

Low-Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed

Country note Italy

Low performance at school can have severe consequences for individuals and economies. Students who are low performers at age 15 are more likely to drop out of school and less likely to attain better-paying and more-rewarding jobs. When a large share of the population lacks basic skills, a country's long-term economic growth is compromised.

- In 2012, 25% of students in Italy were low performers in mathematics (OECD average: 23%), 20% were low performers in reading (OECD average: 18%), 19% were low performers in science (OECD average: 18%), and 12% were low performers in all three of these subjects (OECD average: 12%).*
- Around 140,000 15-year-old Italian students were low performers in mathematics, and more than 67,000 students were low performers in all three subjects (math, reading and science).
- About 35% of 15-year-old students in Italy attend schools where 30% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, about 18% attend schools where half or more of the students are low performers in mathematics, and about 5% attend schools where 80% or more of the students are low performers in mathematics.
- In Italy, the share of low performers in mathematics decreased by 7 percentage points between PISA 2003 and 2012; the share of low performers in reading decreased by 4 percentage points between PISA 2003 and 2012; and the share of low performers in science decreased by 7 percentage points between PISA 2006 and PISA 2012.

PISA defines "low performers" as those 15-year-old students who score below Level 2 on the PISA mathematics, reading and science assessments. Level 2 is considered the baseline level of proficiency that is required to participate fully in modern society. Students who score at Level 1 can answer questions involving clear directions and requiring a single source of information and simple connections, but they cannot engage in more complex reasoning and problem-solving tasks.

Poor performance is not the result of any single risk factor, but rather of a combination and accumulation of various barriers and disadvantages that affect students throughout their lives. **On average across OECD countries**, the probability of low performance in mathematics is higher for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, girls, have an immigrant background, speak a different language at home from the language of instruction, live in single-parent families, attend schools in rural areas, had not attended pre-primary school (or had attended for a year or less), had repeated a grade and also for students enrolled in vocational programmes or schools. **In Italy, the likelihood of low performance in mathematics is higher for students who are socio-economically disadvantaged, girls, speak a different language at home from the language of assessment, had no pre-primary education (or only a year or less of it), had repeated a grade and are enrolled in a vocational programme.**

- A socio-economically disadvantaged student is 2.4 times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. Some 38% of disadvantaged students in Italy were low performers in mathematics in 2012, while only 12% of advantaged students were.
- Among low performers, students in vocational programmes in Italy are twice as likely (34%) as students in academic programmes (15%) to be low performers.

* According to a recent OECD estimate, if, by 2030, all 15-year-old students in Italy reached at least the baseline level of performance in PISA, Italy's GDP in 2095 would be 18% higher. OECD (2015), *Universal Basic Skills: What Countries Stand to Gain*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264234833-en>

Contacts:

Andreas Schleicher
Advisor to the Secretary-General on Education
Policy, Director for Education and Skills
Andreas.SCHLEICHER@oecd.org
Telephone: +33 1 45 24 93 66

Daniel Salinas
Analyst
Directorate for Education and Skills
Daniel.SALINAS@oecd.org
Telephone: +33 1 45 24 74 86



In Italy, as on average across OECD countries, low-performing students play truant more often, spend less time doing homework, and are less perseverant than better-performing students.

- In 2012 in Italy, 59% of low performers in mathematics skipped school at least once during the two weeks prior to the PISA test (OECD average: 23%); this is the second largest percentage among all countries and economies that participated in PISA 2012, after Argentina. Among those Italian students who scored at or above baseline proficiency Level 2, 46% skipped at least a day of school (OECD average: 12%).
- In 2012, low performers in Italy spent an average of 5.6 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among low performers: 3.5 hours per week) while students scoring at or above baseline proficiency Level 2 spent about 9.7 hours per week doing homework (OECD average among better-performing students: 5.3 hours).

Students in Italy are less likely to be low performers in schools that have less ability grouping for mathematics classes and more mathematics-related extracurricular activities, and in schools where there is a lot of parental pressure to maintain academic standards.

- Students in Italy who attend schools where there is more ability grouping for mathematics classes are, on average, 16% more likely to be low performers than students who attend schools with less ability grouping (OECD average: 13% more likely), after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status.
- In Italy, students who attend schools where there is little or no parental pressure to maintain high academic standards are, on average, 33% more likely to be low performers than students who attend schools where parents exert more pressure to maintain academic standards (OECD average: 11% more likely), after accounting for students' and schools' socio-economic status.

Countries as economically and culturally diverse as Brazil, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Russian Federation, Tunisia and Turkey reduced their share of low performers in mathematics between 2003 and 2012. What do these countries have in common? Not very much: their respective shares of low performers in 2003 differed widely, as did their economic performance during the period. But therein lies the lesson: **all countries can improve their students' performance**, given the right policies and the will to implement them.

Italy has reduced its number of low performers in recent years, but major challenges are still ahead. The first step for policy makers is to **make tackling low performance a priority in the education policy agenda** – and translate that priority into additional resources. Given the extent to which the profile of low performers varies across countries, tackling low performance requires a multi-pronged approach, tailored to national and local circumstances. Policy makers, teachers, parents and students themselves all have an important role to play. **An agenda to reduce the incidence of low performance can include several actions:**

- Dismantle the multiple barriers to learning.
- Create demanding and supportive learning environments at school.
- Provide remedial support as early as possible.
- Encourage the involvement of parents and local communities.
- Inspire students to make the most of available education opportunities.
- Identify low performers and design a tailored policy strategy.
- Provide targeted support to disadvantaged schools and/or families.
- Offer special programmes for immigrant, minority-language and rural students.
- Tackle gender stereotypes and assist single-parent families.
- Reduce inequalities in access to early education and limit the use of student sorting.

To learn more, see...

OECD (2016), *Low Performing Students: Why They Fall Behind and How to Help Them Succeed*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264250246-en>