EASLEY, SC (FOX Carolina) - An Upstate educator is hopping across the pond to gain some insight into the challenges public schools in South Carolina face.
Dr. Danny Merck, superintendent for the School District of Pickens County, will join 22 other South Carolina education stakeholders who will visit Finland's public schools. Merck's fellow stakeholders includes educators, policymakers, community and business leaders; journalists, and funders.

The district says Finland's public education system consistently performs at the top of international rankings, with a vast majority of students going on to either to academic or vocational post-secondary education.

The trip is a field study, led by Public Education Partners, Furman University's education department, and the Riley Institute at Furman.

“I have studied Finland’s success extensively as we are constantly looking for the best ways to improve learning,” Merck said. “To see their schools and speak to their education leaders in person is an invaluable opportunity.”

Ansel Sanders, president and CEO of Public Education Partners, says the field study should offer all involved new lessons on how to approach education.

“As we face South Carolina's education challenges, such as our teacher shortage, we must learn from others who have worked to address similar challenges,” said Sanders. “Though Finland is different from South Carolina in that it is a relatively homogeneous country with little poverty, the Finnish approach to education, as well as how the Finns developed this system, offers some useful examples that are applicable in and transferrable to South Carolina.”

Michael Svec, a professor of education at Furman, says Finland's approach holds lessons for South Carolina, where public schools face a growing shortage of teachers. He notes that all teachers in elementary and secondary schools are required to have a Master's degree, which he says helps drive higher levels of trust and respect for teachers.

“Furman has offered a five-year program for teachers in training since 2000, an approach that significantly reduces the rate at which teachers leave the profession in their first five years in the classroom,” Svec said.

He also says Finnish teachers and schools have a lot of autonomy, and that national curriculum guidelines allow room for creativity. For example, Svec says every child has access to early childhood education and that children start first grade at age 7. There are also far fewer
standardized tests, but any such tests are not tied to accountability.

He also notes schools have shorter school days and 90 minutes of recess each day.

However, Finnish counterparts can expect to learn lessons from the study group too.

The sharing of information will not be one-sided,” said Don Gordon, executive director of the Riley Institute at Furman. “South Carolina’s growing success in community schools that support rural communities will be of interest to Finnish educators. They’ll also be interested in our growing network of project-based learning schools because they are transitioning to similar methods of teaching."

The field study will take place over seven days in Helsinki and Oulu in October. Participants will observe in primary and secondary schools, including special education settings and inclusive preparatory education intended to support Finland’s growing number of immigrants and foreign language speakers. They will meet with policymakers, university faculty responsible for teacher preparation, school leaders, teachers, students and family members.

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