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New data from 20 years of IEA's PIRLS

Latest International Results from PIRLS Show Most Students Demonstrate Basic Reading Literacy Skills Despite Dip in Achievement During COVID-19 Pandemic

Achievement trends in fourth grade reading show negative impact from pandemic; home and school socioeconomic status persist as strong indicators of achievement; most children attend schools with positive environments; many students and their parents only “somewhat” like reading.

AMSTERDAM — Substantial percentages of students reached the PIRLS International Benchmarks, despite an unknown negative impact from the COVID-19 pandemic, according to PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), the global standard for monitoring reading achievement at the fourth grade, conducted by IEA.

PIRLS is the only international assessment that successfully collected data during the COVID-19 pandemic, assessing 400,000 students in 57 countries.

“Tremendous efforts by the PIRLS 2021 countries overcame the many obstacles of conducting a school-based assessment during the pandemic,” said Dr. Dirk Hastedt, IEA Executive Director. “Nearly half of the students attended schools where normal operations were disrupted for eight weeks or more.”

There was nearly universal literacy in the 43 countries that managed to collect achievement data on schedule. Most countries had at least 85 percent of their students reaching the Low International Benchmark, demonstrating that they could read straightforward texts. More than one-third of the students in the majority of countries reached the High International Benchmark, demonstrating the ability to interpret, integrate, and evaluate a variety of text and visual elements in relatively difficult reading materials, according to the 2021 assessment directed by Drs. Ina V.S. Mullis and Matthias von Davier at IEA's TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College.

However, achievement trends reflected the negative impact of the pandemic on education, showing declines in reading achievement in 21 of the 32 countries that had comparable trend data between 2016 and 2021, eight with no change, and only three with higher achievement. According to their parents, staying home from school adversely affected learning for two-thirds of the students.

The gender gap in reading achievement favoring girls persisted in PIRLS 2021, according to the research. Girls had higher reading achievement than boys in 51 of the 57 PIRLS 2021 countries, with an average difference of 19 points.

PIRLS 2021 was the fifth assessment cycle marking 20 years of trends, and the transition to digital assessment. Approximately half the countries evaluated students using a state-of-the-art digital assessment with engaging and interactive reading assessment materials, including simulated online projects with multiple websites, videos, and navigational features such as links and pop-ups.

PIRLS 2021 collected a considerable amount of information from school principals, parents, and teachers as well.

“These data provide a comprehensive view of the impact of the pandemic on education,” said Dr. von Davier. “By gathering this information, we can better understand the daily challenges faced by students and educators in times of crises, and work towards solutions to support teaching and learning.”

Highlights based on all 57 countries include:

- **Home support has a substantial impact on reading achievement.** Fourth grade students had higher reading achievement, on average, when they had higher home socioeconomic status (SES), their parents often engaged them in early literacy activities, and they could do early literacy tasks very well when they began school. Parents' enjoyment of reading was associated with their children's higher reading achievement. However, more than two-thirds of the students had parents who only "somewhat like" or "do not like" to read.
- **Most students are in supportive school environments.** Students attending schools with a more affluent student body, schools where instruction was not affected by resource shortages, and schools with hardly any discipline or safety problems had higher average reading achievement at the fourth grade. A higher degree of emphasis on academic achievement also was associated with higher reading achievement.
- **Higher average reading achievement and more positive attitudes tend to exist in mutually reinforcing relationships.** PIRLS 2021 data show a positive relationship between students' confidence in their reading skills and higher average reading achievement. Their self-assessments coincide very well with the PIRLS assessment results, i.e., 43 percent reported they were "very confident" and had average achievement close to the High International Benchmark (541), while the 22 percent who reported they were "not confident" had average achievement just reaching the Intermediate Benchmark (475). Students' reading enjoyment was associated with higher average achievement, however, the majority only "somewhat" or "do not like" to read.

The five PIRLS trend assessments conducted to date resulted from close collaboration among the participating countries, involving thousands of collaborators internationally. IEA and Boston College remain committed to supporting countries in improving their education systems and ensuring that all students have access to high quality education. The report, *PIRLS 2021 International Results*, provides important insights into the current state of literacy education. It also serves as a fundamental resource for educators, policymakers, and researchers worldwide to monitor educational recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.



For more information about this release, early access to the PIRLS 2021 International Report, or to arrange interviews with **IEA Executive Director Dr. Dirk Hastedt, Dr. Thierry Rocher, IEA's chair, or Professors Ina V.S. Mullis and Matthias von Davier, Executive Directors of the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College**, please contact:

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Notes to Editors:

Please use **#PIRLS**, **#20YrsPIRLS**, and **#PIRLS2021** on social media.

About the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College

PIRLS is directed by the [TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center](#) in the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, working in close cooperation with the IEA and the national centers of the participating countries. TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS comprise IEA's core cycle of studies measuring achievement in three fundamental subjects—mathematics, science, and reading.

About IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement)

Founded in 1958, [IEA](#) is an independent, international cooperative of national research institutions, governmental research agencies, scholars, and analysts working to research, understand, and improve education worldwide. IEA conducts large-scale studies on diverse topics, including mathematics, science, reading, civic and citizenship education, and early childhood and teacher education. By linking research, policy, and practice, we support countries to understand effective practices in their education systems and to develop evidence-based policies to improve education.

