Information about the Finnish education system

A guide for immigrant parents
Welcome to Vantaa!

The purpose of this guide is to support parenting and the co-operation between the home and the day-care centre/school, particularly in the situations where the family has recently moved to Finland. The goal of the guide is to answer the questions that parents may have in regards to school work, and to explain how the child’s learning, growth and school work may be supported through the co-operation between the home and the school. The guide has been prepared by the City of Vantaa’s Education Department, funded by the Participative Integration in Finland project.

The Finnish education system

In Finland, a child may participate in early education at age 0-5, afternoon activities from the age of 2.5 and preschool at age 6. Parents and their children may familiarise themselves with early education at residents’ parks or open day-care centres.

At age 7, the child participates in compulsory education that ends once the child has finished comprehensive school or when he or she turns 17. The child’s participation in compulsory education is the parents’ responsibility. Comprehensive school is 9 years long. After this, further studies are available on the secondary level, and later, on the tertiary level.

The goal of the Finnish education system is to provide the student, via the means of a good basic education, with equal opportunities to continue his or her studies, to enter further education of his or her choice and to inspire development and lifelong learning. In Finland, all forms of education are governed by law and curricula.
Early education

Open day-care centres and residents' parks

In Vantaa, day-care-aged children who have no permanent need of day-care may participate, together with their families, in the activities of open day-care centres and residents’ parks. Open day-care centres and residents’ parks offer for example guided music, crafts or sports activities. At other times, the focus is on free play and getting to know other families. The activities are based on active family time where parents take care of their children. Participation is free of charge.

Clubs

Clubs can be found around Vantaa in connection with residents' parks, open day-care centres and day-care centres. Some club activities take place in the morning and others in the afternoon, 2-3 times per week. The daily club time is 2-3 hours depending on the child’s age. There is a fee for the clubs.

Day-care

The purpose of the day-care early education is to support the foundation laid by the family for the child’s growth and development. Day-care is organised according to the families’ needs, either full-time or part-time, in groups the sizes of which depend on the children’s ages and special needs. The options for day-care include a day-care centre, family day-care and group family day-care.

Preschool education

Preschool education is not compulsory in Finland, but nearly all children participate in preschool education which is recommended. Preschool education is organised on weekdays between 8.30am and 2.30pm, with holiday times that follow those of comprehensive education. In preschool, the child learns skills that prepare him or her for school through play, activities and experiences. Preschool is a part of early education and its purpose is to promote the child’s opportunity to grow, develop and learn, as well as to strengthen the child’s self-esteem through positive learning experiences. Preschool education is free of charge.

Preparatory education for comprehensive education for 6-year-olds

Preparatory education for 6-year-olds is intended for children who have recently moved to Finland or when the child has not learnt Finnish sufficiently by age 6 to participate in comprehensive education. The preparatory education focuses on learning Finnish. Five hours of preparatory education are given daily in connection with preschool education. Preparatory education is given at the daycare centre near the home.

Comprehensive education

Comprehensive education in Finland takes 9 years and begins in the autumn of the year in which the child turns 7. In the first and second grade, there are 4 or 5 lessons each day. The children learn skills needed at school such as co-operation skills, taking care of one’s own property and that of others, and taking responsibility of one’s school work. The lessons consist of Finnish and Literature, Mathematics, Environmental and Nature Studies, Religion or Ethics, Music, Art, Crafts and Sports. All subjects are free of charge.

Preparatory education for comprehensive education

Preparatory education is given at the daycare centre near the home.

Grades 3-6

The first foreign language study starts in the third grade. In all Vantaa schools, the language is English. An optional language may be started in the fourth grade. In Vantaa, the options are French, Swedish, German or Russian. In the fifth grade, all students start studying Biology and Geography, Physics and Chemistry, as well as History. Elective subjects also start at this time. In the sixth grade, the students continue studying the subjects started in the fifth grade.

Grades 7-9

School work changes in many ways when the student advances to the seventh grade (junior secondary school). Instead of a single class teacher, the student is taught by several different subject teachers. One of the subject teachers is nominated as the student’s homeroom teacher who manages the group’s matters and stays in touch with the student’s guardians.

In junior secondary school, all students study Finnish and Literature, Swedish, English, Mathematics, Biology, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Health Studies, Religion or Ethics, History, Civics, Music, Art, Crafts, Sports, Home Economics and elective subjects, one of which may be the “A” language that started in the fourth grade. Additionally, all students receive student guidance.

Student guidance

Teachers, a student guidance counsellor and other school staff guide the student in school work, subject studies, study choices and planning future studies. The guidance supports the development of the student’s study and co-operation skills and independence. Work experience makes up one part of student guidance. In the 9th grade of comprehensive school, the curriculum includes a two-week work experience period or TET. There may be additional work experience periods of 2-5 days in the 7th and 8th grades.

Preparatory education for comprehensive education

The student participates in preparatory education if he or she has recently moved to Finland and cannot yet study in Finnish. Preparatory education is given in small groups or as additional support in connection with comprehensive education. The purpose of the education is to learn to study in Finnish. The education includes subjects as determined by the curriculum. In addition, when possible, the student also takes lessons in his or her first language. Together with the guardians, the teacher prepares a personal study plan for the student. The preparatory education is approximately one year in length, after which the student is moved to a comprehensive school class.
School practices

The school year and holidays

The school year is divided into an autumn semester and a spring semester. The autumn semester begins in mid-August and ends in December before December 24th. The autumn semester includes a few days of autumn break. Additionally, the Finnish Independence Day on December 6th is a holiday. The Christmas break begins a few days before Christmas Eve and continues to the New Year, past Epiphany on January 6th.

The spring semester begins in January, on the first working day after Epiphany, and ends at the end of May or the beginning of June, in week 22. The spring semester includes a week-long winter break in week 8 and an Easter break in March or April. Additionally, May Day on May 1st and Ascension Day are holidays. The spring semester report card states when the following autumn semester begins.

The school day

Before a school day the student should have a good night’s sleep and eat breakfast. It is important to practice travelling to school together with the child. In primary school, outdoor shoes are usually taken off, so the child should have indoor shoes. The student should have clothes that are warm even on windy and cold days. Rubber boots are often needed in autumn and spring, and in winter warm winter shoes are necessary.

At first the parents should ensure that the child has packed the textbooks, pencil case and sports clothes needed during the day. Textbooks are loaned out to the student and returned to the school when the student no longer needs them. When choosing sports clothes, take into account whether the lesson is held indoors or outdoors.

During the school day there are lessons and breaks. Additionally there is a lunch break, during which the students are provided with a free meal. The school rules are explained to the students. The rules are agreed upon together. Observing the rules makes the school a safe and comfortable environment.

The school lunch includes a warm meal as well as a salad, bread and milk, buttermilk or water. If the student requires a special diet or his or her diet is restricted due to ethical reasons, the canteen should be provided with information about the student’s special diet needs via a special diet form. For demanding special diets, a doctor’s certificate is also required. The form and instructions are available from the school or on the internet.

After the school day, the child should have a quiet place at home where he or she can do homework. Parents support the child’s school work by showing interest.

Examples of ways for parents to support the child’s school work:
- Encouraging the child to do school work
- Showing interest in the child’s learning and school work
- Supporting the child in setting realistic goals
- Involving skills learnt at school in everyday life: practising mathematics when shopping, reading news in the newspaper and discussing them with the child
- Ensuring the child has adequate rest, regular eating schedule and school supplies
- Encouraging the child to be independent according to his or her age and development level
- Staying in contact with the school and the teachers
- Participating in learning discussions and teacher-parent meetings

Absences

When the child becomes ill or is absent from school for any other reason, the parents must always notify the school immediately. A reason for the absence must be provided. A child who is ill must rest and recuperate at home.

The class teacher may grant a maximum leave of absence of three days. For longer leaves, a permission must be acquired from the headmaster/headmistress well in advance. There must also be a valid reason for a long leave. During the leave, the parents must ensure that the child completes the exercises set by the teacher.

Different religions and cultures have their own holidays. If the child cannot attend school on such a holiday, the parents must apply for permission for the child’s absence.
School personnel

The school personnel include the headmaster/headmistress, teachers, student guidance counsellor, special needs assistants, school psychologist, school welfare officer, school nurse, kitchen staff, cleaners and school host or hostess.

Headmaster/headmistress and teachers

Headmaster/headmistress or school manager
The headmaster/headmistress or school manager manages the entire school together with teachers and other school staff. He or she also makes decisions in matters involving the school.

Class teacher and homeroom teacher
In grades 1-6, the students have a class teacher who is responsible for teaching all subjects. In grades 7-9, various subjects are taught by subject teachers. In addition, the students have an assigned homeroom teacher.

Finnish as a Second Language teacher
The Finnish as a Second Language teacher teaches Finnish and supports the student in studying in Finnish. The Finnish as a Second Language teacher may support the student’s Finnish studies through study skills and prepare him or her for making independent activity during the school day.

Special education teacher
Each school has a special education teacher who teaches special needs students in a small group or in the classroom as a simultaneous teacher. The special education teacher plans and oversees support measures together with the teacher and the parents. The special education teacher is a member of the student care team as an expert in the field of special education.

Religion teacher
The Lutheran and Orthodox Christian religions are taught in grades 7-9 by Religion subject teachers. In addition, Vantaa has teachers for four minority religions: Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism and the Hare Krishna movement.

Student guidance counsellor
Grades 7-9 have a student guidance counsellor who supports the student in his or her studies and helps him or her in making choices and decisions. The goal of the guidance is to strengthen the student’s life management skills and growth toward adulthood as well as promote the development of the student’s study skills and prepare him or her for making informed choices. If required, the guardian is able to visit the student guidance counsellor and discuss matters involving the student’s studies and choices.

Special needs assistants
The schools have special needs assistants. Their job is to support the student in independent activity during the school day.

School psychologist
The school psychologist is an expert in the child’s psychological development and emotional life. Growing, developing and learning often takes place through crises. Together with the student, guardians, other school staff and if required, parties external to the school, the student is supported through the difficulties.

Student care personnel

School welfare officer
The school welfare officer is the school’s social worker. Students can see the school welfare officer to talk about their concerns and to try and come up with solutions together with the welfare officer. The purpose of the school welfare officer is to promote the entire school society’s social well-being and to support the student in their school work. Parents may contact the school welfare officer for example by telephone or through Wilma. The school welfare officer is in touch with the parents when taking care of the child’s matters at the school. The school welfare officer wants to work together with the parents to ensure the child’s school work goes as smoothly as possible. For example, the school welfare may help the child find a suitable hobby or investigate social relations at school.

School nurse
The purpose of school health care is to evaluate and promote the student’s well-being and health in a comprehensive way, as well as to identify problems at an early stage.

The school nurse meets the students and their parents yearly, the school doctor in grades 1, 5 and 8. The following physiological examinations are completed in the preparatory education health examination: weight, height, puberty development, short and long sight, hearing, blood pressure and pulse.

In the event of an accident at school or acute illness, the child may see the school nurse during the school day without an appointment.
Supporting learning and school work

Every child has a right to high-quality teaching as well as guidance and support in learning and school work.

If your child has difficulties at school, this should be brought up with the child’s teacher. Contact may also be made by the school. The home and school investigate the cause of the difficulties together, and the school can arrange for support for the child as early as possible.

Forms of learning support

The student has a right to sufficient growth and learning support as soon as a need for such support becomes apparent. Support measures are prepared and realised together with the student and his or her guardians.

Remedial teaching should be initiated as a pre-emptive measure before any greater obstacles in learning and study appear. Remedial teaching is given either during lessons or at other times. If required, remedial teaching is also available in the child’s first language.

Part-time special education improves learning skills and prevents the growth of problems in various areas of learning. Part-time special education is provided if the child has difficulties for example in language or mathematical skills, learning difficulties in single subjects, difficulties in study skills, social skills or attending school.

Part-time special education is provided as simultaneous teaching, small group teaching or sometimes on a one-on-one basis. The goals and contents of part-time special education are incorporated into the other teaching received by the child.

Flexible teaching arrangements may be used to support the child. Split and block lessons are used to enable study in smaller groups.

Streaming is a teaching method used to take into account the needs of the group and the differences of the child. Streaming may involve the contents of the teaching, teaching materials and methods used, working methods and the amount of classwork and homework set and the time available for them.

Part-time special education

Evaluation and reports

Student evaluation

The purpose of evaluation is to guide and encourage learning. In all schools, each student receives a minimum of two progress reports during the year, one of which is in the form of an evaluation discussion. At the end of the school year, the student receives an end-of-year report. In addition, feedback is provided during lessons. In Vantaa, students are evaluated verbally until the fifth grade and with number marks from the sixth grade onwards. The student is not compared to other students in the evaluation. Instead, the student’s skills, work and behaviour is compared to the goals specified in the curriculum or the student’s personal study plan.

In addition, the student is guided and encouraged from the first grade to perform self-evaluation.

The student is evaluated orally on a daily basis. The purpose of evaluation is to support, guide and encourage the student. We want to encourage the student to achieve his or her goals. The student is evaluated so that he or she knows how to best improve their learning and progress in their studies.

Flexible teaching arrangements

Evaluation discussion and self-evaluation

The parents, student and teacher meet a few times during the school year and discuss the student’s achievement of his or her goals. At the same time they can ponder the next goals for the student to strive for. The parents’ support is important for the student.

The evaluation also involves the student evaluating his or her own behaviour and learning. The evaluation is written down and shown to the parents.

Reports

The student is given an school year report in the spring, at the end of the school year. In addition, progress reports are given during the school year. In junior secondary school, reports may be given at the end of each sub-semester period. Other types of certificates used in comprehensive school are the participation certificate, non-complete leaving certificate and leaving certificate. The leaving certificate is granted at the end of comprehensive school if the student has completed the course required.
Afternoon activities, school club activities and hobbies

Afternoon activities

Afternoon activities involve guided leisure time enabling the children to play, do homework and participate in various activities. Afternoon club activities take place both indoors and outdoors. The club includes a snack. Afternoon club activities are organised daily at the schools or nearby. The club activities start at the end of the school day.

Afternoon activities end either at 4pm or 5pm. The activity time period is chosen for the entire school year. Clubs are not active during school holidays.

Afternoon activities are subject to a fee. The 4-hour club costs 80 euros per month, the 5-hour club costs 110 euros per month. (Price changes are announced separately.)

School club activities

In Vantaa, there are school club activities for the students of grades 1-9. School club activities are optional and free of charge. Activities are usually held after the school day at the school or nearby. The clubs are managed for example by teachers, youth and sports services workers, counsellors from organisations and associations, and other qualified adults. Information about your school’s club activities is available from the school’s newsletters and the teachers.

Other hobbies

Youth services also offer afternoon activities to pre-adolescents and young people. More information is available from the counsellors of youth clubs and residents’ parks.

Co-operation between the home and the school

The child’s parents and other guardians have the primary responsibility for the well-being of the child. Close co-operation between the home and the school is important to safeguard the child’s school attendance, learning and growth and development.

The foundation of this co-operation is everyday communication between the home and the school through a student diary, Wilma (computer software enabling guardians and school staff to exchange messages) or the telephone. The guardians receive the passwords required for the use of Wilma from the school.

Joint discussions and meetings are organised when necessary, but at least once per school year. If required, the school will organise an interpreter for the joint discussions. Interpreters are under the obligation of confidentiality in terms of the students’ and their families’ matters.

The school will also organise joint events that the parents will be invited to attend. The parents are encouraged to attend these group- or school-specific parent-teacher nights and other events as they provide a good opportunity to get to know school staff and other children’s parents. These events provide useful information regarding the children’s school work. The parents are also able to ask questions and make suggestions.

Parents’ associations

Schools have parents’ associations through which parents can participate in the school’s activities. The headmaster/headmistress considers the association’s suggestions when preparing the school year plan and when making changes to the school rules. The parents’ association may also comment on other school matters and participate in the evaluation and development of the school.

In addition, there is a local association of parents’ associations in Vantaa, VANVARY ry. Its purpose is to act as a co-operative body between the parents’ associations in the Vantaa area, to promote co-operation between guardians, schools and government and to voice the opinions of the parents’ associations in matters involving child and youth education.

Supporting the student’s first language

The first language is the basis of thinking and emotional life. Thus a good command of his or her first language supports the child’s school work and learning, including learning new languages. Multilingualism is an important social resource for children as well as adults.

The first language is an important communication tool between family members whilst the children are young as well as when they grow older. Maintaining contact with relatives and friends who speak the same language is also easier.

At school, the child or young person receives teaching in his or her first language, but the parents are the most important factor in the development of the child or young person’s language. Parents can support the first language development by speaking to the child or young person in that language. Parents may for example read books and tell stories in the first language, in a consistent and varied manner. Reading books and telling stories in the first language teaches the child new words and develops his or her thinking. Joint reading and storytelling sessions are also important for interaction between the child and the adult. Parents may encourage the child or young person to speak his or her first language with relatives or friends who speak the same language.
After comprehensive education

Additional comprehensive education learning, i.e. 10th grade

After comprehensive school, the young person may study for another year in the 10th grade if he or she did not receive a secondary study place. In the tenth grade, the same topics are covered as in comprehensive school and the student has an opportunity to improve the marks on his or her comprehensive school leaving certificate. After the tenth grade, the young person may reapply for secondary study in the joint application system.

Guidance and preparatory training for vocational education

The vocational start-up is intended for young people who are interested in vocational training. The vocational start-up explores the options available in vocational training and different vocations. In addition, the training involves visits to various workplaces and work experience periods. During the start-up year, it is possible to complete actual vocational studies as electives in addition to the preparatory training. In addition, the vocational start-up enables the student to improve the marks on his or her comprehensive school leaving certificate similarly to the tenth grade, but with more limitations.

Preparatory training for vocational education for immigrants (mava)

The training is intended for young people of immigrant background who are interested in vocational training and who need to strengthen their Finnish skills and choice of vocation. The goal is to provide the student with the skills to enable vocational study. The training includes learning Finnish and familiarising oneself with various vocations. In addition, the studies include Mathematics, Computing and Civics. During the study year, the student receives support in study and vocational choices.

Youth workshops for 16-24-year-olds

Youth workshops are intended for 16-24-year-old unemployed young people in Vantaa. The workshops are primarily available for young people without vocational qualifications or those who have dropped out of comprehensive school, vocational school or senior secondary school.

Secondary and tertiary education

After comprehensive school, the student may apply for secondary learning, i.e. vocational school or senior secondary school. Applications for these schools are made in the 9th grade through the joint application system. Both forms of training involve approximately three years of study. After completing secondary level training, the young person may apply to study at a tertiary level, at a polytechnic or university.

Contact details:

Class teacher ________________________________

Teachers’ room ________________________________

School secretary ________________________________

Headmaster/Headmistress ________________________________

First language teacher ________________________________

Religion teacher ________________________________

Finnish as a Second Language teacher ________________________________

Special education teacher ________________________________

School nurse ________________________________

School welfare officer ________________________________

School psychologist ________________________________

Student guidance counsellor ________________________________