



# **K-12 EDUCATION TOURS** *2022 Legislative Interim*

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A look at how some sister-nations are setting their learners up to succeed—and a deep dive into how Washington State can step up to do the same.

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# INTRODUCTION

Senator Wellman continued her annual educational listening tour during this year's 2022 interim gearing up for a productive 2023 legislative session. The focus of her tours was to visit schools and skills centers giving the Senator boots-on-the-ground classroom experience, hearing from principals and teachers, and engaging with students. The Senator deepened her understanding of the many nuanced challenges and successes faced by schools during the pandemic and of the quintessential needs of students and families moving forward.

After visiting both Yakima's Union Gap School and Mt. Vernon's La Venture Middle School, the 2022 educational tour took an unexpected international turn when the Senator was extended the personal invitation to visit Finland to listen and learn from some of the nation's educators and educational experts. The experiences in Finland exemplified how the Finnish system is incorporating modern technology and game-based learning (GBL) to build a more robust and engaging educational experience for students.

*"...trust the professionals to do their jobs, give them the tools and support systems they need."*

The guiding concept for this year's school visits was learning directly from educators how to best address their needs as we strive to create an educational system that supports the holistic needs of every child while cultivating a deep curiosity and flourishing sense of creativity. The Senator rooted herself in asking: How might we develop and support a system in which students are engaged with their own learning? And: How can we create an educational journey wherein young learners are eager to understand the importance of what is learned in the classroom today, and the direct impact on us tomorrow?

As Chair of the Senate Committee on Early Learning and K-12, Senator Wellman is focused on helping carefully craft a system where educators are mentors and guides helping students connect to their passion for learning. The educational summit in Finland built on these same goals by showing a concrete example of an educational system that achieves this. The Senator hopes that lessons learned from the listening tours both domestic and abroad will provide building blocks to support long-term transformational change that reshapes what education is and can be in Washington state.



# THE BROAD TAKEAWAY

Discussions with educators in Finland and Washington presented a stark contrast in one simple concept that tended to result in system-wide differences. This concept was TRUST.

Talks with educators in Washington centered around a desire for a more flexible system that promotes creativity while better supporting individualized student learning.



A system where educators are trusted to do their jobs and not micromanaged and where continual growth and reform is built through a meaningful, collaborative process in which everyone is working towards the single goal of student success.

Administrators, teachers, business leaders and educational policy-makers in Finland consistently portrayed examples of how this simple, yet complex concept of trust permeates every aspect of the educational system. This creates a system of collaboration wherein each group is relying on and listening to the needs of the other. Trust flowed from administrators, the public, and the business community. Reciprocity was built on years of clear cooperation and active collaboration between sectors with each stakeholder prioritizing the creation of a better educational experience for students above all other goals—including political gamesmanship.

Teachers in Finland are trusted to do their jobs in the classroom and students are trusted to be agents of their own learning. As one particular educator eloquently stated: “schools do not evaluate the students, students evaluate themselves.” It is from this self-evaluation process that students are left more empowered, engaged and successful in their own learning. Educational professionals, including those involved in setting educational policy, also noted they have seen how a hierarchical approach to teaching (one that micromanages the educators) is clearly not the way to foster successful classroom learning environments. Deputy Mayor of Helsinki, Nasima Razmyar underscored this critical point stating that “teachers have more freedom than the President”.



## THE BROAD TAKEAWAY

In Finland, the school buildings themselves are built to promote an open and collaborative learning environment with a focus on equity and promoting educational opportunities for all. This sentiment even affects the process for determining how facilities are built. Classrooms are configured in a way that creates space where educators can serve as guides and mentors for students who are learning at their own pace and in their own way. In creating schools, one presenter noted that they plan to build the best, most beautiful schools in those communities that are struggling. In this way the school itself becomes the center of that community and promotes a sense of pride amongst its people.



During our discussions with educators here in Washington we heard how teacher preparation programs are not adequately helping educators learn what they will actually need to be successful in the classroom—and such programs are not responsive to changing educational demands. In contrast, Finnish higher education institutions described a system of ongoing collaboration and continual feedback loops between educators, industry, and higher education. This cultivates an environment in which the higher education system can better understand and respond to the evolving needs of the K12 system, and ultimately provide students with more opportunities for success in the workplace.

While in Washington the business community and the teacher's union are often pitted against each other over political interests, we saw examples of businesses actively seeking out collaborative relationships with educators and students to explore what educators need and then develop those new tools for the classroom.



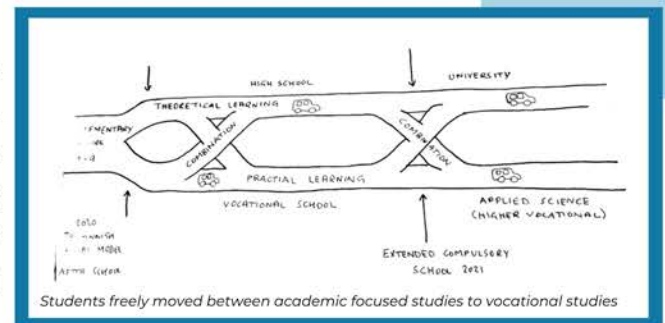
# THE BROAD TAKEAWAY

Finland is currently working on its own education goals and strategies for the future. Education Strategy 2030 is focused on what future skills students will need and what the educational system needs to do today in order to support that future. The Strategy is referred to as “a place of growth” emphasizing that the

goal of the educational system is to create an environment where all have the opportunity to realize themselves and grow as humans, citizens and entrepreneurs. Finnish policy makers also noted that this can only be realized if you do not stress only academic skills but also incorporate the full complement of social and emotional skills that create successful adults.

Washington’s long standing goal of providing individualized student learning that prepares students for future success has clearly been actualized in the Finnish classroom and in their policy making. When students shift between goals those shifts are not viewed as a failure of the student or the teacher but rather recognized as a simple change in a student’s priority or goal, and viewed as part of the learning process. One of the presenters in Finland quickly sketched out a simple diagram showing how students freely moved between academic focused studies to vocational studies and explained that students were supported equally in both. The evolving nature of educational needs is addressed proactively and intentionally to foster meaningful ongoing collaborations between all interested parties. Collaboration is inclusive of the students themselves and prioritizes the student’s learning needs above all else. In applying these concepts to policy-making in Washington, it is worthwhile to note that there is also an inherent practicality in the Finnish approach to trusting the professionals to do their jobs. With 7,500,000 Washingtonians spanning 295 school districts, around 2300 schools, over a million students and nearly 105,000 certificated instructional staff, we simply cannot continue to expect to successfully micromanage every experience in order to achieve success for every student in the classroom.

To create this system we must trust the professionals to do their jobs, give them the tools and support systems they need to do it, and build lasting collaborative relationships to continually redefine what success is and revamp the tools and supports that are needed.





# A TARGETED LOOK AT TECH IN FINLAND:

## Use of Technology and the Game-Based Learning in Finland





## A TARGETED LOOK AT TECH IN FINLAND:

### Use of Technology and the Game-Based Learning in Finland

One promising approach that both aligns with and promotes a more engaging, student-centered and individualized learning experience is gamification and game-based learning. Gamification simply means that educators apply “game design” elements and style to a given educational setting or curriculum. Teachers rewarding students with gold star stickers for their individual progression and self-growth is a clear, albeit elementary example of how educators have successfully been employing gamification tactics for decades—if not the greater part of the century. Game-based learning or GBL, however, takes this simple concept to another level by reimagining how educators actually design learning activities and create an entirely new way of learning.

Gamification and GBL can help make learning more engaging and exciting for students. In turn, this excitement for learning leads to students developing increased agency over their learning. In today’s evolving world, any good educational system needs to be ready



to embrace new technologies and modes of learning. If these new modes of learning are used correctly and in conjunction with new technologies, we can strengthen our educational system by providing students access to a near unlimited multitude of diverse opportunities and experiences. In historically excluded populations, such experiences may not be otherwise available in one’s own community. This level of proactivity can, and in other nations has, created students who are eager to engage with their own education in creative new ways. Washington state is positioned to get ahead, and stay ahead of our students’ hunger to learn, ensuring every young learner has the access and opportunity to climb to the highest rung of their educational journey.





## A TARGETED LOOK AT TECH IN FINLAND:

### Use of Technology and the Game-Based Learning in Finland

Washington has recently begun exploring ways to shift to a mastery-based educational system. Gamification and GBL are modes of learning often found in successful mastery-based schools. One simple example utilized by many mastery-based schools is the use of badges as an alternative to the traditional A-F report card. Badges are awarded to students as they complete and achieve mastery over each learning standard. This practice grants parents a more transparent way to understand exactly where their child is situated throughout the learning continuum (rather than waiting for a single letter grade at the end of an arbitrary unit of time) and students are earning rewards as symbols of each of their learning achievements.

*"...industry working with educators to develop what educators need in the classroom..."*

A primary goal of the trip to Finland was to observe how Finnish schools are implementing gaming in education and the emerging technologies that support that mode of learning while also meeting with companies that are developing these new opportunities for students and educators. During these meetings it became clear that the technology industry is actively involved in helping create a collaborative process within the educational system that is not a top-down approach driven by industry but is instead industry working with educators to develop what educators need in the classroom. At Helsinki Education Hub, a nonprofit operating within Helsinki, this collaboration is clearly on display. The Education Hub's stated purpose is:

*"to strengthen learning and education by improving education and learning start-ups' product development, innovations and productivity. In order to generate and implement new innovations, we bring together learning and education actors, such as EdTech start-ups, investors, learners, teachers, pedagogical experts, researchers, large companies and public sector in Finland and globally. Our mission is to bring learning and education actors such as EdTech start-ups, investors, learners, teachers, pedagogical experts, researchers, large companies and public sector together in Finland and globally. Our vision is to be global model for sharing best practices in advancing education and learning around the globe."*





## A TARGETED LOOK AT TECH IN FINLAND:

### Use of Technology and the Game-Based Learning in Finland

At the Education Hub, industry representatives from EdTech Finland, teachers and learners come together to develop the tools needed for an ever-evolving educational system. Inherent in the success is an attitude that not every collaboration will be a success. While at first glance, Americans might view this “experimentation” with negative connotations since some “failures” are undoubtedly going to occur and a newly developed tool proves less useful than predicted. However, in Finland this is not the case. The collaborative process itself is meaningful and valued. The process includes implementing pilots of the new tools into what educators are already doing in the classroom and these “pilots” are viewed not as tests or experiments but characterized as “co-creation”. The process itself is creating a network of learners, teachers and corporations all working towards a single goal of bettering the educational experience for students. Teachers are actively involved in establishing how the collaboration will happen so there is a pedagogy involved in developing the process itself. The opportunities for collaboration with industry are posted on an online network that all teachers have access to. On this network educators can review the various opportunities and choose which may be of value to their classroom work.



Presenters from GBL industries noted that learning in this way often proves incredibly valuable when working with students with disabilities because it allows a new, alternative way of learning the traditional concepts such as math and science. One presenter noted they had utilized a game to assist in mathematics instruction with some of their students by creating a program that required the student to solve equations before accessing the ability to participate in the game. Once the learning became game-based the students were winning gold medals in the games and solving equations they had previously struggled with.





## A TARGETED LOOK AT TECH IN FINLAND:

### Use of Technology and the Game-Based Learning in Finland

Another presentation focused on a literacy game for ages 6-9 that focuses on teaching basic literacy skills without actual adult involvement. The game is research-based and was developed with around thirty partners including academic universities such as Yale and Cambridge. The research has shown the game to be as effective as one-to-one teacher support. Currently 17 countries are using the game as a national literacy resource and they are personalizing the game for different countries to make it more culturally responsive and appropriate by modifying things like clothing or background scenery to reflect the country using the game. The tool is not intended to be used as a sole instructional strategy but is meant to be used in small (10 minutes) doses each day as a component of a larger educational program.



A third presentation focused on a newly developed digital learning platform for use by educators. The platform improves the creation and understanding of online teaching. The platform helps instructors design courses that are more efficient, more interesting and more accessible and includes coaching for instructors that may have the pedagogical background but not

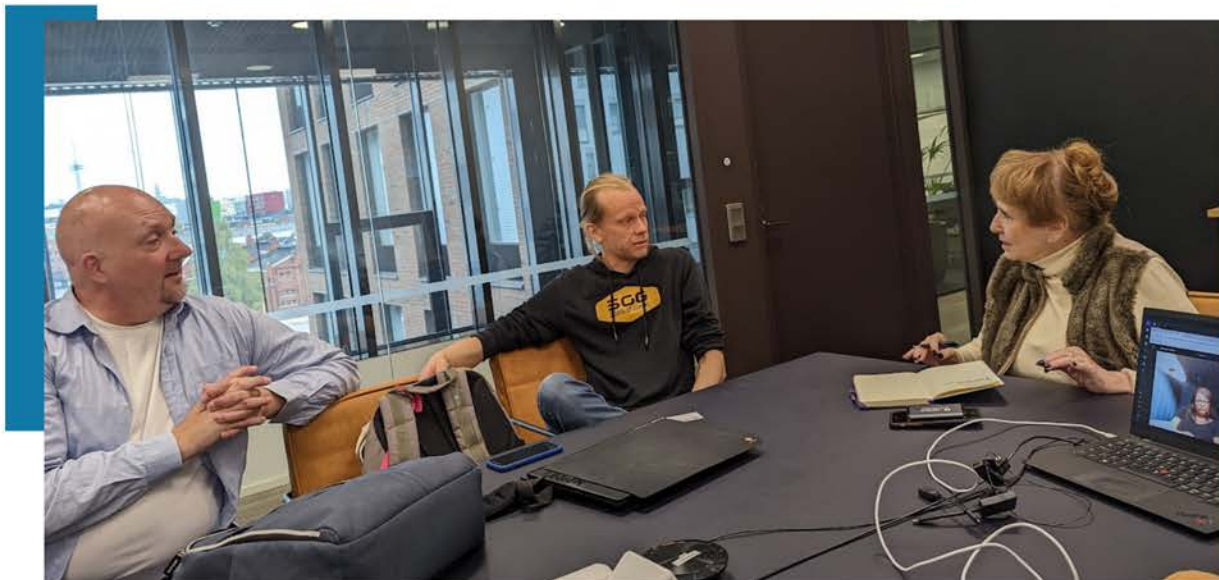
the IT knowledge to actually create an effective online course. While the company creating the platform is not providing the teacher training themselves they are providing the platform for doing the training.



## A TARGETED LOOK AT TECH IN FINLAND:

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In Finland the government has given every municipality money to start a “Hobby Model” which is their version of an afterschool program for kids. Gaming and digital hobbies have become a component of that Model. The gaming and digital hobbies are helping teach kids human skills in a fun and engaging way that doesn’t feel like school. They are teaching kids about topics such as programming, game design, architecture, math, critical thinking. Other skills - creativity, communication, and social skills - become the “unintentional” learning that accompanies that formal learning. Stateside we have programs like FIRST-Washington that hosts robotics and engineering clubs and, with a small amount of support from the state. Operate in many of our K-12 schools and have similar objectives.



Senator Wellman intends to continue to explore the use of gamification, game-based learning and new technologies in educational settings in the 2023 session, including a work session on the topic during the December committee assembly days.



# WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

With related commentary from Finland

Summarizing the comments heard from educators, administrators, skills center directors and students during the site visits.

- The Educational System Educators Want -
- The Tools Needed for Transformational Change -
- Washington's Challenges and Successes -



# WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

## The Educational System Educators Want

*A system that recognizes different and individualized instructional needs for all students and is flexible enough to support multiple modes of learning.*

- Schools noted that during the pandemic the ability to utilize asynchronous instructional space was valuable for some students. One educator noted that while extroverts often shine in the traditional classroom environment, introverts often excel when provided an asynchronous learning opportunity—there needs to be a place for both.
- Educators repeatedly noted that one of the only positives from the pandemic was that we learned how creative our kids can be and how they can successfully be in charge of their own learning.
- Schools are embracing the concept of multiple alternative pathways for students to graduate based on their individualized learning needs and future goals. Alternative pathways are providing a better way to engage students and their families and keep them interested and involved in the educational system.
- Many students struggle in a traditional classroom but thrive in hands-on learning environments. Skills centers had numerous examples of how students are learning all of the same traditional skills but in different ways.
- Educators are very supportive of relooking at what "learning" is and where learning comes from. Teachers recognize that it is often hard to "deprogram" old teaching styles and that additional professional development is needed to support them as they learn and implement new instructional models. They also recognized and noted that it will take support and encouragement from building leadership. Both teachers and building leadership recognized that transformational change requires allowing teachers to be creative and do things "outside of the box."





# WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

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- The high school and beyond plan is viewed as a potentially great tool to help show students how many different options there are in terms of how and what they learn and what they can become. It was viewed as a true way in which educators could look at the whole child. However, teachers noted that they did not have time to meaningfully engage with each student in order to discuss and prepare the plan. The time to build relationships and rapport with each student in order to understand the individualized needs of each student does not currently exist.
- Counselors have also leaned in on having tools that provide a more comprehensive “snapshot” of each child over time. At a caseload ratio of 400:1 they are very limited in how effective they can be. Senator Wellman has been advocating for an online high school and beyond plan that captures meaningful information and connects to online exploration of careers beyond the current versions.
- Administrators are interested in finding flexible, creative ways to create learning environments that work best for both teachers and students. One district noted that they are losing teachers to other fields that have work from home options and wondered if there was a way to create new flexibilities in how they staff classrooms. One educator suggested allowing administrators to look at ways each teacher excels and let them teach in that environment. For teachers and students that excel in virtual learning: let them utilize that method. For students that need more one-on-one face time with a teacher:



*Photo provided by Spokane Public Schools*

use those teachers that prefer that form of teaching environment. The current funding structure is set up in such a way they do not have the flexibility to do this.



## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Educational System Educators Want

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- The directors of skills centers noted that their advisory boards are incredibly helpful in helping them understand where there are changes in the workforce and then using that information to respond and modify programs to adjust quickly to their future changes. In this way skills centers are better preparing their students to enter straight into the workforce possessing all the tools they need to be successful.
- Educators at the skills centers noted that their programs are helping students find their passion for learning again. One student noted how she was bored and disconnected from the work in her traditional comprehensive high school but that she now looked forward to going to school at the skills center every day and enjoyed learning again.
- The biggest problem faced by skills centers was a struggle with high schools unwilling to send students to the skills center because they don't view it as a viable option for all kids. This narrative was especially pervasive for those on a 4-year college track. They noted that high school administrators much of the time only view skills centers as the place to send certain types of students—students with discipline problems or those who aren't performing well academically—rather than an option that would likely be of value to many if not all students. Teachers at the skills center noted that this an “adult” problem that needs to be addressed for the betterment of students.
- A recent visit to the Marysville Pre-apprenticeship program in Washington validated this point firsthand. Students said they did “OK” in math but didn't see the point in traditional classrooms. However, when applying math to “create and build” they enjoyed their mastery and saw the importance of mathematics. Snohomish County educators put this concept into action by implementing Regional Apprenticeship Pathways, or RAP, with the sole mission of “engaging, inspiring, and preparing each student to achieve high standards through rich and relevant educational experiences in building and construction trades.” This was one clear example of how this type of systems-level rethinking could be implemented in our classrooms.



## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Educational System Educators Want

*A system that recognizes different and individualized instructional needs for all students and is flexible enough to support multiple modes of learning.*

#### Related comments from Finland

- The Finnish system of education focuses on trust in teachers as the professionals of the classroom. The country has not established a top-down type program of “controlling” teachers or schools in terms of how they provide education. Teachers are treated as the leaders in the classroom and have autonomy regarding what and how they teach.
- One of the key components in Finland was that subjects are teacher driven with a predominant focus on individuality, creativity, innovation and exploring. Educational tools and curriculum are developed and tested by teachers in the schools and based on years of scientific research to back up their work.
- The three features of Finnish educational system were summarized as follows:
  - Provide teachers with pedagogical tools they need.
  - Focus on development of 21st Century skills.
  - Focus on the joy of learning.



*"The Finnish system of education focuses on trust in teachers as the professionals of the classroom."*





## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Educational System Educators Want

*A system that recognizes different and individualized instructional needs for all students and is flexible enough to support multiple modes of learning.*

#### Related comments from Finland

- A notable educational experience at one school highlighted the collaborative teacher as a mentor mentality which was present throughout the Finnish educational system. An educator explained that, in a particular project developed by a group of students, it was clear that he, as the teacher, needed additional training in order to assist the students in utilizing the technology needed for their project. The teacher sought out professional development at the local higher education institution. Rather than attend the professional development training by himself he brought the students along with him. In this way the students and the teacher learned together and the teacher was in a role of guide rather than instructor. This same instructor explained that some of the students lost interest and decided to shift their focus to another area and another project prior to the completion of that project. This shift was not viewed as a “failure” on the part of the students or the teacher, rather it was viewed as part of the learning process wherein their teacher could help ensure the students were engaged and respected in their own learning journey. In this way the metrics of success have taken on a different meaning. Success is not predetermined and focused on what the adults think is the correct way to learn the material. Success is instead predicated on letting kids be creative, experiment and find their own learning style.

*students and the teacher learned together and the teacher was in a role of guide rather than instructor.*

- Finland does have nationally set “checkpoints” for what students need to learn and by when. Their check points seem to be broader than our standards—allowing and allotting for learning freedom, deviation and creative growth.



# WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

## The Educational System Educators Want

*A system engaged with and supported by the entire community.*

- One school noted that a critical part of the success of the school was that it had created great connections with families and the community.
- If there is to be transformational change within the system, parents and the community must be part of that change. The whole community.
- Educators noted that it all starts with the parents and that we need to find a way to empower parents and raise awareness of how they can contribute to their child's learning from day one.
- Some teachers mentioned that they are seeing more and more children entering school with no preparations - no social skills, no language development—meaning students don't have the foundational skills necessary for educators to even begin the educational process. The system needs to help give parents the tools they need to ensure their children are ready to learn.
- School districts are having to put increased resources towards communications and the development of social media strategies in order to ensure accurate and timely information is getting out to the community and to parents. This is often a new expense that is not even contemplated in our existing funding system. Multi-pronged communication is not something many have done in the past but find it is critically important now. Districts want to be engaged with parents and the community but it is a full time job with no current funds in the funding system. A dedicated communications person would help increase engagement and involvement and help districts proactively address the misinformation that is out there.
- Educators and administrators and skills centers noted that they are doing a lot of outreach to parents and the community to ensure that people know about the skills center and understand the programmatic options available to students and how the model of learning is very different at skills centers as compared to traditional high schools. They noted there is still a perception that skills centers are not an option for all kids.



# WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

## The Educational System Educators Want

*A system engaged with and supported by the entire community.*



### Related comments from Finland:

- Discussions with all levels of educational professionals evidenced a long history of respect for education and a recognition by the entire community that education would be the reason that the country would be successful.
- A focus of every political leader has been creating an educational system that is open and available, and free of charge to all.
- Teachers are actually paid a fixed sum to attend university and pursue their education. This is not financial aid since they are not paying tuition, it is a payment similar to a salary to assist with rent or food. These investments in teachers from the beginning helps make them feel respected as professionals.





## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Tools Needed for Transformational Change

*Facilities that foster and promote a new learning environment.*

- One Washington school noted they are shifting to Universal Design Learning (UDL) but that their facilities are one of the things holding them back. They noted that current classroom set ups do not work as they try to shift away from the traditional teacher directed learning time with a single teacher in the front of the classroom to a different type of instruction and learning that is more fluid and engaging for students. Other districts note that the reliance on passing capital bonds in order to pay for new facilities creates barriers for many communities and that ultimately students suffer because they are in buildings not conducive to learning.
- Districts also noted that climate change is affecting all of our schools and that facilities are not keeping up with the ever-changing environment. As an example, schools in western Washington noted they need air conditioning and new HVAC systems to help keep facilities healthy as the temperatures rise and the air quality declines due to forest fires. One school noted that at times their portables were over 90 degrees inside and poor air quality meant windows could not be opened. The portables were simply not appropriate for classroom use over long periods of time. Additionally, sustainability measures that have recently been enacted by the Legislature will require buildings of certain sizes to incorporate new things. This will add costs for school districts and will affect most of our new school construction and maintenance.

*Districts also noted that climate change is affecting all of our schools and that facilities are not keeping up with the ever-changing environment.*

- Skills centers in particular noted that one of their barriers to taking more students is a simple lack of space. They currently don't have the facilities to add more programs even when they have the demand. A long-term need is more funding for facilities. The directors also noted that there is a need to look at the skills center "deserts" and figure out what the best option for serving those areas might be. Continuing to look at the use of satellite and branch campuses is a good strategy in their view.

## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Tools Needed for Transformational Change

*Facilities that foster and promote a new learning environment.*

Related comments from Finland:

- The schools visited in Finland are relatively new construction and are based on an open space concept. The classrooms facilitate co-teaching and often include multiple grade levels in the same classroom space or same large open area. Classrooms did not have the standard set up: a teacher's desk surrounded by student desks.



- Furniture was moveable and often included combinations of couches, chairs, or benches. Students moved around freely to the setting they felt comfortable working in even if it was lying on the floor or crawling on top of a group of furniture blocks. Students were constantly engaging with each other, including students from multiple grade levels. Students were working collaboratively and often teaching each other. Educators were there to assist but were not at the front of the room giving instruction. Students were responsible for setting their own goals and working towards completion at their own pace with assistance from teachers and other students.





## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Tools Needed for Transformational Change

*A shift to more project-based, hands-on learning and away from single summative accountability measures.*

- Educators noted that we need assessments that are project-based because when things don't feel so much like a traditional test, students actually do much better. Difficulties with the summative assessments required by federal law were also noted as contributing to an inability to be creative and create individualized instruction for students because teachers still feel they need to teach to the test.

*Assessments in general do not account for cultural differences and instead assess students based on the dominant culture's concept of success and knowledge.*

- Assessments in general do not account for cultural differences and instead assess students based on the dominant culture's concept of success and knowledge. Washington state's Education Opportunity Gap, Oversight and Accountability Committee (EOGOAC) has amassed significant data that clearly illustrates this.



- Moving towards a more mastery based educational system is important, however it is going to take a lot of time and a commitment to changing the public's view and to get the entire educational staff within a building on board with said change. Schools will need new resources to do this right and the biggest resource will be time. We must give people time to reflect, train, make mistakes and learn the new system. Educators noted that many parents are only gauging success by a letter grade and it is going to require a significant culture shift to acknowledge and support success in other ways.



## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Tools Needed for Transformational Change

*A shift to more project-based, hands-on learning and away from single summative accountability measures.*

#### Related comments from Finland:

- Finnish educators noted that the U.S. is “obsessed with assessments” and Finland is not. Assessments are not viewed as a component of success. The focus in the Finnish system was described as a focus on whether a student thinks they are learning and allowing each student to take charge of their own learning and assess where they are and then compare that to where they want to be. Students in the Finnish system are empowered to make decisions about their own learning and they find that then students actually do start learning better. Schools do not evaluate students, students evaluate themselves. Students can also test out of things if they already have the competencies.

*"The focus in the Finnish system was described as a focus on whether a student thinks they are learning and allowing each student to take charge of their own learning..."*

- Project-based learning with multi-subject integration and cross-curriculum work was practiced in each of the schools visited in Finland. In one music class the teacher explained that when there was a musical performance the students were also required to do all the tech set up – the amps, microphones, wiring, etc – and in this way they were bringing in learning of other topics beyond just music. In other classes students were doing more than just performing in a play, they were writing the script, designing and making the costumes and also then putting on the performance.



## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Tools Needed for Transformational Change

*Teacher and principal preparation programs that evolve with the educational system and better prepare educators for what they are needing now.*

- Currently the teacher prep programs do not give general education teachers enough special education training. As we move towards more inclusionary practices every teacher needs special education training during their teacher prep program and not just as additional training after they are already in the classroom. General education teachers are managing a lot IEP plans for their students and do not have adequate training. Maintaining and managing all the IEP plans reduces the time teachers can actually spend with all of the students which means all the kids begin to suffer and struggle. This is becoming a huge challenge for teachers. .

Additional training for general education teachers, additional special education staff and additional collaboration time between the general education and special education teachers is needed. Principal preparation programs are also lacking when it comes to actually providing assistant principals with training on what they are being asked to do. Currently assistant principals often help with special education and discipline but neither of those issues are covered very well in the preparation programs

*"Additional training for general education teachers, additional special education staff and additional collaboration time between the general education and special education teachers is needed."*

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*Teacher and principal preparation programs that evolve with the educational system and better prepare educators for what they are needing now.*

### Related comments from Finland

- In the visit at HAMK University we learned about a collaborative process with 70 interested parties and experts in teacher education that has created the Finnish Teacher Education Development Programme. A detailed description of the collaborative process that helped develop the Programme can be found [here](#). The goals of developing this program were to both recognize challenges and make progress in teacher education. In this way they have created a system that will allow teachers pre- and in-service training to be more responsive to the demands of an ever-changing educational system. To respond to the constant changing nature of education, short-term courses are developed for teachers in recognition that full development of a new curriculum for their pre-service training takes time. The collaborations that have already been formed in the development of the Programme are also utilized as a way to get more timely feedback from those in the classrooms on what is missing in teacher preparation programs and that information feeds back into the modification and redevelopment of the institution's curriculum. In this way there is a constant feedback loop between classrooms, industry and the higher education community built on a pre-existing collaborative

*“With a country of 5.5 million people, we don’t have enough people to have people whose job is to make sure someone else is doing their job.”*

- The Ministry of Education and Culture does provide financial support to higher education with educational policy-led development projects where an institution may get funding to develop a new pedagogy. However, that funding never goes to a single university, the funding is given to all institutions and they must work together to develop the deliverable in a collaborative fashion and then the product is available to everyone, it becomes “nationally owned”.





## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### The Tools Needed for Transformational Change

*Teacher and principal preparation programs that evolve with the educational system and better prepare educators for what they are needing now.*

#### Related comments from Finland

- The university undergoes an audit every six years of their program by an independent entity that is contracted with by the Ministry of Education Culture. The purpose of the audit framework is:
  - To evaluate whether the quality of work in the institution meets European quality assurance stands,
  - To assess whether the quality system produces relevant information for the implementation of the strategy and continuous development of the institutions activities and whether it results in effective enhancement activities,
  - To encourage internationalization, experimentation and a creative atmosphere at the institution, and
  - To accumulate open and transparent information on quality work at Finnish institutions.

*Decentralization and autonomy are strongly linked to the Finnish way of interpreting teacher and teacher educators' professionalism and the status of teachers and teacher education in Finnish society.*

- During the presentation of the latest audit team's evaluation in June, 2022, they reported that the strengths of the program at HAMK was:
  - "The continuous improvement of teaching through regular pedagogical training and keeping curricula up to date is explicitly anchored in HAMK's vision and serves as a guiding principle of HAMK's strategic policy.
  - HAMK offers and uses various feedback channels to capture input from students, teachers, staff and external stakeholders and thus identify areas of further development. This constant improvement of the quality of education creates a very motivating atmosphere for studying.
  - HAMK's concrete sequence of the development of qualifications goals, the planning of the study programmes as well as the development and renewal process integrate input from staff and students as well as external stakeholders such as alumni, external partners, and working life staff."



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#### Related comments from Finland

- Another point noted at the teacher training programs was that continuing education is not actually obligatory once an individual becomes a teacher but that despite that most teachers do it anyway. There is no cost to the teacher for this ongoing/continuing professional development. In-service training is modified and tailored by HAMK to meet the needs of the individual schools and is often also tied to research occurring at the university. In this way, the collaborative process is again strengthened. The new training is developed in collaboration with the school and based partially on what is already happening within the building. The institution has regular meetings with all the local education providers so that they can understand, plan, and construct projects and find funding to support what the local education providers are needing. The institution also partners with other groups to find out what is needed of students entering the workforce. An example given was of a meeting with hospitals and health providers and the businesses that are creating new health equipment to make sure they know how they are going to have to modify training to allow hospitals to have the staff that they will need to use the new tools being created by industry.
- At HAMI, which provides vocational teacher education programs, the presenters stressed that one of the key components is that vocational industries and those wanting to pursue careers in those industries are respected equally and not viewed as secondary to academia.
- In terms of what the requirements for teacher preparatory programs are, they have shifted from having an extremely detailed document of what is required of the preparatory programs to a broader document focused on what to do and what not to do. They emphasized that similar to trusting teachers and giving them the autonomy to do their jobs, teacher preparatory programs are treated with a similar level of professionalism and autonomy to make changes as they are needed. They determine what those changes are from their ongoing collaborative work with others.





## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### Washington's Challenges and Successes

*The pandemic blew up the educational system at a time when we needed reform.*

- Educators repeatedly stressed that we need to continue the reform started during the pandemic and not just return to the traditional way of educating students. They also stressed the need to continue to foster a system that lets kids move between different types of learning environments based on what each individual student needs and also let each teacher teach in the way that they excel. Educators noted that there will need to be continued systemic change to allow that to happen.
- One suggestion was to be creative when thinking about certifications and endorsements which would free up schools to use more block scheduling. For example, modified endorsements could allow teachers to link science and art or music as they teach math—doing it in a project-based way that includes multiple disciplines.

*Educators repeatedly stressed that we need to continue the reform started during the pandemic and not just return to the traditional way of educating students.*

*More adults are needed in our schools.*

- Principals noted that they need more assistant principals to assist in the day-to-day activities at the schools so that they can focus on being an instructional leader for their teachers. They also noted that while they want to be instructional leaders, they also recognize teachers are and have been in crisis the last two years because of the extra duties they have had to take on. They recognize that they also need to be emotionally supportive.
- Educators noted that schools are continuing to take on more and more duties with the same number of people and funding. Nothing will change in the classroom until there are more people in the classroom. The increased reliance on technology is another example. Every child now has a computer and schools have dramatically increased technology needs but are still receiving the same number of technology dollars despite that exponential growth in need in just two years.
- School administrators noted that the biggest shortage they are finding is in the area of specialist teachers. They are having to rely on trying to find specialists from other states or using virtual in some instances such as speech pathologists or school psychologists. This isn't a new issue but the increased reliance on virtual providers is new.

## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### Washington's Challenges and Successes

*Teachers do not feel that they are trusted to do their jobs or treated as professionals.*

- The lack of respect for teachers from parents and society in general is causing a lot of burn-out. This lack of respect combined with a high degree of micromanagement is driving teachers out of the profession. Teachers are mentally exhausted.
- Teachers want to honor the diversity of students in their classrooms and help them become critical thinkers. They want to be able to help students learn the qualities that will help them succeed in life - social emotional learning, empathy, awareness of others, equity. However, right now teachers are afraid to do this because of the threat of disciplinary action and parental/societal complaints.
- Educators of color do not feel they can accurately discuss stories and perspectives from their own lives or teach a curriculum reflective of diverse backgrounds.
- Educators feel that new laws and supports are needed to help support teachers and combat all the negative public commentary.
- The one exception to this general comment was teachers at the skills centers. One skill center director noted that they had lost no staff during Covid and that they had actually had staff applying to come to work at the skills center. Skills center directors specifically stated that they felt their teachers are the instructional leaders in their centers, not the administrators. Adding that teachers were trusted to be the experts in their own programs.







## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### Washington's Challenges and Successes

*More social/emotional learning and behavioral health support is critical.*

- Educators noted that the school's ability to respond to urgent needs has improved due to the recent crisis intervention training now available to staff; however, there is still a need to focus on prevention and earlier social emotional skills and awareness at the early grades. By addressing the issues earlier in the system, the need for training on how to deal with crisis scenarios downstream will decrease leading to better outcomes for kids.
- Educators noted that part of the problem is that we tend to be very reactive to issues where proactivity is needed. Often, funding isn't available for programmatic support until something gets to a crisis situation and by then it is too late.
- Educators believe we need a more robust social emotional learning system embedded at every school. Every school stated that there are increasing behavioral and mental health needs adding that more counselors and social workers are still needed. Additionally, principals noted that they are spending more time doing social and emotional support for students and that it is overwhelming. They are not equipped to serve as mental health experts and are not qualified for that role—but in many cases there is simply no one else there to do it.
- Electronic access to clinical sessions with social services workers may be one option. During Covid many schools found that kids actually liked attending these sessions online more than in person. This could be a great option for rural communities.
- Superintendents stated that in many of their districts the parents are entirely reliant on the school nurse and the school mental health supports that are available. Many parents have barriers getting the support themselves and the school-based services are the only inlets for their children.





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### Washington's Challenges and Successes

*The funding system continues to be seen as inadequate and unfair.*

- District superintendents noted that districts are still struggling financially. Two reasons for this were that recent enrollment declines have exacerbated that problem in some districts and that the cost of doing business has gone up, often related to items such as increasing costs of housing. Some districts are struggling to provide affordable housing for teachers and other educational staff within the district.
- Regionalization in the funding model continues to be an issue for some districts and the fact that the new model puts a premium on hiring younger teachers due to the loss of the teacher mix ratio.
- If increased staffing was addressed in the prototype, it would likely solve many of the inadequacies in the overall formula. Every district noted that they are hiring far more certificated staff than the state funding model provides funding for. These additional staff are then funded with local levy dollars.
- The inadequate staffing in the model also then leads to problems with paying staff salaries and providing adequate COLAs. One district gave an example of receiving funding for 307 staff but in actuality has hired over 480 staff to meet the needs of their students. In order to hire the number of staff they need districts end up reducing what they otherwise could provide in salaries and COLAs.
- Skills center directors noted that the funding for skills centers is inadequate adding that the manner in which funding is generated for skills centers often contributes to the issue of high schools not wanting to send students to the skills center because they will be “losing” money.
- The lack of funding for transportation for students from the high schools to the skills center was also a barrier for students attending.
- Additionally, skills center directors noted that they don't get local levy funding so are relying on state funding entirely for salaries for all staff and that regionalization is also an issue since they receive the same regionalization factor as the home district even if every other district they contract with has a higher regionalization factor.







## WASHINGTON SCHOOL & SITE VISITS

### Washington's Challenges and Successes

*The new disciplinary rules continue to create classroom management challenges for teachers.*

- Teachers noted that they often feel that they have no options when it comes to student discipline when a student is acting out in class and impacting the learning of other students.

*Students also noted that more needs to be done when there is a disruptive student in the classroom*

- Students also noted that more needs to be done when there is a disruptive student in the classroom and suggested more parental involvement needed to be occurring for those students.
- Teachers felt their only option was utilizing room clearing techniques because they simply don't have the staff or facilities to do in-school suspensions. Teachers would like more support in the classroom to help students with behavioral issues.





# FRIENDS AND PARTNERS MADE ALONG THE WAY







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### Washington

- Union Gap K-8 School, Union Gap
- La Venture Middle School, Mt Vernon
- Newtech Skill Center, Spokane

### Finland:

- 3DBear: A company providing CTE learning activities in augmented and virtual reality and providing professional development, training and curriculum for teachers. 3DBear currently works with students in Finland as well as some schools in the United States.
- Helsinki Education Hub – An EdTech innovator program and facility, bringing together developers, investors and influencers, where we met with:
  - Marjaana Sall, Education Ambassador, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
  - Martina Nisula, Education Advisor, Education Finland
  - Johanna Koponen, Senior Ministerial Advisor, Ministry of Education and Culture
- Nasima Razmyar, Deputy Mayor, City of Helsinki
- Companies from EdTech Finland, a Finnish industry association focused on the field of educational and learning technology.
- Aurinkolahti Elementary School – A K-9 school where we focused on visiting the elementary grade levels.
- Jätkäsaari School – A K-9 school where we focused on visiting the middle school grade levels.
- HAMK University
- HAMI Vocational Training
- Kiipula Vocational College – a special education focused vocational school.
- Mikko Perala and Karl Ogland of School of Gaming – A company who design and deliver entire school curriculum through games.
- Helsinki Missio: A non-profit working on combatting loneliness of students in a program called School to Belong.
- Melissa Plath and Jerome Richman of FARIA, Finnish-American Research and Innovation Accelerator platform
- Marianna Halonen of Sulava – An education company working to support vocational education, apprenticeships, and University links across Finland.

A heartfelt thank you to all of our  
**FRIENDS AND PARTNERS**

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