



Low-Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed

Country note Spain

Low performance at school can have severe consequences for individuals and economies. Students who are low performers at age 15 are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to attain better-paying and more-rewarding jobs. When a large share of the population lacks basic skills, a country's long-term economic growth is compromised.

- In 2012, 24% of students in Spain were low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 23%), 18% were low performers in reading (OECD average: 18%), 16% were low performers in science (OECD average: 18%), and 10% were low performers in all three of these subjects (OECD average: 12%).*
- More than 95,000 15-year-old Spanish students were low performers in mathematics, and about 42,000 students were low performers in all three subjects (math, reading and science).
- About 29% of 15-year-old students in Spain attend schools where 30% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics and about 6% attend schools where half or more of the students are low performers in mathematics.
- In Spain, the share of low performers in mathematics increased by 1 percentage point between PISA 2003 and 2012, the share of low performers in reading decreased by 3 percentage points between PISA 2003 and 2012, and the share of low performers in science decreased by 4 percentage points between PISA 2006 and PISA 2012.

PISA defines "low performers" as those 15-year-old students who score below Level 2 on the PISA mathematics, reading and science assessments. Level 2 is considered the baseline level of proficiency that is required to participate fully in modern society. Students who score at Level 1 can answer questions involving clear directions and requiring a single source of information and simple connections, but they cannot engage in more complex reasoning and problem-solving tasks.

Poor performance is not the result of any single risk factor, but rather of a combination and accumulation of various barriers and disadvantages that affect students throughout their lives. **On average across OECD countries**, the probability of low performance in mathematics is higher for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, girls, have an immigrant background, speak a different language at home from the language of instruction, live in single-parent families, attend schools in rural areas, have not attended pre-primary school (or have attended for a year or less), have repeated a grade and also for students enrolled in a vocational programmes or schools. **In Spain, the likelihood of low performance in mathematics is higher for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, girls, have an immigrant background, had no pre-primary education (or only a year or less of it), had repeated a grade, and are enrolled in an initial vocational programme (*Programas de Cualificación Profesional Inicial. PCPI*).**

- Some 40% of disadvantaged students in Spain were low performers in mathematics in 2012, while only 8% of advantaged students were.

* According to a recent OECD estimate, if, by 2030, all 15-year-old students in Spain reached at least the baseline level of performance in PISA, Spain's GDP in 2095 would be 15% higher. OECD (2015), *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234833-en>

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- Some 52% of students who had repeated a grade in Spain were low performers in mathematics, whereas among those who had never repeated a grade only 9% were.

In Spain, as on average across OECD countries, low-performing students play truant more often, spend less time doing homework, and are less perseverant than better-performing students.

- In 2012 in Spain, 43% of low performers in mathematics skipped school at least once during the two weeks prior to the PISA test (OECD average: 23%). This is one of the largest percentages among all countries and economies that participated in PISA 2012. Among Spanish students scoring at or above the baseline proficiency Level 2, around 24% skipped at least a day of school (OECD average: 12%).
- In 2012, low performers in Spain spent an average of 4.7 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among low performers: 3.5 hours per week) while students scoring at or above the baseline proficiency Level 2 spent 7 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among better-performing students: 5.3 hours).

Students in advantaged schools and in private, government-dependent schools in Spain are less likely to be low performers.

- In Spain, students who attend disadvantaged schools are 2.6 times more likely to be low performers than students who attend advantaged schools (OECD average: 11.3 times more likely), after accounting for students' socio-economic status.
- Some 29% of students who attend public schools in Spain were low performers in mathematics; some 15% of students who attend private government-dependent schools were low performers in mathematics; and some 10% of students who attended private government-independent schools were low performers.

Countries as economically and culturally diverse as Brazil, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Tunisia and Turkey reduced their share of low performers in mathematics between 2003 and 2012. What do these countries have in common? Not very much: their respective shares of low performers in 2003 differed widely, as did their economic performance during the period. But therein lies the lesson: **all countries can improve their students' performance**, given the right policies and the will to implement them.

The first step for policy makers is to **make tackling low performance a priority in the education policy agenda** – and translate that priority into additional resources. Given the extent to which the profile of low performers varies across countries, tackling low performance requires a multi-pronged approach, tailored to national and local circumstances. Policy makers, teachers, parents and students themselves all have an important role to play. **An agenda to reduce the incidence of low performance can include several actions:**

- Dismantle the multiple barriers to learning.
- Create demanding and supportive learning environments at school.
- Provide remedial support as early as possible.
- Encourage the involvement of parents and local communities.
- Inspire students to make the most of available education opportunities.
- Identify low performers and design a tailored policy strategy.
- Provide targeted support to disadvantaged schools and/or families.
- Offer special programmes for immigrant, minority-language and rural students.
- Tackle gender stereotypes and assist single-parent families.
- Reduce inequalities in access to early education and limit the use of student sorting.

To learn more, see...

OECD (2016), *Low Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264250246-en>