



## Executive Summary

Since school is where most learning happens, what happens in school has a direct impact on learning. In turn, what happens in school is influenced by the resources, policies and practices approved at higher administrative levels in a country's education system.

***Successful school systems – those that perform above average and show below-average socio-economic inequalities – provide all students, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, with similar opportunities to learn.***

Systems that show high performance and an equitable distribution of learning outcomes tend to be comprehensive, requiring teachers and schools to embrace diverse student populations through personalised educational pathways. In contrast, school systems that assume that students have different destinations with different expectations and differentiation in terms of how they are placed in schools, classes and grades often show less equitable outcomes without an overall performance advantage.

Earlier PISA assessments showed these expectations to be mirrored in how students perceived their own educational future. The results of these differences can also be seen in the distribution of student performance within countries and in the impact that socio-economic background has on learning outcomes:

- In countries, and in schools within countries, where more students repeat grades, overall results tend to be worse.
- In countries where more students repeat grades, socio-economic differences in performance tend to be wider, suggesting that people from lower socio-economic groups are more likely to be negatively affected by grade repetition.
- In countries where 15-year-olds are divided into more tracks based on their abilities, overall performance is not enhanced, and the younger the age at which selection for such tracks first occurs, the greater the differences in student performance, by socio-economic background, by age 15, without improved overall performance.
- In school systems where it is more common to transfer weak or disruptive students out of a school, performance and equity both tend to be lower. Individual schools that make more use of transfers also perform worse in some countries.

These associations account for a substantial amount of the differences in the outcomes of schooling systems. For example, the frequency with which students are transferred across schools is associated with a third of the variation in country performance. This does not necessarily mean that if transfer policies were changed, a third of country differences in reading performance would disappear, since PISA does not measure cause and effect. The transfer of pupils who do badly may be partly a symptom, rather than a cause, of schools and school systems that are not producing satisfactory results, especially for lower-achieving students. It is worth noting that the schools with lower transfer rates tend to have greater autonomy and other means of addressing these challenges. The cluster of results listed above suggests that, in general, school systems that seek to cater to different students' needs through a high level of differentiation in the institutions, grade levels and classes have not succeeded in producing superior overall results, and in some respects they have lower-than-average and more socially unequal performance.

***Most successful school systems grant greater autonomy to individual schools to design curricula and establish assessment policies, but these school systems do not necessarily allow schools to compete for enrolment.***

The incentive to deliver good results for all students is not just a matter of how a school's student body is defined. It also depends on the ways in which schools are held accountable for their results and what forms of autonomy they are allowed to have – and how that could help influence their performance. PISA has looked at accountability both in terms of the information that is made available about performance and in terms of the use made of that information – whether by administrative authorities through rewards or control systems, or by the parents, for example through their choice of school. Thus the issues of autonomy, evaluation, governance and choice interact in providing a framework in which schools are given the incentives and the capacity to improve. PISA 2009 finds that:

- In countries where schools have greater autonomy over what is taught and how students are assessed, students tend to perform better.
- Within countries where schools are held to account for their results through posting achievement data publicly, schools that enjoy greater autonomy in resource allocation tend to do better than those with less autonomy. However, in countries where there are no such accountability arrangements, the reverse is true.
- Countries that create a more competitive environment in which many schools compete for students do not systematically produce better results.
- Within many countries, schools that compete more for students tend to have higher performance, but this is often accounted for by the higher socio-economic status of students in these schools. Parents with a higher socio-economic status are more likely to take academic performance into consideration when choosing schools.
- In countries that use standards-based external examinations, students tend to do better overall, but there is no clear relationship between performance and the use of standardised tests or the public posting of results at the school level. However, performance differences between schools with students of different social backgrounds are, on average, lower in countries that use standardised tests.

***After accounting for the socio-economic and demographic profiles of students and schools, students in OECD countries who attend private schools show performance that is similar to that of students enrolled in public schools.***

On average, socio-economically disadvantaged parents are over 13 percentage points more likely than socio-economically advantaged parents to report that they consider “low expenses” and “financial aid” as very important determinants in choosing a school. If children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds cannot attend high-performing schools because of financial constraints, then school systems that offer parents more choice of schools for their children will necessarily be less effective in improving the performance of all students.

***School systems considered successful spend large amounts of money on education, and tend to prioritise teachers' pay over smaller classes.***

School systems differ in the amount of time, human, material and financial resources they invest in education. Equally important, school systems also vary in how these resources are spent:

- At the level of the school system and net of the level of national income, PISA shows that higher teachers' salaries, but not smaller class sizes, are associated with better student performance. Teachers' salaries are related to class size in that if spending levels are similar, school systems often make trade-offs between smaller classes and higher salaries for teachers. The findings from PISA suggest that systems prioritising higher teachers' salaries over smaller classes tend to perform better, which corresponds with research showing that raising teacher quality is a more effective route to improved student outcomes than creating smaller classes.
- Within countries, schools with better resources tend to do better only to the extent that they also tend to have more socio-economically advantaged students. Some countries show a strong relationship between schools' resources and their socio-economic and demographic background, which indicates that resources are inequitably distributed according to schools' socio-economic and demographic profiles.
- In other respects, the overall lack of a relationship between resources and outcomes does not show that resources are not important, but that their level does not have a systematic impact within the prevailing range. If most or all schools have the minimum resource requirements to allow effective teaching, additional material resources may make little difference to outcomes.



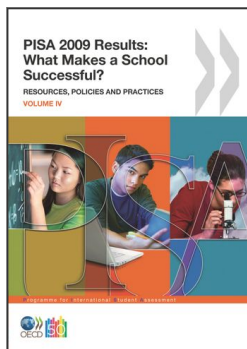
*In more than half of all OECD countries, over 94% of 15-year-old students reported that they had attended pre-primary schools for at least some time.*

Students who had attended pre-primary school tend to perform better than students who have not. This advantage is greater in school systems where pre-primary education lasts longer, where there are smaller pupil-to-teacher ratios at the pre-primary level and where there is higher public expenditure per pupil at that level of education. Across all participating countries, school systems with a higher proportion of students who had attended pre-primary education tend to perform better.

*Schools with better disciplinary climates, more positive behaviours among teachers and better teacher-student relations tend to achieve higher scores in reading.*

Across OECD countries, 81% of students report that they feel they can work well in class most of the time, 71% report that they never, or only in some classes, feel that other students don't listen, and 72% say that their teacher never, or only in some lessons, has to wait a long time before students settle down to learn.

Meanwhile, 28% of students in OECD countries are enrolled in schools whose principals report that their teaching staff's resistance to change negatively affects students or that students' needs are not met; 23% attends schools whose principals report that students are not encouraged by teachers in the school; 22% attend schools whose principals believe that learning is hindered by low teacher expectations; and 17% of students attend schools whose principals say that teacher absenteeism hampers learning.



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