

# PIRLS 2011

## Canada in Context

Canadian Results from the Progress in  
International Reading Literacy Study

*FAQ*



**cmecc**

Council of  
Ministers  
of Education,  
Canada

Conseil des  
ministres  
de l'Éducation  
(Canada)

## *What is PIRLS?*

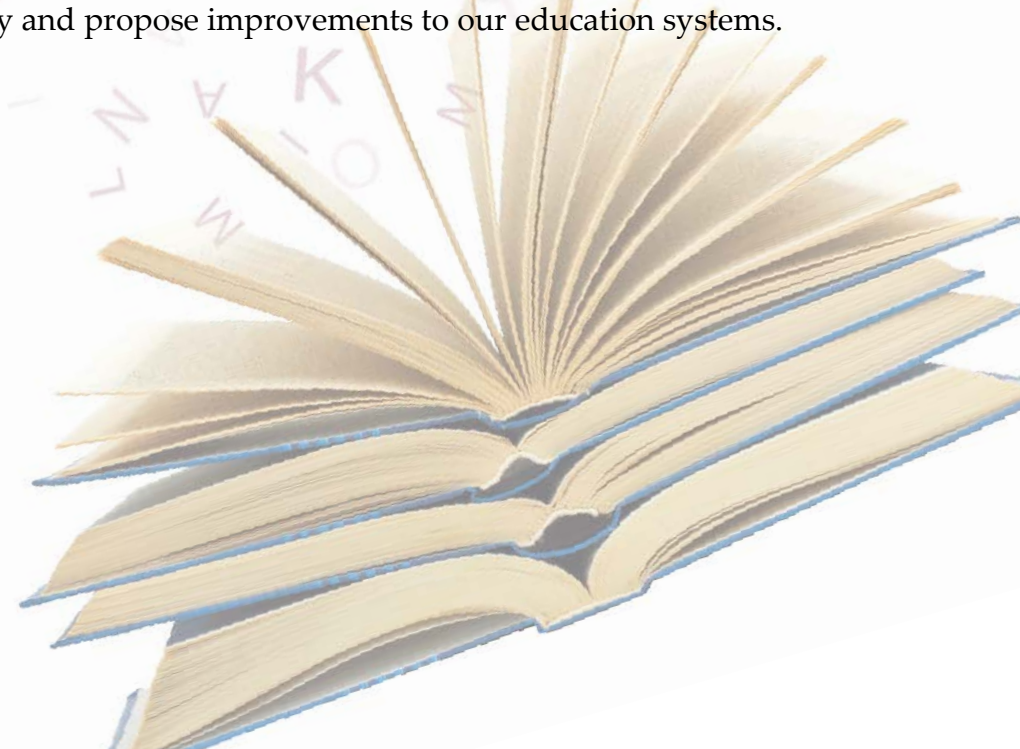
The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international assessment of the reading skills of students from different countries around the world after four years of primary schooling. It is currently the only international assessment that measures reading skills at the elementary-school level.

Coordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), an independent cooperative of research institutions and governmental agencies of which Canada is a participating member, PIRLS provides statistically valid, comparable data on how well students are doing in reading and contextual information on factors that may affect their performance, such as home and school environment.

Approximately 325,000 students from 45 countries and economies around the world participated in PIRLS 2011. In Canada, approximately 23,000 students in Grade 4 from over 1,000 schools across Canada participated; about 16,500 students wrote the test in English and 6,500 students in French.

## *Why do we participate in PIRLS?*

A number of provinces have chosen to participate in PIRLS to ensure that they can evaluate the success of their education systems in comparison to each other and to countries around the world. PIRLS 2011 data will be a valuable resource for government policy-makers and education researchers who wish to study and propose improvements to our education systems.



## *Which provinces participated in PIRLS 2011?*

Nine provinces participated in PIRLS 2011, at three different levels:

- Alberta, Ontario, and Quebec participated at the benchmark level. This means that the results for these provinces appear in both the international and Canadian reports.
- British Columbia, New Brunswick (French-speaking students), Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland and Labrador participated at the provincial level. This means the results for these provinces appear in the Canadian report only.
- Saskatchewan and Manitoba participated at the Canadian level. This means that their results are not identified in the Canadian report because of the small number of students who wrote the assessment. However, their results do contribute to the pan-Canadian average.

New Brunswick (English-speaking students), Prince Edward Island, Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut did not participate in PIRLS 2011.

## *How often is PIRLS administered?*

PIRLS is conducted once every five years. The first assessment took place in 2001, the second in 2006, and the third in 2011. Although some Canadian provinces have participated individually in past assessments, this is the first time that a sufficient number are participating to allow for the publication of pan-Canadian results.

## *How much does PIRLS cost?*

PIRLS 2011 is funded by participating provinces under the aegis of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC). In each of the five years of development of PIRLS 2011, the direct cost was approximately \$260,000 for Canadian participation.



## *What is the difference between the PIRLS international report and the Canadian report?*

The international report offers data at the national level for the 45 participating countries, including Canada, and allows for comparison among them.

The Canadian report offers data at the jurisdictional level, that is, it breaks down Canadian results by province. It also facilitates comparison between English- and French-language school systems. Provincial results are presented along with both Canadian and international averages wherever possible.

PIRLS 2011 marks the first time that a Canadian report is being published.

## *Can student performance among countries and Canadian provinces really be compared?*

Education systems and school programs differ from one jurisdiction to another, so comparing results can be a complex task. PIRLS allows a variety of education systems to be compared according to a set of common benchmarks. These benchmarks have been established through extensive consultations with participating countries and with the guidance of statisticians, psychometricians, and other pedagogic experts from around the world.

By agreeing to the common benchmarks developed by PIRLS to evaluate student achievement, Canadian provinces — and participating countries — are able to determine their performance in relation to other assessment participants, even if their approaches to education differ.

## *How can we compare average scores?*

Because scores were based on samples of students from each country and province, we cannot say with complete certainty that these scores are the same as those that would have been obtained had all students been tested.



A “confidence interval” is a range of scores within which the score for the population is likely to fall 95 per cent of the time, or 19 times out of 20. When comparing two countries or two provinces, the two average scores cannot be said to be different from each other if the confidence interval for the two average scores overlaps. For example, countries performing at about the same level as Canada have a confidence interval for the average score that overlaps with Canada’s confidence interval. In such cases, it would not be statistically valid to say that one performs better than the other.

### *How does PIRLS define reading literacy?*

PIRLS defines reading literacy as:

...the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Young readers can construct meaning from a variety of texts. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.

PIRLS also examines three aspects of students’ reading literacy:

- Purposes of reading
- Processes of comprehension
- Reading behaviours and attitudes

### *What are the international benchmarks of reading achievement?*

The purpose of the international benchmarks is to show the range of student achievement levels in reading across countries. PIRLS uses four international benchmarks:

- Advanced International Benchmark — students who scored 625 points or above
- High International Benchmark — students who scored between 550 and 624 points



- Intermediate International Benchmark — students who scored between 475 and 549 points
- Low International Benchmark — students who scored between 400 and 474 points

## *Is the assessment fair to Canadian students?*

Canada's active participation in PIRLS ensures that the unique qualities of our country's education systems are taken into account. Factors such as linguistic differences, rural and urban school locations, and cultural influences were all considered in the design of the assessment. In addition, the universal framework for the assessed subject incorporates an agreed-upon philosophy for all countries that is based upon the latest pedagogical research.

PIRLS is considered a fair assessment, since all students across the world answer the same questions in reading. It is unique because the assessment is not based on a specific curriculum. Instead, PIRLS measures general student reading skills in Grade 4, defined as the ability to understand information presented in the written format required by society and favoured by the person, and the ability to use it. It assesses how well Grade 4 students are doing in reading, not approaches to reading learning.

## *What did we learn from PIRLS 2011?*

Some of the key findings about the performance of Grade 4 students in reading include the following:

- Canadian students have higher achievement in reading than most participating countries. Only seven countries outperformed Canada in reading: Hong Kong SAR, the Russian Federation, Finland, Singapore, Northern Ireland, the United States, and Denmark.
- In Canada, girls outperformed boys in reading. However, the difference in average scores between boys and girls is smaller in Canada than at the international average.



- Students in English majority-language school systems performed better than students in French minority-language school systems. However, there was no significant difference between the performance of students in the English minority-language school system and students in the French majority-language system in Quebec.
- Canada has one of the highest percentages of students reading at the Advanced International Benchmark, which is the highest level of reading achievement in PIRLS.
- Parents of Canadian students are very engaged with their children in early literacy-related activities, which may have a positive impact on student achievement in reading.
- Canadian students enjoy reading more than students in most other countries. Data suggest that the more students like to read, the better they perform in reading assessment.
- Many teachers in Canada feel that they are limited in how they teach their classes by a number of factors, including children's lack of prior knowledge and skills.
- Bullying is taking place in Canadian schools at the same frequency as in most other countries. Over half of Canadian students are sometimes or often bullied, which is negatively related to their reading achievement.

### *When will the next PIRLS assessment take place?*

The next PIRLS assessment will take place in 2016. Further information can be found on the IEA Web site at

[http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/home/pdf/p2016\\_pirls.pdf](http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/home/pdf/p2016_pirls.pdf).

