

MEDIA RELEASE

Year 4 literacy improves, but more to be done: PIRLS

5 December 2017: Results from the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) released today by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) show that the literacy achievement of Australian Year 4 students has improved on average, but not for students with the lowest literacy skills.

Australia's average score was lower than the average scores for 13 other countries, including Singapore, Hong Kong, Ireland, Northern Ireland and England (which all tested in English), as well as other top-performing countries the Russian Federation, Finland and Poland. Australia's average score was significantly higher than the scores of 24 other countries, including France and French-speaking Belgium, as well as New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, and Malta, which tested in English.

PIRLS has measured trends in Year 4 students' reading literacy achievement every five years since 2001. 2016 is the second time Australia has participated in PIRLS, following participation in 2011.

Releasing the ACER report, *PIRLS 2016: Reporting Australia's results*, ACER Deputy CEO (Research) Dr Sue Thomson said while the results indicate positive changes in Australian students' average reading performance since 2011, they also highlight the existence of groups of students for whom reading comprehension remains an area of great difficulty.

"PIRLS 2016 shows that 81 per cent of Australian Year 4 students are achieving at or above the Intermediate benchmark – the proficient standard for Australia – compared to 76 per cent in 2011, with more students achieving at the High or Advanced benchmark," Dr Thomson said.

"The improvement in the literacy achievement of Australian Year 4 students in PIRLS is broadly consistent with the observation that Year 3 reading levels in NAPLAN have been improving nationally since 2008.

"Nevertheless, the fact remains that about six per cent of students are not reaching the Low benchmark in PIRLS 2016, a proportion similar to PIRLS 2011. In addition, significant achievement gaps by gender, Indigenous status, socioeconomic background and school location remain. The priority for policymakers and educators is to focus on addressing the learning needs of these groups of students."

Results from the questionnaire administered as part of PIRLS 2016 show that students who attended schools where less than 25 per cent of their peers have literacy skills when they start school achieved significantly lower, on average, than students who attend schools where greater proportions of their peers begin formal schooling equipped with literacy skills.

"Schooling and learning is not a race, but if it were, for those students who have no or low literacy skills when they start school, it would be like starting 50 metres behind those with literacy skills and trying to make up that gap. In literacy learning, we know from other studies that the gap doesn't close. Students who are behind at the start will remain behind, unless we do something.

"In order to close that gap we need to provide schools with the resources to facilitate the language development and growth of students who start school with few literacy skills. This is critical in ensuring that they develop their skills and, essentially, catch up," Dr Thomson said.

The PIRLS 2016 results and questionnaire also reveal that higher levels of enjoyment of reading are associated with higher levels of achievement, so long as students have books in the home.

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“Without access to reading materials, a positive attitude alone is not sufficient for students to develop their reading abilities,” Dr Thomson said.

PIRLS 2016 measured the reading literacy of more than 580 000 Year 4 students from 50 participating countries and 11 benchmarking entities, including a nationally representative sample of 6341 Australian students from 286 primary schools.

International comparisons

- Australia’s average reading score for 2016 was significantly higher than the scores of 24 other countries.
- Australia’s average score for 2016 was lower than the average scores for 13 other countries; this was an improvement on 2011, when Australia’s average score was lower than the average scores for 20 other countries.
- Australia was one of 18 countries to record a significant improvement in average reading score between PIRLS 2011 and 2016, while a further 13 countries recorded similar achievement in both cycles and 10 showed declines.
- The average reading literacy achievement of Australian students was above the Intermediate benchmark and just under the High benchmark.

Australian results

- Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria showed a significant improvement in average reading literacy achievement between PIRLS 2011 and 2016, while the remaining states and territories recorded no significant change.
- Sixteen per cent of boys compared to 11 per cent of girls were ‘poor readers’, that is, they did not reach the international Low benchmark.
- Eighteen per cent of students with an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background were poor readers compared to four per cent of non-Indigenous students.
- Nine per cent of students who attended a remote school were poor readers compared to five per cent of students in metropolitan schools.
- Eleven per cent of students attending more disadvantaged schools were poor readers compared to two per cent of students in more advantaged schools.

PIRLS is a project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and is directed by the PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College. ACER manages the implementation and reporting of PIRLS within Australia, with funding from the Australian, and state and territory governments.

The *PIRLS 2016: Reporting Australia’s results* report is available from the Australian PIRLS website www.acer.org/pirls

PIRLS 2016: Reporting Australia’s results

(PDF: 128 pages, 3.9 MB)

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*****ENDS*****

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See the attached media factsheets for more information.

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