

PROGRESS IN INTERNATIONAL READING LITERACY STUDY (PIRLS)

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Abstract: The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is a global assessment conducted every five years to evaluate reading literacy among fourth-grade students. Initiated in 2001, PIRLS is a benchmark for understanding trends in reading achievement and its underlying factors. It evaluates two main purposes of reading—literary experience and information acquisition—through a variety of comprehension processes. PIRLS collects comprehensive contextual data from students, parents, teachers, and schools to inform policy and improve education systems. The transition to digital assessments, including the innovative ePIRLS for online reading, has modernized its methodology. This paper provides an in-depth analysis of PIRLS, its objectives, methodology, key findings, and its role in shaping education policy globally.

Keywords: PIRLS, reading literacy, educational assessment, fourth grade, international comparisons, ePIRLS, digital learning, educational policy, student achievement, comprehension processes.

The ability to read effectively is fundamental for academic success and lifelong learning. PIRLS, organized by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and directed by Boston College's TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center, provides valuable insights into how education systems support this critical skill. Conducted every five years, the study focuses on fourth-grade students as they transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," making it a pivotal point for evaluating reading proficiency.

Methodology

PIRLS employs a robust methodology that combines direct student assessments with contextual questionnaires. The reading assessment evaluates two purposes: literary reading and informational reading. It also examines four comprehension processes:

1. Retrieving explicit information,
2. Making inferences,
3. Interpreting and integrating ideas,
4. Evaluating content and structure.

Contextual data from teachers, schools, and families provide a comprehensive

view of the factors influencing reading outcomes. In recent cycles, PIRLS transitioned to digital formats, culminating in the ePIRLS assessment, which mimics an online environment to measure digital reading skills.

Key Findings: PIRLS 2021, the latest completed cycle, included 57 countries and regional entities. Results revealed significant variations in reading achievement:

Countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Russia consistently ranked high, showcasing strong education systems and supportive learning environments.

Socioeconomic factors, access to resources, and school climate emerged as critical determinants of student success.

Educational Implications

PIRLS data guide policymakers in identifying strengths and weaknesses in education systems. For instance, trends indicate that nations investing in early childhood education and teacher training see better outcomes. PIRLS also aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), emphasizing inclusive and equitable quality education.

Transition to Digital Assessment: The upcoming PIRLS 2026 will fully transition to digital platforms, incorporating adaptive designs tailored to diverse populations. This shift aims to enhance engagement and provide nuanced insights into students' reading capabilities across varying levels of proficiency.

Challenges and Future Directions

While PIRLS offers valuable data, challenges remain in addressing disparities across countries and ensuring all participants have equal access to digital resources. The inclusion of longitudinal studies in PIRLS 2026 aims to provide deeper insights into educational progression.

Conclusion

PIRLS has established itself as an indispensable tool for evaluating reading literacy and informing education policy worldwide. Its evolution to include digital assessments reflects the changing landscape of learning and communication. As countries prepare for PIRLS 2026, the study continues to be a critical driver of educational improvement.

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