School Factors Discussion Leader Guide

Transitions

Countries adopt a variety of strategies for helping children make the transition from home to a school environment. Such preprimary education programs, known also as preschool, kindergarten, and early childhood education, can be up to three years, and are intended to prepare children for primary education.

Slide 1 — PIRLS findings

- Almost all countries make provision for at least one year of preprimary education – only in Iran and Turkey did the majority of students not attend preschool. In some countries (e.g., Germany) parents from lower class do not send children to preschool or only for a shorter time.
- Two-fifths of the students, on average, had parents reporting that the student had at least two years of preprimary education.
- In most countries, principals reported that less than half (and in many cases less than one-quarter) of students beginning their schools had early literacy skills (i.e., recognize most of the alphabet, read some words, read sentences, write letters of the alphabet, and write some words). Exceptions were England, Singapore, Slovenia, Canada, France, Sweden, and the United States.
- More than half the students (54%), on average, across countries had parents that reported their child could do early literacy activities moderately or very well at the time they began school, and only 17 percent had parents reporting they could not do them at all.
- Internationally, average reading achievement was lowest among students not attending preschool (491 score points), and highest among those who attended for more than two years (523 points).

Slides 2 & 3 — Establishing context

Slide 4 — Planning action

Based on responses, the plan of action may need to include further investigations or recommendations related to regarding transitions to school and between schools.

Recommendations may reflect very diverse issues, such as government support to eliminate fees, standards for effective preprimary education programs, and training for kindergarten teachers.
Management and Leadership

Both PISA and PIRLS included surveys of student, teachers, and principals about the learning environment provided at school. PIRLS gathered more school-specific data than PISA.

Slide 5 — Factors affecting reading achievement
In determining the influence of school climate, PISA examined
- teacher support—level of support students perceive from their teachers
- teacher-related support—principals’ perceptions of teachers’ self-expectations, student-teacher relations, teacher absenteeism, staff resistance to change
- student-related support—principals’ and students’ perceptions of absenteeism, alcohol/drug use, disruption of class

In examining school climate, PIRLS created an Index based on principals’ characterizations of teachers’ job satisfaction, teachers’ expectations for student achievement, parental support for student achievement, students’ regard for school property, and students’ desire to do well in school.

PIRLS examined the percentage of time principals devote to various school-related activities on a typical day, including curriculum and pedagogy development, staff management and development, administrative duties, parent and community relations, teaching, and other responsibilities.

School autonomy and decision-making authority represent school-based management. Among the elements considered are the principals’ responsibility and accountability for appointing and dismissing teachers, determining starting salaries and increases, budget formulation and allocation, establishing discipline and assessment policies, approving admittance, and determining courses, course content and selecting textbooks.

Professional development information was collected in PIRLS by asking teachers how much time they spent in seminars and workshops over a two–year period.

Slide 6 — Findings
- Although PISA and PIRLS took different approaches to school climate, both studies reported its impact. PIRLS reports that schools perceived by principals as having a high level of school climate generally had higher average reading achievement than those in schools where the perception of school climate was less positive. PISA’s school climate findings suggest student performance is affected in various ways and degrees. For example, the benefits of teacher support are particularly significant to students with a low performance levels. Teacher-related support had a weak positive relationship to performance. Similarly, teacher morale and
commitment appears to be modestly related to student performance. Student-related factors are closely related to performance: in some countries, the principal’s index of school climate explains between 12 and 21% of the variation in reading performance.

- Internationally, principals report spend about a quarter of their day on administrative duties. Principals in France and Germany reported spending more than 40 percent of their time teaching, the most of any of the PIRLS countries. In Bulgaria, principals spent more than one-third of their time developing curriculum and pedagogy for their schools.

Slide 7 — Findings

- Countries with higher levels of school autonomy and greater teacher involvement in decision making about courses, course content, and textbooks, seem to perform better in reading.
- On average, internationally, about three-quarters of students had teachers who spent 15 hours or fewer in workshops or seminars during a two–year period. Half or more of the students in Bulgaria, France, Iran, and Kuwait had teachers who spent no time in workshops or seminars.

Slides 8–11 — Establishing context

Slide 12 — Planning action

Based on responses, the plan of action may need to include further investigations or recommendations related to school management and leadership.

In considering school climate, creating a proactive vision of effective reading achievement should be considered. Other topics that may impact school climate include fostering personalized school structures, promoting social and cultural sensitivity, and building a reform community with shared agenda.

Reading/literacy can be emphasized by forming literacy advisory councils and professional learning communities, initiating and maintaining collective attention to improving reading instruction and ability, and accepting no excuses for students not learning to read and grow as readers due to external conditions.

All stakeholders in improving reading performance have a role to play in students’ reading development. Positive contexts for collaborative decision making by media specialists, librarians, reading coordinators, and teachers and building collaborations between home and school ensure all stakeholders a voice in crafting a shared agenda.

Professional development may also be a key concern for the action plan. At a minimum, all staff should be aware of local, state, national, and international conferences, seminars, and training sessions. Professional development provides all teachers the opportunity to become reading experts. In some
cases, reserving and raising funds for teacher professional development may be necessary or providing monetary and status rewards for professional development may encourage greater involvement.

Literacy and reading can be included in preservice and inservice development and may be offered in partnership with schools and other agencies. Teacher meetings may provide time to interpret international assessments data and to make information about reading achievement available. Teachers need opportunities to “disseminate” teacher research and/or participate in school/groups of school study groups.

Physical Infrastructure, Resources, and School System Structure

Students attend schools in a variety of educational and institutional settings. PISA examines differences among students within schools and differences between schools within the same country. This section focuses on between-school differences.

Slide 13 — PISA findings

- Ensuring the availability of a suitable physical infrastructure and an adequate supply of educational resources may not guarantee high performance, but the absence of such an environment will possibly affect learning.
- Schools with adequate educational resources, such as computers, library and teaching materials (e.g. multimedia), contribute to learning.

Slide 14 — PISA findings

- Some school systems distinguish types of schools, which may provide substantially different curriculum. In some countries, publicly and privately–managed schools compete. Usually private schools have more selective enrollment. School systems with fewer types of schools and less selection of pupils were associated with higher performance and fewer differences in student outcomes.
- National and local governments, schools and teachers should note that multiple school types and consequent student selection does not appear to raise standards (in fact, the converse) and should act accordingly.

Slide 15 & 16 — Establishing context
Slide 17 — Planning action

Based on responses, the plan of action may need to include further investigations or recommendations related to physical infrastructure, resources, and school system structure.

For example, the action plan may focus on instructional resources to ensure all schools have abundant materials to support reading development, including material in multiple languages and diverse perspectives. Such a plan might call for collaboration with administrators and other agents to ensure that all the schools have at least a library. A schoolwide awareness campaign could ensure that information is available about the benefits of using school library, computers and other resources.