Presentation of PIRLS 2001 Results

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April 8, 2003

Statement by

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Presentation of PIRLS 2001 International Results

Good morning. We are pleased to release the results from PIRLS 2001, which is an international study of fourth-grade reading achievement in 35 countries around the world. PIRLS stands for the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, and the data being released today were collected in 2001. The results are detailed in the *PIRLS 2001 International Report*.

PIRLS 2001 provides reliable and timely data within an international context. The reading achievement results present each country with an opportunity to examine educational policies and practices against a globally-defined benchmark. Beyond comparisons in reading test scores, however, the report contains rich information about children's early literacy experiences and reading instruction.

Analysis of PIRLS data for the 35 participating countries indicates the following findings:

- Sweden had the highest reading literacy achievement of all the countries participating in PIRLS 2001. The Netherlands, England, and Bulgaria were outperformed only by Sweden. Latvia, Canada, Lithuania, Hungary, the United States, Germany, and Italy also performed better than most of the other countries.
- PIRLS assessed two major reading purposes—literary and informational. While the ordering is similar to overall achievement, there are some interesting differences. Sweden and England had the highest average achievement in reading for literary purposes. In reading for informational purposes, Sweden, The Netherlands, and Bulgaria had the highest average achievement.
- In all countries, fourth-grade girls had significantly higher achievement than boys in reading overall as well as in the two purposes. In some countries, the female advantage was somewhat more pronounced for the literary than for the informational purposes (England, Hungary, and Norway).

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To further help understand students' performance, PIRLS identified the upper and lower quartile points on the reading achievement scale to use as international benchmarks.

- Students reaching the Upper Quarter Benchmark demonstrated some depth of understanding of the texts in the assessment (see examples in report's pocket). They could make inferences and interpretations based on what they had read. Sweden, England, Bulgaria, the United States, and The Netherlands had 40 percent or more of their students reaching the Upper Quarter Benchmark.

- Students reaching the Lower Quarter Benchmark performed at a less sophisticated level, but displayed some reading proficiency. They were able to retrieve explicitly-stated information from the various literary and informational texts and make some straightforward inferences. The Netherlands, Sweden, Latvia, and Lithuania had nearly all of their fourth-grade students (95 percent or more) reaching this level.

Considerable research highlights the importance of home environment in fostering children's literacy development. Time devoted to literacy-related activities, access to reading material, and a supportive atmosphere all are key. Consistent with prior findings, the PIRLS data revealed the following:

- In every country, better readers had engaged in early literacy activities before starting school, such as reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, and playing word games. According to their parents, more than half the students (54%), on average, across countries could do these early literacy activities when they began school.

- In every country, fourth-grade students from homes with many children's books (more than 100) had higher reading achievement than those from homes with few children's books (10 or less).

- Students with the highest reading achievement had parents who liked reading. These parents had favorable attitudes toward reading and spent time reading (more than six hours per week, on average).

PIRLS found that the participating countries placed a heavy curricular emphasis on reading during the early years.

- According to principals across the countries, reading was emphasized more than other areas of the curriculum in grades one through four. Almost four-fifths of students (78%) were in schools where reading received more emphasis than other areas of the curriculum.

- Teachers reported spending seven hours per week on language instruction, and as much as nine hours per week in Canada, Colombia, Cyprus, France, Greece, New Zealand, and the United States. More than one quarter of students had teachers reporting more than six hours each week specifically on reading instruction.

PIRLS asked students' teachers about various practices and activities that took place in the classroom and found a remarkable degree of similarity across countries. Teaching reading as a whole-class activity was the most popular approach.

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- Daily instruction based on a textbook or reading series, accompanied by at least weekly exercises in workbooks or worksheets, was used for the majority of students (international average 53%).
- In many countries, oral questioning by the teacher was an everyday activity, and in all countries, it happened with the majority of students at least weekly. Students also reported frequently answering questions in writing about what they had read in class.
- Teachers reported asking students to identify the main idea, and explain or support their understanding of what they had read (used at least weekly with 90% of the students).
- Reading fiction was much more widespread than non-fiction. Teachers reported using fiction for reading instruction at least weekly for 84 percent of students compared to using non-fiction for 56 percent of students.

As might be anticipated, both students and teachers reported that reading was a regular classroom activity. Better readers reported frequent independent reading (daily) and less frequent reading aloud (monthly). Presumably the teachers were able to allow the better readers more time on their own.

- On average internationally, two-thirds of fourth-grade students (66%) reported reading silently on their own daily, and a further 27 percent at least weekly.
- About one-fourth of students (23%) reported reading aloud daily and one-third (36%) weekly.

PIRLS also found that substantial effort around the world has been devoted to providing students with access to library facilities.

- Almost all fourth-grade students (international average 85%) attended schools with a school library, and a majority (65%) with holdings of more than 500 books.
- Many students also had access to classroom libraries, with 57 percent in schools where most or all classrooms had classroom libraries. Nevertheless, teachers reported using them relatively infrequently (weekly or less often for the majority of students).

Teachers were asked about their procedures for assessing students' reading proficiency and the provisions they had for remediation, if necessary.

- While monitoring student progress, teachers relied most on their own professional opinion (for 70% of students) compared to classroom tests (55%) or national/regional examinations (23%).
- When a student falls behind in reading, teachers' most common response was to spend more time working on reading individually with that student (internationally, for 88% of students, on average).
- Almost two-thirds of fourth-grade students were in classes where the teacher reported never having access to a remedial or reading specialist.

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Within all countries, students' attitudes toward reading were generally positive, and students with the most positive attitudes had the highest reading achievement.

- About half the students, on average, enjoyed reading and expressed an appreciation for books.
- In all countries, more girls than boys had positive attitudes toward reading.
- About 60 percent of students reported weekly reading for stories or novels as well as for informational materials. More girls (70%) than boys (55%) reported literary reading, while similar percentages reported reading for information (62% and 59%, respectively).

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