

## 4. WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL SUCCESSFUL?

### How do education systems and schools select and group students?

- In most OECD and partner countries, students are not selected for different schools and programmes before age 15. In others, they are selected at the start of secondary school.
- The Netherlands and Switzerland have the greatest degree of student selection across schools, grades and programmes.
- High-performing countries can be found among those that select and group students both the most and the least; but only in the latter countries are performance differences between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students small.

#### What it means

Education systems today face a major challenge in delivering equal chances to diverse student populations. Some choose to do so by educating all children together, others by differentiating between groups of students.

#### Findings

At the level of the education system, countries make different choices about what age to start grouping children into different classes and programmes, how many different programmes to create and whether to select students for these classes and programmes by ability. Most countries do not select students before the age of 15, so most of the students who participated in PISA either attend non-selective schools or did so until recently. However, in 15 countries, 9 of them OECD members, students tend to have been divided into various education programmes, such as academic or vocational “tracks” from early in their secondary education.

At the level of individual schools, students can be grouped by ability and, in the case of low-achieving students or those with behavioural problems or special learning needs, can be transferred to different schools. These practices are relatively rare in most countries, but are applied in some.

Most 15-year-old students in most countries are in class with other students of a similar age, having progressed together through the school system. However, grade repetition is very common in some school systems: PISA results show that in 11 countries, at least one-third of 15-year-olds reported that they had repeated at least one year of school.

#### Definitions

Countries listed in the chart on the facing page are grouped on the basis of “latent profile analysis”, a technique used to classify countries into a number of groups that share similar features in several aspects related to selecting and grouping students.

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

#### Going further

Further analysis is presented in Chapter 3 of *PISA 2009 Results Volume IV, What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices*. Data on differentiation in individual countries and economies are shown in Tables IV.3.1 to IV.3.4 at the back of that volume.

## 4. WHAT MAKES A SCHOOL SUCCESSFUL?

### How do education systems and schools select and group students?

Table 4.2. **How school systems select and group students for schools, grades and programmes**

This figure divides countries into groups with similar characteristics according to how students are grouped and selected at the system level, the school level and for different grades.

|  |   |  |  | In a group of countries with <i>low</i> levels of vertical differentiation...  | In a group of countries with <i>high</i> levels of vertical differentiation...  |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|--|--|---|--|---|--|
|  |   |  |  | ...on average 7% of 15-year-olds have repeated one grade or more...<br>...and 7% did not start school at the usual ages.   | ...on average 29% of 15-year-olds have repeated one grade or more...<br>...and 11% did not start school at the usual ages.  |  |   |  |
|  |   |  |  | In a group of countries with <i>low</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the school level...  | In a group of countries with <i>high</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the school level...  | In a group of countries with <i>low</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the school level...  | In a group of countries with <i>high</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the school level...  |  |
|  |   |  |  | ...on average 15% of students are in schools that transfer students to other schools due to low achievement, behavioural problems or special learning needs...<br>...and 8% of students are in schools that group students by ability in all subjects. | ...on average 33% of students are in schools that transfer students to other schools due to low achievement, behavioural problems or special learning needs...<br>...and 38% of students are in schools that group students by ability in all subjects. | ...on average 15% of students are in schools that transfer students to other schools due to low achievement, behavioural problems or special learning needs...<br>...and 8% of students are in schools that group students by ability in all subjects. | ...on average 33% of students are in schools that transfer students to other schools due to low achievement, behavioural problems or special learning needs...<br>...and 38% of students are in schools that group students by ability in all subjects. |  |
| In a group of countries with <i>low</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the system level...    | ...on average 15-year-olds are enrolled in 1.1 separate programmes... | ...the average first age of selection is 15.8... | ...and 17% of students are in selective schools. | Australia,* Canada,** Denmark, Estonia,** Finland,** Greece, Iceland,** New Zealand,* Norway,** Poland,* Sweden, United States, United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Russian Federation  | Jordan  | Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Tunisia, Uruguay   | Chile, Colombia, Peru   |  |
| In a group of countries with <i>medium</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the system level... | ...on average 15-year-olds are enrolled in 3 separate programmes...   | ...the average first age of selection is 14.5... | ...and 42% of students are in selective schools. | Ireland; Israel; Italy; Japan;** Korea;** Slovenia; Albania; Azerbaijan; Dubai (UAE); Hong Kong, China;** Montenegro,* Shanghai-China;* Thailand   | Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Qatar, Romania, Chinese Taipei   | Mexico, Portugal   | Luxembourg; Macao, China; Panama  |  |
| In a group of countries with <i>high</i> levels of horizontal differentiation at the system level...   | ...on average 15-year-olds are enrolled in 4.3 separate programmes... | ...the average first age of selection is 11.2... | ...and 61% of students are in selective schools. | Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovak Republic, Croatia, Liechtenstein, Singapore*  | Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia  | Belgium,* Germany, Trinidad and Tobago   | Netherlands,* Switzerland*  |  |

\* Perform higher than the OECD average.

\*\* Perform higher than the OECD average and where the relationship between students' socio-economic background and performance is weaker than the OECD average.

Source: OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results, Volume IV, *What Makes a School Successful?: Resources, Policies and Practices*, Figure IV.3.2, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888932343399>.



**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), "How do education systems and schools select and group students?", in *PISA 2009 at a Glance*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264095250-35-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).