News Release

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SWEDISH STUDENTS GO TO THE HEAD OF THE CLASS IN READING LITERACY, INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT FINDS

Major Report Shows Fourth Graders in Sweden, The Netherlands and England Lead 35 Countries Surveyed; Also Finds Girls Significantly Outpace Boys in Reading Across Countries

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (4-8-03) – European countries were the top performers in reading literacy at the fourth grade level, according to a major report of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) released today by the study's international directors at Boston College.

Sweden, The Netherlands, England, Bulgaria and Latvia had the highest average achievement among the 35 countries surveyed, with Canada, Lithuania, Hungary, the United States and Italy rounding out the top 10 countries, according to the report. Sweden and England had the highest achievement in reading for literary purposes; in reading for informational purposes, Sweden, The Netherlands and Bulgaria were the top performers.

With approximately 150,000 students surveyed, PIRLS is one of the largest international assessments of reading literacy. Directed by the International Study Center at Boston College, which also conducts TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, the largest international study of student achievement ever undertaken), PIRLS assessed a range of reading comprehension strategies for two major reading purposes: literary and informational.

Additionally, PIRLS collected extensive information about home, school and national influences on how well students learn to read, and queried parents and caregivers about their children's early literacy activities.

Among the key findings:

- In all countries, fourth-grade girls had significantly higher average achievement than boys.
- According to principals in each country, reading was emphasized more than any other area of the primary-school curriculum.
- 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.

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"The PIRLS report provides reliable and timely data within an international context," said PIRLS International Study Directors Ina V.S. Mullis and Michael O. Martin of Boston College. "The reading achievement results present each country with an opportunity to examine educational policies and practices against a globally-defined benchmark, while the report also contains rich information about children's early literacy experiences and reading instruction."

"The PIRLS findings underscore that time devoted to literacy-related activities, access to reading material, and a supportive atmosphere all are key," the researchers added.

Additional findings:

Home Environment

- 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 highest reading achievement had parents who liked reading. These parents had favorable attitudes toward reading and spent on average more than six hours per week reading.

Curriculum and Instruction

- 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.
- 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%).
- 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.

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- Both students and teachers reported that reading was a regular classroom activity. Better readers reported frequent independent reading and less frequent reading aloud (monthly). 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.
- 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 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.

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).

About PIRLS

PIRLS is an ongoing project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). The IEA is an international cooperative of national research institutes and government agencies that has been conducting studies of cross-national achievement for more than 40 years.

Thirty-five countries participated in this study, which measured reading literacy achievement of fourth-grade students (ages 9 and 10) and gathered information about home and school factors associated with learning to read. In each country, samples of approximately 3,500 students were assessed in about 150 schools. Data collection began in March 2001 for Northern Hemisphere countries, and in October 2001 for countries in the Southern Hemisphere.

Countries participating in the PIRLS 2001 assessment at the fourth grade level are: Argentina, Belize, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, England, France, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong SAR, Hungary, Iceland, Iran, Israel, Italy, Kuwait, Latvia, Lithuania, Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Morocco, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Romania, Russian Federation, Scotland, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States.

The International Study Center at Boston College, in the Lynch School of Education, is dedicated to conducting international comparative studies in educational achievement. Principally, it is responsible for conducting IEA's studies in reading, mathematics, and science--the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS). Planning is underway for PIRLS 2006.

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IEA's major funding partners for PIRLS included the World Bank, the U.S. Department of Education through the National Center for Education Statistics, and those countries that contributed by way of fees.

[**MEDIA NOTE:** The full PIRLS 2001 reports will be available on-line at the International Study Center's web site at *pirls.bc.edu* or by calling 617-552-1600. To arrange interviews with the PIRLS International Study Co-Directors Ina V.S. Mullis or Michael O. Martin, please call the Boston College Office of Public Affairs at 617-552-3350.]

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