



Foreword

Far too many students around the world are trapped in a vicious circle of poor performance and demotivation that leads only to more bad marks and further disengagement from school. This report provides the first comprehensive analysis of the problem and how it can be tackled.

It shows that more than one in four 15-year-old students in OECD countries have not attained a baseline level of proficiency in at least one of the three core subjects PISA assesses: reading, mathematics and science. In absolute numbers, this means that about 13 million 15-year-old students in the 64 countries and economies that participated in PISA 2012 were low performers in at least one subject; in some countries, more than one in two students were.

One can question whether it makes sense to establish global benchmarks for low performance in a highly diverse set of countries that place different demands on individuals' skills. But this report sets the bar at a very basic level of performance that we should expect all young people in the 21st century to attain. In reading, it is crossing the threshold from being able to read to using reading for learning. In mathematics, it involves a basic understanding of fundamental mathematical concepts and operations.

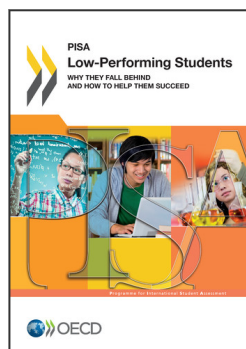
As this report shows, it is education policy and practice that can help students clear this bar, not just per capita income. The policy agenda to tackle low performance needs to include multiple dimensions, such as: creating demanding and supportive learning environments; involving parents and local communities; inspiring students to make the most of available education opportunities; identifying low performers and providing targeted support for students, schools and families; offering special programmes for immigrant, minority-language and rural students; tackling gender stereotypes; and reducing inequalities in access to early education and limiting the use of student sorting.

It is urgent to get this right. Poor performance at school has long-term consequences for both individuals and nations. Students who perform poorly at age 15 face a high risk of dropping out of school altogether; and when a large share of the population lacks basic skills, a country's long-term economic growth is severely compromised. In fact, the economic output that is lost because of poor education policies and practices leaves many countries in what amounts to a permanent state of economic recession – and one that can be larger and deeper than the one that resulted from the financial crisis at the beginning of the millennium, out of which many countries are still struggling to climb. Or put the other way round, for lower middle-income countries, the discounted present value of economic future gains from ensuring that all 15-year-olds attain at least



the PISA baseline level of performance would be 13 times the current GDP and would average out to a 28% higher GDP over the next 80 years. For upper middle-income countries, which generally show higher learning outcomes, the gains would average out to a 16% higher GDP. In other words, the gains from tackling low performance dwarf any conceivable cost of improvement.

Andreas Schleicher
Director for Education and Skills



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