National core curriculum - a basis for basic education instruction


Based on government proposals the Parliament decides on

- the contents of legislation on education and research
- the national objectives for education
- the time allocation for compulsory and optional subjects in basic and general upper secondary education.

The national core curriculum [2] (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014) is determined by the Finnish National Agency for Education [3]. It includes and defines the following:

- the objectives and core contents of different subjects
- the principles of pupil assessment, special-needs education, pupil welfare and educational guidance
- the principles of a good operating culture, assessment
- the concept of learning.

It also provides guidelines on how to adapt the curriculum in instruction in a foreign language or language-immersion instruction or instruction based on Steiner pedagogy. Instruction given in the school's language of instruction and instruction given in a foreign language or the language-immersion, language must form an integrated whole. The objectives and contents of the different subjects are the same as in instruction in the national languages. In Steiner-pedagogical instruction, the national core curriculum for basic education must be adhered to with some exceptions.

The national core curriculum reformed in 2014

The latest national core curriculum for basic education was completed in 2014 by the Finnish National Board of Education (from 2017 the Finnish National Agency for Education [3]). Schools started to work according to the new curriculum in August 2016 for grades 1 – 6 and will be taken in use by 2019 for grades 7 – 9.

The preparation was interactive with a commenting, follow-up and feedback possibility for various stakeholders (e.g. all education providers, pupils and their parents) in different phases of the reform process. Working groups consisted of educational officials, researchers and teachers. These groups focused on discussing the structure and the objectives, conceptions of learning, support for learning
and subjects.

**Transversal competences at the heart of the curriculum**

According to the [national core curriculum](#) for basic education (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014) some of the key aims are:

- developing schools as learning communities
- emphasizing the joy of learning
- emphasizing collaborative atmosphere
- promoting student autonomy in studying and in school life.

Much focus is put on transversal (generic) competences and work across school subjects to meet the challenges of the future. Transversal competence is a mixture of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and will. Competence also means an ability to apply knowledge and skills in a given situation.

In the national core curriculum, the learning goals of the transversal competences are described with seven competence areas. These areas are:

1. Thinking and learning to learn
2. Cultural literacy, communication and expression
3. Managing daily life, taking care of oneself and others
4. Multiliteracy
5. ICT-skills
6. Entrepreneurial and work life skills
7. Participation in and building sustainable future.

This is a new way of combining competence-based and subject-based teaching and learning. Local authorities and schools are encouraged to promote developing these competences and to consider their own innovative ways to reach the set goals.

The core curricula for subjects have been written in a way that the most important competence objectives are linked to the subject’s learning goals. The competences are also assessed as a part of subject assessment. So, every school subject enhances the development of all seven competence areas.

The emphasis is set on collaborative classroom practices. The [National core curriculum](#) (Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet 2014) introduced multi-disciplinary, phenomenon- and project-based studies where several teachers may work with students studying the same topic.

**Local curricula supplements the national curriculum**

The education providers – most often municipalities - and the schools themselves prepare their own more detailed curricula according to the national core curriculum. In the local curriculum the objectives and contents specified in the national core curriculum are specified - as well as other factors bearing on provision of the education.

The local curricula must define for example the values, underlying principles as well as general educational and teaching objectives.

Also the language programme, the local lesson-hour distribution, cooperation between home and instruction of pupils requiring special support or belonging to different language and cultural groups must be addressed.
Subjects in basic education

The Basic Education Act - Perusopetuslaki [4] (in Finnish) regulates the subjects included in the curriculum and student counselling. The Government decides on the overall time allocation by defining the minimum number of lessons for core subjects during basic education.

Schools may focus on different subjects in different ways due to the flexible time allocation. Optional subjects are also included in the curriculum. Pupils’ parents or other guardians decide which of the optional subjects on offer the pupil will take. The curriculum also includes an introduction to working-life period.

The following subjects are common to all pupils according to the syllabus of basic education:

- mother tongue and literature: Finnish or Swedish
- the other national language: Swedish or Finnish
- foreign languages
- environmental studies
- health education
- religion or ethics
- history
- social studies
- mathematics
- physics
- chemistry
- biology
- geography
- physical education
- music
- visual arts
- crafts
- home economics

In addition to these, pupils may have the option to study other subjects suitable to basic education, according to the provisions of the local curriculum. These subjects may be partially or completely optional for pupils.

Number of lesson hours

The Government decides on the overall time allocation for basic education. The present distribution of lesson hours was confirmed by the Government on 2018 (see table below). The number of lessons in A1-language were increased by 2 hours in grades 1 and 2. This increment became valid in schools 1.1.2020.

The time allocation was implemented together with the reformed national core curriculum in schools from September 2018.

Table 5.1 Distribution of lesson hours for basic education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>1st Grade</th>
<th>2nd Grade</th>
<th>3rd Grade</th>
<th>4th Grade</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother tongue and literature</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1-language ¹</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1-language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>32</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Environmental studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology and geography ²</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Physics and chemistry ²</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Health education ²</td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Environment and nature studies in total</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion/Ethics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History and social studies ³</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Visual arts</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Crafts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical education</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home economics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic and practical elective subjects</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic and practical subjects in total</td>
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<td>62</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance counselling</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional subjects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minimum number of lessons</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>224</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Optional A2-language) (12)

(Optional B2-language) (4)

--- = Subject is taught in the grades if stated in the local curriculum.

¹ A1 language teaching begins at 1st grade spring term at the latest, for at least 0.5 hours per week.

² The subject is taught as a part of integrated environmental studies in the grades 1-6.

³ Social studies are taught in grades 4-6 for at least 2 hours per week and grades 7-9 at least 3 hours per week.
The pupil can, depending on the language, study a free-choice A2 language either as an optional subject or instead of the B1 language. The pupil can study the B2 language as an optional subject. The free-choice A2 and B2 languages can, alternatively, be organised as instruction exceeding the minimum time allocation. In this case their instruction cannot be organised using the minimum time allocated in the distribution of lesson hours for optional or B1 language as defined in this paragraph. Depending on the language the pupil receives instruction in a B1 language or optional subjects instead of this B1 language. The distribution of lesson hours would be a minimum of 234 annual lessons for a pupil studying the A2 language as instruction exceeding the minimum time allocation. The corresponding number of annual lessons is a minimum of 226 for a pupil with the B2 language. The total number of annual lessons would be a minimum of 238 for pupils studying both the A2 and the B1 languages as instruction exceeding the minimum time allocation.


The subjects or subject groups in basic education are grouped into sections combining several grades. For each section the minimum number of lessons has been defined in terms of annual weekly lessons. There are 38 weeks in a school year. Therefore, one annual weekly lesson means total 38 lessons during a school year. One lesson means 45 minutes instruction.

For example, in mathematics the distribution of lesson hours means that there must be at least 38 x 32 lessons = 1216 lessons during the nine years of basic education. These 32 lessons are divided into three sections:

- at least six annual weekly lessons (= 228 lessons) must be taught during grades 1–2,
- at least 15 annual weekly lessons (= 480) during grades 3 – 6,
- at least 11 annual weekly (=352) during grades 7 – 9.

Local authorities or schools may decide on how to allocate the lessons to different grades inside a section.

The legislation and regulation that applies:

- Basic Education Decree Perusopetusasetus [6] (in Finnish)
- Government Decree on general national objectives and distribution of lesson hours in basic education, September 2018

Valtioneuvoston asetus perusopetuslaissa tarkoitetun opetuksen valtakunnallisista tavoitteista ja perusopetuksen tuntijaosta [7] (in Finnish)
- Distribution of lesson hours in basic education [8]

Working methods are chosen by teachers

The national core curriculum includes general guidelines and recommendations for the teaching methods and material. However, varied working methods support and direct the learning. Teacher chooses working methods suitable for different ages and various learning situations and in interaction with their pupils. Teachers choose the working methods bearing in mind the objectives stated in the curriculum. In particular, teacher guides the pupils in the use of new working methods and strengthens pupils' ability for self-regulation. The characteristics of different subjects and the development of transversal competences are taken into consideration when choosing the working methods.

Experimental and functional working methods, the engagement of different senses and the use of movement increase the experiential nature of learning and strengthen motivation. Motivation is also strengthened by working methods that support self-regulation and feelings of being part of a group. Drama and other forms of artistic expression promote the pupils' growth into persons with self-knowledge, healthy self-esteem and creativity who can express themselves in versatile ways and engage in constructive interaction with different people and groups. An experimental and problem-centred work approach, play, use of imagination and artistic activities are used to promote conceptual and methodological competence, critical and creative thinking, and skills in applying one's competence.

The selection of working methods may also be used to support communal learning where competence and understanding are constructed in interaction with others. The pupils are guided in acting in various roles, sharing tasks among themselves and assuming responsibility for both personal and shared goals.

The individual and developmental differences between pupils are also taken into account in the selection of working methods. This kind of differentiation of instruction is based on the teacher's knowledge of their pupils' personal needs.

Diverse and appropriate use of information and communication technology (ICT) expands the pupils' possibilities for developing their working approaches and networking skills. This builds their capabilities for independent, interactive and critical acquisition and processing of information and its creative production. The possibilities offered by games and gameful learning are exploited in the selection of working methods.

The learning-to-learn skills are developed optimally when the teacher also guides the pupils in planning and evaluating their working methods. This motivates and helps the pupils to assume responsibility for their learning and work in the school community.

The learning arrangements should support learning taking place inside and outside the school. In addition, utilising authentic learning materials, tools and environment are important as these will help the pupils to both acquire and deepen their knowledge and skills in real and authentic situations.

The teachers choose the learning material

In addition to textbooks and teaching material the teachers decide on the use of ICT. The education providers acquire all the needed learning materials. Textbooks and other materials are free for the pupils.

Learning materials are mostly produced by commercial publishers. There is no inspection of learning materials. Learning material is produced by the Finnish National Agency for Education with a small
circulation and for minority groups subsidised by the government.

Teachers and education providers may utilise a national website that contains information and support for teaching, such as online learning material. The website can be found at edu.fi [10]-website, which is maintained and updated by the Finnish National Agency for Education [3].

The teachers decide on the homework for pupils. There are no official recommendations about homework.

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