The smartest kids in the world?

WHEN MY PARENTS raved about the Finnish education system, I used to think that it was part of a national ego-boosting program. All nations do it. We all have to be best at something. Right?

Perhaps my indifference was linked to my own school experiences. I belonged to the category of teenage boys who were more interested in girls and sports than homework. For me, school was a place where I could hang out with friends, play sports and do a bit of studying on the side.

I went through the Finnish system from Grade One through Twelve. I was never a top student, but I did manage to pass my matriculation exams without any major problems, mainly because I had a knack for languages.

When the OECD started coming out with its PISA (Program for International Assessment) results, I had to rethink my indifference. Finnish 15-year-olds came out on top in virtually every category from mathematics to literacy, from science to problem-solving. We must be doing something right, I thought. And it can't be linked to the fact that Finnish kids spend, on average, less time studying than their OECD counterparts.

Finnish students consistently come out on top in virtually every category from mathematics to literacy.

Following the stellar test results in 2000, 2003 and 2006, Finnish schools have become popular places to visit. International education experts are seeking answers to a simple question: What makes the Finnish education system so successful?

Let me try to provide some reasons.

First, it's all about equal opportunity. The Finnish education system offers everyone equal opportunities for education, irrespective of sex, economic situation, cultural or linguistic background. Basic education is completely free, including instruction, school materials, warm meals, health and dental care, and special needs.

Second, the system is comprehensive. Basic education takes nine years and caters to those between seven and 16 years of age. (Yes, we start "real school" at seven!) Schools don't select their students. Every student can go to school in his or her own district.

Third, we have highly qualified and committed teachers. A master's degree combined with teaching practice is required before qualification. As it's popular to become a teacher, schools can select the most motivated and talented applicants.

Fourth, we encourage evaluation. Unlike some countries which have abolished grades, the Finnish system evaluates learning outcomes from the beginning to the end. The aim is to encourage and support the student; the system produces useful information which helps both schools and students to develop.

And finally, the system is flexible. The curriculum is national, but its implementation is local. This gives the teachers a lot of autonomy regarding the content of the education. Independence does wonders for motivation.

These five factors are the building blocks for a system in which the differences between the strongest and weakest are small.

PISA isn't the only measure of an education system's success. Nevertheless, it does give a good indication of how a country is doing.

In the past four years I've had the privilege of giving talks in more than 80 schools around Finland, from the south all the way up to Lapland. I must say that I've been really impressed by what I've seen: the schools are in excellent condition, the students are bright, and the teachers are both proud and motivated.

Our family is in the process of moving from Brussels to Finland. One of the most important things is to find a good school. Somehow I feel that it's not going to be a problem. As far as academic motivation is concerned, I hope that our children take after their mother rather than their father.

Alexander Stubb is Finland's foreign minister.