

Key Messages

Launch of the Report Card 15: An Unfair Start: Inequality in children's education in rich countries

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This report examines educational inequalities in 41 of the world's richest countries, all of which are members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and/or the European Union (EU). Using the latest data available, it exposes the drivers of inequalities across childhood – from access to preschool to expectations of post-secondary education – and explores, in-depth, the relationships between educational inequality and factors such as their parents' occupations, migration background, the child's gender and school characteristics. The key feature of the report is the league table that summarizes the extent of educational inequalities at every level - preschool, primary school and secondary. The indicator of inequality at preschool level is the percentage of students enrolled in organized learning one year before the official age for entering primary school. The indicator for both primary school (Grade 4, around age 10) and secondary school (age 15) is the gap in reading scores between the lowest- and highest-performing students. The ranking at age 15 is the lead indicator in the report because this represents the level of inequality towards the end of compulsory education.

Key Messages

Findings

- Countries aiming to reach levels of excellence can at the same time offer equal opportunities for all its children – in other words countries can indeed offer their children the best of both worlds – they can achieve standards of excellence in education and have relatively low inequality. This shows that there is no trade-off between equality and performance. Bigger, richer countries do not necessarily produce better results as national wealth does not mean less inequality in education. Some of the smaller, poorer countries included in this report, such as Latvia and Lithuania, have higher preschool enrolment rates and lower inequality in reading performance in primary and secondary school than those with far greater resources.
- Countries can have different degrees of educational inequality at different educational stages. Ireland and Slovenia are in the bottom third of countries (high inequality) when it comes to preschool enrolment, but move to the middle third for primary school and then to the top third (low inequality) at secondary school. France has one of the highest rates of preschool enrolment but then falls to the bottom third in secondary school. The Netherlands goes from being the most equal country in primary school reading scores to ranking 26th (of 41 countries) when children are 15 years old.

- In 16 countries, more than 5 per cent of children do not attend preschool the year before they start school. This amounts to more than one million children in total across these countries.
- By Grade 4, around age 10, there are large gaps in children's reading abilities. In almost all countries, more than 10 per cent of children do not reach an intermediate level of reading proficiency expected at this age.
- There are also large inequalities in children's reading scores at 15 years old. Latvia, Ireland and Spain had the lowest levels of inequality at this age. Malta, Bulgaria and Israel had the highest.
- Large inequalities in children's educational progress are linked to family background. These inequalities already exist when children enter preschool and persist at primary and secondary school.
- In half of the countries in Europe for which data are available, children from the poorest fifth of households have a lower preschool attendance rate than children from the richest fifth. In Croatia which has the largest gap in both absolute and relative terms two in three children (70 per cent) from households in the richest fifth of the income distribution attend preschool, while the rate for the poorest fifth is less than one child in four (22 per cent).
- In both surveys, PISA and PIRLS, the variation in reading's scores of children at the ages of 10 and 15, are partially linked to their parent's occupation. In other words, in all countries for which data are available, children who have at least one professional parent have significantly higher reading scores than the children of non-professionals. The gap in scores between the children of professionals and non-professionals ranges from around 28 points in Finland to 66 points in Bulgaria.
- Girls do better than boys in reading abilities and these gaps tend to grow as children get older. Yet, in some countries the gap is smaller when tests are done on a computer rather than on paper – boys do better in computerised tests than on paper. These gaps in reading performance tend to grow as children get older. Thus, early interventions last a life time.
- Among children aged 15 who are doing equally well at school, those with parents in high-status jobs such as corporate managers, senior officials, doctors, lawyers and engineers are much more likely to expect to continue into higher education than those with parents in low-status jobs, such as small business owners, clerical workers, skilled workers, general labourers, service or sales workers, craft or trade workers, plant or machine operators, and those who have never worked for pay..
- In 21 out of 25 countries with substantial levels of immigration, children who are first-generation immigrants tend to do less well at school at age 15 than non-migrant children.
- In 15 countries, second-generation immigrant children also do not do as well as non-migrant children. However, in Australia and Canada, second-generation immigrant children do better than non-migrant children. These patterns reflect varying patterns of migration to different countries as well as parental background (occupation, income, language)

- In most countries, there are large differences in average reading performance between schools. When children are 15 years old, there is more variation in performance between schools than among children at the same school in Bulgaria, Hungary and the Netherlands. On the other hand, there is relatively little variation in performance between schools in Finland, Iceland, and Norway.
- An important factor underlying these performance variations between schools is the average family background of children in each school. Differences associated with family background tend to matter most in countries such as Hungary and Luxembourg, where children from richer and poorer families tend to attend different schools – schools that reflect their class, status or wealth.

Recommendations

- It is not a matter of one size fits all. Policies and practices in one country do not automatically work in another country so policies cannot simply be copied and pasted wholesale because education systems have evolved under very different circumstances. Each country's education system has developed within a distinct national context.
- Through a combination of family allowances and public services, rich countries can make sure all children develop varied interests and achieve their full potential. Integration of children with different family backgrounds – working-class or middle-class for example - into different schools not only enhances and enriches the education environment but can lead to more equal opportunities for all children and ultimately for the society and nation as a whole – a win-win.
- Policy makers and educators need to address equal engagement of boys and girls in all core subjects, paying attention to the gender mix of teachers and challenging gender stereotypes every step of the way.
- Not enough is known about how inequalities develop and persist in different contexts. More high-quality, cross-country, comparable evidence is needed to fill these gaps. Longitudinal studies that follow the same children over time as they grow up would be particularly valuable.
- Policy and public debates should be more fully informed by available evidence such as surveys and data listed in this report. International comparisons should consider not just how countries are faring in terms of educational performance but also the level of inequality among students in each country. Greater equality does not come at the expense of lower educational standards.
- Although not directly covered in the report, it is acknowledged that regional bodies like the European Union could play a critical role in advocating for better indicators of equality in their future benchmarks. Longitudinal studies of children's lives which can make a

substantial contribution to target sources of inequalities, how they evolve over a child's educational journey, and therefore also how those sources of inequality can be tackled.

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