

News Release

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STUDENTS IN RUSSIAN FEDERATION, HONG KONG SAR AND SINGAPORE TOP GLOBAL ASSESSMENT OF READING LITERACY

Major Survey of 4th Grade Level Students Across 40 Countries Also Reveals:

- **Girls outpace boys in reading literacy across all countries**
- **Children's enjoyment, appreciation for reading is on the decline**
- **Countries can implement changes to improve their students' performance.**

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (11-28-07) – The Russian Federation, Hong Kong SAR and Singapore were the three top-performing countries in reading literacy at the fourth grade level, according to a major report of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), one of the most influential global assessments of reading literacy in the world. The report was released today by the study's international directors at Boston College.

Luxembourg, Italy, Hungary, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium (Flemish), Bulgaria and Denmark also had higher achievement than the majority of other participants. In addition, three Canadian provinces—Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario—were among the highest achieving participants (see following Exhibits).

With approximately 215,000 students surveyed across 40 countries, -- including 26 countries that also participated in PIRLS 2001 and have trend data in this report -- PIRLS 2006 is one of the largest international assessments of reading literacy. Directed by the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College, which also conducts TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, the largest international study of student achievement ever undertaken), PIRLS assesses a range of reading comprehension strategies for two major reading purposes: literary and informational.

Additionally, PIRLS collects extensive information about home, school and national influences on how well students learn to read, and queried parents and caregivers about their children's early literacy activities.

“This report contains a wealth of data countries can use to improve schooling in reading, while confirming the family as children's first, and perhaps most important, reading teacher,” say PIRLS co-directors Ina V.S. Mullis and Michael O. Martin of Boston College.

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Another important contribution of the new report, Mullis and Martin continued, is that the results demonstrate that countries can make progress in improving children's academic achievement.

According to the report, most of the highest-achieving countries in 2006 showed significant improvement since 2001, including the three top-performing countries. The five other countries with significant gains in achievement were Singapore, Slovenia, the Slovak Republic, Italy, Germany, and Hungary.

Among the countries with the largest gains, the two Asian participants, Hong Kong SAR and Singapore, enacted systemic reforms since 2001 in the reading curriculum, instructional materials, and teacher education, said Mullis and Martin. Also significant is the fact that the Russian Federation and Slovenia underwent structural changes, so that students now receive one more year of primary schooling, the researchers said.

Other key findings:

In the majority of countries, relatively few students (7% or less) reached the PIRLS 2006 Advanced International Benchmark, while nearly one fifth did so in Singapore and the Russian Federation. Students reading at this level could provide and support interpretations, integrate information across texts, and understand literary and organizational features.

In PIRLS 2001, and again in PIRLS 2006, girls had higher reading achievement than boys in all countries (509 vs. 492, on average). The difference was substantial in many countries, raising concern about the educational prospects of so many low-achieving boys during their adolescent years and beyond.

Impact of the Home

- PIRLS 2006 reinforces on a worldwide basis the well-established finding that children from homes fostering literacy become better readers. Students had higher reading achievement when they were from homes where their parents enjoyed reading and read frequently, books were in abundance, and students were engaged in literacy activities -- from alphabet blocks to word games -- from an early age.
- Internationally, there was a positive relationship between fourth grade students' reading achievement and the amount of time spent in preprimary education. According to parents' reports, about four fifths of students internationally had attended more than one year of preprimary education.
- In both PIRLS 2001 and PIRLS 2006, parents' assessments of their children's early literacy skills were in alignment with how well their children could read at the fourth grade. According to parents, about one third of children, on average, entered school with basic literacy skills, which represented an increase in 17 countries since PIRLS 2001.

Students' Attitudes

- Only about half the students across the PIRLS 2006 countries agreed that they enjoyed reading and appreciated books, reflecting a troubling downward trend since 2001. Moreover, fewer students in PIRLS 2006 reported reading for fun. Almost one third hardly ever read for fun (twice monthly at most).

Reading Instruction

- Primary schools around the world place considerable emphasis on teaching reading. Almost three fourths of students attended schools that placed more emphasis on reading than on other school subjects. Many schools had initiatives to encourage students to read, and half had programs to help teachers improve reading instruction.
- Both principals and teachers reported that textbooks were the foundation of reading instruction. In general, more students were asked to read literary than informational texts on a weekly basis.
- Both teachers and students agreed that independent silent reading was a frequent classroom activity. Most often, students were asked to answer questions about what they had read, either orally or via worksheets.
- Internationally, most fourth grade students (89%) attended schools with libraries, and had classroom libraries (69%). Nearly two thirds had access to computers in school and more than half were in schools with Internet access. Since PIRLS 2001, there was a substantial increase in the percentage of students having access to computers and the Internet in school.

School Environment

- The reading achievement of students in schools with few disadvantaged students was much higher than for students with a high percentage (more than 50%) of disadvantaged classmates. On average, 18 percent of students were in schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged students.
- There was a positive relationship between school safety and reading achievement. Fortunately, most fourth graders felt safe in their schools and reported minimal, if any, incidents of stealing, bullying, and injury. Principals generally were in agreement that school safety was at most a minor problem.
- The majority of teachers (64%) had a positive view of their teaching career. There was a correspondence with parents' views, with 60 percent of the students having parents who reported a good deal of satisfaction with their child's school.

ABOUT PIRLS 2006

PIRLS 2006 is the second in a cycle of internationally comparative reading assessments carried out every five years. Conducted at the fourth grade, this world-wide assessment and research project is designed to measure trends in children's reading literacy achievement and collect information about the policy and practices related to learning to read and reading instruction.

Forty countries participated in this study, which measured reading literacy achievement of fourth-grade students (typically age 10) and gathered information about home and school factors associated with learning to read. In each country, samples of approximately 4,000 students were assessed in about 150 schools. Data collection began in October 2005 for countries in the Southern Hemisphere and in March 2006 for Northern Hemisphere countries.

The countries that participated included Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Chinese Taipei, Denmark, England, France, Georgia, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Qatar, Romania,

Russian Federation, Scotland, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United States.

Countries also participating in the PIRLS 2001 assessment at the fourth grade level, for which PIRLS 2006 offers trend data are: Bulgaria, England, France, Germany, Hong Kong SAR, Hungary, Iceland, Iran, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Romania, Russian Federation, Scotland, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United States.

PIRLS is an ongoing project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a global cooperative of national research institutes and government agencies that has been conducting studies of cross-national achievement for nearly 50 years. IEA's major funding partners for PIRLS included the World Bank, the U.S. Department of Education through the National Center for Education Statistics, and those countries that contributed by way of fees.

PIRLS is directed by the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center of the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, which is dedicated to conducting international comparative studies in educational achievement. Principally, it is responsible for conducting IEA's studies in reading (PIRLS) and in mathematics and science (Trends in Mathematics and Science Study, known as TIMSS).

[**Media Note:** The full PIRLS 2006 reports will be available on-line at the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center's web site at pirls.bc.edu or by calling 617 552 1600. To arrange interviews with the PIRLS International Study Co-Directors Ina V.S. Mullis or Michael O. Martin, please call the Boston College Office of Public Affairs at 617-552-3350.]