



# LEAP TO HELSINKI

*or "There and Back Again"...*

**by Elsie Bertholm, Shelley Hardcastle & Michele Reid**

*Moi (that's 'hello' in Finnish).*

This past Spring Break we were given an opportunity to visit Helsinki, Finland, through the LEAP (Leading Educators Around the Planet) organization. This group connects school leaders around the world in collaborative peer shadowing and study tour experiences, allowing school leaders to share and learn from each other. Since the program was first started in New South Wales by the Directors of LEAP (Australia), Warren Marks and Sue Lazenby, there have been exchanges between various countries including Scotland, Ireland, USA, Finland, Australia, Singapore and Canada.

In the fall of 2018, BC had the opportunity to host two administrators from Helsinki, Illka Laasonen and Hilka O'Dowd. In return, the three of us – Michele Reid (Coquitlam), Shelley Hardcastle

(Saanich) and Elsie Bertholm (Surrey) – were able to visit schools in Helsinki this past Spring Break. Arriving in mid-March in a snowstorm is not the typical Spring Break that one thinks of, but the trip was filled with adventure, learning, cultural exchange and collegiality. We have been in schools in various countries over the past couple of years and the one constant is that no matter where in the world you are, kids are kids, teachers are teachers and there are more similarities than differences when you look at the school systems.

Spending full days immersed in a variety of school settings – elementary, high school, international – and engaging in meaningful and sometimes intense conversations around school protocol, funding, immigration, EAL language

learners, special needs, magnet schools, marketing, teacher qualifications, staffing, religion in school and more, meant that our days were full and interesting. It was richly rewarding to meet administrators and teachers from a variety of schools with varying backgrounds, as we saw new ways to engage students, organize buildings, teach curriculum, bring in technology, build core values and explore the pedagogy of another country steeped in its history and culture.

It is exciting to be in a new country with an unfamiliar language, food, customs and more. The advantage of being part of a LEAP job shadow is that you get a real inside look at what it means to live and work in another country. We took advantage of this by participating in activities such as the traditional sauna. Literally “leaping” into a freezing lake in winter and then quickly



Shelley Hardcastle and Michele Reid



Elsie Bertholm and daughter

getting into a warm sauna was exhilarating, and it made us think that it would be an excellent practice back home, as it definitely wakes you up! We rounded out the trip by visiting Helsinki and using the local transit to see incredible buildings, historical sites, museums and music venues, and sampling a variety of traditional and international cuisine.

We highly recommend that you take the ‘LEAP’ to go on one of these exchanges! It is a fantastic way to learn about another culture, connect with educators, see new ways of doing things. Our most important takeaway was to realize that what you are doing in your own school has value, that our system here in BC is excellent and that we are leaders in education worldwide!

**Kiitos** (*Thank You*)

**ELSIE BERTHOLM** is the Principal of Bear Creek Elementary, Surrey

**SHELLEY HARDCASTLE** is the Principal of Keating Elementary, Victoria

**MICHELE REID** is the Principal of Mary Hill Elementary, Port Coquitlam