

POLICY BRIEF 2/2026

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Declining learning outcomes: Students' views on the causes of the decline and possible solutions

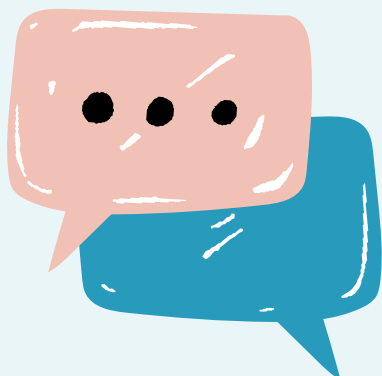
- ▶ The learning outcomes and wellbeing of young people are intertwined. Mental wellbeing and social relationships are especially important when it comes to learning.
- ▶ It is crucial to prevent polarization in young people's abilities, wellbeing and future aspirations, as such disparities negatively affect their learning in many ways.
- ▶ Meaningful and safe personal relationships, support for the development of basic skills and school engagement, and meaningful opportunities for choice and participation strengthen young people's motivation to learn.
- ▶ School alone cannot solve all learning and wellbeing challenges, but it plays an important role in young people's broader support network.



Throughout the 21st century, the learning outcomes of children and adolescents in Finland have declined in reading, mathematics and natural sciences. Adolescents completing comprehensive school were asked for their views on the reasons for this decline and how it could be reversed. Student hearings were conducted in workshops across Finland, involving three general education classes and one special education class, with around ten to twenty students in each class.

The aim was to gather a variety of views on the decline in learning outcomes and solutions to improve them from students nearing the end of their comprehensive school journey. The workshops involved both individual and small-group activities.

The student hearing is included in the final report of the working group set up by the Ministry of Education and Culture to review the development of learning outcomes in comprehensive education. The report was published in April 2026. The student hearings were conducted in collaboration with EDUCA Education for the Future Flagship (Research Council of Finland #358924), in 2025. This summary of the student hearings report presents the key findings from the hearings.



The wellbeing and learning outcomes of young people are polarized

While some young people receive plenty of support and encouragement for learning and dealing challenges in life, others feel left on their own and find everyday life burdensome. In such circumstances, it can be difficult to focus on or stay engaged to studying. Furthermore, young people experience the demands and expectations placed on them in different ways. Some feel that expectations at school are too low, while others feel exhausted and increasingly uncertain about the future.

Mental wellbeing is essential for learning

Student hearings showed that young people's overall wellbeing and learning outcomes are mutually linked. During the workshops, young people called for **improved access to mental health services** and expressed a desire for effective ways to promote mental wellbeing in everyday school life. Having too many difficult issues on one's mind makes it difficult, if not impossible, to focus on learning.

The students emphasised that society needs to take swift and comprehensive action to address the growing mental health issues affecting young people. While school alone cannot solve all learning and wellbeing challenges, it plays an important role in young people's broader support network.

Encouragement from teachers is important

It is well established that learning is fostered by positive teacher-student interactions in an emotionally supportive atmosphere, where teachers are responsive to students' needs and perspectives and employ engaging teaching methods.

According to young people, **teachers who are encouraging and fair** and who ensure that every pupil stays engaged while maintaining a peaceful learning environment, make schoolwork meaningful, motivating and fruitful. Having a warm and open relationship with a teacher and opportunities to study together with others makes learning more enjoyable and ensures that students can get support from their peers when facing difficulties.

The importance of the wider developmental environment and personal responsibility

During the student hearings, it became clear that schools are not isolated entities and thus cannot single-handedly address all challenges related to learning and wellbeing. Instead, **a systemic approach and cooperation between various sectors are needed**. School attendance and learning improve when parents have the time, willingness and skills to help, when also friends are interested in school, and when leisure activities support wellbeing.

Students also recognised their **own responsibility for maintaining their wellbeing and improving their learning methods**. Difficulties in adopting effective learning strategies, insufficient sleep, and excessive use of social media can undermine young people's motivation for school and weaken their commitment to studying.

Focusing on basic psychological needs strengthens motivation

Based on student hearings, experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness support motivation to learn and school engagement. Therefore, these basic psychological needs should be intentionally addressed every day at school. In practice, this means the following:

- Focusing on students' active participation and opportunities to make choices
- Using methods that foster a sense of community and strengthen students' social relationships
- Providing constructive and supportive feedback to reinforce students' positive experiences of their own abilities

Young people also believe that it is important for everyone to **find personal meaning in studying critical basic skills such as mathematics and reading**. This would motivate them to practice and develop those skills more actively.

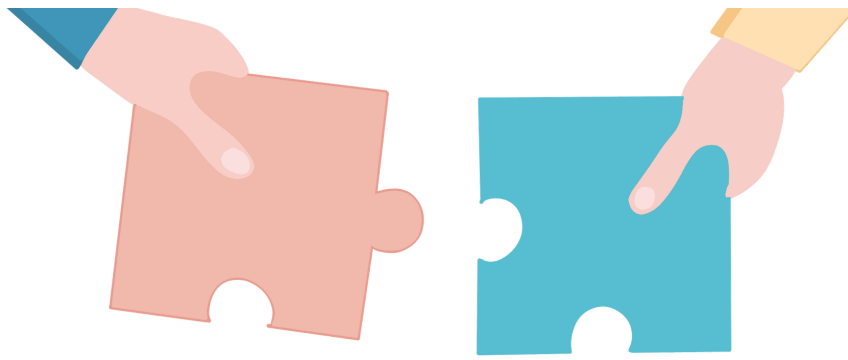
Young people's faith in the future is being tested

Students described their views on the future in very different ways. While some expressed fear and worry, others looked forward to further studies and starting their careers.

To give every young person the opportunity to dream about their future, students emphasised the need to **improve access to employment for young people**, and to provide everyone with support, assistance and guidance in shaping their aspirations. They also expressed a desire for support from adults in planning the steps needed to realise their dreams, and support to **put these plans into action**.

Young people's insights should be heard

Young people are experts in their own learning and daily lives. They have the right to be heard on matters that affect them and to have their views considered in decision-making. Young people's perspectives should be considered in the ongoing discussion about declining learning outcomes, both in everyday school life and in decision-making concerning their education and lives more generally.



Researchers' recommendations:

- ▶ **Families** need support to provide their children with a safe daily life, resources to encourage their children to engage with school, and low-threshold help in challenging situations.
- ▶ **Schools** should create environments and conditions that foster a sense of community and prevent loneliness and bullying, enabling every child and adolescent to develop meaningful social relationships that support learning and wellbeing.
- ▶ **Teachers and other school professionals** need sufficient and well-targeted resources to support each student's learning and wellbeing in day-to-day school life.
- ▶ **Multisectoral collaboration** should also support student's mental wellbeing and enable agile responses to challenges.
- ▶ **In teacher training**, the focus should be on competencies related to interaction, wellbeing and instructional learning support – skills that are needed in everyday school life to meet students' needs.
- ▶ **Students** should find personal meaning in learning and developing critical basic skills such as mathematics and reading. Teachers, families, friends and Finnish society as a whole should support and enable this.
- ▶ **Hobbies** should offer children and adolescents meaningful ways to spend their free time so that it supports mental and physical wellbeing, rather than spending all their free time on social media.
- ▶ **Socially sustainable education policy** is based on research and require that children and adolescents are being heard, and that their views and participation are taken into account in decision-making and day-to-day school life.
- ▶ **Employers and other working-life representatives** should listen to the experiences and views of young people so that each young person can dream, find their own path and have faith in the future.



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