

Preface

Among its many findings, our PISA 2018 assessment shows that 15-year-old students in the four provinces of China that participated in the study – Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang – outperformed by a large margin their peers from all of the other 78 participating education systems, in mathematics and science. Moreover, the 10% most disadvantaged students in these four provinces also showed better reading skills than those of the average student in OECD countries, as well as skills similar to the 10% most advantaged students in some of these countries. True, these four provinces in eastern China are far from representing China as a whole, but the size of each of them compares to that of a typical OECD country, and their combined populations amount to over 180 million. What makes their achievement even more remarkable is that the level of income of these four Chinese regions is well below the OECD average. The quality of their schools today will feed into the strength of their economies tomorrow.

In this context, and given the fact that expenditure per primary and secondary student rose by more than 15% across OECD countries over the past decade, it is disappointing that most OECD countries saw virtually no improvement in the performance of their students since PISA was first conducted in 2000. In fact, only seven of the 79 education systems analysed saw significant improvements in the reading, mathematics and science performance of their students throughout their participation in PISA, and only one of these, Portugal, is a member of the OECD.

During the same period, the demands placed on the reading skills of 15-year-olds have fundamentally changed. The smartphone has transformed the ways in which people read and exchange information; and digitalisation has resulted in the emergence of new forms of text, ranging from the concise, to the lengthy and unwieldy. In the past, students could find clear and singular answers to their questions in carefully curated and government-approved textbooks, and they could trust those answers to be true. Today, they will find hundreds of thousands of answers to their questions on line, and it is up to them to figure out what is true and what is false, what is right and what is wrong. Reading is no longer mainly about extracting information; it is about constructing knowledge, thinking critically and making well-founded judgements. Against this backdrop, the findings from this latest PISA round show that fewer than 1 in 10 students in OECD countries was able to distinguish between fact and opinion, based on implicit cues pertaining to the content or source of the information. In fact, only in the four provinces of China, as well as in Canada, Estonia, Finland, Singapore and the United States, did more than one in seven students demonstrate this level of reading proficiency.

There is another side to this. The kinds of things that are easy to teach are nowadays also easy to digitise and automate. In the age of artificial intelligence (AI) we need to think harder about how to develop first-class humans, and how we can pair the AI of computers with the cognitive, social and emotional skills, and values of people. AI will amplify good ideas and good practice in the same way as it amplifies bad ideas and bad practice – it is ethically neutral. However, AI is always in the hands of people who are not neutral. That is why education in the future is not just about teaching people, but also about helping them develop a reliable compass to navigate an increasingly complex, ambiguous and volatile world. Whether AI will destroy or create more jobs will very much depend on whether our imagination, our awareness, and our sense of responsibility will help us harness technology to shape the world for the better. These are issues that the OECD is currently exploring with our Education 2030 project.

PISA is also broadening the range of outcomes that it measures, including global competency in 2018, creative thinking in 2021, and learning in the digital world in 2024. The 2018 assessment asked students to express how they relate to others, what they think of their lives and their future, and whether they believe they have the capacity to grow and improve.

Measuring the well-being of 15-year-old students, the target PISA population, is particularly important, as students at this age are in a key transition phase of physical and emotional development. When it comes to those social and emotional outcomes, the top-performing Chinese provinces are among the education systems with most room for improvement.

Even across OECD countries, just about two in three students reported that they are satisfied with their lives, and that percentage shrank by five percentage points between 2015 and 2018. Some 6% of students reported always feeling sad. In almost every education system, girls expressed greater fear of failure than boys, even when they outperformed boys in reading by a large margin. Almost a quarter of students reported being bullied at least a few times a month. Perhaps most disturbingly, in one-third of countries and economies that participated in PISA 2018, including OECD countries such as Greece, Mexico and Poland, more than one in two students said that intelligence was something about them that they couldn't change very much. Those students are unlikely to make the investments in themselves that are necessary to succeed in school and in life. Importantly, having a

Preface

growth mindset seems consistently associated with students' motivation to master tasks, general self-efficacy, setting learning goals and perceiving the value of school, and negatively associated with their fear of failure. Even if the well-being indicators examined by PISA do not refer specifically to the school context, students who sat the 2018 PISA test cited three main aspects of their lives that influence how they feel: life at school, their relationships with their parents, and how satisfied they are with the way they look.

It may be tempting to conclude that performing better in school will necessarily increase anxiety about schoolwork and undermine students' well-being. But countries such as Belgium, Estonia, Finland and Germany show that high performance and a strong sense of well-being can be achieved simultaneously; they set important examples for others.

Other countries show that equity and excellence can also be jointly achieved. In Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Korea, Macao (China), Norway and the United Kingdom, for example, average performance was higher than the OECD average while the relationship between socio-economic status and reading performance was weaker than the OECD average. Moreover, one in ten disadvantaged students was able to score in the top quarter of reading performance in their country/economy, indicating that poverty is not destiny. The data also show that the world is no longer divided between rich and well-educated nations and poor and badly educated ones. The level of economic development explains just 28% of the variation in learning outcomes across countries if a linear relationship is assumed between the two.

However, it remains necessary for many countries to promote equity with much greater urgency. While students from well-off families will often find a path to success in life, those from disadvantaged families have generally only one single chance in life, and that is a great teacher and a good school. If they miss that boat, subsequent education opportunities will tend to reinforce, rather than mitigate, initial differences in learning outcomes. Against this background, it is disappointing that in many countries a student's or school's post code remains the strongest predictor of their achievement. In Argentina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Peru, the Slovak Republic and the United Arab Emirates, a typical disadvantaged student has less than a one-in-eight chance of attending the same school as high achievers.

Furthermore, in over half of the PISA-participating countries and economies, principals of disadvantaged schools were significantly more likely than those of advantaged schools to report that their school's capacity to provide instruction is hindered by a lack or inadequacy of educational material; and in 31 countries and economies, principals of disadvantaged schools were more likely than those of advantaged ones to report that a lack of teaching staff hinders instruction. In these systems, students face a double disadvantage: one that comes from their home background and another that is created by the school system. There can be numerous reasons why some students perform better than others, but those performance differences should never be related to the social background of students and schools.

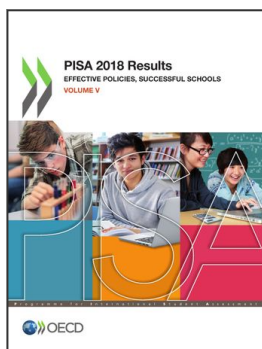
Clearly, all countries have excellent students, but too few countries have enabled all of their students to excel and fulfill their potential to do so. Achieving greater equity in education is not only a social justice imperative, it is also a way to use resources more effectively, increase the supply of skills that fuel economic growth, and promote social cohesion. For those with the right knowledge and skills, digitalisation and globalisation have been liberating and exciting; for those who are insufficiently prepared, these trends can mean vulnerable and insecure work, and a life with few prospects. Our economies are linked together by global chains of information and goods, but they are also increasingly concentrated in hubs where comparative advantage can be built and renewed. This makes the distribution of knowledge and wealth crucial, and it can only be possible through the distribution of education opportunities.

Equipping citizens with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their full potential, to contribute to an increasingly interconnected world, and to convert better skills into better lives needs to become a more central preoccupation of policy makers around the world. Fairness, integrity and inclusiveness in public policy thus all hinge on the skills of citizens. In working to achieve these goals, more and more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient education policies and practices.

PISA is not only the world's most comprehensive and reliable indicator of students' capabilities, it is also a powerful tool that countries and economies can use to fine-tune their education policies. That is why the OECD produces this triennial report on the state of education around the globe: to share evidence of the best policies and practices, and to offer our timely and targeted support to help countries provide the best education possible for all of their students.



Angel Gurría
OECD Secretary-General



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