

Executive summary

The Eastern Europe and Central Asia¹ (EECA) region is undergoing rapid economic, social and political changes. While many countries in the region have made progress on several development indicators, they also face substantial challenges. Most countries are still struggling to attain the same level of development as international benchmarks, with per capita gross domestic product still well below the average across OECD countries. Economic inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, remains particularly high and/or is rising in many countries. Finally, good governance is an important issue and there is a recognized need to build trustworthy and effective systems in the region.

A knowledgeable and skilled population is a critical component to the vibrant economies and inclusive, cohesive societies that EECA countries aim to build, which makes education reform a central pillar of development efforts. To reform education, EECA countries need to understand the performance of their education systems and benchmark their outcomes against those of other countries. The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a survey that assesses student learning and collects information about the characteristics of students and schools around the world. Many EECA countries have participated in PISA since its inception in 2000, and ten countries from the region did so in 2018, the widest participation to date. This report analyses PISA 2018 data to help determine what 15-year-olds in EECA countries know and can do. Based upon these findings, and drawing upon an international knowledge base that includes several United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)-OECD policy reviews, this report also suggests policy considerations about how education systems in the region can improve schooling and teaching to help all students learn and succeed.

Learning outcomes

Results from PISA 2018 reveal that overall outcomes from the region are improving. Many systems that participated in PISA prior to 2018 raised their performance in 2018 and none saw a decrease in performance. Simultaneously, EECA countries are now testing a greater share of 15-year-old students, which demonstrates that educational improvement and expansion are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, performance in EECA countries is generally lower than that of countries across the OECD. The EECA average in reading, the main domain assessed in PISA 2018, was 421 score points, compared with 487 in the OECD. Achievement within the region also varies greatly, with Georgia scoring 380 in reading and Croatia scoring 479.

Worryingly, PISA 2018 results also show that learning outcomes in the region are highly inequitable. Boys perform worse than girls at rates exceeding international averages. In systems with many rural schools,

¹ This report focuses on countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia that are supported by the UNICEF ECARO office and participated in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment in 2018—Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine.

students from urban areas outperform students from rural areas at rates much greater than in similar OECD countries.

Providing excellent and equitable schooling

A key feature of education in the some parts of the EECA region is that enrolment into upper secondary education is very academically selective when compared to OECD countries. Relatedly, students in upper secondary schools are highly segregated; low- and high-achieving students are isolated from each other in many EECA countries, as are socio-economically disadvantaged and high-achieving students. Given the disparities in educational outcomes in some EECA countries, these findings raise questions about the equity of education systems in the region. Students from more advantaged backgrounds with stronger academic performance might compete for places in prestigious upper secondary schools, while students from more disadvantaged backgrounds and weaker academic performance might be grouped together in other institutions. Countries in the region are addressing these issues by improving the quality of education in lower levels of schooling, strengthening the value of all upper secondary education pathways and programmes and reforming selection mechanisms into upper secondary schools to focus less on examination results.

Another characteristic of education systems in EECA countries is their level and distribution of school resources. Compared to international benchmarks, education spending in the region is low, especially when considering the significant infrastructural improvements that many schools need. In addition, resource allocation is inequitable. Schools with more socio-economically advantaged student intakes tend to enjoy greater resourcing than schools with more disadvantaged student intakes, and urban schools are often better resourced than rural schools. These trends can exacerbate inequities, especially at the upper secondary level, as students from advantaged backgrounds might be selected into better-resourced schools than students from disadvantaged backgrounds. EECA countries can consider several strategies to address these concerns, such as establishing more equitable funding policies, improving school leaders' capacity to use resources, and strengthening school evaluation to better identify the needs of schools.

Compared to international benchmarks, students in EECA countries are provided with significantly less learning time during regular school hours (overall roughly two hours less per week than the OECD average, and as much as five hours less in some countries). On the other hand, learning time outside of school tends to be relatively higher in EECA countries, in particular participation in commercial tutoring. This situation is problematic because students might not have enough time in school to learn, but supplementing their learning outside of school is inequitable as students from advantaged backgrounds have access to more and higher quality resources. Allocating more learning time during regular school hours, and helping schools use the extra time wisely, can help address these inequities.

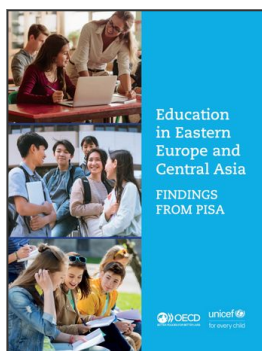
Finally, students in EECA countries generally show higher rates of truancy than their peers across the OECD. Roughly 60% of EECA students reported that they had been recently truant, compared to about 33% in OECD countries. Boys and disadvantaged students are more likely to be truant than girls and students from advantaged backgrounds. However, truancy in general has a weaker association with performance in the EECA region than across the OECD, which might reflect the lower levels of in-school learning time in the region and the higher levels of learning time outside of school. To address issues related to truancy, EECA countries can consider introducing data collection and analytical tools to identify truant students and develop programmes to target students who are most at risk of being truant and dropping out of school.

Assuring high quality teaching

Teaching is one of the most important aspects of an education system and can significantly shape student learning. In the EECA region, the teaching profession is influenced by several factors, including teachers' relatively older age and lower salaries compared to international benchmarks. Partly as a result of these factors, teaching practices in the region can be largely traditional and centred around the teacher (e.g. delivering a lecture to the whole class), with less emphasis on individualised, adaptive instruction. These circumstances might also contribute to inequities in learning, as teachers might not teach students from different backgrounds in ways that best help them learn. EECA teachers are also, on average, more likely to engage in negative behaviour such as not being prepared for classes or being absent from school. To improve this situation, EECA education systems have developed teacher standards that spell out how teachers are expected to teach. Using these standards to help determine career progression and professional development can further encourage teachers to implement the desired practices in their classrooms. EECA countries can also consider developing codes of conduct to more clearly set out what is expected of teachers in terms of their day-to-day practice, disposition and integrity.

Requirements related to teacher qualifications can help ensure high quality teaching. Teachers in EECA countries are fully certified and hold master's degrees at rates similar to teachers in OECD countries, though socio-economically advantaged and urban schools are more likely to have better qualified teachers. Unlike international benchmarks, however, teacher certification and holding advanced degrees are less positively associated with increased student performance or improved teacher practices, suggesting that these quality assurance mechanisms are not always fulfilling their purposes. EECA countries can consider introducing several measures to improve how well teacher qualifications signal high quality teaching. These initiatives include raising the quality of initial teacher education programmes, introducing measures to assure the quality of initial teacher education and implementing mandatory probation once teachers begin teaching. To make the allocation of qualified teachers more equitable, countries can create incentive schemes that better compensate teachers for working in environments that are more difficult.

To improve teacher practice, most education systems provide teachers with professional development that is based upon their observed needs. In EECA countries, teachers generally engage in less professional development than teachers across OECD countries, and those who work in socio-economically disadvantaged and rural schools are even less likely to do so. Moreover, more professional development in the region, unlike in OECD countries, is not associated with more frequent use of desired teaching practices, which suggests that there could be issues related to how teachers' needs are identified, and the quality of professional development opportunities. To expand professional development, EECA countries are providing more funding to schools and teachers, constructing training centres and better leveraging technology. To create higher quality training that is relevant to teachers, countries can consider accrediting training providers and making the teacher appraisal process more holistic, which can help form a more accurate understanding of what teachers' strengths and weaknesses are and what further training they might need.



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