International Comparisons: Reading Literacy at Grade 4

In 2016, the United States, along with 15 other education systems, participated in the new ePIRLS assessment of students’ comprehension of online information. The average online informational reading score for fourth-grade students in the United States (557) was higher than the ePIRLS scale centerpoint (500). Only three education systems (Singapore, Norway, and Ireland) scored higher than the United States.

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 TIMSS\(^1\) 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. In 2016, there were 58 education systems that had PIRLS reading literacy data at grade 4.\(^2\) These 58 education systems included both countries and other benchmarking education systems (portions of a country, nation, kingdom, emirate, or other non-national entity).\(^3\) Sixteen of these education systems, including the United States, also administered ePIRLS, a new computer-based extension of PIRLS designed to assess students’ comprehension of online information.
In 2016, the average reading literacy score for fourth-grade students in the United States (549) was higher than the PIRLS scale centerpoint (500). The U.S. average score was higher than the average scores of 30 education systems (over half of the participating education systems) and not measurably different from the average scores of 15 education systems. The United States scored lower than 12 education systems: Moscow City (Russian Federation), the Russian Federation, Singapore, Hong Kong (China), Ireland, Finland, Poland, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Norway, Chinese Taipei (China), England (United Kingdom), and Latvia.
PIRLS describes achievement at four international benchmarks along the reading achievement scale: Low (400), Intermediate (475), High (550), and Advanced (625). In 2016, about 16 percent of U.S. fourth-graders reached the *Advanced* benchmark. The percentages of students reaching this benchmark ranged from 1 percent in Saudi Arabia and in the Islamic Republic of Iran to 43 percent in Moscow City (Russian Federation). Seven education systems (Moscow City [Russian Federation], Singapore, the Russian Federation, Northern Ireland [United Kingdom], Ireland, Poland, and England [United Kingdom]) had a higher percentage of fourth-graders who reached the *Advanced* benchmark than the United States did.
In 2016, the United States, along with 15 other education systems, participated in the new ePIRLS assessment of students’ comprehension of online information. The average online informational reading score for fourth-grade students in the United States (557) was higher than the ePIRLS scale centerpoint (500). The U.S. average score was higher than the average scores of 10 education systems and not measurably different from the average scores of 2 education systems. Only three education systems (Singapore, Norway, and Ireland) scored higher than the United States.
Similar to PIRLS, ePIRLS also describes achievement at four international benchmarks along the reading achievement scale: Low (400), Intermediate (475), High (550), and Advanced (625). In 2016, about 18 percent of U.S. fourth-graders reached the Advanced benchmark. The percentages of students reaching this benchmark ranged from 3 percent in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates) to 34 percent in Singapore. Singapore was the only education system with a higher percentage of fourth-graders who reached the Advanced benchmark than in the United States. Ireland, Norway, and Denmark had percentages of fourth-graders who reached the Advanced benchmark that were not measurably different from the percentage in the United States.
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 PIRLS was administered in 61 education systems. However, three education systems did not administer PIRLS at the target grade and are not included in this indicator.

3 The IEA differentiates between IEA members, referred to always as “countries,” and “benchmarking participants.” IEA member countries include both “countries,” which are complete, independent political entities, and “other education systems,” or non-national entities (e.g., England, the Flemish community of Belgium). Non-national entities that are not IEA member countries (e.g., Abu Dhabi [United Arab Emirates], Ontario [Canada]) are designated as “benchmarking participants.” These benchmarking systems are able to participate in PIRLS even though they may not be members of the IEA. For convenience, the generic term “education systems” is used when summarizing across results.

4 PIRLS and ePIRLS scores are reported on a scale from 0 to 1,000, with the scale centerpoint set at 500 and the standard deviation set at 100. The scale centerpoint represents the mean of the overall PIRLS achievement distribution in 2001. The PIRLS scale is the same in each administration; thus a value of 500 in 2016 equals 500 in 2001.

Reference tables: Digest of Education Statistics 2017, tables 602.10 and 602.15

Related indicators and resources: International Comparisons: Science, Reading, and Mathematics Literacy of 15-Year-Old Students; International Comparisons: U.S. 4th-, 8th-, and 12th-Graders’ Mathematics and Science Achievement; Reading Performance

Glossary: N/A