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

Country note Mexico

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, 55% of students in Mexico were low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 23%), 41% were low performers in reading (OECD average: 18%), 47% were low performers in science (OECD average: 18%), and 31% were low performers in all three of these subjects (OECD average: 12%).*
- Around 805,000 15-year-old Mexican students were low performers in mathematics, and about 450,000 students were low performers in all three subjects (math, reading and science).
- About 80% of 15-year-old students in Mexico attend schools where 30% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, about 60% attend schools where half or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, and about 19% attend schools where 80% or more of the students are low performers.
- In Mexico, the share of low performers in mathematics and in reading decreased by about 11 percentage points between PISA 2003 and 2012. Mexico is one of the PISA-participating countries that has made the greatest progress in reducing low performance in these subjects during this period. The share of low performers in science has not changed since PISA 2006.

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. **In Mexico, as 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, attend schools in rural areas, had not attended pre-primary school, and had repeated a grade**. On average across OECD countries, but not in Mexico, the likelihood of low performance is also higher for students who live in single-parent families and for those enrolled in a vocational programme.

- In Mexico, a socio-economically disadvantaged student is almost 3 times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. Some 71% of disadvantaged students in Mexico were low performers in mathematics in 2012, while 37% of advantaged students were.
- Students in Mexico who speak a different language at home from the language of instruction are 86% more likely to be low performers in mathematics than students who speak the same language at home as in school (OECD average: 35% greater).

* According to a recent OECD estimate, if, by 2030, all 15-year-old students in Mexico reached at least the baseline level of performance in PISA, Mexico's GDP in 2095 would be 50% higher. OECD (2015), *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*, OECD Publishing, Paris, http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234833-en

Contacts:
Andreas Schleicher
Advisor to the Secretary-General on Education Policy, Director for Education and Skills
Andreas.SCHLEICHER@oecd.org
Telephone: +33 1 45 24 93 66

Daniel Salinas
Analyst
Directorate for Education and Skills
Daniel.SALINAS@oecd.org
Telephone: +33 1 45 24 74 86

In the Mexico, 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 in Mexico, 25% of low performers in mathematics skipped school at least once in the two weeks prior to the PISA test (OECD average: 23%). Among Mexican students performing at or above the proficiency baseline Level 2, 16% skipped at least a day of school (OECD average: 12%).

- In 2012, low performers in Mexico spent an average of 4 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among low performers: 3.5 hours per week) while students scoring at or above baseline proficiency Level 2 spent about 6.6 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among better-performing students: 5.3 hours).

Students in Mexico are less likely to be low performers in schools where teachers are absent less often, where there are fewer teacher shortages, where the quality of educational resources is higher, and where there are more mathematics-related and creative extracurricular activities available for students.

- Mexican students attending schools whose principal reported that teacher absenteeism hinders learning were, on average, 26% more likely to be low performers than students attending schools where teacher absenteeism does not hinder learning, after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status (OECD average: 12% more likely).

- In Mexico, students attending schools where there are fewer mathematics-related extracurricular activities available for students were, on average, 14% more likely to be low performers in mathematics than students in schools where more of these activities were available (OECD average: 8% 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.

Mexico has reduced its number of low performers in recent years, but major challenges are still ahead. The first step for policy makers is to **make tackling low performance a priority in the 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