

9. Do public schools level the playing field between rich and poor children?

Nothing can erase the effects of socio-economic background, but public schools in Canada are among the best in the world at helping to level the playing field between rich and poor children.

In all countries, including Canada, education achievement is affected by socio-economic status: on average, students from wealthier families perform better than students from poorer ones, and students who attend schools located in richer neighbourhoods do better than students who attend schools in poorer ones. In Canada, however, the relationship between socio-economic status and performance is weaker than in almost all other OECD member countries. Canada's public schools do a better job than those of almost all other countries in equalizing opportunities between economically advantaged and disadvantaged students.⁴³

- Canada is one of only ten “high achievement / high equity” countries: countries that combine higher than average PISA math scores with a weaker than average relationship between performance and socio-economic status.⁴⁴ In fact, among OECD members with above average math scores, only one country (Estonia) has a weaker relationship between performance and socio-economic status than does Canada.
- Canada has a higher than average proportion of “resilient” students within its student population; resilient students are those who combine low socio-economic status with high achievement.⁴⁵

- Canada is one of only six high achieving countries whose PISA ranking is significantly higher for economically disadvantaged students than it is for advantaged students (Canada “ranks” 13th overall for math performance, but 12th when the performance of disadvantaged students is compared, and only 17th when the performance of advantaged students is compared).⁴⁶ In other words, Canada is one of a small group of countries that do particularly well in terms of the performance of disadvantaged students and whose high overall performance is combined with a lesser degree of socio-economic polarization. (The other countries/economies in this group are Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland and Macao-China.)
- Canada stands out as having the second most equitable education system in the OECD – behind only Finland – measured by assessing the proportion of variation in students’ PISA math scores that is explained by socio-economic differences between schools. This means that in every OECD country except Finland, the socio-economic status of the neighbourhood a student is born in and of the local school they attend has more of an impact on their academic performance than in Canada.⁴⁷

⁴³ The results in this section are taken from Chapter 2 of OECD, PISA 2012 Results, Volume II; see: <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-volume-ii.htm>

⁴⁴ Socio-economic status is measured by means of an index taking into account factors such as parental education and occupation, household possessions and educational resources available at home.

⁴⁵ See Figure II.2.4, p. 41 (http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/pisa-2012-results-excellence-through-equity-volume-ii/equity-in-outcomes_9789264201132-7-en#page11); a student is defined as resilient if they are in the bottom socio-economic quartile in their country and perform in the top quarter of students from all countries after accounting for socio-economic status.

⁴⁶ See Figure II.2.6, p. 43; http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/pisa-2012-results-excellence-through-equity-volume-ii/equity-in-outcomes_9789264201132-7-en#page13

⁴⁷ See Figure II.2.8, p. 48; http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/pisa-2012-results-excellence-through-equity-volume-ii/equity-in-outcomes_9789264201132-7-en#page18