

International Comparisons: Reading Literacy at Grade 4

In the 2011 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), the average reading literacy score for 4th-grade students in the United States (556) was higher than the average score for participating countries (500). The United States was among the top 13 education systems in reading literacy and scored higher, on average, than 40 education systems.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international comparative assessment that evaluates reading literacy at grade 4. The assessment is coordinated by the TIMSS¹ and PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College with the support of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). PIRLS has been administered every 5 years since 2001.² In 2011, there were 53 education systems that had PIRLS reading

literacy data at grade 4. These 53 education systems included both countries and other benchmarking education systems (portions of a country, nation, kingdom, or emirate, or other non-national entity). These benchmarking systems are able to participate in PIRLS even though they may not be members of the IEA. In addition to participating in the U.S. national sample, Florida participated individually as a benchmarking education system.

Table 1. Average PIRLS reading literacy assessment scale scores of 4th-grade students, by education system: 2011

Education system	Overall reading average scale score	Education system	Overall reading average scale score
PIRLS scale average	500	PIRLS scale average	500
<i>Hong Kong-China</i> ¹	571 ▲	France	520 ▼
Russian Federation	568 ▲	Spain	513 ▼
Finland	568 ▲	Norway ⁵	507 ▼
Singapore ²	567 ▲	<i>Belgium (French)-Belgium</i> ^{2,3}	506 ▼
<i>Northern Ireland-Great Britain</i> ³	558	Romania	502 ▼
United States	556	Georgia ^{4,5}	488 ▼
Denmark ²	554	Malta	477 ▼
Croatia ²	553	Trinidad and Tobago	471 ▼
<i>Chinese Taipei-China</i>	553	Azerbaijan ^{2,6}	462 ▼
Ireland	552	Iran, Islamic Rep. of	457 ▼
<i>England-Great Britain</i> ³	552	Colombia	448 ▼
Canada ²	548 ▼	United Arab Emirates	439 ▼
Netherlands ³	546 ▼	Saudi Arabia	430 ▼
Czech Republic	545 ▼	Indonesia	428 ▼
Sweden	542 ▼	Qatar ²	425 ▼
Italy	541 ▼	Oman ⁷	391 ▼
Germany	541 ▼	Morocco ⁸	310 ▼
Israel ¹	541 ▼		
Portugal	541 ▼		
Hungary	539 ▼	Benchmarking education systems	
Slovak Republic	535 ▼	<i>Florida-USA</i> ^{1,4}	569 ▲
Bulgaria	532 ▼	<i>Ontario-Canada</i> ²	552
New Zealand	531 ▼	<i>Alberta-Canada</i> ²	548 ▼
Slovenia	530 ▼	<i>Quebec-Canada</i>	538 ▼
Austria	529 ▼	<i>Andalusia-Spain</i>	515 ▼
Lithuania ^{2,4}	528 ▼	<i>Dubai-UAE</i>	476 ▼
Australia	527 ▼	<i>Maltese-Malta</i>	457 ▼
Poland	526 ▼	<i>Abu Dhabi-UAE</i>	424 ▼

See notes on next page.

▲ Score is higher than U.S. average score.

▼ Score is lower than U.S. average score.

¹ National Defined Population covers less than 90 percent of National Target Population defined by PIRLS.

² National Defined Population covers 90 percent to 95 percent of National Target Population defined by PIRLS.

³ Met guidelines for sample participation rates only after replacement schools were included.

⁴ National Target Population does not include all of the International Target Population defined by PIRLS.

⁵ Nearly satisfied guidelines for sample participation rates after replacement schools were included.

⁶ Exclusion rates for Azerbaijan and Georgia are slightly underestimated as some conflict zones were not covered and no official statistics were available.

⁷ The PIRLS International Study Center has reservations about the reliability of the average achievement score because the percentage of students with achievement too low for estimation exceeds 15 percent, though it is less than 25 percent.

⁸ The PIRLS International Study Center has reservations about the reliability of the average achievement score because the percentage of students with achievement too low for estimation exceeds 25 percent.

NOTE: Education systems are ordered by 2011 average score. Italics indicate participants identified and counted in this report as an education system and not as a separate country. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) scores are reported on a scale from 0 to 1,000, with the scale average set at 500 and the standard deviation set at 100. The PIRLS average includes only education systems that are members of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), which develops and implements PIRLS at the international level. "Benchmarking" education systems are not members of the IEA and are therefore not included in the average. Florida data are based on public school students only.

SOURCE: Thompson, S., Provasnik, S., Kastberg, D., Ferraro, D., Lemanski, N., Roey, S., and Jenkins, F. (2012). *Highlights From PIRLS 2011: Reading Achievement of U.S. Fourth-Grade Students in an International Context* (NCES 2013-010), table 3, data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), 2011. See *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, table 602.10.

In 2011, the average reading literacy score for 4th-grade students in the United States (556) was higher than the average score for participating countries (500). The United States was among the top 13 education systems in reading literacy (five education systems had higher average scores, and seven had scores that were not measurably different). The United States scored higher, on average, than 40 education systems.

The five education systems with average reading scores above the U.S. score were Finland, Hong Kong (China), the Russian Federation, Singapore, and, within the United States, Florida. Additionally, Florida's average score (569) was higher than the PIRLS scale average. No education system scored higher than Florida, although four had scores that were not measurably different. Forty-eight education systems scored lower than Florida.

Endnotes:

¹ The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assesses mathematics and science knowledge and skills at grades 4 and 8. For more information on TIMSS, see indicator [International Comparisons: U.S. 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-Graders' Mathematics and Science Achievement](#).

² The international reports for PIRLS 2016 are scheduled to be released in December 2017.

Reference tables: *Digest of Education Statistics 2015*, table 602.10

Glossary: N/A

Related indicators and resources: Reading Performance; International Comparisons: U.S. 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-Graders' Mathematics and Science Achievement; International Comparisons: Science, Reading and Mathematics Literacy of 15-Year-Old Students; U.S. Student and Adult Performance on International Assessments of Educational Achievement [*The Condition of Education 2006 Spotlight*]; U.S. Performance Across International Assessments of Student Achievement [*The Condition of Education 2009 Spotlight*]