

PIRLS

Executive Summary



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In 2001, nine countries replicated IEA's 1991 Reading Literacy Study: Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, New Zealand, Singapore, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United States. Conducted at the third or fourth grades (the grade with most nine-year-olds), the study assessed student reading in three major domains: narrative texts, expository texts, and documents. Students completed a brief questionnaire about their home and school literacy activities and instruction.

Because it was a decade after the original Reading Literacy Study, IEA also launched the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2001. Thirty-five countries, including the nine participants in the trend study, were involved in this newly-developed state-of-the-art reading assessment for fourth-grade students. Results from the PIRLS assessment can be found in the *PIRLS 2001 International Report*. Additional information about the countries, including the nine participating in the trend study, may be found in the *PIRLS 2001 Encyclopedia*.

The nine countries should be congratulated for participating in the trend study as well as in PIRLS. Participation in both studies enables these countries to view their 2001 levels of reading achievement through the lens of whether or not progress had been made. To obtain information about changes in reading achievement, the countries re-administered the same version of the reading literacy test and student questionnaire, as they did in 1991. They followed stringent requirements for sampling, and followed the same procedures for test administration and data collection. Rigorous attention was given to quality control throughout.

Trends in Students' Reading Literacy Achievement

- Reading literacy achievement increased significantly in Greece, Slovenia, Iceland, and Hungary between 1991 and 2001. There was no significant change in Italy, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United States. Only Sweden had a significant decrease in performance.
- For the three major domains, changes in each country's achievement in reading narrative and expository texts mirrored those overall, the exception being a decrease for the United States in the narrative domain. For documents, achievement did not change significantly in Sweden and the United States, but all the other participating countries showed improvement.

Trends in Factors and Reading Activities Having a Positive Influence on Reading Achievement

- In seven of the participating countries, 88 percent or more of students in 2001 reported always or almost always speaking the language of test at home, reflecting either no change or modest decreases from 1991. Fewer students spoke the language of the test at home in Italy (69%) and Singapore (42%).
- For participating countries, the percentages of students with more than 100 books in the home ranged from about one- to two-thirds (31 to 65%). For six of the countries – Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Slovenia, Sweden, and the United States – this represented a significant decrease (5 to 11%) from 1991.
- Seven of the nine countries had a significant decrease in the percentages of students with a daily newspaper in the home.
- Except in Iceland, students reported either no change or less reading for fun in 2001 than a decade earlier. Iceland was the only country with an increase, and the only one where the majority of students (51%) reported reading books for fun on a daily basis.

- In 2001, the percentages of students reporting borrowing library books at least weekly ranged from moderately high (57 to 66%) in New Zealand, Singapore, Slovenia, and the United States; to medium (42%) in Iceland; to relatively low (20 to 33%) in Greece, Hungary, Italy, and Sweden. These levels represented a decline for Hungary, Singapore, Slovenia, and Sweden.
- In 2001, there was considerable variation in daily textbook reading, ranging from 71 percent of the Greek students to 14 percent of the Swedish students. Despite these differences, however, the trend in each country over the past decade was toward reading textbooks less frequently.
- Reading a story book in reading or language class was at least a weekly activity for the majority of students in each country (except Hungary) in 2001. There was, however, some decrease in story book reading in Singapore, Hungary, New Zealand, Italy, Sweden, and Slovenia.
- In Iceland, Sweden, and the United States, students reported some increases in homework. Students in New Zealand reported essentially no change, and those in the remaining countries reported less homework.