

Student performance and equity in education

The education system is responsible for equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills and tools needed for their life-long development. The quality of education can be gauged by how effectively students incorporate the skills needed to thrive in the society in which they live. Early investments in education offer higher returns than later investments and supportive school environments are essential for providing better opportunities to socioeconomically disadvantaged children (OECD, 2012).

There are two main international assessments of education, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) by the International Association for Education Achievement (IEA). PISA focuses on 15-year-old students, TIMSS focuses on 4th and 8th grade students, and PIRLS on 4th grade students (aged 13-14). These assessments offer cross-country comparisons and allow for identifying differences between groups of students and schools.

Overall, the PIRLS scores of participating OECD countries in 2016 have remained stable since 2011, with Ireland and Finland as the top performers. France and Wallonia (Belgium) had the lowest scores among participating OECD countries. The largest improvements were observed in Lithuania (+22 scale score points), Australia (+17), Hungary (+15), Ireland (+15) and Spain (+15), while scores decreased the most in Portugal (-13) and Israel (-11). The scores of the 2016 PIRLS are highly correlated with those of the 2015 PISA round across participating countries, which indicates that the average performance of education systems remains stable throughout school years and that such assessments are reliable.

Children who access early learning opportunities are more likely to increase their skills throughout their lives and achieve better outcomes. PIRLS identifies schools where over 75% of the students enter primary education with basic reading skills, e.g. as reading some words. In OECD countries, 21% of the students attend such schools, with 96% in Ireland and 94% in Northern Ireland. The difference in performance between those who attend schools where the majority of children enter with basic skills and the mean is largest in Chile. Israel, Italy and Poland show the opposite; – however, in such countries, fewer than 15% of students attend schools where the majority enter primary education with basic reading skills.

Integration of students in the school can explain performance variations. The PIRLS questionnaire assesses whether students feel they belong to their school by enquiring whether they like being in school and whether their teachers treat them fairly, among others. While 82% of Portuguese students indicated a high sense of belonging, only 42% did so in the Czech Republic. In most OECD countries, students expressing a high sense of belonging scored better than those with a lower sense of belonging.

The gaps are largest in Northern Ireland and Finland. Israel is the only country where those expressing a low sense of belonging outperform those who express a high sense.

Methodology and definitions

Data are derived from the PIRLS 2016 assessment. PIRLS has been conducted every five years since 2006 by the International Association for the IEA, which also produces the TIMSS. With regard to coverage, 50 countries and 11 benchmarking regions participated in 2016, with a total of 346,852 students. The assessment focused on four reading comprehension processes: retrieve explicitly stated information; make straightforward inferences; interpret and integrate ideas and information; and evaluate and analyse content and textual elements. The PIRLS reading achievement scale was established in 2001, based on the achievement of all participating countries. It ranges from 300 to 700 points, with a centre point of 500, corresponding to the mean of overall achievement in 2001.

In the school background questionnaire, the school principals were asked to indicate the percentage of students who entered 1st grade knowing how to recognise most letters of the alphabet, read some words, read sentences, read a story, write letters of the alphabet and write some words. Figure 11.27 shows only results for those who reported at least 75% of the students had three or more of such skills.

In the student background questionnaire, children were asked to report their agreement with the following statements: “I like being in school”, “I feel safe when I am at school”, “I feel like I belong at this school”, “Teachers at my school are fair to me”, “I am proud to go to this school”. High sense of belonging is defined as at least “agreeing a lot” to three statements and “agreeing a little” to the other two.

Further reading

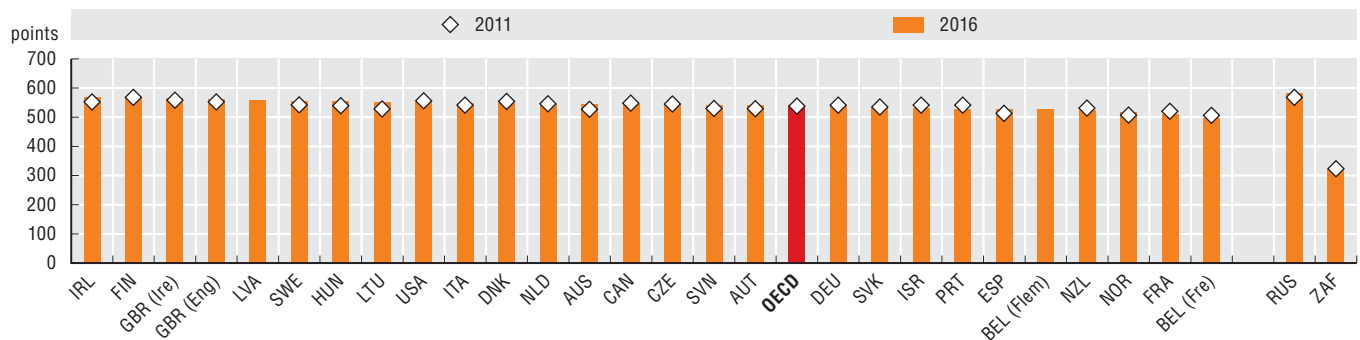
OECD (2012), *Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264130852-en>.

Figure notes

Belgium is presented as the French Community [BEL (Fre)] and the Flemish Community [BEL (Flem)]. The United Kingdom is presented as England [GBR (En)] and Northern Ireland [GBR (Ire)].

Data for Estonia, Greece, Iceland, Japan, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, Switzerland and Turkey are not available. On data for Israel, see <http://doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

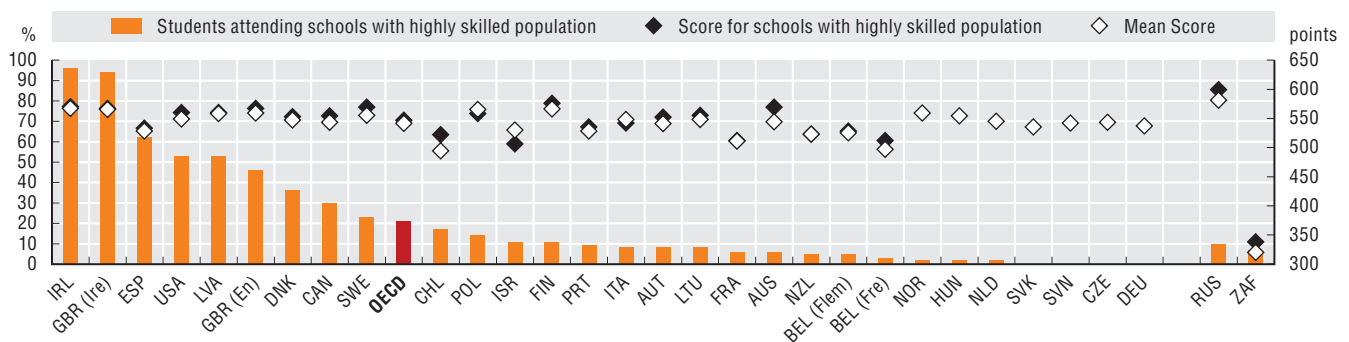
11.26 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) scores, 2011 and 2016



Source: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934033897>

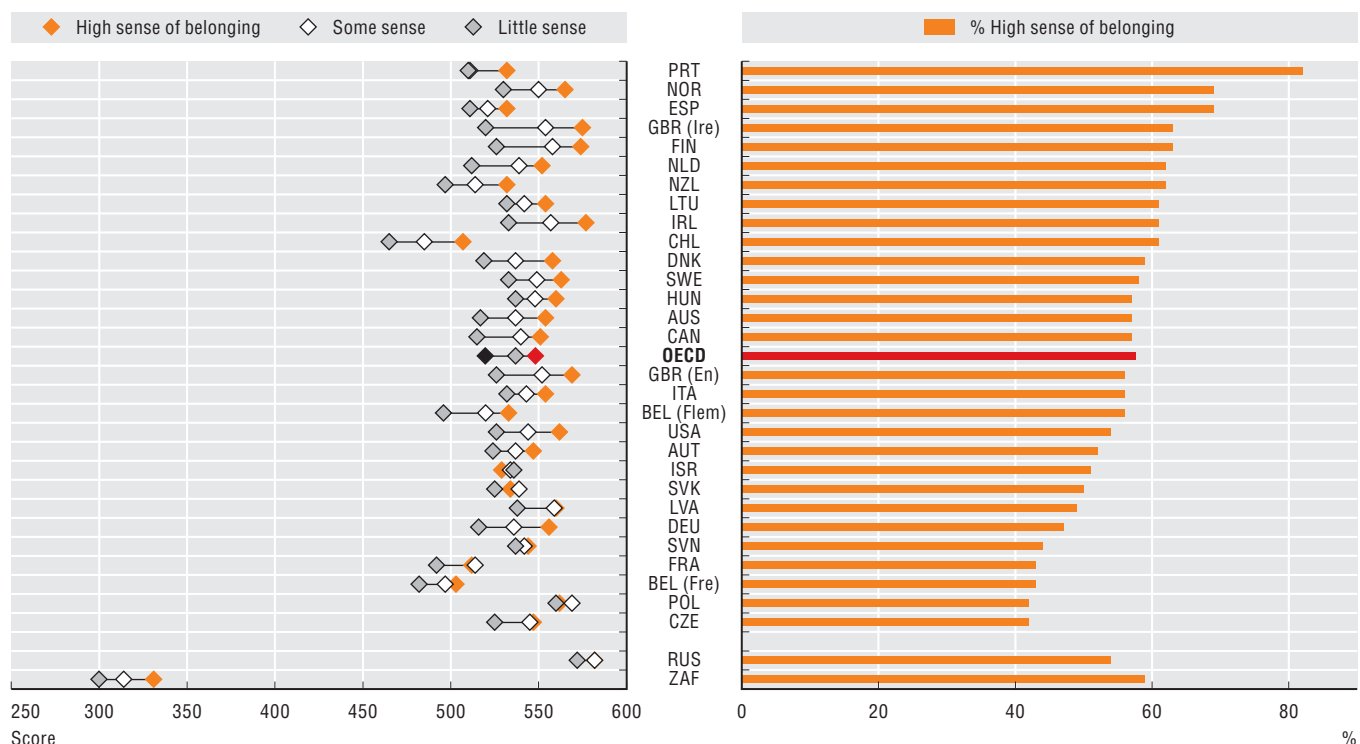
11.27 Score on PIRLS for students who attend a school where over 75% of the students enter with some reading and writing skills, 2016



Source: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016.

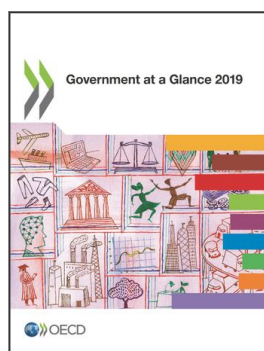
StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934033916>

11.28 Score on PIRLS by sense of belonging and percentage of students showing high sense of belonging, 2016



Source: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2016.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934033935>



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