Russian Federation, Hong Kong and Singapore Achieve Highest Average Scores in PIRLS 2006 Study

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The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS\(^1\)) is an international study of reading that was administered to students in Grade 4 in 40 countries/regions, including the United States, and five Canadian provinces in 2006. In addition to describing performance on reading literacy, PIRLS identifies a range of home, school and teacher factors associated with performance. It also allows for comparison with an earlier PIRLS study in 2001.

The Russian Federation, Hong Kong SAR, and Singapore were the three highest-performing countries in PIRLS 2006\(^2\). The Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario also performed very well. Other high-ranking countries included Luxembourg (ranked 4\(^{th}\)), Italy (5\(^{th}\)), Hungary (6\(^{th}\)) and Sweden (7\(^{th}\)). The United States ranked 14\(^{th}\), with an average score that was above the international average and not significantly different from Germany (8\(^{th}\)), the Netherlands (9\(^{th}\)), Flemish Belgium (10\(^{th}\)), Bulgaria (11\(^{th}\)), Denmark (12\(^{th}\)), Latvia (13\(^{th}\)), England (15\(^{th}\)) and Austria (16\(^{th}\)). Countries performing less well than the United States included New Zealand (19\(^{th}\)), Scotland (21\(^{st}\)), France (22\(^{nd}\)), Poland (24\(^{th}\)), Spain (25\(^{th}\)), Israel (26\(^{th}\)) and Norway (30\(^{th}\)).

Of the 26 countries that also participated in PIRLS 2001, eight countries showed significant gains in average reading achievement in PIRLS 2006. The largest gains were observed in the Russian Federation, Hong Kong SAR and Singapore, with Italy, Germany and Hungary among the countries registering smaller gains. Countries with significantly lower average scores in 2006 than in 2001 included the Netherlands, Sweden, England and Romania. Improvement in Germany and Hungary was attributed to better performance among boys but not girls, while in the Netherlands, the decline was attributed to a drop in performance among girls. The United States did not change in average reading achievement between 2001 and 2006.

Although U.S. fourth-graders maintained their relative standing on PIRLS as compared with the 2001 assessment, much has already been made of American students “losing ground” relative to other participating nations. The lack of any overall gains in reading achievement came as a disappointment to U.S. policy makers who have asserted NCLB law has led to significant improvements in reading for children in grades 1 through 3.

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1 PIRLS is a study of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The PIRLS International Study Centre ([http://isc.bc.edu/pirls2006/index.html](http://isc.bc.edu/pirls2006/index.html)) is located at Boston College.
2 Ranking refers to countries/regions only.
In 2006, girls had significantly higher average reading achievement scores than boys in all but two countries, Luxembourg and Spain, where average achievement was the same for girls and boys. This finding is similar to the 2001 assessment and adds further evidence to a global pattern of gender disparity in favor of girls also found on PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

As in PIRLS 2001, PIRLS 2006 found a positive relationship between students’ reading achievement in fourth grade and parents having engaged their children in early literacy activities before starting school (e.g., reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, and playing word games). Parents in 14 countries reported increases in engagement in 2006 relative to 2001. The numbers of children’s books in homes was also associated with achievement, with children in homes with the greatest numbers of books (more than 100) doing much better than those in homes with few books (0-10).

One average, across PIRLS 2006 countries, nearly one third of students (32%) reported reading stories or novels outside of school every day or almost every day, and an additional one third (31%) reading them at least once a week. In contrast, 16 percent of the students, on average, reported reading informational materials on a daily basis and 43 percent reading such materials on a weekly basis. More students in Russia, Israel, the Netherlands, and Singapore reported reading stories or novels on a daily basis than in 2001. Daily reading of stories or novels the United States were about the same in both 2001 and 2006, but daily reading of informational texts was lower in 2006. Finally, in 2006, in the United States and across countries in general, boys reported spending more time reading stories or articles on the Internet than girls, while girls reported spending more time reading the same text types in books and magazines than boys.

These and other interesting results can be found in PIRLS 2006 International Report, which may be downloaded from http://isc.bc.edu/pirls2006/index.html

The PISA/PIRLS Task Force is charged by the IRA board to monitor and analyze the results of PIRLS and PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), and disseminate information about these cross-national assessments in the form of reports, and conference presentations. To access the Task Force reports and links to other resources go to: http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/reports/pisa.html