

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

Country note United Kingdom

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 the United Kingdom were low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 23%), 17% were low performers in reading (OECD average: 18%), 15% were low performers in science (OECD average: 18%), and 11% were low performers in all three of these subjects (OECD average: 12%).*
- Around 162,000 15-year-old students in the United Kingdom were low performers in mathematics, and more than 83,000 students were low performers in all three subjects (math, reading and science).
- About 29% of 15-year-old students in the United Kingdom attend schools where 30% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 30%), and about 9% attend schools where half or more of the students are low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 14%).
- In the United Kingdom, the share of low performers in all three subjects has not changed significantly since 2006. Brazil, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Tunisia and Turkey reduced their share of low performers in mathematics between 2003 and 2012.

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 vocational programmes or schools. **In the United Kingdom, the likelihood of low performance in mathematics is higher for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, girls, had no pre-primary education (or only a year or less of it), had repeated a grade and are enrolled in a vocational programme, compared to students who are advantaged, boys, had more than one year of pre-primary education, had not repeated a grade and are enrolled in a general programme.**

- A socio-economically disadvantaged student is almost five times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student (OECD average: 4 times more likely). Some 32% of disadvantaged students in the United Kingdom were low performers in mathematics in 2012 (OECD average: 37%), while only 8% of advantaged students were (OECD average: 10%).
- In the United Kingdom, students who had attended only a year or less of pre-primary education (25% of them were low performers in mathematics) were 44% more likely than students who had attend more than a year of pre-primary education (18% were low performers) to be low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 49% more likely), after accounting for student socio-economic and demographic background.

* According to a recent OECD estimate, if, by 2030, all 15-year-old students in the United Kingdom attained at least the baseline level of performance in PISA, the United Kingdom's GDP in 2095 would be 12% 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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- Among low performers in mathematics in the United Kingdom, students enrolled in vocational programmes (55%) are about six times more likely as students in academic programmes (21%) to be low performers.

In the United Kingdom, 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, low performers in the United Kingdom spent an average of 3.1 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among low performers: 3.5 hours per week) while students scoring at or above the proficiency baseline Level 2 spent about 5.3 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among better-performing students: 5.3 hours).
- In the United Kingdom, low performers tend to show less perseverance in school and also lower levels of mathematics self-efficacy than students scoring at or above the baseline proficiency Level 2. The difference in perseverance and self-efficacy between low performers and better-performing students is larger in the United Kingdom than on average across OECD countries.

Students in the United Kingdom are less likely to be low performers in schools where teachers are more supportive, where teacher morale is higher and where there are more creative extracurricular activities available for students.

- Students attending schools where mathematics teachers are less supportive are, on average, 27% more likely to be low performers than students who attend schools with more supportive teachers (OECD average: 6% more likely), after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status.
- Students attending schools where teacher morale is low are, on average, 14% more likely to be low performers than students who attend schools where teacher morale is higher (OECD average: 7% more likely), after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status.

Economically and culturally diverse countries have managed to reduce low performance in PISA. 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 their 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>