

## KEY MESSAGES

### “Report Card 9 - The Children Left Behind”

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1. *Report Card 9* ‘The Children Left Behind’ uses a new method for measuring disadvantage among children. It is a significant contribution to understanding how well the world’s developed nations are doing to limit disparities within their societies and to support all children to reach their fullest potential.
2. The latest in UNICEF’s landmark *Report Card* series, ‘The Children Left Behind’ attempts to grasp the true depth and breadth of child well-being for 24 OECD countries, most of them in Europe. It does so *not* by examining top versus bottom, but by comparing the gap between children in the bottom of the distribution with those at the median. As such, children who are most disadvantaged are compared with what is considered ‘normal’ in their country. Three dimensions of well-being are examined: material well-being, education and health. In each case, the question asked is ‘*how far behind are children being allowed to fall?*’
3. The possibility of reducing bottom-end inequality for children exists not just on the basis of an abstract goal, but against a standard of what the best-performing countries are already achieving in limiting inequality. As such, *Report Card 9* provides a realistic measure of the scope for improvement. The fact that some countries are doing better than others shows that a higher level of disadvantage for those at the bottom end of the distribution is not inevitable or immutable.
4. The report shows a number of examples where countries that have the highest median levels of performance also rank best in reducing inequality. The countries with the lowest levels of inequality in self-reported health complaints – the Netherlands, Austria and Portugal – are also the countries with the highest median levels of health. While the two countries with the lowest bottom-end inequality in reading literacy, Finland and the Republic of Korea, are also the two countries with the highest median levels of educational achievement. As such, it is argued that greater equality can be achieved without sacrificing efficiency and economic performance. Equity and efficiency in a society can be complementary and mutually reinforcing.
5. The larger the relative gap, the higher a child’s risk of exclusion and of being far from the standards of well-being of the society where the child lives. Causality is always difficult to establish, but many hundreds of studies in different OECD countries have shown that allowing children to fall unnecessarily far behind brings in its wake a long list of practical costs and negative consequences for the child as well as for the whole society.
6. The heaviest costs of ‘falling behind’ are paid by the individual child. But there is also a significant cost to society in the form of increased strain on health and hospital services, remedial schooling, welfare and social protection programmes, and on the police and the courts. There is also a significant cost to business and economies because of the lower skill

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levels and reduced productivity resulting from a large number of children failing to develop to their full potential. The threat that bottom-end inequality poses to social cohesion and the overall quality of life in advanced industrial economies is another cost that must be paid by all society.

7. The earlier the intervention, the greater the leverage. Children who fall behind do so at the earliest stages of their lives and that has lifelong consequences. Attempting to compensate for disadvantage later in life is more difficult, more costly and is less likely to be successful.
8. For a child to suffer avoidable setbacks in the most formative stages of development is a breach of the most basic tenet of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* – that every child has a right to develop to his or her full potential. It is unfair and unjust to hold children responsible for the circumstances into which they are born. *Report Card 9* calls on governments to close the gap so that all children are given the same opportunities in life.

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