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Are large cities educational assets or liabilities?

- Large cities are generally educational assets: in most countries, performance improves dramatically when only the scores of students in urban areas are considered, although this is not the case in some countries, such as Belgium, Slovenia, the United Kingdom and the United States.
- When comparing the performance of students in large cities, students in Portugal and Israel perform as well as those in Singapore, and students in Poland perform as well as those in Hong Kong.

Countless policy makers and researchers have flocked to observe the education systems of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Singapore, which are among the top five performers in the PISA 2009 reading assessment. Many visitors have been particularly impressed by the fact that these education systems succeed in embracing the social heterogeneity in their student populations that is intrinsic to large urban environments – something that many other education systems struggle to achieve. But large cities do not just pose social challenges to educators; they also offer important advantages for schools, such as a richer cultural environment, a more attractive workplace for teachers, more school choice, and better job prospects that can help to motivate students. New analyses from PISA highlight these advantages, showing that, in several countries, students from urban areas (defined here as cities with over a million inhabitants) do as well as students in PISA's top performing city-states, even if the different push and pull factors of urban environments play out very differently across countries.

The performance of urban students often lifts overall country scores…

For example, students in urban areas in countries like Portugal and Israel, countries that tend to perform around the OECD average, compare favourably with students in Singapore, one of the top performers in PISA. Similarly, the performance of students in Poland's urban areas compares easily with that of students in Hong Kong. More generally, students in large urban areas in OECD countries outperform students in rural schools by the equivalent of more than one year of education.

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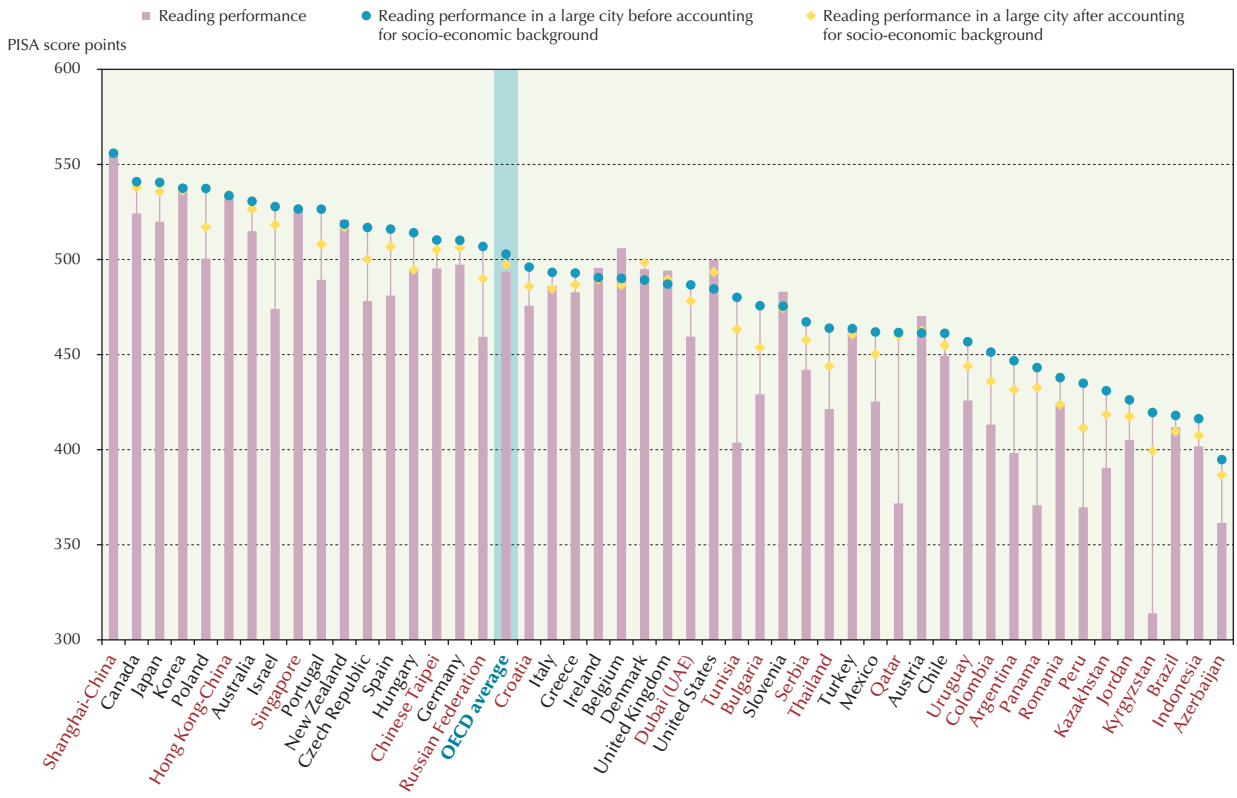
Sometimes the differences in performance that are related to school location are the result of the socio-economic contexts of these locations. The distribution of populations within countries varies widely in density and other characteristics, and these differences need to be borne in mind when interpreting a cross-country analysis of how students in different communities perform. However, PISA results show that differences in socio-economic background explain only part of the story; much of performance gap remains even after accounting for socio-economic factors.

...but there are notable exceptions.

While the performance of most countries improves when only the scores of students in urban environments are considered, the opposite effect is seen in a few countries. In Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States, for example, the performance of students in large urban areas drags down overall country scores. This might be because, in these countries, not all students can enjoy the advantages that large urban centres offer. They may, for example, come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, speak a different language at home than the one spoken at school, or have only one parent to turn to for support and assistance.

Big cities can motivate and inspire students



Note: Countries and economies are ranked in descending order of the average performance of 15-year-old students in PISA 2009 at the country level.
A large city is a city with over 1 million inhabitants.
Socio-economic background refers to the average PISA *Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status* (ESCS).

Source: OECD, *PISA 2006 Database*.

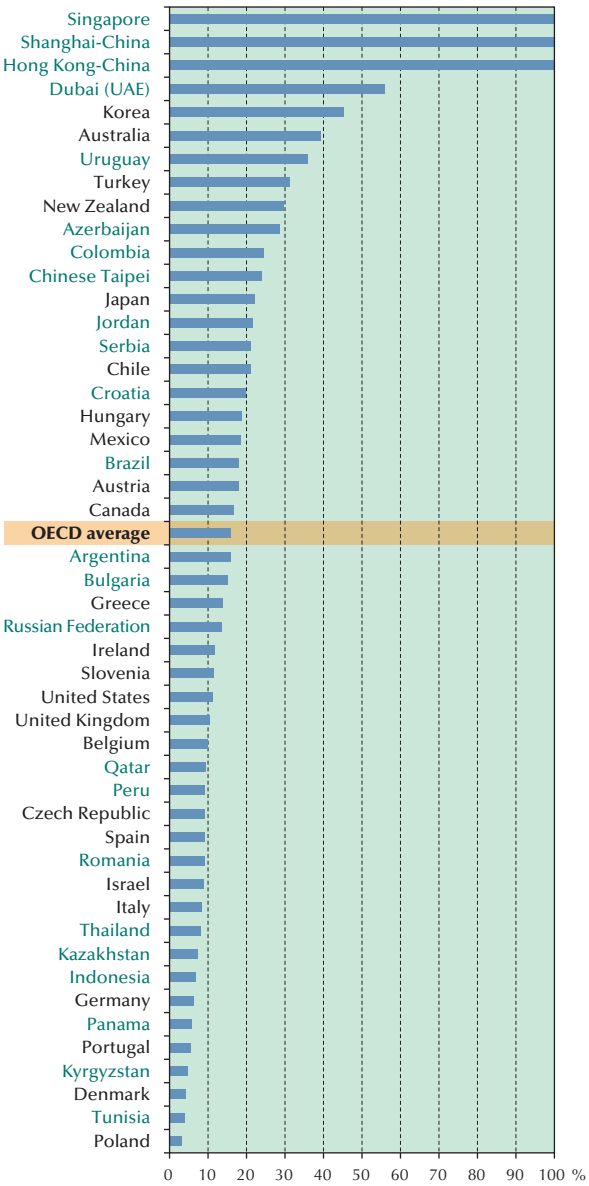
In many cases, socio-economic differences tell only part of the story.

It is also striking to see how much the performance gap varies across countries. For example, when comparing students of similar socio-economic backgrounds in OECD countries, the performance gap between students in city schools and those in rural schools in Chile, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Mexico and Turkey is more than 45 score points, well over a year of formal schooling. In Hungary, the gap is more than 70 score points wide.

Students in large urban areas in Canada, Japan, Korea and Poland, and students in Hong Kong and Shanghai score an average of 530 points in the PISA reading test, before accounting for socio-economic background. After accounting for socio-economic background, these students in Canada, Japan, Korea and Shanghai score at least 533 points, in Singapore they score an average of 527 points, in Australia 526 points, and in New Zealand and Poland, 517 points.

In Finland and Luxembourg, the average performance of students living in the countries' largest communities – that is, cities with 100 000 to 1 million inhabitants – is also high, at 543 and 564 score points, respectively. After accounting for socio-economic background, in Finland, these students score 537 points, and in Luxembourg they score an average of 520 points. The large difference in adjusted and unadjusted performance seen in Poland, for example, is evidence of the large gap in socio-economic background between urban and rural areas. This may reflect differences in how educational resources and cultural and educational facilities are distributed, depending on the socio-economic profile of an area – all of which can have an impact on student performance.

Percentage of students who attend school in a large city



Note: A large city is defined as a city with over 1 million inhabitants.
Source: OECD, *PISA 2009 Database*.

So while moderate PISA performers like Israel, Poland and Portugal can take some pride in knowing that their students in urban areas now perform on par with students in the best-performing education systems, these countries need to address inequities and inequality in their educational outcomes, in the distribution of educational resources, and in learning outcomes inasmuch as they are associated with students' backgrounds. In particular, isolated communities in these countries might need targeted support and policies to ensure that students attending schools in these areas reach their full potential. Conversely, those countries whose students in large urban areas underperform will have to figure out how to enable these students to tap into the cultural and social advantages that urban environments provide, otherwise these countries will continue to miss out in the league of the world's educational champions.

The bottom line: Large cities can be a challenge, but are mostly a boon, to educators. The key is both to embrace social heterogeneity within the student population and ensure that all students in urban areas can take full advantage of the wealth of cultural and social opportunities that big cities offer.

For more information

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See *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes* (Volume II)

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