Compulsory Education (*Oppivelvollisuuslaki*, 1214/2020) on 30 December 2020. The Act will be effective from 1 August 2021.

Finland was in the past often praised for its excellent results in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which regularly measures 15-year-olds' reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills. However, these results have declined. The overall scores are dropping, and the number of top performers is decreasing, while the number of low performers is increasing. Girls are still doing well, but there are problems with boys, who are significantly lagging behind the girls (OECD, 2021). Educational achievements among children and youngsters from an immigrant background lag behind those of the native population by two to three years (Oma Linja, 2016; Finnish Government, 2019).

Almost 10% of Finnish youngsters leave school aged 16, i.e. when compulsory schooling ceases, with only basic education (Pekkarinen, 2018). Low educational attainment strongly correlates with exclusion from employment. 36% of those who were not studying at the age of 18 were unemployed at the age of 28. The

corresponding share was 15% for those still in education when they were 18 (Seuri et al., 2018). The employment rate among those with only basic level education is 50%, whereas it is 75% among those with secondary level education.

Furthermore, boys with only basic education have a significantly higher probability of committing crimes compared to those who continue their studies. During the 10-year follow-up period after admission to the secondary level, the percentage of young people with a criminal record is 10 points lower among boys who have continued their education compared with boys with basic educational attainment (Huttunen et al., 2019).

According to the Marin Government, these figures mean that education and training provide the best safeguard against social exclusion and lack of prospects in life. Investment in education also enhances employment opportunities and foster economic growth. Therefore, the goal must be for every young person to complete at least secondary level education, and one central means to achieve that goal is to extend the upper age limit for compulsory education from 16 to 18 (Finnish Government, 2019).

In addition to raising the age limit, the Government will offer the necessary learning materials and tools needed for secondary education free of charge to students. Free education also includes school transport, adequate nutrition, and, in some cases, housing.

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## Outlook and commentary

The Government's Bill was extensively discussed in the Parliamentary Plenary Debate. The parties represented in the Government eulogised the reform and compared it with the 1968 Basic School Reform, whereas the opposition parties (the National Coalition [Conservatives], the Finns Party and the Christian Democrats) criticised the Bill and called for it to be dropped.

The main criticisms hinged on three aspects:

- 1) it was argued that free education, including school materials and transportation, would be too expensive and overburden municipal budgets that are already in deficit. Also, the Confederation of Finnish Industries was worried about the costs and called for the introduction of means-testing instead of the universal delivery of free education, as the Bill proposed.
- 2) Those who have difficulties learning would not benefit if they are "forced" to spend two more years in school. Force is not a good educator.
- 3) In a related argument, the representatives of the National Coalition insisted that instead of investing in prolonging compulsory education, the funds should be used to strengthen pre-school and basic education. This investment would give students the skills and knowledge needed to continue to

the secondary level, without obliging them to do so.

There were as many as 150 oral expert Parliamentary hearings or written statements. Most of them supported the reform, but almost all put forward some arguments against it and provided suggestions for improvements. For example, the Child Ombudsman, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions and the Trade Union of Education in Finland (OAJ) were critical of some aspects and sought improvements, such as more investment in study supervision and special teachers in order to prevent students dropping-out from secondary education. At present, 16% of those who start at the secondary level drop out of their studies.

There were also many comments from professors of education, sociology and economics. The main line of their argument was that in the long run, raising the age for compulsory education would pay for itself. Furthermore, even if the reform were to generate extra costs, this change is needed. The main beneficiaries of the extension of compulsory education would be those in vulnerable positions and children coming from poor families who would be discouraged from continuing their education if it were not free of charge (Virtanen, 2020). Thus, it is expected that the socio-economic inequalities in admission to higher education will decrease.

## Further reading

Act on Compulsory Education: [Oppivelvollisuuslaki](#), 1214/2020.

Finnish Government (2019), [Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government 2019: Inclusive and competent Finland – a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable society](#), Helsinki: Finnish Government. [retrieved 19 January 2021].

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OmaLinja research project (2017), "[Mikä mättää peruskoulussa?](#)" [*What is wrong with Basic School?*], Helsinki: VATT Institute for Economic Research. [retrieved 19 January 2021].

Pekkarinen, T. (2018), [Toiselle asteelle siirtyminen ja syrjäytymisen riski](#), [Transition to the secondary level and the risk of exclusion], OmaLinja, Research blog. [retrieved 18 January 2021].

Seuri, A., Uusitalo, R. and Virtanen, H. (2018), "Pitäisikö oppivelvollisuusiikää nostaa 18 vuoteen?" [*Should the compulsory school age be raised to 18 years?*], Helsinki: Economic Policy Council, Background paper.

Virtanen, H. (2020), [Oppivelvollisuusiän nostaminen turhaan vastatuulella](#) [*Raising compulsory school age in vain in headwinds*], Helsinki: ETLA. [retrieved 19 January 2021].

## Author

[Olli Kangas](#) (University of Turku)

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