

52. Equity in access to education

The long-term social and financial costs of educational inequalities can be high, as those without the competencies to participate in society fully may not realise their potential and they are likely to generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security. For these reasons, governments have a vested interest in reducing disparities in access to education, including those based on geography (e.g. distance) or socio-economic status.

In trying to provide students with equitable learning opportunities, education systems aim to reduce the extent to which a student's socio-economic background affects his or her performance in school. On average across OECD countries, 14% of the variation in students' reading performance can be explained by their socio-economic backgrounds. Students with more socio-economically advantaged backgrounds generally perform better. Across OECD countries, this advantage averages to 38 score points in reading for each increase of one standard deviation in socio-economic background, which is roughly equivalent to one year's worth of schooling. However, in Korea and Finland, the OECD countries with the highest reading performance, the link between student background and performance is weaker than on average, suggesting that equity and performance are not opposing or impossible policy objectives.

In some countries, the size or location of the community in which a school is located is strongly related to student performance. The variation in performance reflects differences in educational opportunities available in rural and urban areas, and the characteristics of these locations, such as population density, distribution of labour markets, and the extent to which urban and suburban areas are sought and populated by individuals from different backgrounds. In large communities or densely populated areas, more educational resources may be available for students. Isolated communities might need targeted support or specific educational policies to ensure that students attending schools in these areas reach their full potential. Across OECD countries, students in urban schools score an average of 23 points higher in reading than students in other areas, even after accounting for socio-economic background. The difference is the largest in Hungary, where 15-year-olds in city schools are at least one proficiency level ahead of those in rural schools. The performance gap between students living in urban and rural areas is at least half a proficiency level in Chile, the Czech Republic, Italy,

Mexico, Portugal, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Turkey. School location and student performance, however, are not strongly related after accounting for socio-economic differences in Belgium, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, Poland, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Methodology and definitions

Socio-economic background is measured according to the *PISA index of social, cultural and economic status*, which is based on information, provided by students, about their parents' education and occupations and their home possessions. On this index, one "unit" is equivalent to one standard deviation across all OECD students meaning that across all OECD countries, about two-thirds of students are from a socio-economic background that is one unit above and one unit below the average.

The achievement scores were based on assessments of 15-year olds administered as part of the OECD's PISA programme, which focussed on reading in 2009.

Further reading

OECD (2010), *Education at a Glance 2010: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background – Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes*, Vol. II, OECD Publishing, Paris.

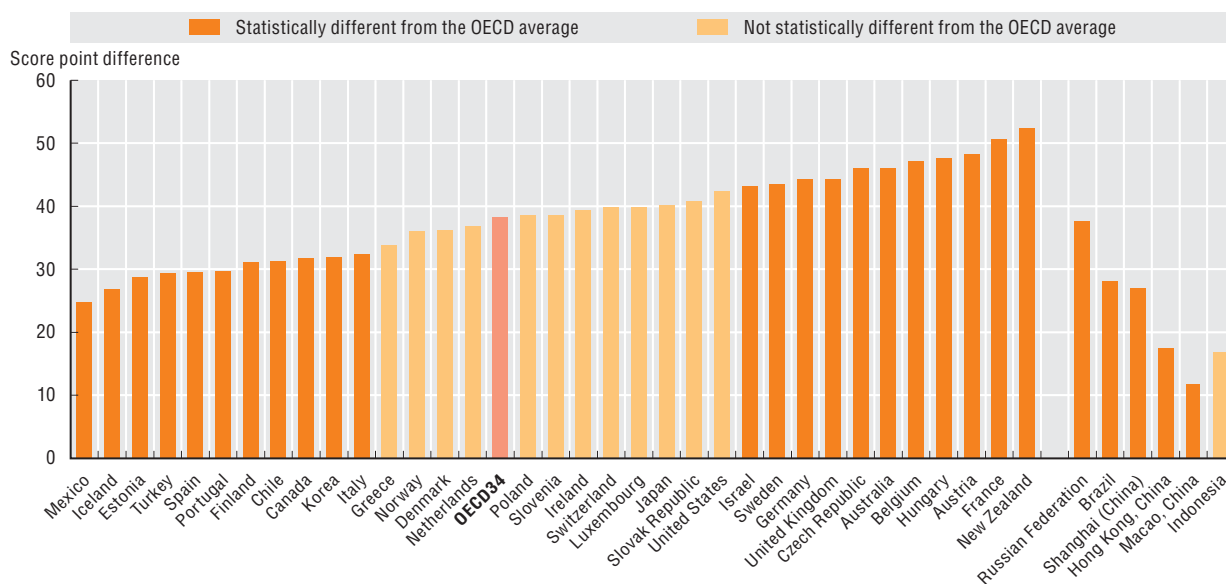
Figure notes

52.1: Values that are statistically significantly different from the OECD average are indicated in dark orange.

52.2: Data are not available for France. Countries are ranked in descending order of the average performance of students in cities (cities and large cities). For Korea, only two schools are represented in the "village hamlet or rural area" category, and the results cannot be generalised.

Information on data for Israel: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932315602>.

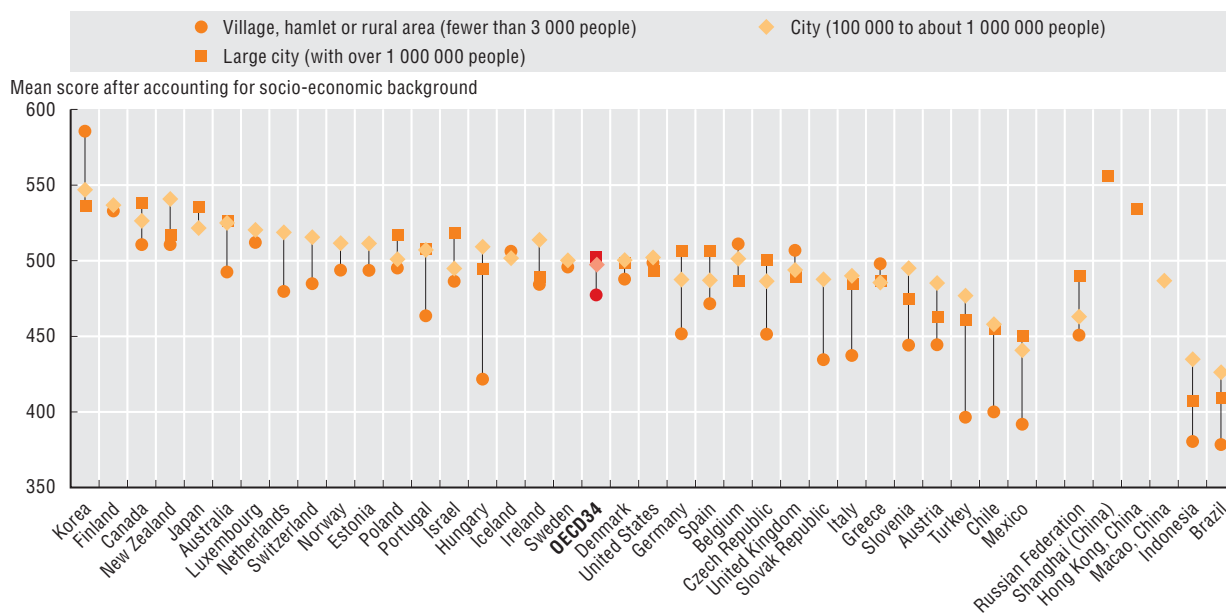
52.1 Average reading score point difference associated with socio-economic background (2009)



Source: OECD, PISA 2009 Database, Table II.3.2.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932391450>

52.2 Reading performance, by school location (2009)



Source: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background – Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes, Vol. II, OECD Publishing, Paris, Figure II.2.6.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932391469>



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