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Grade expectations

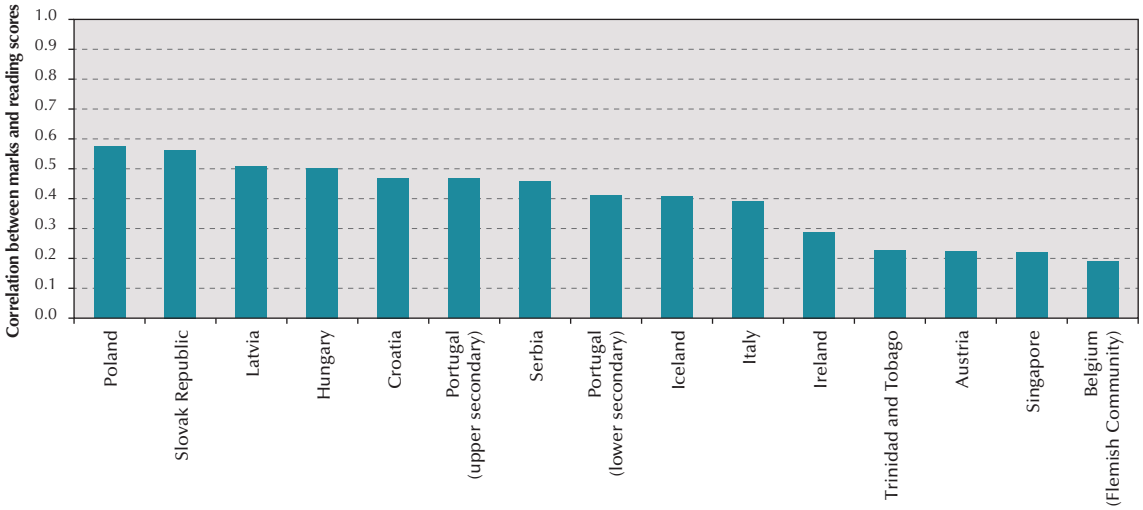
- Countries vary in the way they use marks, but they all tend to reward the mastery of skills and attitudes that promote learning.
- Teachers tend to give girls and socio-economically advantaged students better school marks, even if they don't have better performance and attitudes than boys and socio-economically disadvantaged students.
- It seems that marks not only measure students' progress in school, they also indicate the skills, behaviours, habits and attitudes that are valued in school.

School marks are more than just a source of anxiety – and pride – among students; they are a way that society communicates its values concerning education and the skills needed to be good learners. Marks serve the primary purpose of promoting student learning by informing students about their progress, alerting teachers about their students' needs, and certifying the degree to which students have mastered the tasks and competencies valued by teachers and schools.

Marks can have long-term consequences for a student.

Through school marks, teachers reward certain habits, attitudes and behaviours with the objective of fostering learning. In all countries and economies, teachers reward the mastery of competencies and skills in reading through marks in their language-of-assessment course. Most also reward the skills, attitudes, habits and behaviours that are necessary for lifelong learning, such as reading for enjoyment, using effective learning strategies and positive student-teacher relations. This is both desired and expected; but teachers seem to reward other things as well.

The correlation between the mark students received in their language-of-assessment course and their PISA reading score



Note: Macao-China, Mexico and New Zealand are omitted from this figure because they measured student marks as pass/fail as their marking systems differ by region and/or school.

Countries are sorted in descending order of the percentage of students with failing marks in their language-of-assessment course.

Source: OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Table B2.3.

More troubling, PISA found that schools and teachers systematically reward certain student characteristics that are unrelated to learning. For example, after accounting for students' reading proficiency, study habits and attitudes towards school and learning, in all countries and economies girls and socio-economically advantaged students receive higher marks than their peers. This practice could have far-reaching – and long-lasting – effects for two reasons: students often base their expectations of further education and careers on the marks they receive in school; and school systems use marks to guide their selection of students for academically oriented programmes and, later, for entry into university.

Schools throughout the world use marks…

More than 95% of students in the countries and economies that participated in PISA 2009 – except Korea – attend a school that measures student achievement through teacher-prepared tests, student portfolios or student projects. In most cases, students receive feedback on these assessments in the form of school marks. PISA sought to find out how education systems use such marks and whether they are awarded fairly. Some 17 countries and economies disseminated an additional questionnaire on Educational Careers when they conducted the PISA 2009 assessment. The questionnaire included a question that asked students about the mark they received in their previous language-of-assessement course.

…but in different ways.

Few countries and economies share the same grading schemes; indeed, even schools within a country may have different ways of marking. In addition, different education systems establish their own ways of informing students that they have failed the class or the assessment. In some countries, the marking scheme allows for only one possible value for failing. This means that students who fail do not know how far they are from meeting the passing criteria. This is the case in Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia and the Slovak Republic. Other countries establish the passing mark somewhere in the middle of the scale, which gives students an idea of how far they are from the minimum passing criteria. The Flemish Community of Belgium, Italy and Singapore, for example, establish the pass/fail cut-off point at the 50% range of the marking scale. In Ireland, the grading scale ranges from 0 to 100, but only scores below 40 are considered unsatisfactory or failing. In some countries, such as Austria, Hungary, Poland and the Slovak Republic, the remaining values on the marking scale reflect the quality of the passing mark in clear and distinct labels, such as "sufficient", "good", "very good" and "excellent". Meanwhile other countries, including Iceland and Ireland, use a wider array of numeric values (e.g. 50 to 100, 10 to 20 or 6 to 10).

Marking systems across countries and economies

Failing mark	Marking range					Schools or regions have different marking systems
	1 to 5	1 to 6	1 to 10	1 to 20	1 to 100	
Many possible values	Portugal (lower secondary)		Iceland, Italy, Latvia	Portugal (upper secondary)	Belgium (Flemish Community), Ireland, Singapore, Trinidad and Tobago	Macao-China, Mexico, New Zealand
One value	Austria, Hungary, Serbia	Croatia, Poland, the Slovak Republic				

Source: OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Table B2.1.

School systems also differ widely in the extent to which they pass or fail students. More than 30% of lower secondary students in Portugal received failing marks, a percentage that is consistent with the large number of students who reported having repeated a grade during their school careers. The percentage of students who receive failing marks is also high in Italy, Macao-China, New Zealand and Singapore, where at least 10% of students reported having received a failing mark in their language-of-assessment course. Receiving failing marks is comparatively uncommon in Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Croatia, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Serbia and the Slovak Republic, where fewer than 5% of students receive failing marks.

Effective marking practices

- Marks should communicate clear and useful information with the purpose of promoting learning.
- Marks should be based on clear and specific criteria, measuring achievement against pre-established goals.
- Marks should not be used to signal expectations or to judge behaviour or handwriting. If necessary, separate marks related to behaviours from those related to achievement.
- Do not use marks to punish students for late or incomplete work.
- Marks far below passing can demoralise students and discourage further effort.
- Marks should not be based on a curve, as that creates unhealthy competition and reduces motivation.
- Not all evaluation exercises need to be returned to students with marks.
- In certain contexts, qualitative personal assessments unrelated to numeric marks are preferable.

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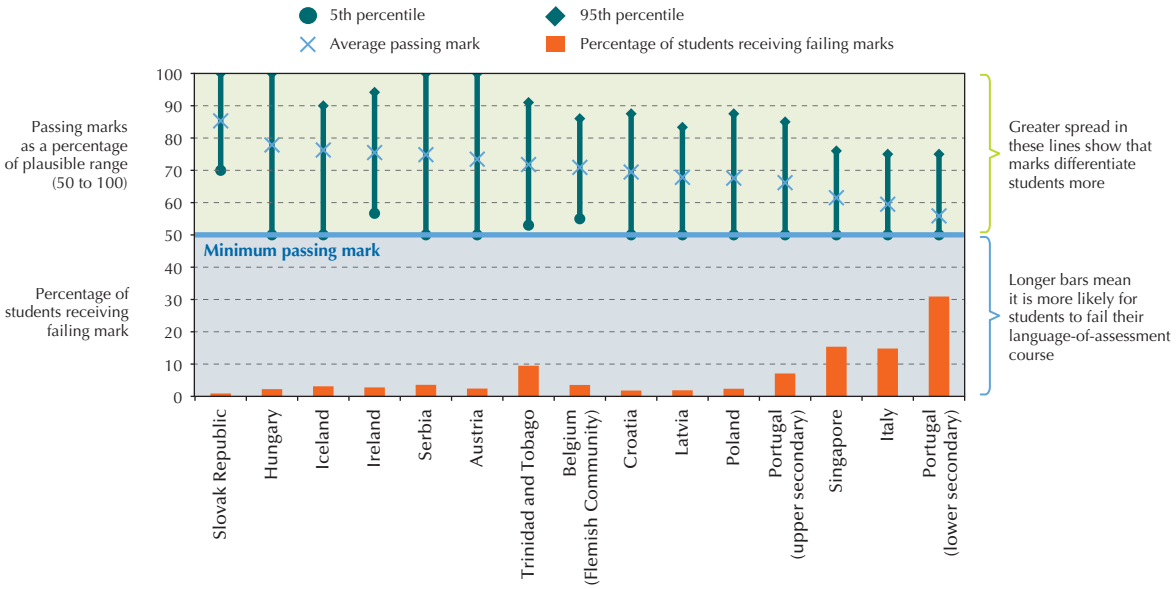
Analyses suggest that countries and economies that have a grading system with a limited number of values and use labels that refer to clear categories of achievement (e.g. "sufficient", "good", "very good", "excellent") can better differentiate students' relative performance. In Austria, Hungary, Poland and Serbia students' marks are not concentrated around the average as much as in Italy, Singapore and in lower secondary schools in Portugal, where comparatively few students receive marks at the top or bottom of the passing scale, even though there are potentially more values that can be used to differentiate students.

How countries and economies define "passing" and "failing"



Note: Macao-China, Mexico and New Zealand are omitted from this figure because they measured student marks as pass/fail as their marking systems differ by region and/or school. For comparison purposes, passing marks are considered as a percentage of the plausible range; the lowest passing mark is set at 50 and the highest possible mark at 100.

Countries are sorted in descending order of the average passing mark.

Source: OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Table B2.2.

The bottom line: Given that marks are important for what happens both in and beyond school, it is crucial for school systems to align their marking policies with their general assessment and evaluation frameworks, and to promote effective grading practices that reward the behaviours and attitudes that help students to learn.

For more information

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See OECD (2012), *Grade Expectations: How Marks and Education Policies Shape Students' Ambitions*, PISA, OECD Publishing.

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Does it matter which school a student attends?