

Executive Summary

PIRLS is an international assessment of reading comprehension at the fourth grade that has been conducted every five years since 2001. In 2011, nationally representative samples of students in 49 countries participated in PIRLS and prePIRLS. Forty-five countries assessed fourth grade students, and some countries participated in one or more of the other available options initiated in 2011 to permit wider participation at the end of the primary school cycle: four countries assessed their sixth grade students; and three countries participated in prePIRLS, a less difficult version of PIRLS inaugurated in 2011 to be a stepping stone to PIRLS. In addition, PIRLS 2011 included nine benchmarking participants, mostly regions of countries that also participated in PIRLS, including three Canadian provinces, two Emirates, the Andalusian region of Spain, and the US state of Florida. Malta and South Africa used benchmarking to collect information relevant to their language of instruction policies. In total, approximately 325,000 students participated in PIRLS 2011, including countries assessing students at more than one grade, benchmarking participants, and prePIRLS. PIRLS 2011 continues the series of significant international studies in reading literacy conducted by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). PIRLS is directed by IEA's TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College.

Students in PIRLS responded to questions designed to measure their reading comprehension across two overarching purposes for reading:

Reading for literary experience; and

Reading to acquire and use information.

Achievement results are reported on the PIRLS scale, which has a range of 0–1,000 (although student performance typically ranges between 300 and

More Increases Than Decreases Over the Past Decade

Compared to 2001, ten countries raised their levels of reading achievement in 2011, and 13 countries improved since 2006.

Declines in reading achievement were primarily in European countries. Only four countries showed net declines in reading achievement over the decade—Bulgaria, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Sweden—whereas seven had decreases since 2006.

Little Reduction in Large Gender Gap Favoring Girls

In nearly all of the countries and benchmarking participants, girls outperformed

High Percentages of Students Reach PIRLS International Benchmarks

PIRLS reports achievement at four points along the scale as international benchmarks: Advanced International Benchmark (625), High International Benchmark (550), Intermediate

Reflecting the upward trends in average achievement, there were more improvements across the International Benchmarks in 2011 than there were declines. Remarkably, six countries showed improvement at all four benchmarks over the last decade, raising the level of performance across the entire distribution of student achievement: Singapore, the Russian Federation, Hong Kong SAR, the United States, Slovenia, and Iran.

Top-performing Countries Demonstrate Relative Strength in Interpreting, Integrating, and Evaluating Comprehension Skills

Within both the literary and informational reading purposes, PIRLS measures a

Supportive Home Environment and Early Start Crucial in Developing Children's Reading Achievement

A supportive home environment and an early start are crucial in shaping

Throughout a child's development, the time devoted to literacy-related activities remains essential to the acquisition of reading literacy skills. To examine students' early home literacy experiences, PIRLS includes parents' reports about

Preprimary education, in the form of preschool, kindergarten, or an early childhood education program, plays an important role in preparing children for primary

Considering that 1) parents are students' first teachers and many parents have concentrated on literacy skills, and that 2) substantial percentages of students in some countries have attended several years of preprimary education, it is not surprising that many students begin primary school with some literacy skills. PIRLS included the Early Literacy Tasks scale based on parents' responses to how well their children could do five early literacy tasks (e.g., read sentences, write some words) upon entering school. Parents' assessments of their children's initial literacy skills corresponded well with reading achievement at the fourth grade, sixth grade, and among the prePIRLS and benchmarking participants. For example, reading achievement at the fourth grade was substantially higher for the one-quarter of students whose parents reported their children could perform the activities *very well*, next highest for the 42 percent whose parents reported *fairly well*, and much lower for the one-third whose parents reported *not well at all*. RII

Successful schools also are likely to have better working conditions and facilities as well as more instructional materials, such as books, computers, technological ~~stuff~~ 2

PIRLS 2011 asked students' reading teachers to provide their views on the adequacy of their working conditions. Teachers were asked about five potential problem areas, such as the building needing significant repair, overcrowding, and inadequate instructional materials. Students whose teachers reported **no problem areas** in their working conditions had higher reading achievement, on average, than those whose teachers reported **one or more problem areas**. However, teachers reporting **no problem areas** ranged from 5 to 49 percent across the fourth grade countries, and the results need to be considered in the context of expectations and economic situations. In the sixth grade and prePIRLS countries, substantial percentages of students (more than half in some cases) had teachers reporting **one or more problem areas** with school conditions.

Successful Schools Emphasize Academic Success and Have Safe and Orderly Environments

Students with the highest reading achievement typically attend schools that emphasize academic success, as indicated by rigorous curricular goals, effective teachers, students that desire to do well, and parental support. Both principals

There is growing evidence that bullying in schools is on the rise, especially with the emergence of cyber-bullying, and that bullying does have a negative impact on students' educational achievement. The Students Bullied at School scale was based on how often students experienced six bullying behaviors, such as "Someone spread lies about me" and "I was made to do things I didn't want to do by other students."

Students Bullied at School—
International Averages

PIRLS 2011 **4th**

At the fourth grade, an increase in the frequency of bullying was related to a decrease in average reading achievement. Unsettlingly, across countries, although nearly half (47%) of the fourth grade students reported A being bullied, the majority were bullied either A (33%) or A (20%).

Teacher Education and Career Satisfaction Related to Higher Reading Achievement

Internationally, 72 percent of the fourth grade students had reading teachers with an emphasis on language in their formal education and training, 62 percent with an emphasis on pedagogy/teaching reading, and 33 percent with an emphasis on reading theory. In all three instances, although differences were small, higher average reading achievement was associated with teachers having this specialized education.

It is difficult to examine the effects of teacher experience on student achievement, because sometimes more senior teachers prefer assignments with students of higher ability and fewer discipline problems, and other times more experienced teachers are assigned to lower-achieving students in need of more help. Nevertheless, internationally, close to three-fourths of the fourth grade students had very experienced teachers (10–20, or more, years of experience), with reading achievement highest for the 41 percent of students whose teachers had taught for 20 or more years, and lowest for the 12 percent whose teachers had less than five years of experience.

The PIRLS 2011 Teacher Career Satisfaction scale was positively related to average reading achievement, in that, internationally, students with teachers (54%) had higher achievement than those with teachers that were

only (40%) or (5%). Students were

Engaging Instruction Related to Higher Reading Achievement

To help build a better bridge between curriculum and instruction, PIRLS 2011

collected information on the extent to which teachers used a variety of instructional practices to engage students in reading.

