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

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, 20% of students in Australia were low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 23%), 14% were low performers in reading (OECD average: 18%), 14% were low performers in science (OECD average: 18%), and 9% were low performers in all three of these subjects (OECD average: 12%).*

- Around 57,000 15-year-old Australian students were low performers in mathematics, and more than 26,000 students were low performers in all three subjects (math, reading and science).

- About 28% of 15-year-old students in Australia attend schools where 30% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, and about 7% attend schools where half or more of the students are low performers in mathematics.

- The share of low performers in mathematics increased by 5 percentage points between PISA 2003 and 2012 in Australia; the share of low performers in reading and science has not changed since PISA 2003 and PISA 2006, respectively.

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 generally 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 Australia, the likelihood of low performance in mathematics is higher for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, girls, had no pre-primary education, had repeated a grade and are enrolled in a vocational programme.**

- A socio-economically disadvantaged student is five times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. Some 33% of disadvantaged students in Australia were low performers in mathematics in 2012 (OECD average: 37%), while only 8% of advantaged students were (OECD average: 10%).

- Students in Australia who had repeated a grade are three times as likely (38%) as students who never repeated a grade (18%) to be low performers. On average across OECD countries, students who had repeated a grade are seven times as likely (55%) to be low performers as students who had never repeated a grade (18%).

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* According to a recent OECD estimate, if, by 2030, all 15-year-old students in Australia attained at least the baseline level of performance in PISA, Australia's GDP in 2095 would be 11% 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 Australia, as on average across OECD countries, low-performing students play truant more often, spend less time doing homework, and are less perseverant than proficient students.**

- In 2012, low performers in Australia spent an average of 3.5 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among low performers: 3.5 hours per week) while students scoring at or above the baseline proficiency Level 2 spent about 6.6 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among proficient students: 5.3 hours).

- In Australia, low performers tend to show less perseverance in school and also lower levels of mathematics self-efficacy than students who score at or above the baseline proficiency Level 2. The difference in perseverance and self-efficacy between low performers and proficient students is larger in Australia than on average across OECD countries.

**Students in Australia are less likely to be low performers in schools where teachers' low expectations for students do not hinder learning, where teachers are more supportive, where the quality of educational resources is higher and where there are fewer teacher shortages.**

- Students attending schools where the quality of educational resources is lower are, on average, 13% more likely to be low performers than students who attend schools where the quality of educational resources is higher (OECD average: 3% more likely), after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status. In Australia, the quality of educational resources is higher than average across OECD countries in schools with large proportions of low-performing students (mean value of 0.44 compared to -0.03 on the PISA index of quality of schools' educational resources) and those with a large proportion of proficient students (0.74 compared to 0.09). In PISA 2012, there was no OECD country where large proportions of low-performing students attended schools with better educational resources.

- Australian students attending schools where mathematics teachers are less supportive are, on average, 25% 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.

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.

In general, the analyses on low performers in the PISA 2012 participating countries and economies show that it is important 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