



## **Parental involvement in school activities**

This chapter examines differences between countries and economies in parents' involvement in school activities, and how these forms of engagement are associated with school characteristics and students' reading performance. It also discusses why some parents may not participate in school-related activities, what criteria parents use to choose a school for their child, and how the parents of low-achievers and top-performers view their child's school.

Teachers and principals often count on parents to help them create a positive learning environment in their schools. The family-school partnership can take the form of parents discussing education matters with their child, helping with homework, supervising their child's progress through education, communicating with school personnel, participating in decision making, and being involved in school activities (LaRocque, Kleiman and Darling, 2011<sup>[1]</sup>). The first three forms of parental involvement entail interactions between parents and their child; they are referred to as home-based parental involvement. The latter three require interactions between parents and the school staff; these are collectively referred to as school-based parental involvement. This chapter examines primarily three forms of school-based parental involvement that are essential for creating a positive school climate: communicating with teachers, volunteering in school-related activities and participating in school governance (Cohen et al., 2009<sup>[2]</sup>).

Getting involved at school allows parents to obtain first-hand information on the learning environment, learn how to navigate the education system, demonstrate to their child that education is important, and influence their child's behaviour by establishing consistent norms (Cohen et al., 2009<sup>[2]</sup>; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994<sup>[3]</sup>). Previous studies have found that parental involvement in their child's education has a positive effect on student outcomes (Castro et al., 2015<sup>[4]</sup>; Grolnick and Slowiaczek, 1994<sup>[3]</sup>), even if the effect is largely dependent on the quality of this involvement (Borgonovi and Montt, 2012<sup>[5]</sup>; Moroni et al., 2015<sup>[6]</sup>; Pomerantz, Moorman and Litwack, 2007<sup>[7]</sup>). The constructive involvement of parents in school activities has been positively associated with, among other things, student achievement (Haynes, Comer and Hamilton-Lee, 1989<sup>[8]</sup>; Hill and Taylor, 2004<sup>[9]</sup>; Jeynes, 2012<sup>[10]</sup>), social skills (Sheridan et al., 2012<sup>[11]</sup>), attendance (Avisati et al., 2014<sup>[12]</sup>), good behaviour (Domina, 2005<sup>[13]</sup>; Sheridan et al., 2017<sup>[14]</sup>), positive relationships with schoolmates (Garbacz et al., 2018<sup>[15]</sup>) and mental health (Wang and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014<sup>[16]</sup>).

However, some studies indicate that school-based parental involvement is only modestly associated with student outcomes, at least when compared to "at-home good parenting" (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003<sup>[17]</sup>). In this regard, a low level of parental involvement in school-based activities may simply reflect parents' trust in the school (Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008<sup>[18]</sup>) or a model of school governance based on the understanding that teachers control the instructional process and parents provide home support or simply delegate their academic responsibilities (Bauch and Goldring, 1998<sup>[19]</sup>). On the other hand, a high level of parental involvement in some school activities, such as volunteering in physical and extracurricular activities, may reflect a lack of school resources.

### What the data tell us

- According to school principals, about 41% of students' parents discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative and 57% did so on the initiative of teachers, on average across OECD countries. However, only 17% of parents participated in local school government and 12% volunteered for physical or extracurricular activities.
- On average across OECD countries, parents discussing their child's progress was more common in socio-economically advantaged schools when the initiative was taken by parents, and in disadvantaged schools when the initiative was taken by teachers.
- On average across the nine OECD countries that distributed the parent questionnaire, the issues that parents most commonly cited as hindering their participation in school activities were time-related, and included the need to work (34%) and the inconvenience of meeting times (33%).
- Parents overwhelmingly cited school safety, school climate and school reputation as the most important criteria when choosing a school for their child, followed closely by students' academic achievement and the offering of specific subjects or courses.

To examine parents' involvement in school activities, PISA 2018 asked principals about the proportion of parents who, during the previous academic year, participated in the following school activities: "discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative"; "discussed their child's progress on the initiative of one of their child's teachers"; "participated in local school government"; and "volunteered in physical or extracurricular activities".

PISA also asked parents in the 17 countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire (9 of which were OECD countries and economies) to report whether, during the previous academic year, they had participated in any of the following ten school-related activities ("yes", "no", "not supported by school"): "discussed my child's behaviour with a teacher on my own initiative"; "discussed my child's behaviour on the initiative of teachers"; "discussed my child's progress with a teacher on my own initiative"; "discussed my child's progress on the initiative of teachers"; "participated in local school government"; "volunteered in physical or extracurricular activities"; "volunteered to support school activities"; "attended a scheduled meeting or conference for parents"; "talked about how to support learning at home and homework with my child's teachers"; and "exchanged ideas on parenting, family support, or the child's development with my child's teachers".

The first part of this chapter focuses mainly on the information from the school questionnaire. While this has the advantages of including all PISA-participating countries and economies and providing a broader picture of parents' participation in school activities (the question does not refer specifically to the parents of 15-year-olds), the findings should also be interpreted with caution as they are based on principals' estimates of how many parents participated. For instance, school principals may not observe unprompted parent-teacher interactions, especially when the initiative comes from parents.

## HOW PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES VARIES ACROSS COUNTRIES AND SCHOOLS

According to school principals, about 41% of students' parents discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative and 57% did so on the initiative of teachers, on average across OECD countries in 2018 (Figure III.10.1). However, 17% of parents participated in local school government and only 12% volunteered for physical or extracurricular activities, such as building maintenance, sports or field trips. Differences across countries and economies were pronounced. For instance, in Albania, Baku (Azerbaijan), Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang (China), Belarus, Greece, Kazakhstan, Montenegro, the Philippines and Viet Nam, at least 6 in 10 parents discussed their child's progress on their own initiative, whereas in Argentina, Brazil, Japan, Morocco, Norway, Switzerland and Uruguay, fewer than 3 in 10 did. A majority of parents participated in school government in Albania, Baku (Azerbaijan), the Dominican Republic, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, the Philippines and Saudi Arabia, but in a majority of countries and economies, fewer than one in four parents did so. Parents volunteering in extracurricular activities was most widespread in Baku (Azerbaijan), Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Philippines, the Russian Federation and Thailand (more than 40% of parents did so), but least common in Belgium, France and Slovenia (less than 5% of parents volunteered).

An interesting indicator is to compare the share of parents who discussed their child's progress on their own initiative and those who did so on the initiative of teachers. In Denmark, Iceland, Japan, Macao (China), Norway and Sweden, such discussions were more prevalent when they were on the teachers' initiative (at least a 40 percentage-point difference), whereas discussions on the parents' initiative were relatively more common in Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, the Republic of North Macedonia (hereafter "North Macedonia") and Slovenia (at least a 10 percentage-point difference).

According to parents in the 17 countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire, attending a scheduled meeting or conference for parents was the activity in which they most frequently participated, followed by all the activities involving parent-teacher interactions (e.g. discussing their child's behaviour and progress) (Table III.B1.10.1). By contrast, volunteering to support school activities (e.g. in the school library, media centre or canteen, or as a guest speaker), volunteering in physical or extracurricular activities (e.g. building maintenance, carpentry, gardening, school play, sports, field trip) and participating in school government were the activities in which they participated the least. Any comparisons with the results from the school questionnaire should be interpreted with caution, given that school principals were asked about all the parents in the school, and the parent questionnaire was only distributed to the parents of 15-year-olds. In addition, the response rate was generally lower in the parent questionnaire than in the school questionnaire, and parents were given the option to answer "not supported by school" (which was coded as "not participated").

As regards school differences in parents' participation in school-related activities (as reported by principals), parents discussing their child's progress was more common in socio-economically advantaged schools than in disadvantaged schools when the initiative was taken by parents, whereas it was more common in disadvantaged schools than in advantaged schools when the initiative was taken by teachers, on average across OECD countries (Figure III.10.2). Similarly, more parents in city schools discussed their child's progress on their own initiative than parents in rural schools did, while the opposite was true when the initiative came from the teacher. Moreover, parent-teacher interactions were more prevalent in private than in public schools, regardless of who took the initiative. Across OECD countries, parents' participation in school government was similar across the different types of schools, except it was slightly more common in socio-economically advantaged schools (Table III.B1.10.5). But the proportion of parents who volunteered in physical or extracurricular activities was larger in rural than in city schools, and in private than in public schools (Table III.B1.10.6).

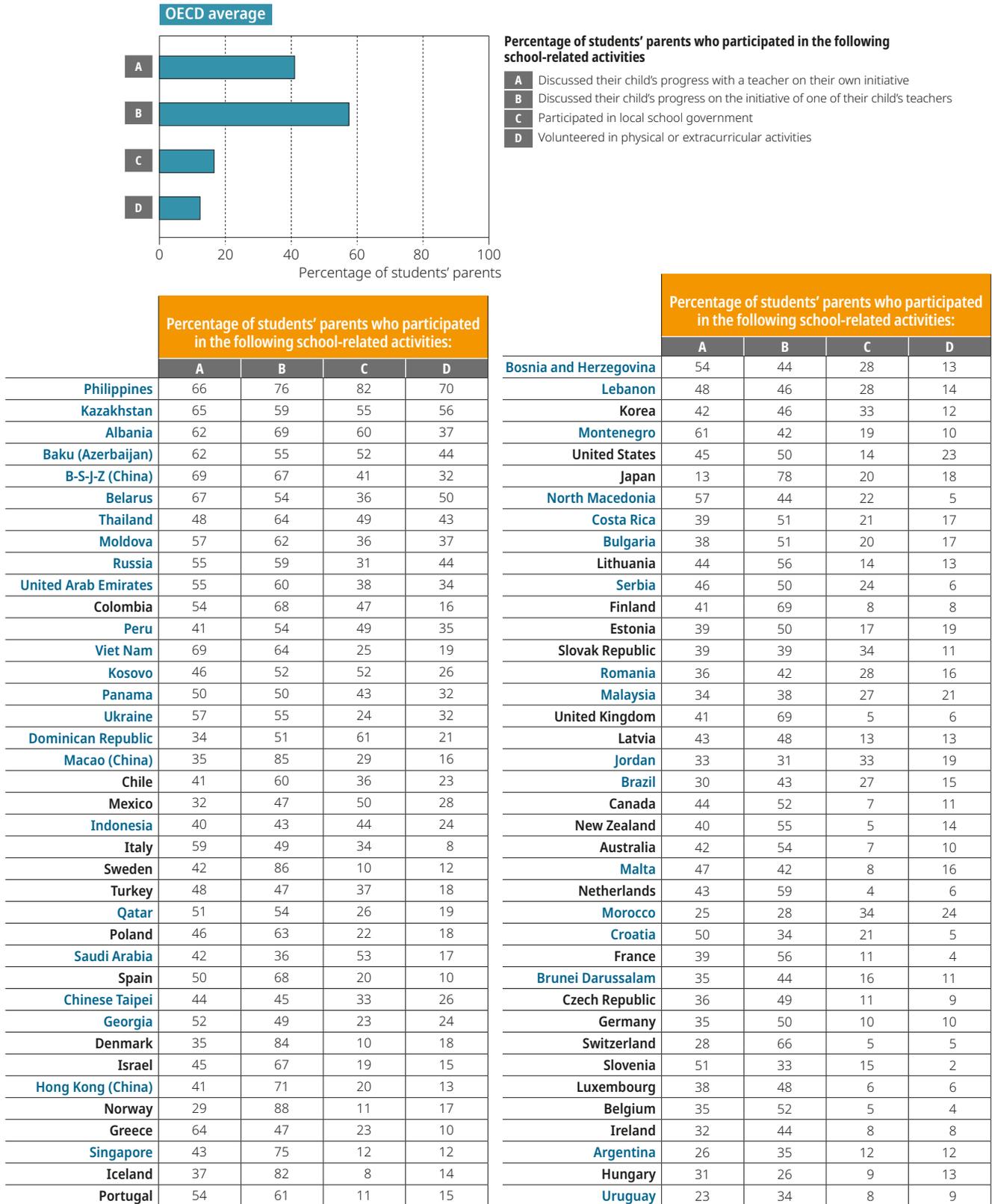
## TRENDS IN PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

According to school principals, the percentage of parents who participated in school-related activities did not change greatly between 2015 and 2018, on average across OECD countries (Table III.B1.10.2). If anything, the percentage of parents who participated in school government decreased by three percentage points, and the share of parents who volunteered in physical or extracurricular activities decreased by one percentage point during the period.

Increases of more than five percentage points in parents' participation between 2015 and 2018 were observed in the following countries and economies for the following activities: in Colombia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Republic of Moldova (hereafter "Moldova"), Montenegro, North Macedonia and Turkey, for discussing their child's progress on the parents' initiative; in Iceland and Macao (China), for discussing their child's progress on the teachers' initiative; in Moldova, for participating in local school government; and in Albania, Kosovo, Malta, Mexico and the United Arab Emirates, for volunteering in physical or extracurricular activities.

Figure III.10.1 Parental involvement in school-related activities

Based on principals' reports



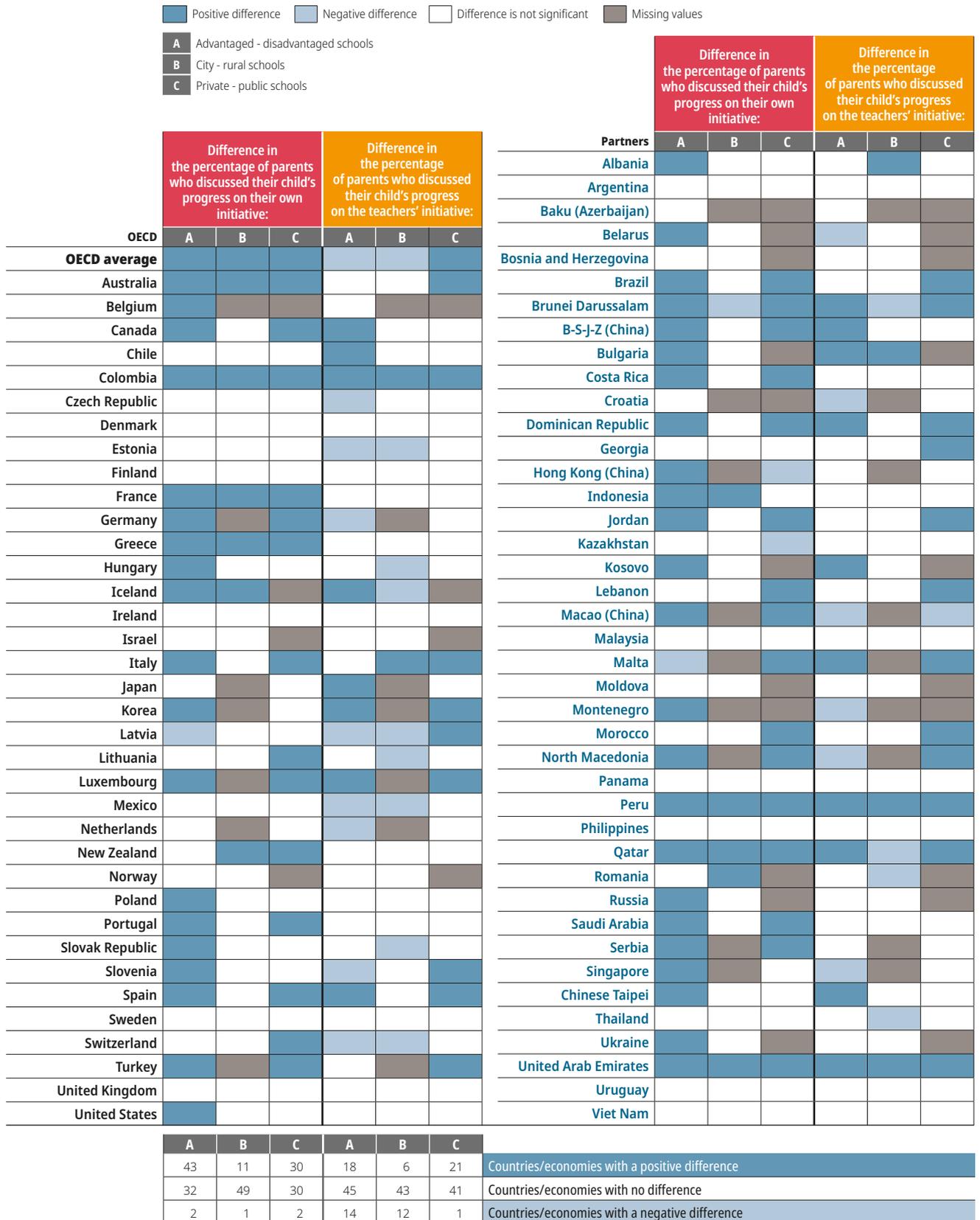
Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the percentage of students' parents who participated in school-related activities (average of four activities).

Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table III.B1.10.1.

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Figure III.10.2 **Discussing child's progress, by school characteristics**

Based on principals' reports



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Tables III.B1.10.3 and III.B1.10.4.

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By contrast, declines of more than 10 percentage points over the period were observed in the Dominican Republic and Romania, for discussing their child's progress on parents' initiative; in Colombia, Croatia, Qatar, Romania and Slovenia, for participating in school government; and in the Dominican Republic and Qatar, for volunteering in extracurricular activities.

## HOW PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL ACTIVITIES IS RELATED TO READING PERFORMANCE

Parental involvement in school-related activities, as perceived by school principals, is mostly unrelated to students' reading performance, at least after accounting for the socio-economic profile of students and schools (measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status) (Table III.B1.10.7). The only form of parental involvement that was weakly related to reading performance, on average across OECD countries, was the percentage of parents who discussed their child's progress on the initiative of teachers. For every 10 percentage-point increase in the share of parents who discussed their child's progress on the teachers' initiative, according to principals' reports, reading scores slipped by 0.4 of a point after accounting for the socio-economic profile of students and schools.

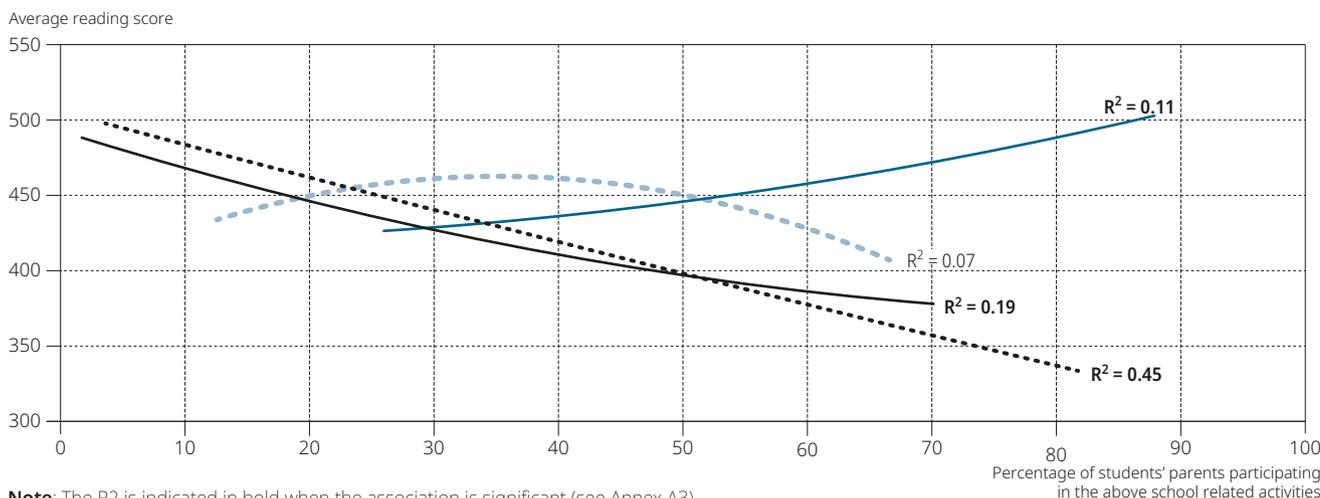
Perhaps more interesting are the results at the system level (Figure III.10.3). The average score in reading was higher in those countries and economies where more parents discussed their child's progress on the initiative of teachers, and that positive association remained even after accounting for per capita GDP and for other forms of parental involvement in school-related activities (Figure III.10.4). For every 10 percentage-point increase in the share of parents who discussed their child's progress on the teachers' initiative, the average reading score increased by 10 points, on average across the 74 countries and economies with available data. While this analysis cannot prove cause and effect, the prevalence of parents discussing their child's progress on the initiative of teachers may be an indication of a school system's responsiveness.

Figure III.10.3 Parental involvement in school-related activities and average reading performance

System-level analysis (74 countries and economies)

During the previous academic year, percentage of students' parents who participated in the following activities, according to principals:

- Discussed their child's progress with a teacher on their own initiative
- Discussed their child's progress on the initiative of one of their child's teachers
- Participated in local school government
- Volunteered in physical or extracurricular activities



Note: The R2 is indicated in bold when the association is significant (see Annex A3).

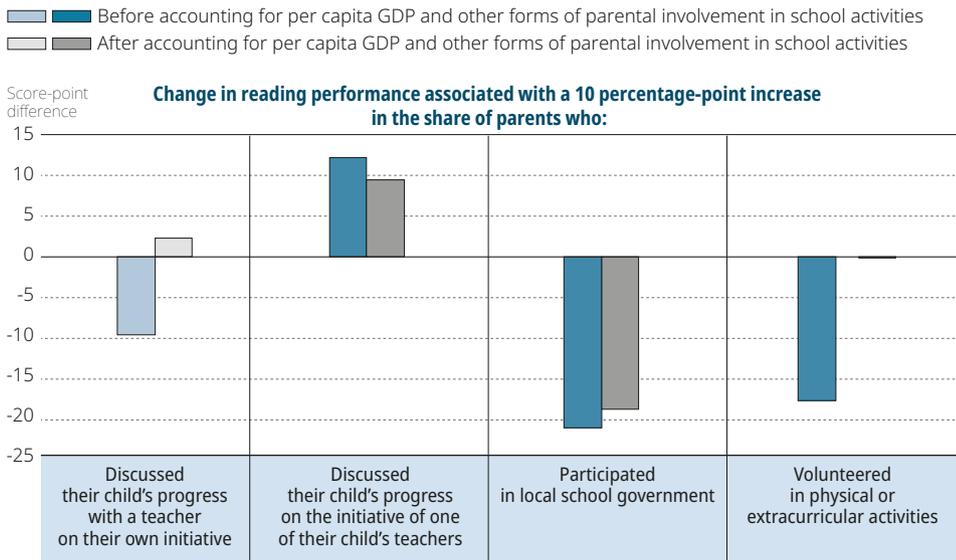
Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Tables III.B1.10.1 and I.B1.4.

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By contrast, the average reading score was lower in education systems where more parents participated in school government and volunteered in physical and extracurricular activities (Figure III.10.3). One potential reason for this negative association could be schools' need for increased parental involvement in low-income countries because of financial pressures, and that students in these countries tend to show poorer academic performance. Indeed, once per capita GDP and other forms of parental involvement are accounted for, the only significant negative association with reading performance that remains concerns parents' participation in school government (Figure III.10.4). For every 10 percentage-point increase in the share of parents who participated in school government, the average reading score dropped by 19 points.

Figure III.10.4 **Parental involvement in school-related activities, average reading performance and per capita GDP**

System-level analysis (74 countries and economies)



Note: Statistically significant values are shown in darker tones (see Annex A3).

Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Tables III.B1.10.1, I.B1.4 and B3.1.4.

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## WHAT DO PARENTS CITE AS HINDERING THEIR PARTICIPATION IN SCHOOL-RELATED ACTIVITIES?

In PISA 2018, students in 17 countries and economies took home a questionnaire for their parents to complete. Amongst other things, parents were asked if, during the previous academic year, their participation in school activities was hindered by any of the following issues: “The meeting times were inconvenient”; “I was not able to get off from work”; “I had no one to take care of my child/children”; “The way to school is unsafe”; “I had problems with transportation”; “I felt unwelcome at my child’s school”; “I feel generally awkward in a school”; “My language skills were not sufficient”; “I think participation is not relevant for my child’s development”; “I do not know how I could participate in school activities”; and “My child does not want me to participate”.

On average across the nine OECD countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire, the issues that parents most commonly cited as hindering their participation in school activities were time-related, and included the need to work (34%) and the inconvenience of meeting times (33%) (Figure III.10.5). The other four issues that were cited by more than 10% of parents were not knowing how to participate in school activities (14%), not considering their participation relevant for their child’s development (13%), not having somebody to take care of their children (13%) and their child not wanting them to participate (12%). Other issues were less frequently mentioned, yet in some countries and economies, problems of safety, transportation and language skills were commonly cited.

In the Dominican Republic and Panama more than one in three parents mentioned safety as hindering their participation in school-related activities; in Brazil, Chile and Mexico about one in six parents so reported. Transportation problems were mentioned by more than 10% of parents in Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Italy, Mexico and Panama, and a lack of language skills was mentioned by more than one in ten parents in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Hong Kong (China), Malta, Mexico and Panama. Perhaps more worryingly, 41% of parents in Panama and 17% of parents in Chile cited feeling unwelcome at the school as hindering their participation.

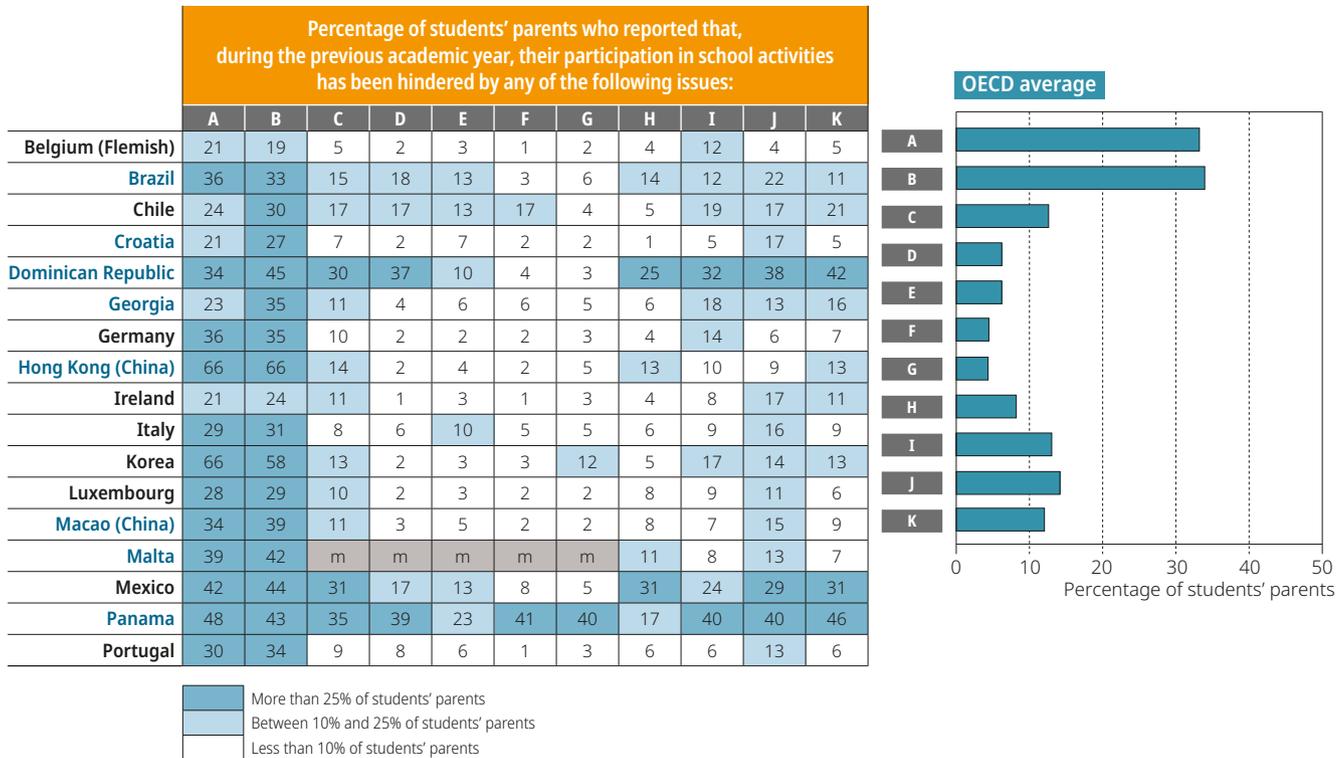
## WHAT DO PARENTS LOOK FOR IN THEIR CHILD’S SCHOOL?

Many parents want to choose the school their child attends and are prepared to invest time and resources to do so. From talking to family, friends and neighbours, and surfing the Internet for reviews, rankings and school inspection reports, to visiting schools and even moving to another location, many parents are ready to go the extra mile to see their child placed in the best school possible. Some schools, too, want to know what parents are looking for so they can become more attractive options. Information on parents’ preferences is also vital for education systems as a whole. It helps systems meet family expectations, get parents involved in school matters, and ensure that teachers, students and parents are all working towards the same goals.

Figure III.10.5 Issues hindering parents' participation in school-related activities

Based on parents' reports

- A The meeting times were inconvenient
- B I was not able to get off from work
- C I had no one to take care of my children
- D The way to school is unsafe
- E I had problems with transportation
- F I felt unwelcome at my child's school
- G I feel generally awkward in a school
- H My language skills were not sufficient
- I I think participation is not relevant for my child's development
- J I do not know how I could participate in school activities
- K My child does not want me to participate



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table III.B1.10.8.

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In the 17 countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire, PISA asked parents what criteria they considered important when choosing a school for their child. They were asked to report how much importance they ascribed, from “not important” to “very important”, to 14 criteria mainly related to school quality, financial constraints, the school’s philosophy or mission, global openness and geographical distance between their home and the school.

While parents cited several criteria as important when choosing a school, they overwhelmingly indicated that school safety, school climate and school reputation come first, followed closely by the students’ academic achievement and the offering of specific subjects or courses (Figure III.10.6). For instance, on average across the OECD countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire, 92% of students’ parents considered a safe school environment important or very important; 89% considered an active and pleasant school climate important or very important; and 81% attached the same importance to the academic achievement of the students in the school. Interestingly, these results were similar to those reported in PISA 2012 (OECD, 2015<sub>[20]</sub>), even though the countries that distributed the parent questionnaire were not exactly the same.

In every school system, parents ascribed more importance to school safety than they did to the academic achievement of the students in the school; and in every school system, except Brazil and Ireland, they also considered an active and pleasant school climate more important than student achievement. That many parents considered safety as their number one concern when choosing a school for their child may reflect parents’ growing anxiety about bullying and violence in and around schools.

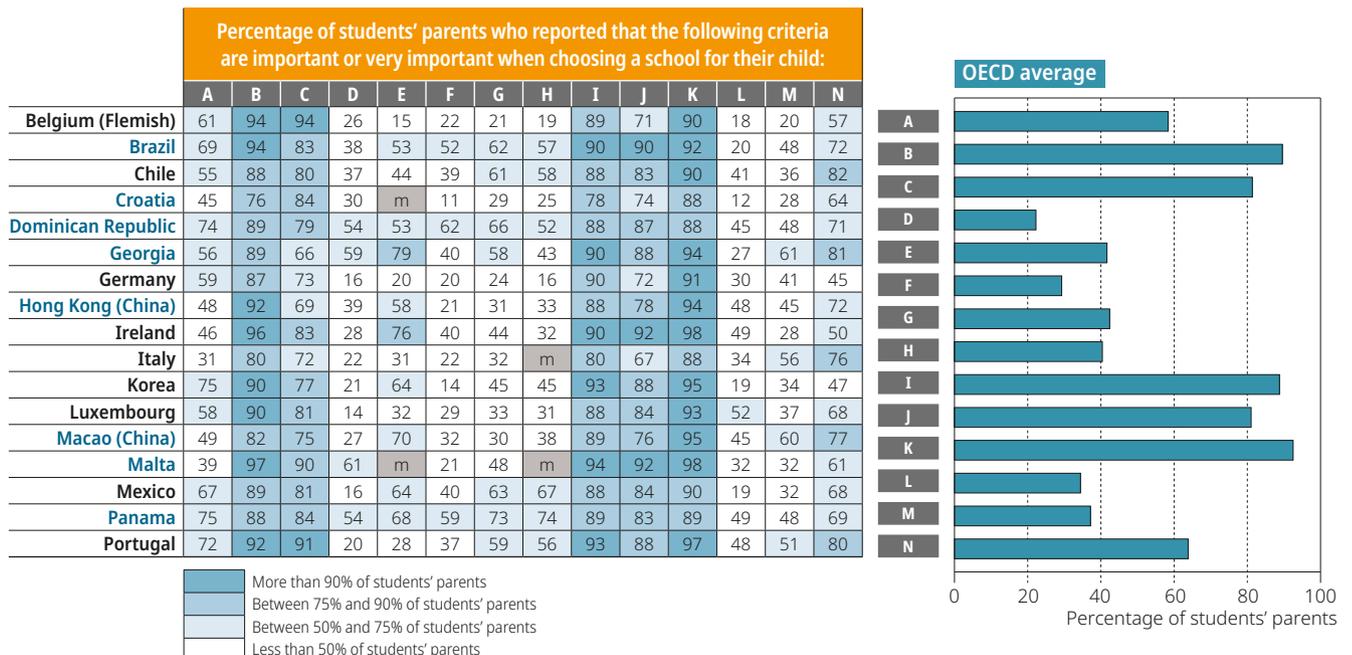
On average across the OECD countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire, the other two criteria that a majority of parents considered important or very important are the school's focus on foreign language instruction and the distance between the child's home and the school. The countries where parents paid more attention to foreign languages were Chile, Georgia and Portugal, whereas the countries where this criterion was least important were Germany, Ireland and Korea. At least 60% of parents in the Flemish Community of Belgium, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Korea, Mexico, Panama and Portugal considered the distance to school important or very important. This might reflect, amongst other things, that parents in these education systems are more concerned about how to get to school (e.g. financial costs, safety, travel time) or that in these school systems a larger share of parents believe that their local school meets high quality standards.

Most parents would like their children to attend the best school, but not everyone can afford to prioritise only the quality of the school. On average across the OECD countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire, a somewhat larger share of socio-economically advantaged parents than of disadvantaged parents considered important or very important the school's reputation, the academic achievement of students, the school climate/safety, exchange programmes with schools in other countries and the focus on foreign-language instruction (Table III.B1.10.10). By contrast, compared to more advantaged parents, socio-economically disadvantaged parents assigned a much greater importance to financial considerations when choosing a school for their child. For example, while 55% of disadvantaged parents considered the availability of financial aid to be important or very important, only 26% of advantaged parents did so. They also assigned greater importance than advantaged parents to other aspects of the school, such as the geographical distance between their home and the school, the religious philosophy of the school, and whether other family members had attended the same school.

Figure III.10.6 **Criteria for choosing school**

Based on parents' reports

- A The school is at a short distance to home
- B The school has a good reputation
- C The school offers particular courses or school subjects
- D The school adheres to a particular religious philosophy
- E The school has a particular approach to pedagogy/didactics
- F Other family members attended the school
- G Expenses are low
- H The school has financial aid available, such as a school loan, scholarship or grant
- I The school has an active and pleasant school climate
- J The academic achievements of students in the school are high
- K There is a safe school environment
- L The school has an international student body
- M The school offers exchange programmes with schools in other countries
- N The school has a focus on foreign-language instruction



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table III.B1.10.9.

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## HOW DO THE PARENTS OF LOW-ACHIEVING AND TOP-PERFORMING STUDENTS VIEW THEIR CHILD'S SCHOOL?

PISA asked parents in the 17 countries and economies that distributed the parent questionnaire whether they agree (“strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “agree”, “strongly agree”) with a series of statements about their child’s school: “Most of my child’s school teachers seem competent and dedicated”; “Standards of achievement are high in my child’s school”; “I am happy with the content taught and the instructional methods used in my child’s school”; “I am satisfied with the disciplinary atmosphere in my child’s school”; “My child’s progress is carefully monitored by the school”; “My child’s school provides regular and useful information on my child’s progress”; and “My child’s school does a good job in educating students”. Their answers were combined to create the index of parents’ perceived school quality whose average across OECD countries and economies is 0 and standard deviation is 1. Higher values in the index indicate that parents perceive their schools to be of better quality.

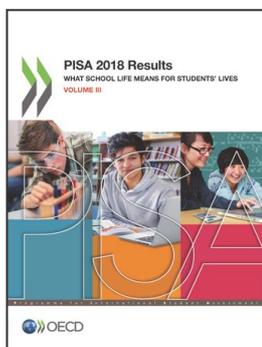
PISA also asked parents whether they agree (“strongly disagree”, “disagree”, “agree”, “strongly agree”) with a series of statements about their child’s school: “My child’s school provides an inviting atmosphere for parents to get involved”; “My child’s school provides effective communication between the school and families”; “My child’s school involves parents in the school’s decision-making process”; “My child’s school offers parent education or family-support programmes”; “My child’s school informs families about how to help students with homework and other school-related activities”; and “My child’s school co-operates with community services to strengthen school programmes and student development”. Their answers were combined to create the index of school policies for parental involvement whose average across OECD countries and economies is 0 and standard deviation is 1. Higher values in the index indicate that parents perceive their schools to have more/better policies to get parents involved.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, PISA data reveal that, in a majority of education systems with available data, the parents of top-performing students in reading (those at proficiency Level 5 or above) appeared to be the most satisfied with the quality of their schools (Table III.B1.10.11). They were more likely than the parents of low-achieving students in reading (those below proficiency Level 2) to agree with statements like “Standards of achievement are high in my child’s school”, “Most of my child’s school teachers seem competent and dedicated” and “My child’s school does a good job in educating students”. The largest gaps, in favour of the parents of top performers, were observed in Brazil and Malta, whereas Germany was the only country where the gap was in favour of the parents of low achievers.

By contrast, on average across OECD countries and in half of the education systems with available data, the parents of low-achieving students were more likely than the parents of top-performing students to report that their child’s school makes an effort to get parents involved in school matters (Table III.B1.10.11). This disparity may be interpreted positively for some countries, given that some of these policies, such as providing education for parents, family-support programmes and information on how to help students with homework, may be targeted to struggling students. The countries with the largest gaps in the index of school policies for parental involvement, in favour of the parents of low achievers, were Croatia, Germany, Italy and Portugal.

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