

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

Country note France

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, 22% of students in France were low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 23%), 19% were low performers in reading (OECD average: 18%), 19% were low performers in science (OECD average: 18%), and 13% were low performers in all three of these subjects (OECD average: 12%).*
- Around 169,000 15-year-old French students were low performers in mathematics, and more than 95,000 students were low performers in all three subjects (math, reading and science).
- About 30% of 15-year-old students in France attend schools where 30% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, about 20% attend schools where half or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, and about 7% attend schools where 80% or more of the students are low performers.
- The share of low performers in mathematics increased by 6 percentage points between PISA 2003 and 2012 in France; the share of low performers in reading increased by 4 percentage points since PISA 2000; and the share of low performers in science has not changed since PISA 2006.

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, had not attended pre-primary school (or had attended for a year or less), had repeated a grade and also for students enrolled in a vocational programmes or schools. **In France, the likelihood 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 assessment, had no pre-primary education, had repeated a grade and are enrolled in a vocational programme.**

- A socio-economically disadvantaged student is more than 4 times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. Some 40% of disadvantaged students in France were low performers in mathematics in 2012, while only 5% of advantaged students were.
- Some 57% of all French students who had repeated a grade by age 15 were low performers in mathematics in 2012 (OECD average: 54%). By contrast, only 8% of students who had never repeated a grade were low performers (OECD average: 18%). France is one of three OECD countries with an exceptionally large difference in the share of low performers between those who had repeated a grade and those who hadn't.

* According to a recent OECD estimate, if, by 2030, all 15-year-old students in France reached at least the baseline level of performance in PISA, France's GDP in 2095 would be 18% 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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In France, 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 France, 18% of low performers in mathematics had skipped school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test (OECD average: 23%). Among French students performing at or above the proficiency baseline, 7% skipped at least a day of school (OECD average: 12%).
- Low performers in France tend to show less perseverance in school compared with low performers in OECD countries. The difference in perseverance between low performers and better-performing students in France is similar to the average difference in OECD countries.
- Low performers in France tend to have less of a sense of belonging at school than students who score above the baseline in mathematics, by a margin that is about twice as large as on average across OECD countries.

Students in France are more likely to be low performers in schools with a socio-economically disadvantaged profile and in private government-dependent schools.

- Students attending socio-economically disadvantaged schools (i.e. schools that receive students from the bottom quarter of the socio-economic distribution) are, on average, more than 40 times more likely to be low performers in mathematics than students who attend advantaged schools (i.e. those that receive students from the top quarter of the socio-economic distribution) (OECD average: 11 times more likely), after accounting for the socio-economic status of individual students.
- In France, students attending private government-dependent schools (i.e. private schools that receive half or more of their funding from government sources) were, on average, more than twice as likely to be low performers in mathematics in 2012 than students in public schools (OECD average: no difference with public schools), after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status.

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>