

# PIRLS 2011

## Canada in Context

Canadian Results from the Progress in  
International Reading Literacy Study

*Highlights*



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# PIRLS 2011

## Canadian Highlights

In the spring of 2011, over 23,000 Grade 4 students from over 1,000 schools participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Survey (PIRLS). Overall, Canadian students performed well from an international perspective.

*Canadian students performed well in reading from an international perspective.*

Overall, Canadian students performed quite well on PIRLS 2011, having higher reading achievement than most participating countries. Canada had an average score of 548, which is well above the PIRLS scale centrepoint of 500. Of the 45 countries participating in PIRLS 2011, seven performed significantly higher than Canadian students: Hong Kong SAR, the Russian Federation, Finland, Singapore, Northern Ireland, the United States, and Denmark. There were six countries that performed at the same level as Canada: Croatia, Chinese Taipei, Ireland, England, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic.

In relation to the Canadian average, British Columbia performed above the Canadian average, while Ontario, Nova Scotia, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador performed at the Canadian average. The average scores for Quebec and New Brunswick French were significantly lower than that of Canada overall.

## What is PIRLS?



PIRLS is an international assessment that measures reading achievement of Grade 4 students, as well as trends in policies and practices related to literacy. Administered every five years since 2001, it is carried out by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a consortium of research institutions in 60 countries.

PIRLS focuses on three aspects of reading literacy:

- the purposes of reading
- the processes of comprehension
- behaviours and attitudes toward reading.

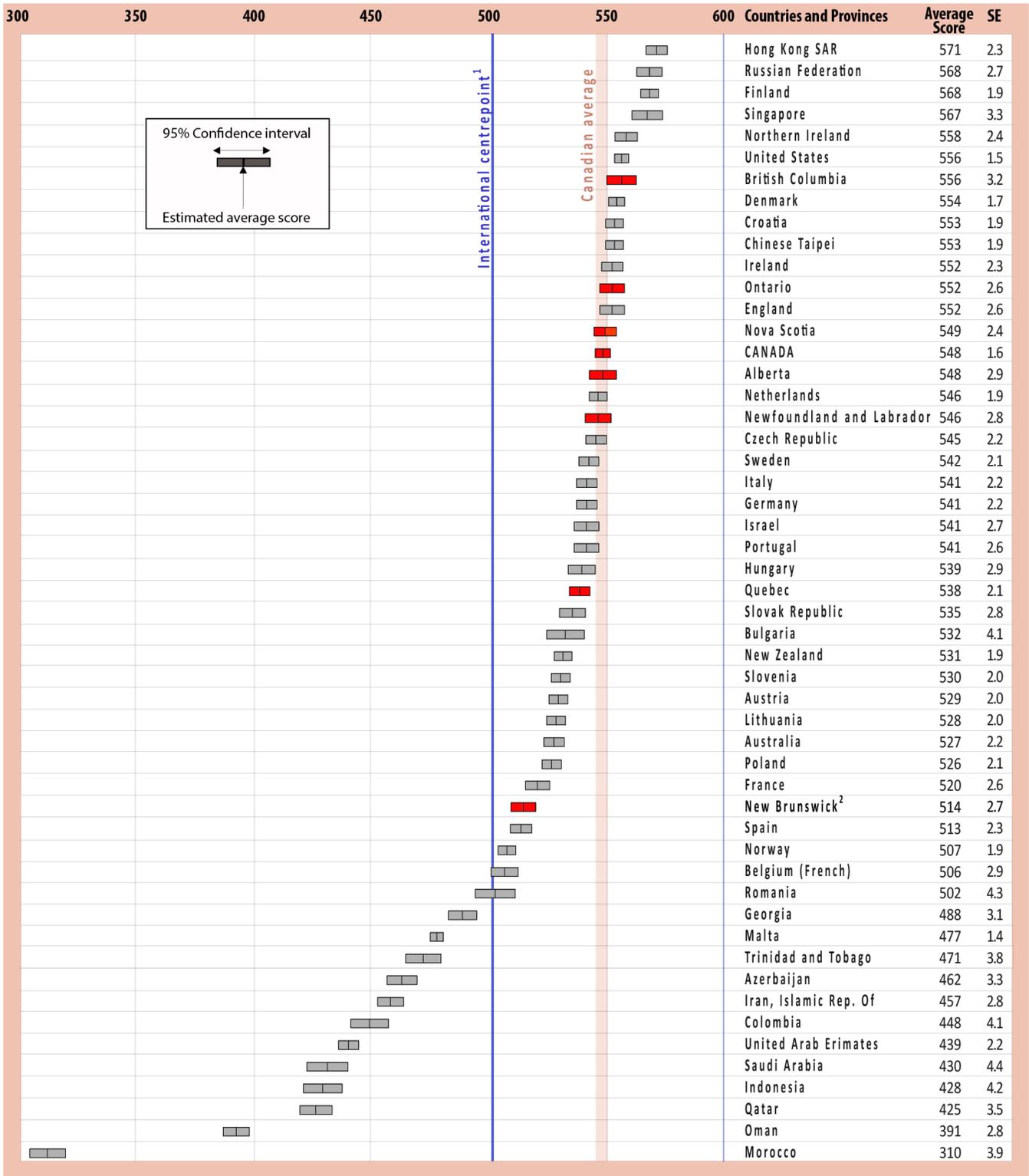
The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) was mandated to oversee the administration in Canada.

Further information on PIRLS may be obtained at:  
<http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/index.html> and

[http://www.cmec.ca/399/Programs-and-Initiatives/Assessment/Progress-in-International-Reading-Literacy-Study-\(PIRLS\)/Overview/index.html](http://www.cmec.ca/399/Programs-and-Initiatives/Assessment/Progress-in-International-Reading-Literacy-Study-(PIRLS)/Overview/index.html)



Average scores and confidence intervals in reading for countries and Canadian provinces



<sup>1</sup> International centrepoint represented an average score in PIRLS 2001, and it has been set at 500 since then.

<sup>2</sup> Only New Brunswick French participated in PIRLS 2011.



*Students enrolled in English majority-language school systems achieved higher results than those enrolled in French minority-language school systems.*

British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and Nova Scotia oversampled students to obtain results for the two language groups.

In most participating provinces, students enrolled in a majority-language school system significantly outperformed those enrolled in a minority-language school system. The differences for these provinces ranged from 43 points to 51 points. In Quebec, there was no significant difference in student performance between these two groups.

*Consistent with other large-scale studies, girls performed better than boys in reading.*

In Canada overall, girls outperformed boys by 12 points. However, the difference in the average scores was statistically significant in all provinces. This pattern was consistent across almost all participating countries, but the difference in the average scores between boys and girls was smaller in Canada when compared to the international average.

*More young Canadians reached the highest level of performance in reading than in most other countries.*

In Canada, 13 per cent of students reached the highest level of performance — the *Advanced International Benchmark*. This percentage is well above the international median (8 per cent), placing Canada among the countries with the highest proportion of *advanced* students. The percentages of Canadian students reaching the *Advanced International Benchmark* ranged from 3 per cent (New Brunswick French) to 15 per cent (British Columbia and Ontario).



## *The home environment provides a solid foundation for students learning to read.*

About three-quarters of Canadian students *always* speak the language of the test at home, and they performed better in reading compared to students who *sometimes* or *never* speak the test language at home. Grade 4 students whose parents *often* performed literacy-related activities had an advantage of 25 points over those students whose parents only *sometimes* performed these activities. As is to be expected, a large proportion of Canadian parents (about 70 per cent) often read books with their children and talked about things they had done with them before their children began primary school. On the other hand, a lower proportion of parents (less than 40 per cent) talked about what they had read or played word games with their children.

Canadian students with parents who like to read achieved higher scores than those who do not (569 vs. 533 points). Significant variability can be observed across provinces, with 41 per cent of Canadian parents classified as *liking to read*, 50 per cent as *somewhat liking to read*, and 9 per cent as *not liking to read*.

## *Grade 4 students like reading... a lot.*

Worldwide, Canadian students are among those who like to read the most, surpassed only by those in four countries (Portugal, Georgia, Iran, and Indonesia). PIRLS results also confirmed that students' enjoyment of reading has a positive relationship with their reading scores. Not surprisingly, the more parents like to read, the more their children will like to read as well.

**Literacy-related activities** were defined as: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys, talking about things they have done, talking about things they have read, playing word games, writing letters or words, and reading aloud signs and labels.

The more often students read stories or novels, the better they perform in reading. But reading other materials occasionally (such as books that explain things, magazines, comic books, poems, and things on Internet) also improve reading achievement.



In Canada and most other countries, there is a positive relationship between reading achievement and time spent reading outside of school, but only up to a certain point. PIRLS data suggest that reading more than two hours a day does not make you a better reader....

What children read also matters! According to PIRLS results for Canada, reading stories and novels every day is related to higher achievement in reading.

*Canada benefits from a cadre of relatively experienced teachers who continue to participate in professional development activities.*

Over 80 per cent of Grade 4 teachers across Canada are female. However, their age and years of experience vary substantially across provinces. Furthermore, fewer Canadian teachers have completed graduate studies than the international average. PIRLS also revealed that over 80 per cent of these Grade 4 teachers have specialized in teaching at the primary/elementary level, and a quarter of them have taken language arts as their major field of study. Generally, Canadian teachers devote more time to professional development activities than do teachers in most other countries.

*According to teachers, many Grade 4 students do not come to school ready to learn.*

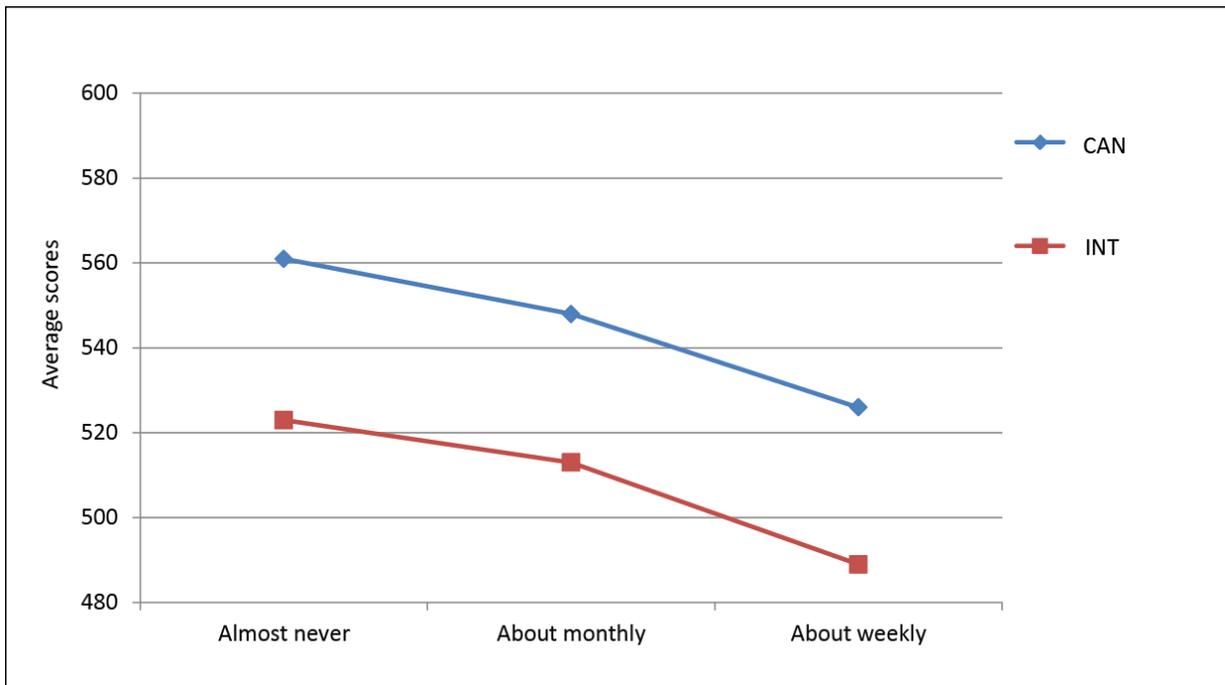
Canadian students benefit from a positive home environment for learning, with educated parents and resources such as books and computers. That being said, for about four-fifths of Canadian students, teachers felt that a lack of prerequisite knowledge and skills does limit, to a lesser or greater extent, how they teach; that two-thirds of Grade 4 students come to school lacking sleep; and that one-third of students are lacking basic nutrition. Considering the importance of coming to school ready to learn, these issues have serious repercussions on the school experience of too many students.



## Canadian schools are safe... but student bullying is a serious concern.

Learning in a stable and safe school environment has a significant impact on students' academic success. When compared internationally, more Canadian teachers feel that their school provides a safe and orderly environment. Generally, Canadian principals also believe that their schools have fewer discipline and safety issues than there are in the other countries. However, in spite of the serious efforts undertaken in all Canadian jurisdictions to tackle this issue, bullying remains a serious concern for Grade 4 students. Less than half of students surveyed stated that they were almost never bullied in school; over one-third were bullied approximately once a month, and one-fifth were bullied approximately once a week. There is little inter-provincial variation on the level of bullying in Canada. The most prevalent bullying behaviours experienced by students include: being made fun of or called names; being left out of games or activities by other students; having lies spread about them; or being hit or otherwise injured by fellow students. As shown in the chart below, the negative relationship between bullying and reading performance is significant, both in Canada and internationally.

**Relationship between bullying in school and reading performance**





## Looking forward

This PIRLS Assessment represents the first opportunity to study how Canadian students in the primary grades learn to read in a global context. It highlights the success that we have achieved in creating a culture of reading in school and at home. In spite of some provincial differences in student achievement, PIRLS also confirms the many similarities within the Canadian education systems, and that, for the most part, Canadian provinces perform very well, as measured by several of the indicators used in the study.

Further **international PIRLS results** are available in the *PIRLS 2011 International Report*, available at: <http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2011/index.html#>

The **Canadian PIRLS results** are available on the CMEC Web site at: [http://www.cmec.ca/399/Programs-and-Initiatives/Assessment/Progress-in-International-Reading-Literacy-Study-\(PIRLS\)/Overview/index.html](http://www.cmec.ca/399/Programs-and-Initiatives/Assessment/Progress-in-International-Reading-Literacy-Study-(PIRLS)/Overview/index.html)