

November 28, 2007

Statement by Dr. Seamus F. Hegarty

Chairperson, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)

Why PIRLS Is Important

Whatever else they do, education systems must equip young people with sophisticated literacy skills; the alternative is poverty and lost opportunities for the individual and for society.

PIRLS is important because it throws a spotlight on reading literacy around the globe. It identifies which school systems are equipping their students with good reading skills, and which are not.

Schools and teachers need to know what makes the difference between good performance and poor performance. What practical steps can be taken to ensure that their students read better? Can children be helped to enjoy reading as well as just being competent at it? Why do boys read less well than girls, in every country? And what can be done about it? How about the home – what can parents do to help their children become competent, enthusiastic readers?

Policy makers likewise want to secure improvements across their education systems. They too look for answers to these questions but necessarily have broader perspectives. They seek evidence to guide policy formation and resource allocation. Which policies best support the development of reading literacy? How should resources be allocated for optimal impact? Should teacher education be modified in any way? What is the impact of different national assessment systems?

PIRLS provides a means of addressing these questions, and many more besides. Our approach is scientific, not doctrinaire. We appreciate the complexity of the questions and the diversity of schooling around the world. We do not believe that there are simple answers or that the same prescription applies to every country.

But there are answers. These necessarily will vary from one country to another because reform initiatives, to be effective, must be rooted in a good understanding of the context of literacy learning in a country.

Media Contact:
Patricia Delaney
Director of Media Relations
Boston College
+1 617 552 3352
delaneyp@bc.edu

PIRLS Project Contact:
Ina V.S. Mullis
Michael O. Martin
Co-Directors
TIMSS & PIRLS
International Study Center
+1 617 552 1600

– MORE –

For example, in Hong Kong SAR there were numerous changes in the wake of the publication of PIRLS 2001. While Hong Kong students' performance was good, it did not match their customary prowess in mathematics and science and there was a great deal of official and public concern. This led to many developments: primary schools were given more resources to promote a broader view of reading; reading comprehension tests were redesigned to reflect the PIRLS approach; research studies of bilingual reading have been conducted using the PIRLS framework; both initial teacher education and in-service education programs have been modified; parents are exhorted to become involved in their children's early reading; and all parents of newborn babies are being given a guidebook on fostering early language skills.

If we look at other countries, a range of impacts can be discerned, from changes to curriculum and assessment approach to more focused teacher education and better support for parents. In Slovenia, for instance, PIRLS raised the profile of reading literacy dramatically and has helped shape the work of a commission charged with the future development of reading literacy in the country. In countries such as Iran, Macedonia, and Slovakia, PIRLS has been a stimulus for the reform of primary schooling, leading in Macedonia, for example, to a decision to change the beginning of compulsory schooling to include one year of preprimary education.

These few examples illustrate the wide range of benefits to countries from taking part in PIRLS. We in IEA maintain a strong commitment to support countries as they assemble evidence from PIRLS to inform policy and improve practice. We believe that the launch of PIRLS 2006 today represents a major opportunity for school improvement worldwide, and we are intent on supporting that process in every way we can.