

1. WHAT STUDENTS KNOW AND CAN DO

What can students do in reading?

- On average across OECD countries, 19% of 15-year-olds do not attain reading proficiency Level 2, and 8% attain proficiency Level 5 or above.
- Only 1% of students, on average across OECD countries, and nowhere more than 3%, can perform the most complex reading tasks at proficiency Level 6.
- In 10 partner countries, only a minority of students reaches Level 2. However, the great majority of 15-year-olds in these countries shows at least some reading proficiency.

What it means

Students who do not attain the PISA baseline proficiency Level 2 in reading lack the essential skills needed to participate effectively and productively in society. A key priority for all countries is to ensure that as many students as possible attain at least Level 2. At the other end of the performance range, countries can gain competitive advantage in the knowledge economy by educating their students to handle complex reading tasks at Levels 5 and 6.

Findings

On average in OECD countries, just over four in five students (81%) are proficient in reading to at least Level 2. In the OECD countries Finland and Korea, and the partner economies Hong Kong, China and Shanghai, China, over 90% of students reach Level 2 or above, but in 10 partner countries only a minority of students does so. Students who fail to reach Level 2 struggle to perform many everyday reading tasks, and evidence from earlier PISA surveys shows that these students are unlikely to become lifelong learners or do well in the labour market.

However, even most students who do not attain Level 2 can read at some level. In PISA 2009, the measurement of proficiency was extended to incorporate some very straightforward reading tasks, categorised as Level 1b. On average in OECD countries, 99% of students are proficient at Level 1b or above, as are at least 90% of students in all 65 countries and economies that participated in PISA 2009, except Albania, Argentina, Kyrgyzstan, Panama, Peru and Qatar.

At the other end of the performance scale, an average of 8% of students in OECD countries can complete complex reading tasks at Level 5 or 6. These top performers

form a pool of talent that will help countries to compete in the global knowledge economy. In New Zealand, the partner economy Shanghai, China and the partner country Singapore, 16% to 19% of students are top performers, at least twice the OECD average. But for some countries, developing even a small corps of high-performing students remains an aspiration: in 16 countries, less than 1% of students reach Level 5.

Among top performing students, only a few can complete the most difficult tasks and attain Level 6, the new top proficiency level introduced in PISA 2009. On average, 1% of students in OECD countries reach this level; while in Australia; New Zealand; Shanghai, China and Singapore, 2% to 3% of students do. However, in 3 OECD countries and 18 partner countries and economies, less than one-tenth of one per cent of students reach Level 6.

Definitions

In the PISA survey, reading tasks are ranked by difficulty and are associated with each of the seven proficiency levels from 1b (easiest) to 6 (hardest). A student reaches a given proficiency level if the test results show that he or she has at least a 50% chance of performing a task at that level. Students are classified at the highest level at which they are proficient.

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

Going further

Descriptions of what students can do at each proficiency level, and examples of tasks, are presented in Chapter 2 of *PISA 2009 Results Volume I, What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science*. Full data are shown in Table I.2.1 at the back of that volume.

Further reading from the OECD

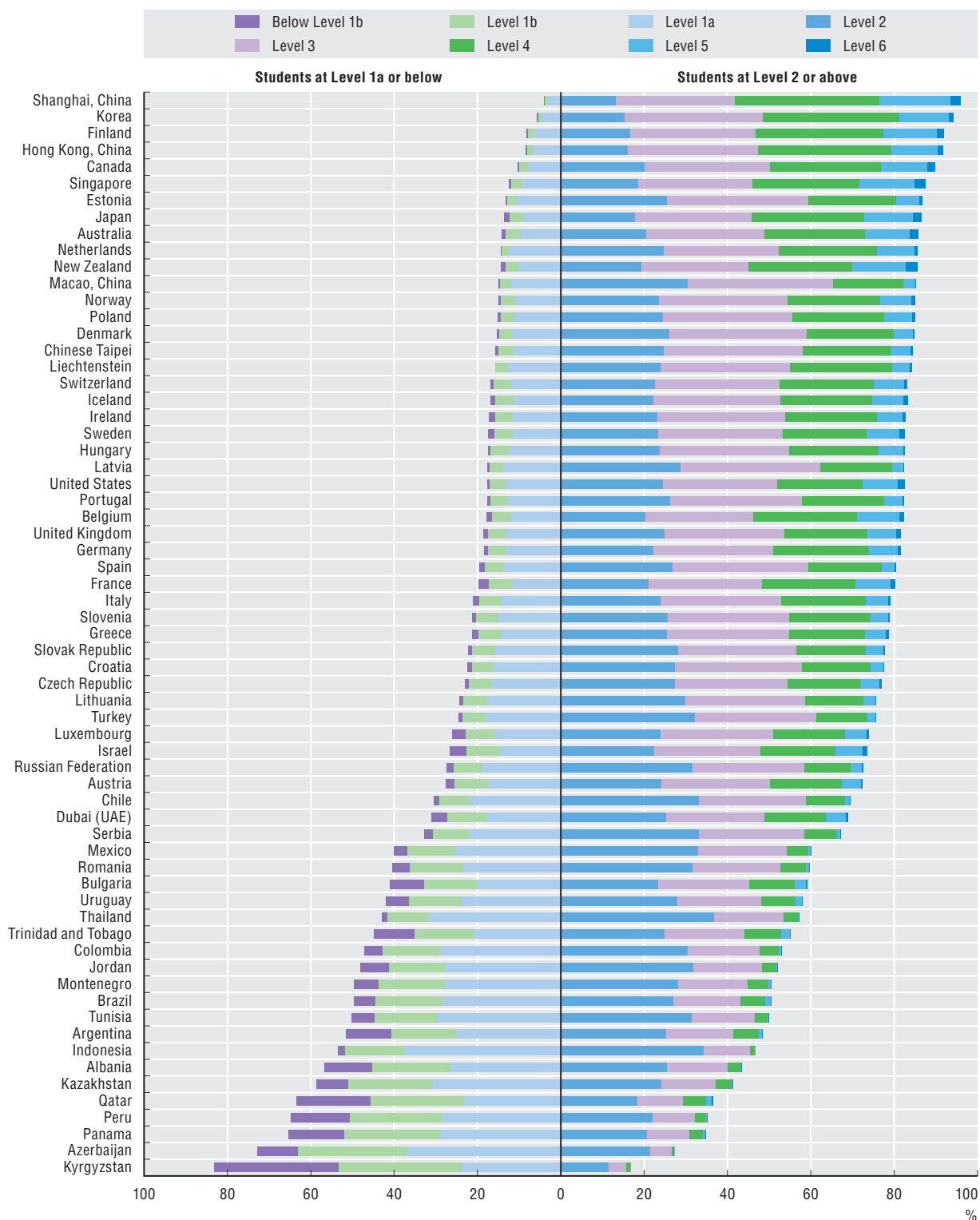
PISA 2009 Assessment Framework (2009).

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What can students do in reading?

Figure 1.1. How proficient are students in reading?

Percentage of students at the different levels of reading proficiency



1. Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of students at Levels 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Source: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results, Volume I, What Students Know and Can Do: Student Performance in Reading, Mathematics and Science, Figure I.2.14, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343133>.



From:
PISA 2009 at a Glance

Access the complete publication at:
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264095298-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2011), "What can students do in reading?", in *PISA 2009 at a Glance*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264095250-3-en>

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