

Espoo International School Staff Statement

5th April 2023, Espoo

Addressed to: Kasvun ja oppimisen lautakunta

The following is a statement from the staff of Espoo International School regarding the proposed changes to English-language education in Espoo.

As a staff we are against both proposal 1 (Principles of pupil admission) and change 2 (English-language education being provided by both Espoo International School and Kivimiehen koulu). We have numerous concerns regarding both proposals, many of which come down to the rushed timetable and insufficient planning of the proposed changes. School year is about to end, and planning for next semester has been done at Espoo International School for months already. It is not reasonable to adjust to these changes in the few weeks that are left after your meeting on April 19th.

Proposal 1: Pupil admissions

There are several challenges in implementing the proposed changes for pupil admissions, which we would like to lay out for your consideration. We cannot be in favour of the proposal, unless you can present viable solutions to these problems.

Support for English language learning at EIS

Espoo International School caters for students who study the Finnish national curriculum at a fluent level in English. The curriculum does not provide English as a second language tuition to students who do not use English at a mother tongue level. Currently, the lessons allocated for mother tongue learning have been split between Finnish and English so that all the grade levels, with the exception of first grade, have only 2-3 English lessons per week.

According to research, it takes seven years for a child to achieve fluency in a foreign school language. If EIS were to accept students who have only begun learning in English recently, they would not have access to any English as a second language support for their learning with the current resources. Alternatively, emphasis will change to learning English from actually learning IN English, putting the mother tongue speakers at a disadvantage.

Challenge 1. Espoo International School will need to update its curriculum to begin providing tuition for English as a second language.

Challenge 2. The school will also need to recruit qualified teaching staff for teaching English as a second language by August 2023. With the increase of different language proficiency levels in classes, it is likely that additional learning support resources such as classroom assistants will also be required. Recruitment needs to start immediately in April 2023, without knowing how many of these students would be starting in August.

Admissions workload and lack of resources

Espoo International School has English-language entrance exams and a relatively high student turnover, which produces additional work to administration and teachers compared to Espoo's Finnish-language schools. International families come and go throughout the year. When a new student joins our school, we must find out about the study background of the child as well as their choices when it comes to Religion or Ethics, A2 languages or other elective subjects. The staff also needs to evaluate the new students for any potential need of support, which takes time. When students come and go, there are sometimes challenges in the formation of new groups, and it is difficult for the staff to keep an eye out for all new students.

The entrance exams take up multiple days of work from numerous teaching and administrative staff members, who must prepare, administer, and assess the exams. There is also a huge workload in ensuring transparency and appeal processes. With the proposed changes, none of these commitments will go away, but more workload will ensue to cater for the new group of school report-based applicants. The workload will fluctuate unpredictably throughout the academic year, adding additional strain to the daily running of the school.

Challenge 3. New admissions policies will need to be produced and communicated to the applicant families as soon as possible. In order to ensure that the new report-card based applicants receive appropriate pedagogical assessment when they arrive, we would need teachers with reduced contractual lesson hours to work on these throughout the next academic year.

Introducing transition classes

We understand that one proposed option for supporting new English-language learners is to provide transition classes where they can learn English and then later transition to the mainstream classes.

Challenge 4. We believe introducing transition classes requires a lot of time, careful pedagogical thinking and planning, and recruitment of experienced, qualified teaching staff. If these classes are introduced, they must follow the same model as the Finnish International School of Tampere stipulates. The maximum size for these classes is 10 students. The planning and recruitment processes must begin immediately.

Shortage of facilities

Currently at Opinmäki, there is a lack of small group work spaces. There would be great difficulties in finding spaces for the small transition classes at short notice. Olarin koulu also needs small-scale, calm and safe spaces for transition classes and special education provision, so there will be a shortage of these kinds of rooms available.

Furthermore, accepting all applicants applying from English-speaking schools may worsen the current shortage of classroom spaces at Opinmäki. It may also lead to very large class sizes (over 25 students per class), as new students get added to existing classes throughout the school year. These challenges will affect the quality of teaching and learning, as well as the feasibility of support for learning.

Challenge 5. We propose that to ensure the legislative right for learning and language support in appropriate small group classrooms, additional “parakki” buildings would need to be built at Opinmäki campus.

Challenge 6. There needs to be a cap on student admission numbers based on the availability of facilities, taking into consideration the classroom sizes.

Admittance to English-language education for three years

It was unclear in the proposal what will happen to students who have been admitted to English-language education for three years after three years have passed. If they wish to stay in the school, do they have to reapply?

Challenge 7. Clarify the process for “fixed-term” students’ continuation of studies in Espoo’s English-language education after the initial three year period.

Verification of the validity of reports from English-speaking schools

If new students are admitted to Espoo International School based on their former school’s report card only, there needs to be a rigorous verification procedure to ensure that forged documents are detected.

Challenge 8. Clarify the verification procedure for applicants’ documentation.

How will applicants be allocated between Kivimiehen koulu and Espoo International School?

The proposal is unclear on how applicants to English-language education would be allocated to Espoo International School and Kivimiehen koulu, if an English stream is set up there. Will international applicants from English-speaking schools have priority to choose which school they wish to attend? Will applicants who are admitted via entrance exam have lower priority to choose their preferred school? It is also unclear if students from Kivimiehen koulu can apply for Espoo International School after meeting the requirements.

Challenge 9. Clarify the admissions procedure and priority given to different applicants for English-language education for both entrance exam and school-report based application routes.

Proposal 2: Providing English-Language education in two separate schools, Espoo International School and Kivimiehen koulu

There are several challenges in implementing the proposed separation of English-language education into Espoo International School and Kivimiehen koulu, which we would like to lay out for your consideration. We cannot be in favour of the proposal, unless you can present viable solutions to these challenges.

Future of English-language education in Espoo

English-language education and Espoo International School have been under several organisational changes during the past decade. A lot of work was put into merging all English-language education in the school merger of EIS with Postipuu and Komeetta English-language streams in 2015. Building a new school culture has taken years, and the proposed change to go back to the model of English-language streams within the Finnish-speaking school of Kivimiehen koulu would reverse the progress that we have achieved. Based on the recurring attempts to implement organisational changes at Espoo International School over the past few years, we have concerns that there is no clear long-term vision for English-language education in Espoo in terms of location and organisational structure. Our wish is to reside in the same building permanently, or at least for a long-term period, and to keep our school community intact.

Challenge 10. Establish a transparent, long-term plan for the facilities and organisational structure of English-language education in Espoo.

Long-term plan on classes per grade level at Espoo International School and Kivimiehen koulu

With the proposed changes, Espoo International School would shrink over time to 2 classes per grade level in primary school and maintain 4 classes per grade level in the middle school. At the same time, Kivimiehen koulu would gain an English-speaking stream in primary school with 1 class per grade level. This does not yet add more places to English-language education in Espoo if the class sizes remain capped at 25 places each. Is there a plan to add a second class per grade-level at Kivimiehen koulu in the future?

Furthermore, if Olarin koulu continues to grow as the surrounding catchment area is built up, eventually Espoo International School will be squeezed out of the current Opinmäki campus due to the Lähikoulu priority given to Olari pupils. We reiterate that our wish is to reside in the same building permanently, or at least for a long-term period, and to keep our school community intact.

Challenge 11. With growing student numbers in Olarin koulu, ensure there are enough right-sized classrooms for classes at Espoo International School. Establish new primary classes for growing numbers of admitted students at Kivimiehen koulu or Espoo International School.

Concerns over job security and teacher retention

Despite assurances that current staff would continue to have work in Espoo, we have concerns that the proposal will impact the job security of those staff members with temporary contracts. Over time, the number of primary teacher positions at Espoo International School will decrease as primary intake increases in Kivimiehen koulu. With decreasing pupil numbers, will the EIS vice principals' roles come eventually under scrutiny?

The proposed changes will also affect the employer image negatively, and we fear that some of our colleagues may look for employment elsewhere. It is a well known fact that there have been persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified English-speaking teachers at Espoo International School due to the stringent qualification specifications imposed by the Finnish National Agency for Education (OPH) to those teachers with foreign teaching qualifications. Many of us have invested countless time and finances to reach

qualified teacher status, and others are in the process. We need our experienced teachers to stay with us.

Challenge 12. Ensure there is enough work for all staff members in the future.

Challenge 13. Work to ensure long-term teacher retention in Espoo's English-language education.

Challenges in filling primary teacher contractual lesson hours

If the number of classes at Espoo International School is reduced over the next few years to two per primary grade level, there will be less primary lessons in total to divide between the existing teachers. We fear there will be challenges in filling the primary teachers' contractual lesson hours, which may in turn lead to the termination of some contracts, or forcing some teachers to work part-time.

At Kivimiehen koulu, there will likely also be challenges to fill the contractual lesson hours for primary teachers who do not speak Finnish, as they will not be able to flexibly offer electives to the middle school, as has currently been the case.

Challenge 14. Make a viable plan for providing full contractual lesson hours to all teachers.

Position of English-speaking teachers at Kivimiehen koulu

We also have experience working in a school where some staff are bilingual, while others only speak English as a working language. These members of staff might feel excluded from formal and informal events that take place in Finnish. This will prove to be a tough challenge for Kivimiehen koulu to work with, as the school will have mainly Finnish staff with varying levels of English, accompanied by teachers of the English side who might not know any Finnish at all. What will the official working language of the school be? How will collaboration time be implemented? The proposal gives no clear answers to this question.

Challenge 15. If the proposal is implemented, the administration of Kivimiehen koulu will need to build a truly bilingual working culture to ensure non-Finnish-speaking teachers can fully operate in the daily life of the school. This will mean also producing all working documents in two languages.

Transition of new Kivimies students into Espoo International School 7th grade

Over the past few years the teachers of Espoo international School have worked hard to build a positive school culture, and a safe learning environment for all grades 1-9. We have increased the cooperation between primary and secondary schools to help with the crucial transition from grade 6 to grade 7, when students also start studying in the MYP program. We feel that all this work will have gone to waste when our primary school is being suppressed to only two primary classes for each grade level, with Kivimiehen koulu having its own administration and school culture. When those students enter Espoo International School for grade 7, it will be hard to integrate the students from the two schools into one, with Kivimiehen koulu being at a disadvantage. We have been given vague instructions on how to collaborate with Kivimiehen koulu over this, but it is unclear to us how this will be handled in practice when the collaboration time (ys-aika) is barely enough to handle the running of one school.

Challenge 16. To avoid these problems we would like to make a proposal where we keep the Kivimies campus as part of Espoo International School, but choose one of the teachers working there to be in charge of Kivimiehen kampus as a vice principal. The campus will eventually grow to have six classes with 25 students in each of them to be a proper campus. The right for these students to continue studying in Espoo International School for grades 7-9 needs to be ensured.

Impact on staff and student wellbeing

The proposed changes have an impact on the wellbeing of our staff and students. The fragmentation of educational provision in English will lead to challenges in transitioning from primary to middle school, especially for those children with special educational needs. The reduction of primary classes at EIS will take several years, meaning an annually recurring concern over which teacher(s) have to move schools to maintain their job. Uncertainty over student numbers at the two schools of Opinmäki campus also create conflict over facilities and uncertainty about EIS being able to stay intact, with all classes in the same building. Our school already has problems with teachers experiencing excessive work-related chronic stress, and increasing mental health concerns in the student body. We feel the proposed changes will adversely affect the wellbeing of both staff and students.

Challenge 17. Mitigate the adverse effects of the proposal on teachers' and students' wellbeing. This may include recruiting additional staff to the student wellbeing team, providing necessary occupational health services to staff members, and taking actions to improve the quality of the working and learning environments.

Final remarks on the timeline of the changes

We have laid out above seventeen challenges concerning the two proposals. We, the staff of Espoo International School, cannot agree to these proposals before action has been taken to address each challenge. It is clear that all of these issues cannot be resolved in the highly ambitious proposed timeline, where the changes would be implemented starting August 2023. We therefore urge the committee of Kasvun ja oppimisen lautakunta to postpone implementation until a thorough inquiry has been made into the proposals' challenges.