

## READING PROFICIENCY OF 15-YEAR-OLD STUDENTS

Are all students equipped with adequate knowledge and skills when they leave compulsory education? Answering this question is important as the competences gained in schools shape the probability of pursuing higher education and of accessing well paid and rewarding jobs.

### Definition

Differences in the proficiency of students are assessed in terms of reading skills, as measured by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of students aged 15, i.e. towards the end of compulsory education. Reading literacy is defined as the ability of students to use written information in situations which they encounter in their life. This implies a capacity to understand, use and reflect on written texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society. This definition goes beyond the traditional notion of decoding information and literal interpretation of what is written towards more applied tasks. The concept of reading literacy used in PISA is defined by three dimensions: the format of the reading material, the type of reading task or reading aspects, and the situation or the use for which the text was constructed.

Two indicators are used to describe differences in the reading proficiency of students. The first is the distribution of students among different levels of reading proficiency, with the length of the various shadings on the bar showing the percentage of students proficient at each level. Students proficient at Level 5 are capable of completing sophisticated tasks, such as locating and using information that is difficult to find in unfamiliar texts; understanding such texts and inferring which information is relevant to the task; and being able to evaluate critically and build hypotheses, draw on specialised knowledge, and accommodate concepts that may be contrary to

expectations. Students proficient at Level 1 are only capable of completing the simplest tasks, such as locating a single piece of information, identifying the main theme of a text or making a simple connection with everyday knowledge. Students with literacy skills at or below this level lack the necessary skills to benefit from the educational opportunities open to them. The second indicator is the ratio between the mean scores of students in the top and bottom decile of the distribution of reading scores (with higher values of this ratio denoting higher inequalities).

Over 400 000 15-year-old students in 57 participating countries were assessed for PISA 2006. The estimates shown in the tables are based on probability samples.

### Comparability

PISA results have a high degree of comparability across countries. Leading experts in participating countries advise on the scope and nature of the assessments, with final decisions taken by OECD governments. Substantial efforts and resources are devoted to achieving cultural and linguistic breadth and balance in the assessment materials. Stringent quality assurance mechanisms are applied in translation, sampling and data collection. The large sample size of PISA allows meaningful comparisons across groups of people within each country.

### Overview

In the OECD area, an average of 8.6% of the students performed at Level 5, with this share ranging from more than 20% in Korea to less than 1% in Mexico. When looking at the other end of the distribution of reading skills, 12.7% of OECD students performed at Level 1 and a further 7.4% performed below that level. Differences across countries in the size of this underperforming group are wide, with the share of students performing at or below Level 1 ranging from around 5% in Finland to close to 50% in Mexico.

There are also large differences in the reading performance of students in the top and bottom deciles of the distribution. In Mexico, the Czech and Slovak Republics and Italy best performing students have reading skills that are around 80% higher than those of their counterparts at the bottom of the distribution, while such difference is less than 50% in Korea and Finland.

### Source

- OECD (2007), *PISA 2006: Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World: Volume 1 Analysis*, OECD, Paris.

### Further information

#### Methodological publications

- OECD (2006), *Assessing Scientific, Reading and Mathematical Literacy: A Framework for PISA 2006*, OECD, Paris.

#### Online database

- OECD PISA Database.

#### Websites

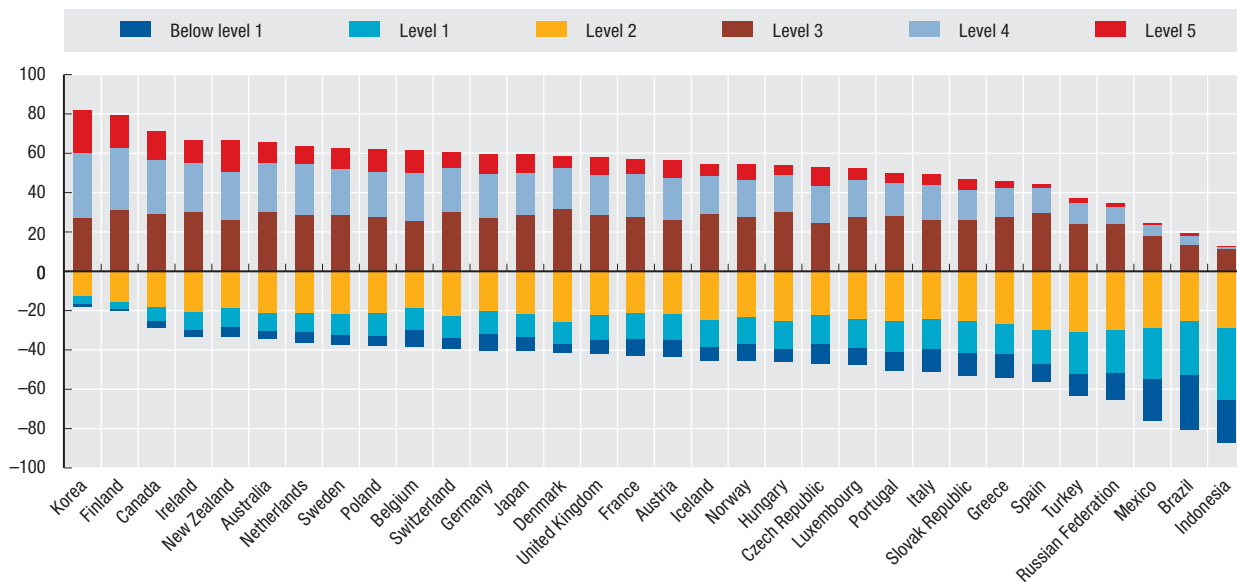
- PISA website, [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org).



READING PROFICIENCY OF 15-YEAR-OLD STUDENTS

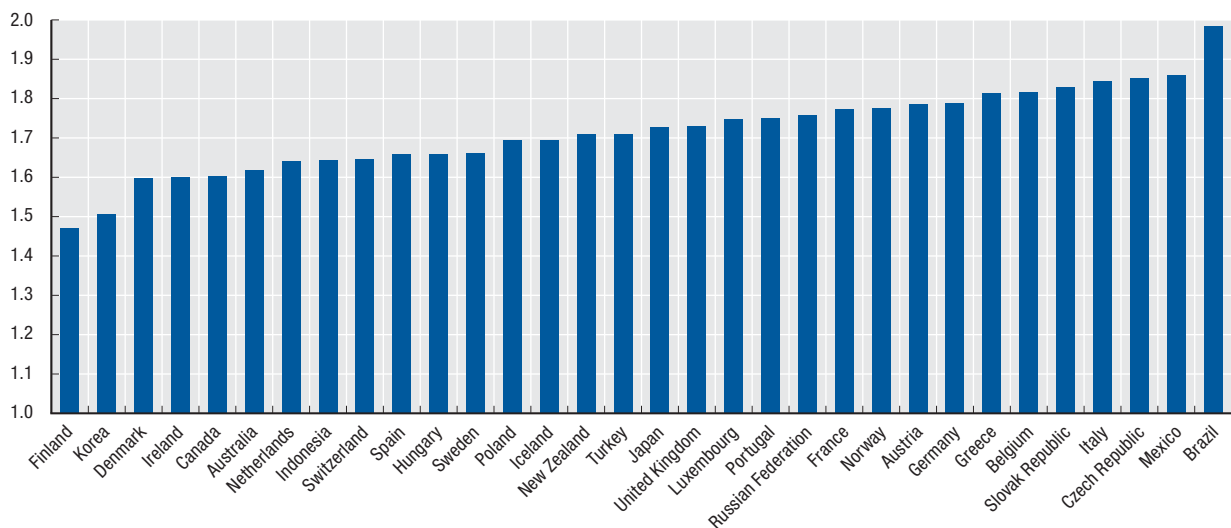
Distribution of students among different levels of reading proficiency

Year 2006

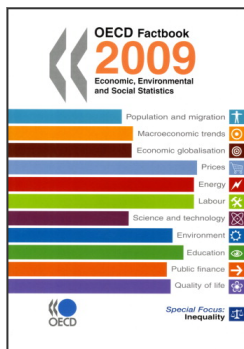


Ratio between mean scores of students in the top and bottom decile of the distribution of reading scores

Year 2006



StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/540155287485>



**From:**  
**OECD Factbook 2009**  
Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics

**Access the complete publication at:**  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/factbook-2009-en>

**Please cite this chapter as:**

OECD (2009), "Reading proficiency of 15-year-old students", in *OECD Factbook 2009: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/factbook-2009-104-en>

This work is published under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD. The opinions expressed and arguments employed herein do not necessarily reflect the official views of OECD member countries.

This document and any map included herein are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

You can copy, download or print OECD content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from OECD publications, databases and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgment of OECD as source and copyright owner is given. All requests for public or commercial use and translation rights should be submitted to [rights@oecd.org](mailto:rights@oecd.org). Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use shall be addressed directly to the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) at [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com) or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at [contact@cfcopies.com](mailto:contact@cfcopies.com).