

# Foreword

IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) implements large-scale assessments with partner organizations worldwide to better understand education practices, processes, policies, and educational outcomes. By providing expertise and continually innovating and improving sound research within its expanding global network, IEA studies provide a foundation for learning about education across and within these systems. IEA strives to improve quality teaching and learning around the world through the collection and provision of reliable, valid, and comparable data on a variety of subjects.

Investigations into reading comprehension have been conducted by IEA since as early as 1960, as it was one of the five subject domains assessed within the IEA Pilot Twelve-Country Study conducted with 13-year-olds. This evolved further in 1970 and 1971 under the umbrella of the Six Subject Survey, which assessed 14-year-olds in two areas of reading-related education: a continuation of reading comprehension as well as the additional topic of literature education. IEA also supported the Faculty of Education at the University of Hamburg in 1990 and 1991 in investigating the reading literacy of 14-year-olds in the Reading Literacy Study.

It was clear that the need for data on how well students were reading was essential to the utility of education data, and there was support to see this grow in a way that could measure trends over time in a consistent and reliable manner. This idea evolved into PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), which was launched in 2001 with 35 participants spanning five continents. Unlike its predecessors, this study focused on fourth-grade students in the critical period when they are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn.

From its origin, PIRLS has assessed the cognitive processes involved in comprehension, the various purposes that drive reading, and investigated the behaviors and attitudes that underlie reading literacy. Examining reading comprehension focuses on how students process and understand written information and the reasons they engage with texts. Meanwhile, the student questionnaire examines students' reading behaviors and attitudes. Additionally, the parent, teacher, and school questionnaires provide insights into the home and school environments that support or hinder reading literacy development.

PIRLS has continued to monitor progress in reading literacy every five years since 2001, with a steady increase in global participation that reached 65 education systems in 2021. The study's evolving design showcases the innovation and updates that keep each cycle at the forefront of research in education whilst still maintaining trend capabilities. This is exemplified in the shift from

a paper assessment to a digital assessment, which began with some countries in PIRLS 2016 and will be fully implemented for all participants in the 2026 cycle. Regardless of assessment medium and cycle, PIRLS continues to provide internationally comparative data on how well children read by assessing fourth-grade students' reading achievement and offers policy-relevant information for improving teaching and learning.

The results from PIRLS 2021 offered valuable insights into the state of reading literacy among fourth-grade students globally. While most students attained at least basic reading proficiency around the world, the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education was evident. Achievement trends showed declines in reading performance in 21 out of 32 countries with comparable data between 2016 and 2021. The disruptions caused by the pandemic adversely affected learning for two-thirds of students on average, according to their parents.

Despite these challenges, PIRLS 2021 highlights some positive findings. Results underscored the importance of early literacy activities and a conducive learning environment at home. Most students attended schools with supportive environments that emphasized academic achievement and minimized resource shortages or disciplinary issues.

As we continue to learn from these results through thematic reports and trend analysis in future cycles, it is crucial to address the pandemic's effects and continue promoting equitable access to quality education worldwide. With 58 education systems set to participate, the fully digital PIRLS 2026 offers a comprehensive, global perspective on reading comprehension among fourth-grade students.

Because PIRLS 2026 completes the transition to a fully digital assessment, all students from the participating education systems will get to participate in an engaging and interactive reading assessment. This system will enable students to participate in a unified reading assessment that reflects their diverse reading experiences both in and out of school. The digital environment also provides the opportunity to collect process data which can give insights on how students interact with the digital assessment. This allows for opportunities to make inferences about the response strategies and processes used by students. The innovation in PIRLS development is also reflective in the use of a group adaptive design model as well as the use of automated scoring.

These frameworks provide further context about the different aspects of PIRLS 2026. These frame the context of the research and data that will be collected during the assessment cycle. IEA studies develop their assessment frameworks alongside countries cooperatively, which is an important cornerstone of keeping them involved and the content relevant for all involved. This also reflects the collaborative efforts behind studies like PIRLS. I am grateful for all of the National Research Coordinators and their teams who participated in these efforts in particular, as well as all of the work they do through the other aspects of the PIRLS cycle.

These endeavors are also greatly supported by the pioneering and innovative work of the TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development and especially the authors of the assessment framework: Matthias von Davier, Ann Kennedy, Erin Wry, John Sabatini, Katherine A. Reynolds, Audrey Gallo, Maya Komakhidze, Liqun Yin, and Pierre Foy. Thank you as well to the IEA Amsterdam and IEA Hamburg colleagues who continue to support this study through its twenty-five years of trend data.

I further extend my thanks for the high-quality creation of PIRLS 2026's assessment items and context questionnaires, led by the PIRLS team at Boston College, and supported by the outstanding expertise of international development partners as well as the PIRLS 2026 Reading Development Group and Questionnaire Development Group. The Expertisecentrum, Netherlands, as well as reading literacy experts from the University of Memphis, USA, also provided great assistance for PIRLS passages, and I am likewise grateful for the important sampling support from Research Triangle Institute International.

IEA's Publications and Editorial Committee, chaired by Seamus Hegarty, provided review and guidance for the authoring, reviewing, and publication process, while IEA's Technical Executive Group remained an important consultation source for technical aspects of the study to ensure sound design and implementation.

The high-quality information in *PIRLS 2026 Assessment Frameworks* is supported by many teams and individuals worldwide coming together. Thank you all for your contributions, insights, and hard work. I am especially thankful to the countries who chose to participate in this study. The commitment to collect scientifically sound data about the experiences of students, teachers, parents, principals, and schools remains at the heart of this important work. Thank you to each individual involved in this endeavor and became part of the tapestry that is PIRLS 2026 data.

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# Introduction

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has been monitoring international trends in reading achievement among fourth-grade students for 25 years. As a critical point in a student's education, the fourth year of schooling establishes the foundations of literacy, with reading becoming increasingly central to learning across all subjects.

PIRLS complements the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) at the fourth grade. Both studies are directed by the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College, which works closely with IEA Amsterdam and IEA Hamburg.

PIRLS serves as a cornerstone in assessing the reading proficiency of fourth graders, providing a critical benchmark to understand young learners' reading achievement in a dynamic global landscape. In 2021, PIRLS introduced a targeted assessment design developed to allow adaptivity of the difficulty of the assessment to match students' reading achievement in participating countries. This transition also included integrating interactive, digital reading formats through ePIRLS blocks that simulate web-based reading. Over half of the participants made the shift to a digital format, while a linking (bridge) sample facilitated the transition.

PIRLS 2026 represents a significant milestone in the assessment's history by completing the transition to a fully digital reading assessment. This move reflects PIRLS' commitment to leading the field and staying relevant in an era where digital literacy is essential for every child's education. By embracing the digital reading assessment format, PIRLS 2026 aims to create an engaging, authentic assessment experience that aligns with young learners' daily digital reading practices. Additionally, technology enhances assessment practices, including more efficient data collection, innovative test design, and automated scoring.

The *PIRLS 2026 Assessment Frameworks* consist of three chapters covering major assessment components:

1. Reading Assessment Framework (Chapter 1): Describes the aspects of reading literacy assessed in PIRLS.
2. Contextual Framework (Chapter 2): Addresses topics covered in the PIRLS 2026 context questionnaires and Encyclopedia.
3. Assessment Design (Chapter 3): Presents the rationale and procedures for the group-adaptive assessment design.

Updates to the PIRLS 2026 framework chapters involved contributions from National Research Coordinators (NRCs) in participating countries and from experts at partner institutions who assisted in developing item drafts and framework chapters. Their input informed new constructs of interest for the questionnaires, ensuring the frameworks remain relevant for measuring and reporting on reading achievement over time. Expert committees—the Reading Development Group (RDG) and Questionnaire Development Group (QDG)—guided revisions based on evolving theories and policy-focused research.