

4. WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL SUCCESSFUL?

Does selecting and grouping students affect reading performance?

- In countries where students repeat grades more often, reading scores tend to be lower and the association between reading performance and students' socio-economic background tends to be stronger. The same is true in countries where more schools transfer difficult students to other schools.
- In countries where more schools group students by ability in all subjects, reading scores are lower.
- Where schools select students for different learning programmes at a young age, differences in achievement between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students tend to be greater.

What it means

By measuring aspects of student selection and grouping across 34 OECD countries, PISA can show the general relationship between these policies and student performance in reading. The results show that some types of differentiation among students tend to be associated with lower levels of performance and less equity among students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Countries using such practices need to ensure that they do not result in inequities in learning opportunities linked to students' socio-economic backgrounds.

Findings

PISA shows that reading performance in countries where schools frequently use grade repetition is worse than in those where schools seldom have students repeat grades, even after accounting for countries' national income. Around 15% of the variation in performance across OECD countries can be explained by differences in the rates of grade repetition. Within countries too, schools where more students repeat grades tend to show lower scores in reading. And those countries with greater rates of grade repetition also show a greater impact of socio-economic background on performance. This may be because schools that have students repeat grades may have less incentive to try to improve the performance of struggling and disadvantaged students.

Another practice associated with lower scores in reading overall and greater performance gaps between students from different socio-economic backgrounds is transferring students to different schools. This practice accounts for over one-third of the performance variation across countries. Transferring students because of low academic achievement, behavioural problems or special learning needs could be linked to schools that have limited incentives to work with difficult students. Students who are transferred to other schools face difficulties in adjustment that may also affect their performance. To

some extent, high transfer rates may also be symptoms, rather than a cause, of underperforming schools and school systems.

On average across OECD countries, those countries where more schools group students by ability in all subjects tend to show lower scores in reading. However, within some countries, the reverse is sometimes true.

In countries that select students at a young age for different education programmes, such as academic or vocational "tracks", there tend to be greater differences in results among students from different socio-economic backgrounds. These school systems do not show better-than-average results overall. The age of selection and socio-economic inequity may be linked because at a younger age, students are more dependent upon their parents and their parents' resources, so more advantaged families can get their children onto higher-achieving programmes.

Definitions

PISA uses the term "differentiation" to discuss these various selection policies. "Vertical differentiation" refers to the ways in which students progress through the education system as they become older. Even though the student population is differentiated into grade levels in practically all schools in PISA, in some countries, all 15-year-old students attend the same grade level, while in other countries they are dispersed throughout various grade levels as a result of policies governing the age of entrance into the school system and/or grade repetition. "Horizontal differentiation" refers to differences in instruction within a grade or education level. It can be applied by the education system or by individual schools and involves grouping students according to their interests and/or performance.

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

Going further

Further analysis is presented in Chapter 2 of *PISA 2009 Results Volume IV, What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices*. Data on the effects in individual countries and economies are shown in Tables IV.2.1 to IV.2.3 at the back of that volume.

Further reading from the OECD

Learning for Tomorrow's World: First Results from PISA 2003 (2004).

4. WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL SUCCESSFUL?

Does selecting and grouping students affect reading performance?

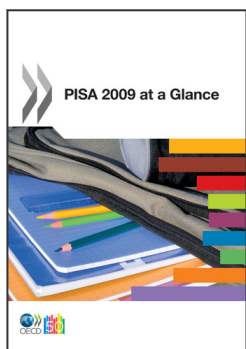
Table 4.1. **How school systems' policies for selecting and grouping students are related to educational outcomes**

How these policies are related to...	...reading performance.	...equal learning opportunities for all students.
More grade repetition	X	X
Average age of entry into primary school	x	x
More school programmes	x	x
Early selection for school programmes	x	X
More students in selective schools	x	x
More students are transferred to other schools	X	X
More students are grouped by ability in all subjects	X	x

X is negatively related to performance or equity.

x Smaller symbols indicate no statistically significant relationship.

Source: OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results, Volume IV, What Makes a School Successful?: Resources, Policies and Practices*, Figure IV.2.1a, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343380>.



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), "Does selecting and grouping students affect reading performance?", in *PISA 2009 at a Glance*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264095250-34-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. 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 or the Centre français d'exploitation du droit de copie (CFC) at contact@cfcopies.com.