

# PIRLS 2011: reading achievement in England

## Executive summary

The PIRLS 2011 survey is the third in the IEA's<sup>1</sup> series of comparative international surveys of reading achievement of fourth grade (Year 5 in England) pupils. PIRLS is administered on a five-yearly cycle, so the 2011 survey updates the picture of performance from 2006. PIRLS was first conducted in 2001<sup>2</sup> and the next survey is planned for 2016. In 2011, 45 countries participated with 9–10 year olds and England has participated in all three surveys.

England's PIRLS 2011 sample, with the inclusion of replacement schools, met the IEA's stringent participation targets and can therefore be deemed nationally representative of Year 5 pupils. A total of 129 schools and 3,927 pupils took part. Information about survey design and the sampling requirements are available in Appendix A of the national report.

This executive summary complements the full national report for England (Twist *et al*, 2012) and is based on information in the international report (Mullis *et al*, 2012).



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## Overview

England's performance in PIRLS 2011 was well above the international average and significantly higher than that seen in 2006. There was a wide range of achievement in England: the best readers were among the best in the world but there was a greater proportion of weaker readers than in many other high achieving countries. The difference between the reading achievements of boys and girls was greater than that seen in many other countries.

In common with a number of other high achieving countries, pupils' attitudes to reading were less positive in England than the average internationally. The more able readers were more likely to enjoy reading and be motivated to read than the weaker readers. Compared to 2006, fewer pupils in 2011 reported *never or almost never* reading for fun out of school. Over half of pupils in PIRLS 2011 reported reading for half an hour or more every day out of school.

The sections below explore this overview in more detail, summarising the key findings outlined in each chapter of the national report. Teacher and headteacher views are reported as the proportion of pupils whose teacher/headteacher gave particular responses.

## Reading attainment in PIRLS 2011

- England's average scale score of 552 was significantly above the scale centre point of 500. Among all participating countries, England's score was similar to eight other countries, significantly higher than thirty-one countries, and significantly lower than just five countries.
- This performance is an improvement compared to the 2006 survey. The highest scoring countries in 2006 (Hong Kong, Russian Federation and Singapore) remained the highest scoring countries in 2011 and two new participants, Finland and Northern Ireland, also scored significantly higher than England.
- Following a fall in 2006, England's performance is now very close to that achieved in 2001. Of the higher achieving countries (average scale score over 500), only two, Chinese Taipei and the United States, showed a greater improvement between 2006 and 2011.

## Range of attainment in 2011 and the trend

- There was a wide distribution of scores in England. The highest attaining pupils were among the best readers in the survey, but the lower attaining pupils did less well than the weakest readers in other high scoring countries.
- This wide range of achievement was characteristic of England's performance in PIRLS 2001 and 2006.

## Attainment by gender

- Girls performed significantly better than boys in PIRLS in England and in almost all other participating countries.
- The difference between the attainment of boys and girls was greater in England than in most other countries and has remained stable across all three PIRLS surveys.

## The language context of PIRLS in England

- A fifth of pupils in the survey in England reported speaking at least one other language in addition to English at home.

## Pupils' attitudes to reading

- Over a quarter of pupils in England gave responses that showed they enjoyed reading, but a fifth gave responses that placed them in the *Do not like reading* category. In England and within all other countries, pupils who reported the most enjoyment in reading also attained the highest scores.
- In contrast to what was seen *within* countries, *between* countries those with the highest average reading scores tended to have a high proportion of pupils in the *Do not like reading* category.
- Two-thirds of pupils in England reported high levels of motivation to read. Pupils in countries with the highest average reading performance reported the lowest levels of motivation to read.
- Pupil reports of reading confidence in England were similar to the international average with just 10 per cent categorised as *Not confident*.
- Although trends over time are difficult to identify due to changes in the analysis methodology, it appears that pupils' enjoyment in, and motivation for, reading has improved from 2006, and has surpassed the levels seen in 2001.
- *Between* countries, pupils in countries with the highest achievement tended to report the lowest levels of engagement in reading lessons. In England, a third of pupils reported a high level of engagement in reading lessons.
- In England, teachers' reported use of strategies to engage pupils in their learning was high compared to other countries.

## Reading attainment: purposes and processes in PIRLS 2011

- Pupils in England performed equally well on the two reading purpose scales: reading for literary purposes, and reading to acquire and use information.
- Performance on both purpose scales was significantly higher in England in 2011 than in 2006.
- On the processes of reading comprehension scales, pupils in England scored higher on the interpreting, integrating and evaluating scale, than on the retrieving and straightforward inferencing scale.
- The achievement scores for England on both reading comprehension process scales are significantly higher in 2011 than in 2006.
- In England, girls achieved significantly higher average scores than boys on both of the reading purpose scales and on both of the reading comprehension process scales.

## The curriculum and teaching

- Teachers of pupils in England spent more time on language teaching (the teaching of English) than the average time spent internationally.
- The amount of time spent on the teaching of reading, including reading across the curriculum, was just less than the international average, although internationally, responses regarding the time spent teaching reading varied greatly. Generally, pupils in higher performing countries spent less time on reading activities than the average, while pupils in English-speaking countries spent more.
- England had the highest proportion of pupils in schools where teachers reported that teaching of a range of reading skills was emphasised at or before the academic year in which pupils turned eight (Year 3 in England).
- In England and on average internationally, the average achievement of pupils who began learning a range of reading skills earlier was higher than that of those who were introduced to the skills later.
- The percentage of pupils in England whose teachers reported that pupils practised a range of comprehension skills and strategies on at least a weekly basis was close to or above the international average.
- Internationally, the average achievement scores were the same regardless of whether or not computers were available for use in reading lessons. Average achievement in England was similar for pupils who did and who did not have access to a computer for reading lessons. More pupils in the top performing countries used computers in reading lessons than did those in less well performing countries.

## The school teaching environment

- In England, three-quarters of pupils were taught reading by teachers whose teacher education included an emphasis on *English language*.
- In England, almost all pupils had teachers who reported that they were *satisfied* or *somewhat satisfied* with their careers.
- Teachers in England reported high levels of collaboration to improve teaching.
- Headteachers and teachers in England reported among the highest levels of emphasis on academic success.
- The vast majority of pupils in England had teachers who reported that their schools were safe and orderly and three-quarters of pupils attended schools where the headteacher reported hardly any problems of discipline or safety.
- The vast majority of pupils in England had teachers who felt that their teaching was rarely limited by disruptive or uninterested pupils.
- Reports of bullying from pupils in England corresponded very closely with international averages; just under a half of pupils reported that they were *almost never* bullied, but a fifth reported that they experienced bullying behaviours *about weekly*.

## School resources

- Teachers in England gave among the highest overall ratings about their working conditions with almost a half reporting *hardly any problems*.
- On average, teachers in England reported *minor* or *hardly any problems* relating to working conditions.
- Teachers in England reported making use of a wide range of different materials for teaching reading, but by far the most widely used resource was a *variety of children's books*. They also reported the lowest use of workbooks and worksheets as a basis for teaching among all participating countries.
- England's schools reported the highest computer provision of all participating countries.
- Compared to the international average, fewer pupils in England were in schools with libraries of 5,000 books or more, but more pupils were likely to have class libraries with more than 50 books than on average internationally.
- England was one of the countries where pupils were most likely to be given class time to use their class library at least once a week and be able to borrow books from it.
- According to their headteachers, the vast majority of pupils in England were not greatly affected by shortages of reading resources.



## The home environment in PIRLS 2011

- Pupils in England reported having an above average number of books at home. Pupils who reported a larger number of books at home had higher mean achievement scores than pupils who reported fewer books at home.
- The average achievement of pupils in England was higher for pupils who reported spending more time reading outside of school than those who spent less time reading outside of school. This pattern was not seen clearly in the international data.
- Compared to 2006, fewer pupils in 2011 reported *never or almost never* reading for fun out of school. Over half of pupils in PIRLS 2011 reported reading for half an hour or more every day out of school.
- The average achievement for pupils in England who reported having their own television, mobile phone or DVD player was lower in each case than for those who did not possess these items.
- Teachers were asked the extent to which they thought their teaching was limited by pupils' lack of prerequisite skills and knowledge, basic nutrition and sufficient sleep. Responses were in line with international averages with regard to prerequisite skills and knowledge, and basic nutrition. Teachers of a greater proportion of pupils in England reported their teaching was limited by pupils' lack of sleep than the international average.

## References

Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Foy, P., & Drucker, K.T. (2012). *PIRLS 2011 international results in reading*. Chestnut Hill, MA: TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, Boston College. <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/reports/international-results-pirls.html>

Twist, L., Sizmur, J., Bartlett, S. & Lynn, L. (2012). *PIRLS 2011: Reading achievement in England*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research. NFER [online]. Available: [www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls)

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<sup>1</sup> International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA): <http://www.iea.nl>

<sup>2</sup> NFER administered the PIRLS 2011 survey and previous cycles in England. Outcomes from previous cycles of PIRLS internationally and in England and other UK regions are available through the NFER website: [www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/pirls)

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