

#117

The PISA logo consists of the letters 'P', 'I', 'S', and 'A' in a stylized, multi-colored font. Each letter is composed of several overlapping shapes in shades of blue, red, orange, and grey.

**i n F o c u s**

What can we do to ensure a level playing field for all students?

Programme for International Student Assessment



## What can we do to ensure a level playing field for all students?

- School systems in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Korea, Macao (China), Norway and the United Kingdom achieved high performance in reading. Strikingly, students' socio-economic status was less predictive of their performance in these countries/economies than the OECD average.
- Whether students were channelled into different tracks or programmes at a younger age or not accounted for almost half of the variation (46%) in the impact of students' socio-economic status on their reading performance across OECD countries.
- Differences in the prevalence of schools taking the initiative to provide written specification of student performance standards accounted for over 18% of the variation in the impact of students' socio-economic status on their reading performance across OECD countries.

Many education systems aim to provide learning opportunities to all students regardless of their backgrounds in order for them to realise their potential. Education systems are expected to break down barriers to social mobility. However, too often, children are not given enough opportunities to succeed, to pursue their interests, or to develop their skills. Individual circumstances over which students have no control often affect the quality of the schooling they receive and the educational path they choose. They also influence students' development of attitudes and dispositions toward learning, and can shape students' dreams for their future.

Differences in opportunities for students often result in achievement gaps among students with different backgrounds. Over the last 20 years, PISA has shown that students' socio-economic status, which includes parents' occupations and educational levels and home possessions, are predictors of performance scores in reading, mathematics and science in all countries and economies participating in PISA. So far, this has been without a single exception.

What is more concerning is that recent studies have shown that learning loss during the pandemic was most pronounced among socio-economically disadvantaged students and schools.<sup>1</sup> [A previous PISA in Focus](#) suggests that pre-pandemic socio-economic gaps in students' readiness to cope

and learn in challenging situations translate into possibly wider gaps in learning achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

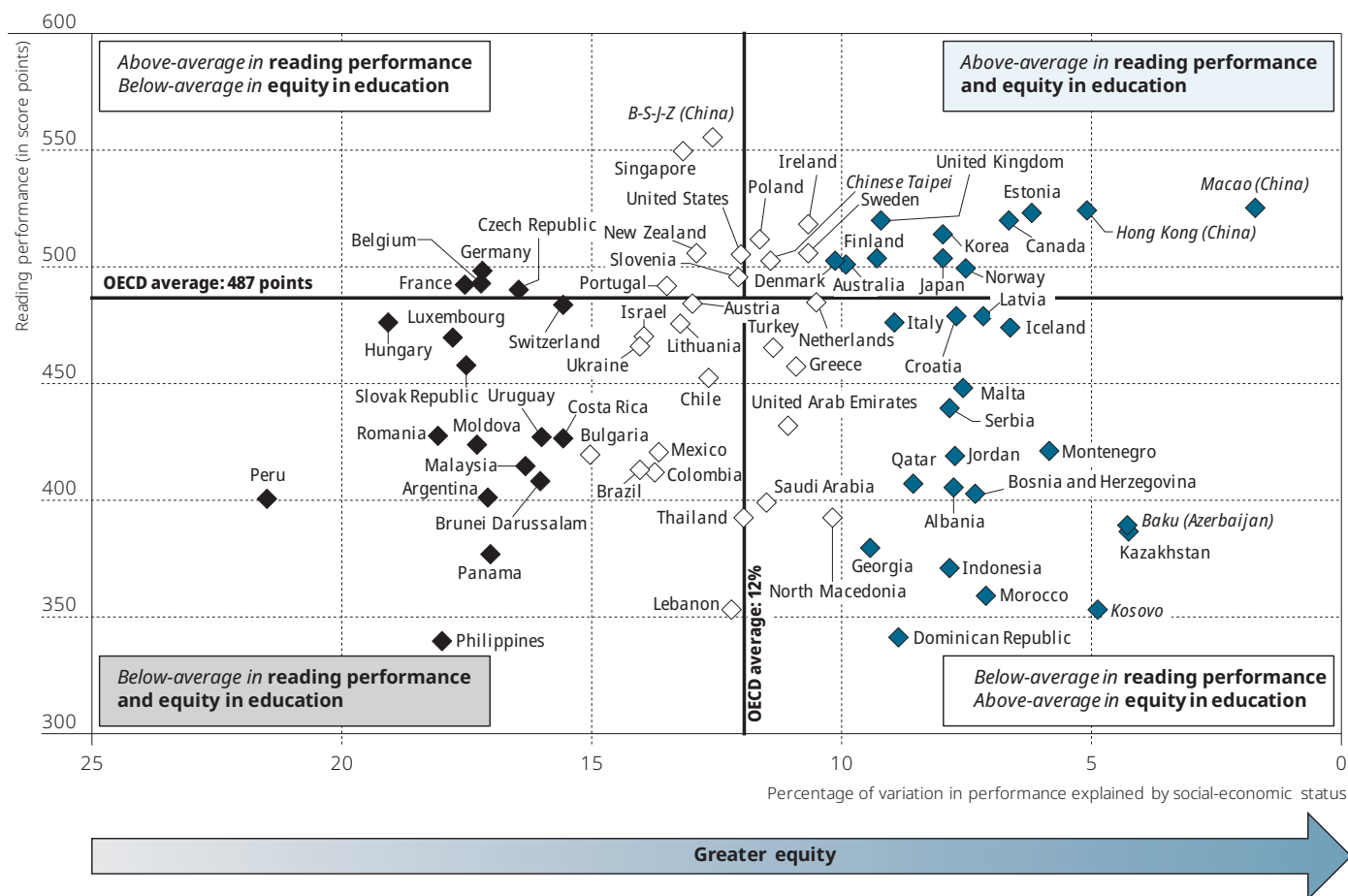
To overcome these challenges, each system adopted innovative policy responses according to a [special survey](#) carried out collaboratively by the OECD, UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank.

This policy brief points to key aspects to consider in providing students with needed opportunities to level the playing field for all students and achieve greater equity in education beyond the exigencies of the pandemic. Which countries and economies have been able to minimise the impact of students' socio-economic status on their performance in PISA 2018? What are common ways in which these countries/economies organise schooling?

Though students' socio-economic status predicts PISA performance scores, the relationship varies considerably depending on countries/economies. This shows that poverty is not always an impediment to students' achievement and that the way schools are organised matters. PISA also finds it is possible to attain both strong performance and greater equity in education. This is the case for education systems in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hong Kong (China), Japan, Korea, Macao (China), Norway and the United Kingdom.

# Strength of the socio-economic gradient and reading performance

- ◆ Strength of the relationship between performance and socio-economic status is **above** the OECD average
- ◇ Strength of the relationship between performance and socio-economic status is not statistically significantly different from the OECD average
- ◆ Strength of the relationship between performance and socio-economic status is **below** the OECD average



**Note:** Socio-economic status is measured by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status.

**Source:** OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.2.3.

**StatLink** <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934037184>

## Reconsider a system that selects and sorts students

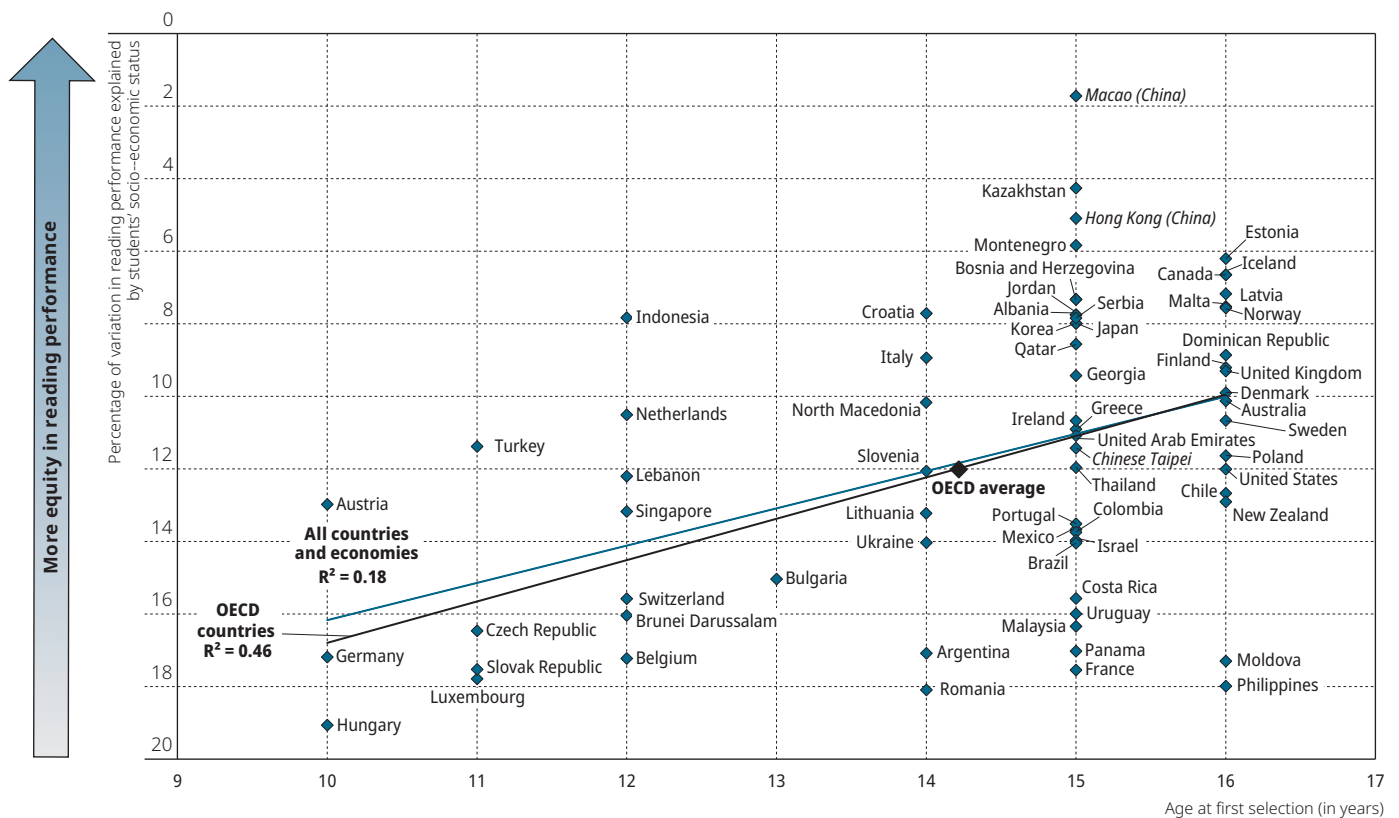
Countries/economies that ensure a more level playing field for students tend to limit or delay the sorting of students into different programme or grade levels. PISA 2018 results show that the impact of students' socio-economic status on their performance is weaker in countries/economies where:

- Fewer education programmes are available to 15-year-olds;
- Students are sorted into different education programmes when they are older;
- Fewer students have repeated a grade.

PISA 2018 results show that countries/economies that cater to different students' needs by separating

them into different educational tracks and grade levels (also known as stratification) do not produce superior overall results. Not only that, they show less equitable performance distribution by student socio-economic status. In highly stratified systems, there are often different expectations and fewer incentives for teachers and schools to support struggling students if there is an option of transferring them to other tracks or holding them back a grade level. In contrast, in comprehensive systems, teachers and schools must find ways of working with students who are across the performance spectrum by providing additional support for struggling students. They also have high expectations for all of their students. These different expectation and incentive systems may help explain the greater level of equity achieved in systems that use stratification less.

## Age at first selection and equity in reading performance



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.2.3 and Table B3.3.3.  
StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934130911>

### Provide adequate resources, consider equitable resource allocation and ensure effective use of resources

Countries/economies that provide their students with a more level playing field allocate adequate resources to schools in an equitable and effective manner. PISA 2018 results show that in these countries and economies:

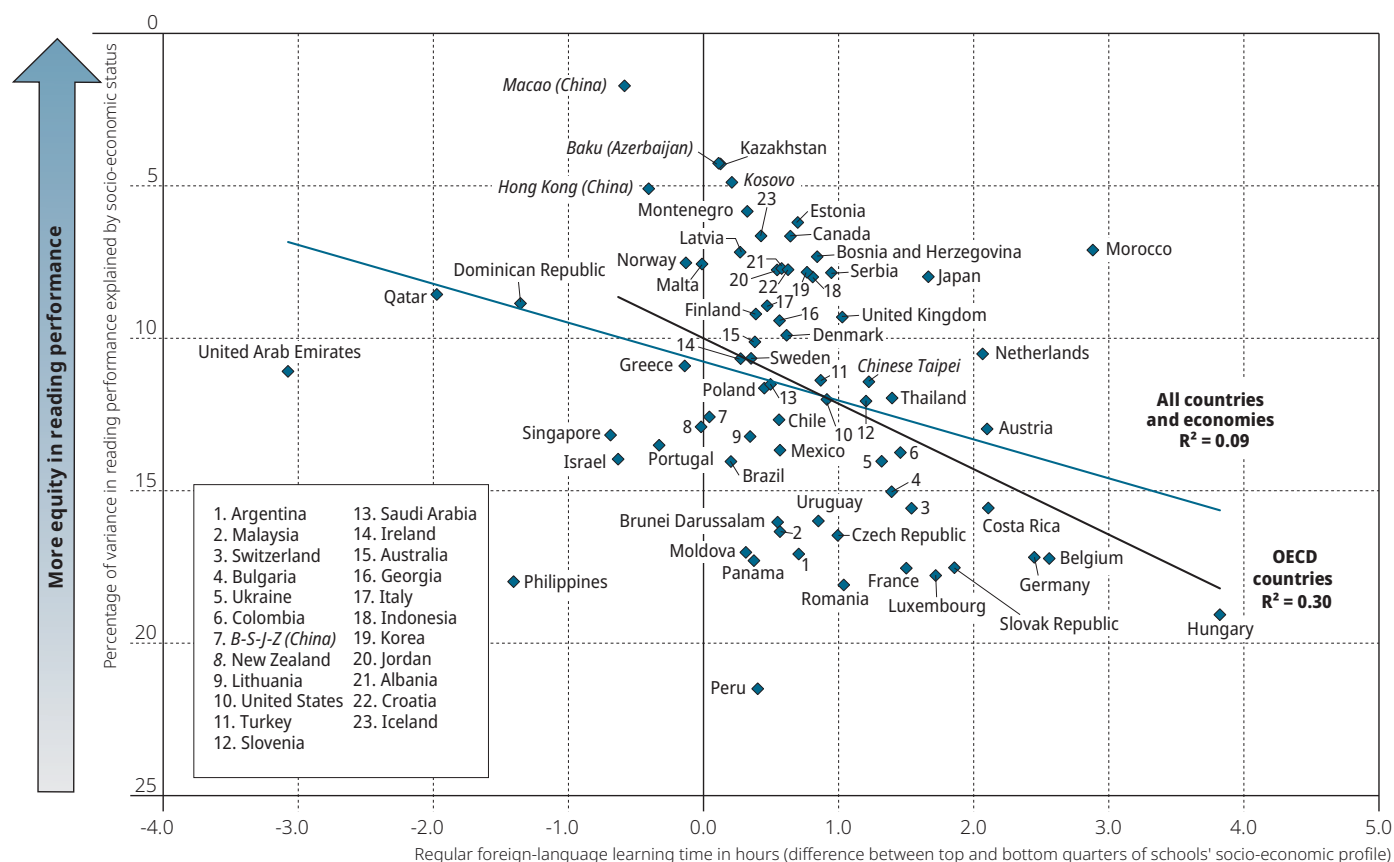
- More schools have effective online learning support platforms;
- More schools schedule time to discuss instructional materials using digital devices;
- Disadvantaged schools offer almost as much learning time for foreign languages in regular school lessons as advantaged schools do (or, in some cases, disadvantaged schools offer even more time than advantaged schools).

It is important to allocate adequate resources to schools but this needs to be coupled with support systems for teachers and schools to effectively use them. This is especially vital for new types of resources such as digital resources. Scheduling time to discuss the effective use of digital devices for instruction may help schools use these resources more efficiently and minimise the gaps between teachers in terms of digital skills and knowledge.

Concerning time resources, time allotted to foreign-language lessons is an important marker of overall socio-economic disparities in learning time in regular school lessons. Advantaged students have more opportunities to learn foreign languages than disadvantaged students do. Countries/economies with a smaller time disparity for foreign-language lessons show greater overall equity in education. Further research is needed to fully understand what drives the socio-economic disparities in time spent in foreign-language lessons and its implications for social cohesion.

# Disparity in regular foreign-language learning time and equity in reading performance

Regular school lessons



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table V.B1.6.3 and Table II.B1.2.3.  
 StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934131728>

## Find a balance between school autonomy and more centralised accountability

Countries/economies that ensure a more level playing field for students give schools more autonomy over students' learning and balance this with accountability arrangements at the district or national level. PISA 2018 results show that countries/economies where the relationship between student socio-economic status and student performance is weaker share some common characteristics. These include:

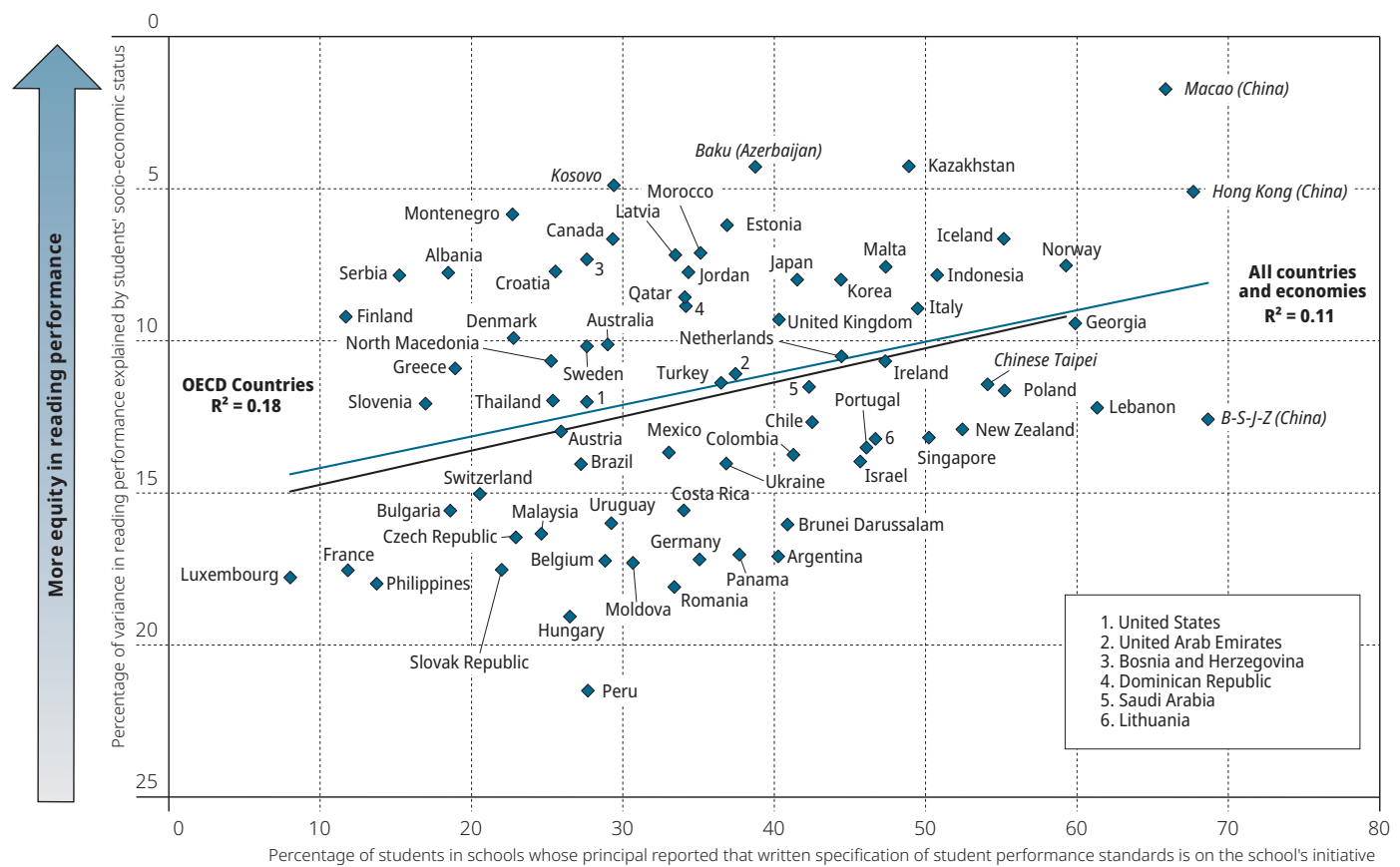
- Based on district or national policies, more schools seek written feedback from students and have regular consultations on school improvement at least every six months;

- At the school's initiative, more schools have written specifications for student performance;
- More schools use student assessments to identify aspects of instruction or the curriculum that could be improved and to inform parents about their child's progress.

PISA 2018 countries/economies with the features listed above also produced high average scores. High-performing countries/economies with greater equity in education find a balance between school autonomy and more centralised accountability measures.

PISA 2018 results also imply that schools' taking the initiative to share the results of student assessments and discuss their child's progress with parents is one way for schools to be accountable for their students' learning.

## Written specification of student performance standards on the school's initiative and equity in reading performance



Source: OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.2.3 and Table V.B1.8.11.  
 StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934132108>

### Provide access to quality early education for all children

Countries and economies that provide a more level playing field for their students ensure access to quality early education for more children. PISA 2018 results show that in these countries/economies:

- More students attended pre-primary education at least for a year.

A strong beginning in early learning establishes neural pathways that are more difficult to develop later. Research has shown the benefits of pre-primary education in promoting the development of cognitive, language and numeracy skills, especially among least advantaged students.

However, ensuring pre-primary attendance for all students is not in itself enough to create an equitable education system. PISA 2018 results showed that in countries/economies where more students had attended pre-primary education for three years or more, students' socio-economic profile was more strongly related to their performance at the age of 15.<sup>2</sup> This result may imply that advantaged students tend to benefit more than disadvantaged students from spending more time in pre-primary education – or that there is a difference between the two groups of students in the quality of the pre-primary education they had attended. When expanding and extending pre-primary education, care must be taken not to widen the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in access to and the quality of this level of education.

## The bottom line

In the current pandemic situation where socio-economic performance gaps are likely to have widened, education policy makers, administrators and educators should consider the following points to ensure that all students are provided with opportunities necessary for them to fulfil their potential:

- Provide a strong beginning in early learning for all children and pay attention to the quality and duration of pre-primary education to which children with diverse backgrounds have access.
- Set high expectations for all students and provide support for them to fulfil these while minimising the adverse impacts of selection and sorting students into different education tracks or grade levels.
- Provide adequate resources to all schools regardless of their students' socio-economic intake and ensure that allocated resources are used effectively in all schools.
- Give schools autonomy over their students' learning while setting up centralised accountability arrangements that prevent certain schools from falling behind.

It is possible for countries/economies to attain overall strong performance while ensuring a more level playing field for all students regardless of their background.

## Notes

1. Some examples include those in England ([Renaissance Learning, Education Policy, 2021](#)), the Flemish community in Belgium ([Maldonado and DeWitte, 2021](#)), and in the Netherlands ([Engzell, Frey and Verhagen, 2021](#)).
2. This correlation is rather weak ( $r$  is around 0.21 to 0.25) and found only in mathematics and science (but not in reading) across all PISA 2018 participating countries/economies (but not across OECD countries).

## For more information

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