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What makes urban schools different?

- In most countries and economies, students who attend schools in urban areas tend to perform at higher levels than other students.
- Socio-economic status explains only part of the performance difference between students who attend urban schools and other students.
- Schools in urban settings are larger, tend to benefit from better educational resources, and often enjoy greater autonomy in how they can allocate those resources.

An "urban advantage" in student performance is seen nearly everywhere…

On average across OECD countries, students who attend schools in cities of more than 100 000 people perform better in PISA than students who attend schools in villages, rural areas, or towns with up to 100 000 inhabitants. This difference in performance translates to about 20 PISA score points – the equivalent of half-a-year of schooling. However, the extent of the performance gap between students who attend schools in urban areas and students who attend schools in non-urban settings varies greatly among countries. In many partner countries and economies, the performance gap is extremely wide. For example, it is larger than 55 score points in Albania, Bulgaria, Dubai (UAE), Kyrgyzstan, Panama, Peru and Qatar; but an "urban advantage" in performance is observed in every partner country and economy that participated in PISA 2009. Among OECD countries, a performance gap between these two groups of students can be observed in 19 countries and is widest in Mexico and Portugal. There is no performance difference in 15 OECD countries.

Cities with more than 100 000 people generally host over-representations of individuals with particularly high and particularly low levels of skills. In many countries and economies, the performance difference between students who attend schools in cities and those who attend schools in villages, rural settings, or towns reflects families' decisions about housing and employment, which, in turn, influence how students' socio-economic status is distributed geographically. In all countries and economies except for Austria, Belgium, Germany, Israel, Korea, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States, students who attend schools in urban settings come from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

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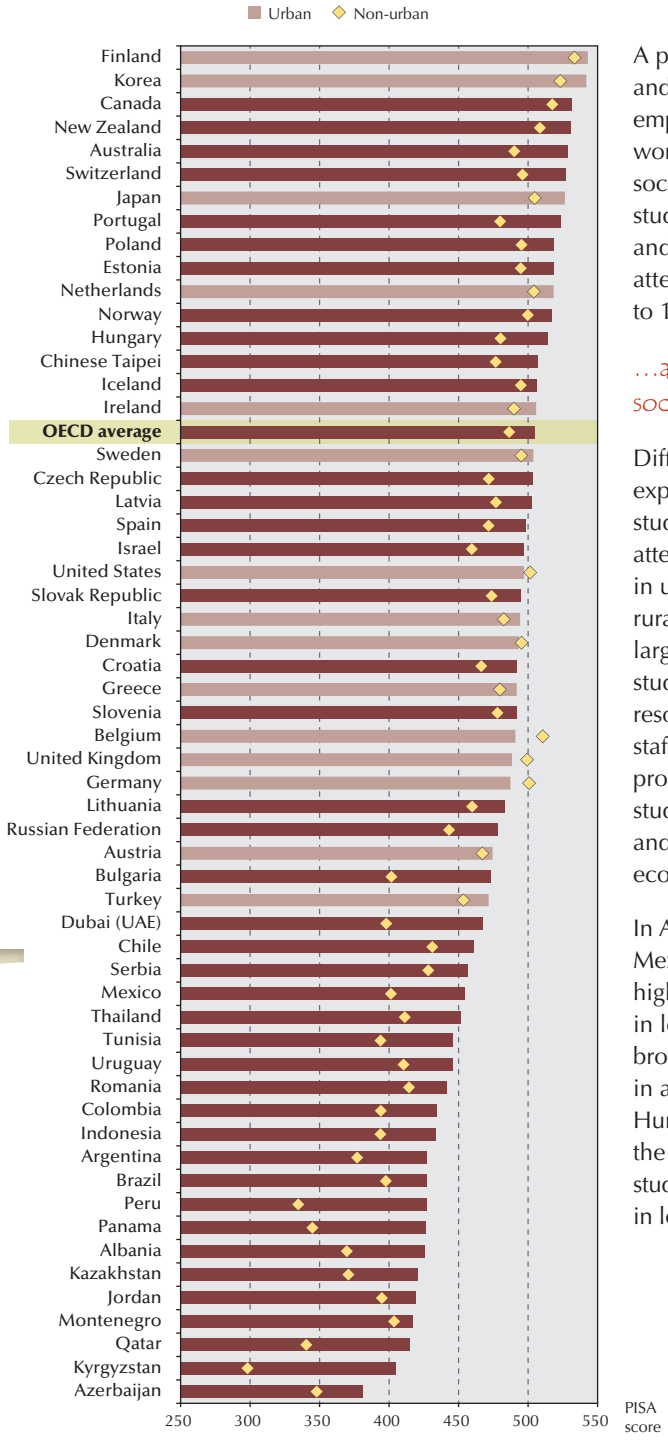
The "urban advantage" in student performance



A possible reason for this is that in these countries and economies, urban areas might offer better employment prospects, particularly to highly skilled workers. In Denmark, on the other hand, socio-economic segregation works differently: students whose parents have high levels of education and high-status occupations are more likely to attend schools in rural locations or in towns of up to 100 000 people.

…and it's not only related to students' socio-economic backgrounds.

Differences in students' socio-economic background explain only part of the performance gap between students who attend urban schools and those who attend schools in non-urban areas. In fact, schools in urban areas tend to be different than schools in rural areas and towns. Urban schools are usually larger, have a more socio-economically advantaged student body, enjoy greater responsibility for resource allocation, are less likely to experience staff shortages, are more likely to have a higher proportion of qualified teachers, and have higher student-teacher ratios than schools in rural areas and towns, especially in partner countries and economies.

In Australia, Colombia, Dubai (UAE), Finland, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Uruguay, a significantly higher proportion of students in urban areas than in less-populated areas attend schools that have broad authority over resource allocation. Similarly, in all countries except Belgium, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Israel, the Netherlands, Panama, the Slovak Republic and the United Kingdom, students in urban settings are more likely than students in less-inhabited areas to attend large schools.

Note: Score-point differences in reading performance that are statistically significant between urban and non-urban students are marked in darker tone.
Countries are ranked in descending order of the PISA score in reading of urban students.
Schools that are located in cities of more than 100 000 people are considered urban while schools that are located in less-populated areas are referred to as non-urban.

Source: OECD PISA 2009 database.

How do urban schools in [OECD countries / partner countries and economies] differ from non-urban schools?

	School socio-economic background	Disciplinary climate	School size	Responsibility for curriculum and assessment	Responsibility for resource allocation	Material educational resources	Teacher shortage	Extracurricular activities	Student-teacher ratio	Proportion of qualified teachers	Student-teacher relations
Australia	+	+	+		+	+	-				+
Austria			+								
Belgium				-	-	-	+				+
Canada	+		+			+	-	+			+
Chile	+		+								
Czech Republic	+		+				-				
Denmark	-		+		-				+		
Estonia	+	+	+					-	+	+	
Finland	+		+		+	+					
Germany						-					
Greece	+									+	
Hungary	+					+					
Iceland	+	+	+	+	-	-	+		-	+	+
Ireland	+				+	+				+	
Israel		+			+				-		-
Italy	+		+		+				+		-
Japan	+		+					+	+		
Korea			+						+		
Mexico	+	-	+	+	+	+	-	+			
Netherlands				+							
New Zealand	+	+	+					+	+		+
Norway	+		+			+	-				
Poland	+	-	+								-
Portugal	+		+						+		
Slovak Republic	+	-									
Slovenia	+	-	+	+	-	-		-	-	+	
Spain	+		+		+				+		
Sweden	+	+	+		+						
Switzerland	+		+	+							
Turkey	+		+					+			
United Kingdom									-		+
United States			+								
Albania	+		+		+	+		+	+	+	
Argentina	+		+			+	-				-
Azerbaijan	+		+						+	+	-
Brazil	+	-	+		+	+	-	+		+	-
Bulgaria	+		+								-
Colombia	+		+		+	+	-	+	+		-
Croatia	+		+								-
Dubai (UAE)	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	-
Indonesia	+		+			+	-			+	-
Jordan	+		+	+	+				+		
Kazakhstan	+		+		+				+	+	-
Kyrgyzstan	+		+		+	+		+		+	-
Latvia	+		+	-	-				+	+	
Lithuania	+		+	-	-						-
Montenegro	+	+	+	-	-	+	-		+	+	-
Panama	+				+	+	-			+	-
Peru	+		+	+	+	+	-	+		+	
Qatar	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	+
Romania	+		+				-				-
Russian Federation	+		+			+		+	+	+	
Serbia	+		+				-	+	-		-
Chinese Taipei	+		+					+	+	+	
Thailand	+		+			+		+	+	+	
Tunisia	+	-	+			+					
Uruguay	+		+	+	+	+	-				-

Note: Only countries and economies with sufficient data are considered.
Positive/negative signs indicate a positive/negative and statistically significant difference between urban and non-urban schools. No sign indicates that differences between urban and non-urban schools are not statistically significant.

Source: OECD 2009 database.

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Urban schools tend to benefit from certain characteristics that are related to better student performance.

An analysis of questionnaires distributed among students participating in PISA 2009 also finds that in Australia, Dubai (UAE), Estonia, Iceland, Israel, Montenegro, New Zealand, Qatar and Sweden, students who attend schools in urban areas tend to enjoy a better disciplinary climate in their classes than students who attend schools in less-populated areas; while in Brazil, Mexico, Poland, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Tunisia, the opposite is true. In 17 countries and economies out of the 65 that participated in PISA 2009, a shortage of teachers is less of a problem in urban areas than in non-urban areas; and in 15 countries, students who attend schools in urban settings are more likely to be able to choose from among a greater number and wider range of extracurricular activities.

When differences in student and school characteristics are taken into account, students who attend schools in cities with more than 100 000 people and those who attend schools in less-populated areas perform similarly. That implies that the differences in performance between these two groups of students stem partly from differences in the socio-economic backgrounds of the two groups of students and partly from the fact that, in many countries, schools in cities enjoy different resources, have different governance structures, and provide different learning environments than schools in less-populated areas.

The bottom line: Contrary to conventional wisdom about big city schools, PISA finds that students in these schools generally perform better than those attending schools in non-urban settings. While the performance difference is related to the socio-economic status of students, it is also associated with some of the characteristics that distinguish urban schools, such as having more and better resources, greater autonomy in how they allocate those resources, and an adequate supply of teachers.

For more information

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See OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: Overcoming Social Background: Equity in Learning Opportunities and Outcomes,* (Volume II), PISA, OECD Publishing;
OECD (2010), *PISA 2009 Results: What Makes a School Successful? Resources, Policies and Practices* (Volume IV), PISA, OECD Publishing.

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