

Press release

A LEAGUE TABLE OF EDUCATIONAL DISADVANTAGE IN RICH NATIONS

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UNICEF publishes new league tables on education Huge inequality in educational achievement exists in every rich nation, says report

Florence, 26 November - A new report from UNICEF provides the first “big picture” comparison of the performance of schools in the world’s rich industrialized nations.

In an effort to provide a reliable overview of how each country’s education system is performing, UNICEF’s Innocenti Research Centre has produced a new international league table by combining data from five separate tests covering reading literacy, maths and science. The tests are drawn from two major international surveys – the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS). Korea and Japan come out top of the class while Portugal, Greece, Italy and Spain lie at the bottom.

The report shows that educational performance in some OECD countries is consistently better than in others. A child at school in Canada, Finland or Korea has a higher chance of being educated to a reasonable standard and a lower chance of falling a long way behind the average than a child born in Denmark, Germany, Greece, Hungary or the United States.

In real terms the proportion of 15 year-olds judged “*unable to solve basic reading tasks*” varies from under 7 per cent in Korea and Finland to more than 20 per cent in Portugal, Greece, Hungary, Germany, and Switzerland. The percentage considered “*unable to apply basic mathematical knowledge*” varies from under 10 per cent in Korea and Japan

to a staggering 45 per cent or more in Portugal, Greece, Spain and Italy. As these children grow up, the real meaning of such poor educational achievement will become clear. Whether they are looking for a job, or trying to work out how much medicine to give their own child based on the instructions written on the packet, they will find themselves at a very serious disadvantage.

At the heart of UNICEF's study is the issue of inequality in learning. "*How far behind are the weakest students being allowed to fall?*" it asks. In an attempt to answer this question the report proposes an original view of educational performance. It presents an alternative league table which ranks countries by the size of the gap that exists between low achievers and average students – in other words by the degree of educational inequality between the nation's school children. Countries at the top of this league such as Finland, Spain, Portugal and Canada are doing relatively well in containing inequality by not allowing their low achievers to fall as far behind as they do in other countries. On the other hand, countries at the bottom such as Belgium, New Zealand, Germany and the United States are allowing very wide gaps to open up.

But overall the report concludes that nowhere is there room for complacency. Large disparities in the achievement of pupils exist in every rich nation. Indeed the gaps between the test scores of different children in the same school year can be so huge that some children are the equivalent of many school years behind most of their classmates. Even in the best performing country – Finland – low achieving 8th grade pupils are approximately 3.5 years behind the average Finish 8th grader in maths. In Belgium, Germany and New Zealand the low achievers are approximately five whole years behind.

Non-native children are found to be particularly disadvantaged with poor performance in some countries more than three times higher among children of immigrant families than among other children. This is the case in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Germany. On the other hand Australia and Canada, both countries with high proportions of children from immigrant families among the population, have a much better record. Non-native and first-generation children in Canada and Australia are only slightly more likely than other children to show poor results in reading. This serves to highlight the challenge faced by every rich nation in ensuring that minority groups receive the help they need to overcome the particular disadvantages they face. However, these findings do not support the commonly held belief that countries with a high proportion of immigrant children are likely to find themselves lower down the education league tables. The report shows that the share of non-native and first generation children living in each country does not affect the overall national rankings.

Looking for explanations for the differences in educational success between nations the report considers the allocation of resources. But the data show no simple relationship between national expenditures per pupil and success in the education league tables. Indeed, Korea, which sits high in the league tables, spends approximately the same amount per pupil as Greece, which ranks very low. Similarly there is no obvious relationship between the average number of pupils per teacher and the national test results.

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A strong relationship does exist, however, between educational achievement and the occupation, education and economic status of the children's parents - whichever country they live in. For example, Irish children whose parents are high-earning professionals have a 90 per cent chance of progressing to further education – as opposed to a 13 per cent chance for children whose parents are in unskilled manual occupations.

But while home background is seen to play a role throughout the OECD, the extent of the influence varies considerably between countries. In Germany or Mexico the children of less educated mothers are three to four times more likely to perform poorly in reading literacy. But children of less educated mothers in Finland, Ireland, Poland, Iceland, Norway or Sweden are only about one and a half times more likely to get low marks.

The report argues that it is unacceptable that the social and economic status into which a child happens to be born should so profoundly influence his or her chances of success in school. Although it concludes that schools are proving more effective at combating existing social inequality in some countries than in others the report also highlights the fact that educational disadvantage becomes established very early in life – even before a child enters the formal education system at age five or six.

UNICEF therefore proposes that attempts to mitigate educational disadvantage need to begin through good quality early childhood care and education. Care outside the home in the two years or so before primary school is today a fact of life for many children growing up in OECD countries. And there is mounting evidence to suggest that high quality early childhood care and education may have an increasing role to play in minimising educational disadvantage and social exclusion. Many parents are already taking advantage of the good quality provision that currently exists. But such provision is often privately financed. To extend the benefits to all children will require significant public investment.

Governments of all OECD countries remain committed to the principle of equality of opportunity, and to the goal of allowing each child to reach his or her full potential. But as this report shows, that ideal is far from being realised.

NOTE TO EDITORS:

The UNICEF *Innocenti Report Card* uses data from three different international assessments of learning achievement or 'functional literacy' (the ability to use information in various formats to function effectively in modern society).

The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) of 1995 and 1999 covered a total of 52 countries in one or other year (or both). The *Report Card* focuses on the eighth grade children in TIMSS, typically aged 14, of whom the study contained about 3800 per country.

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The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) surveys 15 year-olds, assessing their 'preparedness for adult life' near the end of compulsory schooling through measurement of maths, science and reading literacy. While TIMSS focuses more on measuring mastery of an internationally agreed curriculum, PISA is intended to measure broader skills, trying to look at how students would be able to use what they have learned in real-life situations. The first PISA assessment took place in 2000 covering 32 countries. On average, 5700 children in each country took part.

The 1994-98 International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) covered 21 countries. About 3500 people per country were assessed.

The new league tables were constructed using data from PISA and TIMSS.

The first league table lists developed nations according to their average rank in five different tables showing the percentage of 14 to 15 year-olds who fall below fixed international benchmarks of competence in reading, maths and science. The second league table uses data from the same five TIMSS and PISA tests but ranks each country according to the size of the gap in test scores between its low-achievers (5th percentile) and its middle-achievers (50th percentile). It then averages those rankings to produce a league table of *relative* educational disadvantage.

At the UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children in May 2002 the governments of the world made a series of commitments to specific goals for children and young people. These commitments compliment a series of Millennium Development Goals that had been earlier pledged to by all 189 United Nations Member States. Commitments to the provision of quality education and to ensuring early childhood development are recognised as key priorities for the decade.

This publication is the fourth in a series of Innocenti Report Cards, designed to monitor the performance of the industrialized nations in meeting the needs of their children. Each Report Card presents and analyses league tables ranking the performance of rich nations against critical indicators of child well-being.

Embargoed media materials and downloadable copies of the report are available from the IRC Newsroom: <http://www.unicef-icdc.org/presscentre/newsroom/>

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