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**DIRECTORATE FOR EDUCATION  
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**Meeting of the Education Committee at Ministerial Level**

**RAISING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING FOR ALL - ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION**

**Dublin, 18-19 March 2004**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. Raising the quality of learning is a perennial objective of all educational systems. Rapid economic and social change makes this objective more important to the maintenance of a flourishing economy and society but more difficult than ever to achieve. It is even harder to realise if the objective is to raise the quality of learning for all, not just for some.

2. Achieving the twin objectives of high levels of performance and equitable distribution of outcomes is an ambitious goal. The findings from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2000) have shown that some countries have succeeded in achieving both. For these countries to sustain and even advance their positions, and for others to try to match them, poses new challenges and requires a range of policy reforms. Teachers are widely regarded as central to raising the quality of learning but many OECD countries face difficulties in ensuring an adequate supply of teachers and improving teacher effectiveness. Raising the quality of learning for all is very difficult to achieve in the context of increasing diversity of students and, as a result, social cohesion can be at risk. Can education enhance social cohesion? Can it promote engagement in a shared community and culture, and so nurture democratic citizenship?

3. Although these policy issues apply to lifelong learning, this paper focuses mainly on schooling, as that is the primary focus of the 2004 OECD Education Ministerial. During schooling, the major foundations of lifelong learning for all are built, and many current deficiencies begin to emerge. Ministers are invited to discuss these issues under two themes, namely: *Raising Performance Levels for All* and *Improving Teacher Supply and Effectiveness*. These issues will also be discussed during the consultations with the Business and Industry Advisory Committee to the OECD (BIAC) and the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC). The Working Lunch will focus on *Education for Democratic Citizenship* as one aspect of the broader topic of *Education and Social Cohesion* that will be explored in the Forum.

## **THEME 1: RAISING PERFORMANCE LEVELS FOR ALL**

4. To succeed in a rapidly changing world, individuals need to advance their knowledge and skills throughout their lives. Education systems need to lay strong foundations for this by developing key competencies and strengthening young adults' capacity and motivation to continue learning beyond school. The first OECD-wide assessment of student performance, which was carried out as part of PISA 2000, revealed wide differences in the extent to which countries are succeeding in equipping young adults with knowledge and skills in key subject areas.

5. For some countries, the PISA 2000 results were disappointing, showing that their 15-year-olds' performance lagged considerably behind that of 15-year-olds in other countries, sometimes by the equivalent of several years of schooling and sometimes despite high investments in education. PISA 2000 also highlighted significant variation in school performance and raised strong concerns about equity in the distribution of learning opportunities (see Figures 1 and 2). At the same time, the high and equitable performance levels achieved by some countries demonstrated that these challenges can be addressed, and set ambitious goals for others. Progress will depend crucially on pedagogy and quality teachers (see Theme 2), but also on schools having high aspirations, fostering individual student engagement with learning, and providing a good disciplinary climate and good teacher-student relations. Institutional differentiation and streaming will also have an impact on performance. To offer quality learning, schools depend on the right policy framework and institutional context.

### **Establishing standards and monitoring educational quality**

6. The tradition of education systems is often characterised as knowledge-poor — education systems face difficulties in enabling schools and teachers to share, jointly develop and implement knowledge about their work and performance. While those who run education systems usually have access to some relevant knowledge, those who deliver educational services often do not, or face obstacles in translating such knowledge into effective practices. One of the main prerequisites for raising performance levels thus seems to be to make education a knowledge-rich profession in which those responsible for delivering educational services — most notably teachers and school principals — act as partners and have the authority to act and the knowledge necessary to do so, and can access effective support systems to assist them in implementing change. This may also involve improving school leadership and making changes in school organisation that strengthen professional networks and encourage collaborative learning within and between schools.

7. Such considerations — together with a shift in public and governmental concern away from mere control over the resources and content of education toward a focus on outcomes — have, in many countries, driven the establishment of standards for the quality of the work of educational institutions. Countries pursue approaches to standard-setting ranging from the definition of broad educational goals and areas of competency to the formulation of concise performance expectations in well-defined subject areas. Furthermore, some countries have gone beyond establishing educational standards as mere yardsticks and have introduced performance benchmarks that students at particular ages or grade levels should reach.

8. There is similar variety in the approaches countries pursue in monitoring educational quality and adherence to standards. These include different forms of external assessment, external evaluation or inspection, and schools' own quality assurance and self-evaluation efforts. Last but not least, there are

diverging views on how results from evaluation and assessment can and should be used. Some see them primarily as tools to reveal best practices and identify shared problems in order to encourage teachers and schools to improve and become more supportive and productive learning environments. Others extend their purpose to support contestability of public services or market-mechanisms in the allocation of resources, *e.g.* by making comparative results of schools publicly available to facilitate parental choice or by having funds follow students.

### ***Questions for discussion***

- What approaches to establishing and monitoring educational standards have countries found most effective in raising aspirations, establishing transparency over educational objectives, and providing teachers with a reference framework for understanding and fostering student learning? How are governments addressing the risk that standard-setting could narrow the curriculum and encourage teaching to the test?
- How can performance targets best be defined to ensure baseline quality in educational outcomes for the most vulnerable students while, at the same time, raising performance and aspirations for all students, including high-performers?
- What type of performance benchmarks (*e.g.* national versus school-level results; comparisons with all other schools versus comparisons with only similar schools; or raw results versus estimates of the value schools add) have countries found most productive for the stakeholders involved, including parents, teachers and schools?

### **Developing effective support systems and devolving responsibility to the frontline**

9. Formulating and monitoring adherence to educational goals and standards are widely considered to be prerequisites for raising performance levels. But the more difficult challenges include: feeding data on performance back to those who deliver educational services, most notably teachers and school principals; establishing rewards, support systems and consequences that flow from them; and combining governance structures that devolve responsibility to the front line with an equitable distribution of learning opportunities.

10. Much of the difference in the average performance of countries in PISA 2000 can be explained by the prevalence of poorly performing students and schools. Similarly, there is much more variation among countries in the performance of students from disadvantaged socio-economic contexts than in the performance of students from advantaged backgrounds. This suggests that raising performance levels depends critically on the capacity of education systems to address the needs of poorly performing students and schools. The approaches countries have chosen for this purpose vary and include specific focus on allocation of increased resources to socially disadvantaged students, making changes to selection and streaming practices, or transformation of management structures and practices. Some offer non-selective school systems that seek to provide all students with similar opportunities for learning. Other countries respond to diversity by forming groups of students of similar levels of performance through selection either within or between schools, with the aim of serving students according to their specific needs. The effectiveness of these policies and practices remains controversial but the results from PISA 2000 suggest that both overall variation in student performance and performance differences between schools tend to be greater in those countries with rigid institutionalised selection and tracking practices at early ages. By contrast, virtually all countries that performed well in PISA 2000 place an emphasis on strategies and approaches for teaching heterogeneous groups of learners, with a high degree of individualised learning processes.

11. Addressing the problem of poor performance crucially depends on strong support systems, either located at individual schools or in specialised support institutions, which can help digest results from comparative evaluation and provide professional advice and assistance to teachers and school management. Some countries seek to target such support services directly at students on a needs basis, including services for students requiring special educational or social assistance, or educational and career counselling. Some use networks of schools, or of schools and other institutions, to facilitate performance improvement for teachers and schools. Yet others focus on the school system as a whole and often include external agencies.

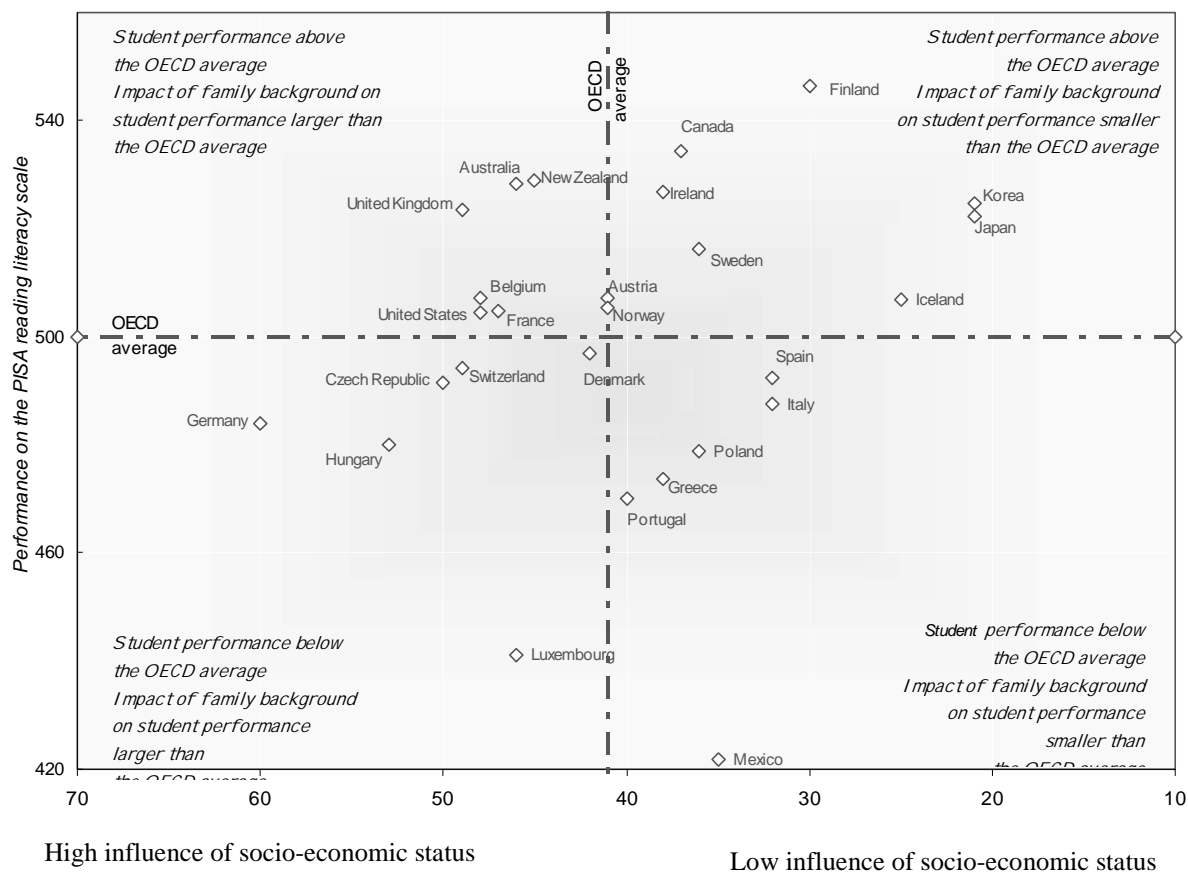
12. One other widely adopted policy lever designed to raise performance levels is the devolution of responsibility for education to the frontline, linked to an encouragement of responsiveness to local needs. In fact, in most of the countries that performed well in PISA 2000, local authorities and schools now have substantial autonomy with regard to educational content and/or the management of resources. However, the trend towards devolved responsibility has not been uniform across the different areas of decision-making. In some countries, the development and adaptation of educational content can be considered the main expression of school autonomy. Others, by contrast, have focussed on strengthening the management and administration of individual schools through market-oriented governance instruments or collaboration between schools and other stakeholders in local communities while, in some cases, even moving towards centralised governance of curricula and standards.

### *Questions for discussion*

- What obstacles have countries found in tracking and addressing the causes of quality differences between schools? How can poorly performing schools be improved, including through differential resource allocation, without creating rewards for poor performance?
- Should support systems be available to all students and schools or targeted at those most in need? Should support be targeted mainly at disadvantage or poor performance?
- What distribution of decision-making responsibilities across the various stakeholders in the different areas of decision-making have countries found most conducive to encouraging performance orientation, local responsiveness and collaborative learning within and between schools while, at the same time, ensuring that learning opportunities remain accessible on an equitable basis?

**Figure 1. Some countries achieve both high performance standards and an equitable distribution of learning outcomes**

Relationship between the average performance of OECD countries on the PISA reading literacy scale and the socio-economic distribution of student performance



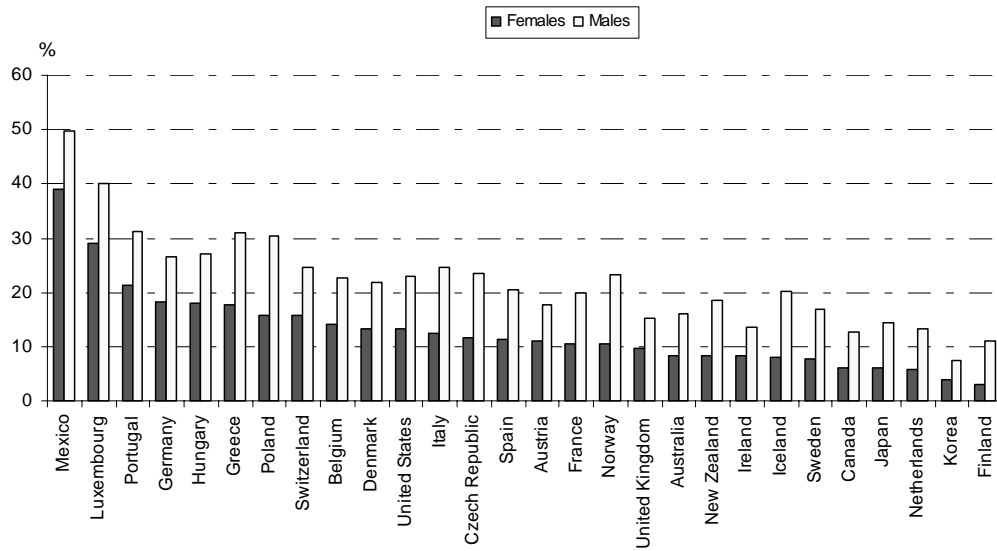
**Note:** The mean reading performance in five countries is not statistically different from the OECD average: Denmark, France, Norway, Switzerland and the United States. The socio-economic distribution of student performance in eight countries is not statistically different from the OECD average: Austria, Denmark, Greece, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Poland and Portugal.

For the definition of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status, see OECD (2001), *Knowledge and Skills for Life – First Results from PISA 2000*, Annex A1.

**Source:** OECD PISA 2000 at [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

**Figure 2. 15-year-old boys are at a much higher risk of being low performers than girls**

Percentages of males and females at or below the most basic PISA level of reading literacy performance

Source: OECD PISA 2000 at [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

## WORKING LUNCH: EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

13. Raising the quality of learning should involve not only cognitive but also wider human competencies, including those civic qualities which contribute to effective democracies. At the same time, continued rapid social and economic change poses both challenges to and opportunities for our notions of citizenship. There is some evidence that deference to established elites, including loyalties to traditional political parties, is falling, balanced by increasing commitment to single-issue pressure groups. Civic involvement is declining in some countries, while in others issues of religious, ethnic and cultural tolerance have taken on fresh salience. Student populations are changing in response to urbanisation, globalisation and demographic change. In many countries migration is increasing. This raises many issues, including how to teach democratic citizenship to migrant students with variable rights to participate in the political life of the country where they live.

14. In the face of such change, the issue for education is how to develop not only successful individuals with good workplace skills, but also “democratic citizenship” — an outcome both linked to, and supportive of, social cohesion. Defining the qualities we might wish to see in citizens of democratic societies remains a political and context-dependent task. It might include qualities such as fairness, tolerance and a co-operative approach, recognition of the value of social norms, and a civic spirit. While education and informal learning, in isolation, cannot create model citizens, they can, alongside other factors, make a constructive contribution.

15. Devising a policy response will require clear objectives, keeping a balance between the “nation-building” role of civic education and its role in valuing and recognising social diversity. At the same time, choice and diversity in educational provision may have to be increased to meet individual needs.

16. Realising policy objectives could involve action in a number of domains. Narrowly, there are issues about how civic education should be included in the curriculum, or what action could be taken to reform school ethos and management to provide a model of democracy in action, for example through the development of group decision-making in classrooms. More broadly we might think how to encourage more engagement between educational institutions and the community – for example, by promoting community volunteering among students — and about what forms of informal learning are effective in promoting citizenship, amongst adults as well as young people.

### *Questions for discussion*

- What new demands for democratic competencies have arisen as a result of rapid economic and social change?
- What policy responses — in curricula and teaching styles, school ethos and management, school-community relations and post-compulsory education — are necessary to address these challenges?



**THEME 2: IMPROVING TEACHER SUPPLY AND EFFECTIVENESS**

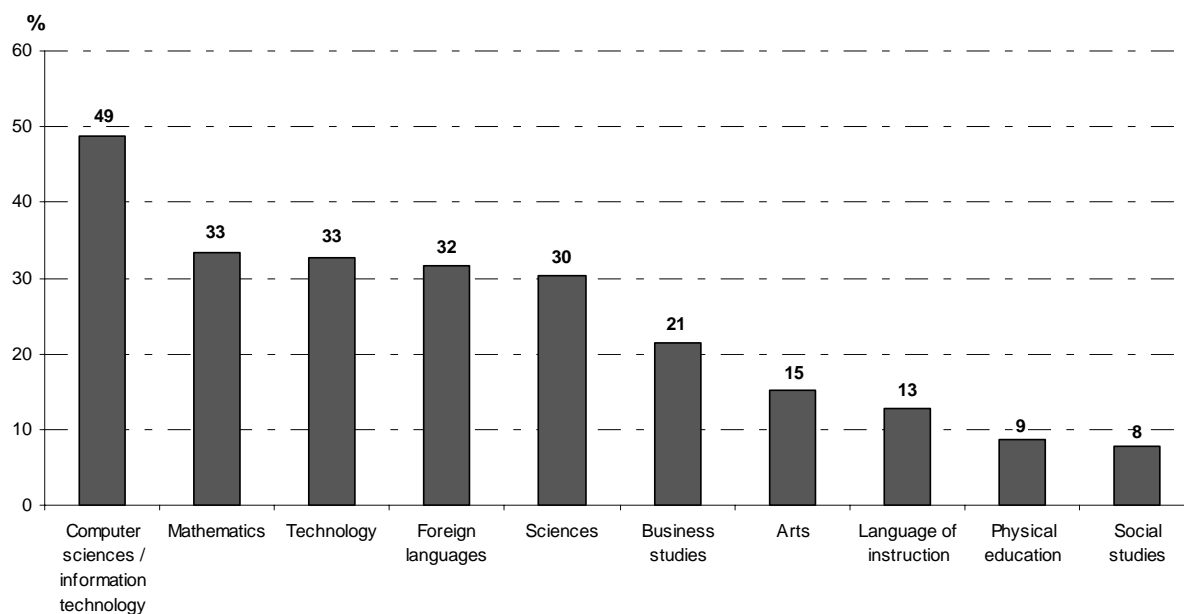
17. The quality of teachers and their work are key determinants of student learning. Teachers directly influence what students learn, their attitudes to learning, and their skills and motivation for lifelong learning. Teachers also constitute the most important resource in financial terms: on average in OECD countries around 60% of total expenditure on schools is allocated to teachers' compensation. Improving the efficiency and equity of education systems depends, in large measure, on ensuring that able people want to work as teachers and that their teaching is of high quality. Such issues go to the heart of teachers' work and careers, and the success of any reform requires that teachers themselves are involved in policy development and implementation.

**Improving teacher supply**

18. There are serious difficulties in many countries in maintaining an adequate supply of good quality teachers, and further developing the skills of those already in the profession. The role of the teacher is evolving, with a greater emphasis on facilitating students' learning and preparing them for a society and labour market in which they will need to be self-directed learners. However, the PISA 2000 results show that in half of the OECD countries, a majority of 15-year-olds attend schools where principals believe that student learning is hindered by a teacher shortage or inadequacy. Other survey data indicate that principals in upper secondary schools have particular difficulties in recruiting teachers in computer sciences, mathematics, technology, languages and sciences (see Figure 3) – areas that are all high priorities. As well, there is increasing interest in attracting people from outside education to broaden the expertise in schools, and in introducing more flexible approaches to staffing.

**Figure 3. There are major difficulties in hiring qualified teachers in key subjects**

Cross-country mean percentage of upper secondary students attending schools where the principal reports that hiring fully qualified teachers is difficult, 2001



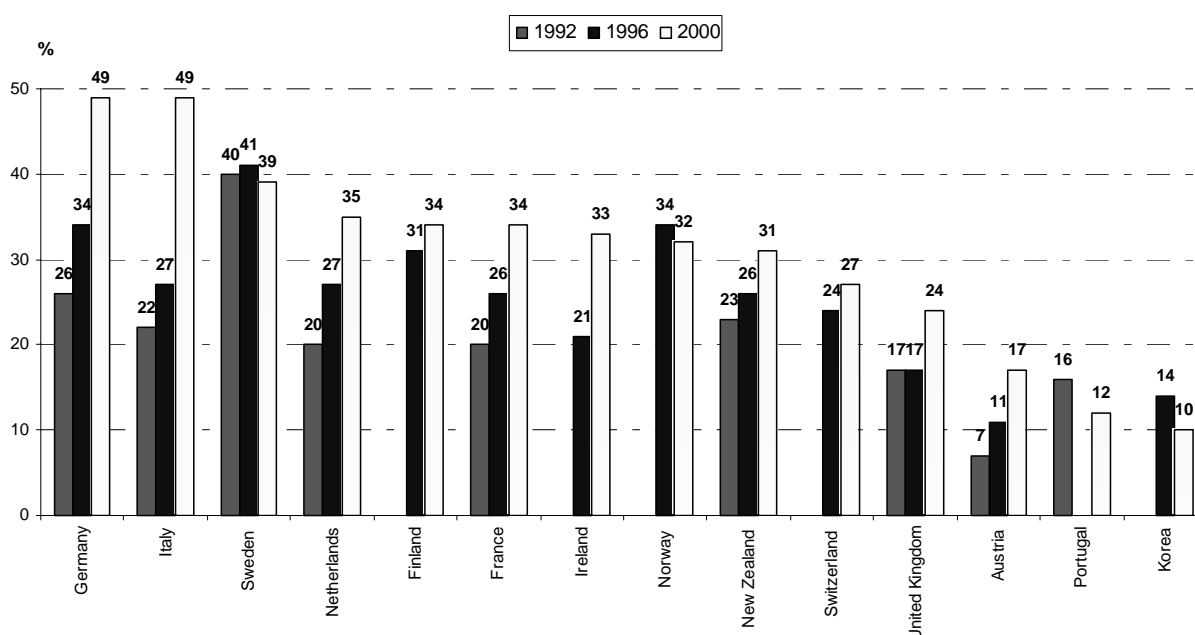
**Note:** Subjects are ranked in descending order of the cross-country mean percentage of upper secondary students attending schools where the principal reports that hiring fully qualified teachers is difficult. Proportions by study area are calculated for cross-country means. The countries covered are: Belgium (Fl.), Denmark, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

**Source:** OECD International Survey of Upper Secondary Schools (ISUSS) database, 2003. Published in *Education at a Glance 2003*.

19. In most countries, teaching is an ageing profession, which suggests that large numbers of retirements will occur in the next 5-10 years (see Figure 4). In addition, the attractiveness of the teaching profession to new entrants – as indicated by relative salaries and social status – has declined substantially in some countries in recent years. In 15 of the 21 countries with relevant data, the salary of a teacher with 15 years' experience grew more slowly than GDP per capita between 1996 and 2001. In some countries, a substantial number of teachers do not hold a full teaching qualification. In addition, the proportion teaching in fields in which they are not fully qualified is strikingly high.

**Figure 4. The teaching workforce is ageing**

Percentage of teachers aged 50 years and over, lower secondary education, 1992-2000



**Note:** Countries are ranked in descending order of the percentage of teachers aged 50 years and over in 2000, in lower secondary education. While data for 2000 include private and public sectors, data for 1992 and 1996 are limited to the public sector. 1992 data for France, the Netherlands, Portugal and the United Kingdom, 1996 data for Ireland and New Zealand, and 2000 data for Ireland and the Netherlands include the upper secondary sector. Data for 1992 for Germany refer to the former Federal Rep. of Germany and include government-dependent private institutions. 2000 data for Switzerland include only public institutions and 2000 data for Norway include the primary level. The 1992 figure for the United Kingdom is limited to England and Wales while the 1996 figure is limited to England and Scotland. The 2000 figures for Austria and Switzerland refer to 1999.

**Source:** OECD Education Database. Published in *Education Policy Analysis 2002*.

20. Another fundamental concern is ensuring that all students have high-quality teachers. For countries more severely affected by shortages, there is evidence that students in disadvantaged areas find themselves in classes with many of the least experienced and least qualified teachers. Policies to improve teacher recruitment and retention also need to address the equitable distribution of teachers across schools. In most countries there are perennial problems in how to identify and deal with ineffective teachers. Some groups in public discussion want to focus mainly on this question, to the detriment of the image and achievements of the large majority of teachers. Others do not want to admit that this is a real problem.

21. Teachers need support, challenge and reward if they are to perform well and wish to continue in the profession. The traditional approach to rewarding teachers relies mainly on uniform salary scales. These are based primarily on qualifications and experience and involve small annual increments spread over many years (on average 25 years in OECD countries). This approach needs reconsideration. Greater weight could be given to characteristics which are harder to measure – enthusiasm, commitment and sensitivity to student needs – but which may be more directly related to the quality of teaching and learning, or to direct assessment of student learning as a measure of teacher quality.

### *Questions for discussion*

- What policies are countries finding effective in attracting able people and established professionals from other careers to bring new skills into teaching and help meet demand in

subject areas experiencing acute shortages? How can the benefits of bringing different forms of "non-teacher" expertise into schools be realised, while avoiding any associated costs?

- How do countries ensure that high-quality teachers are equitably distributed across schools?

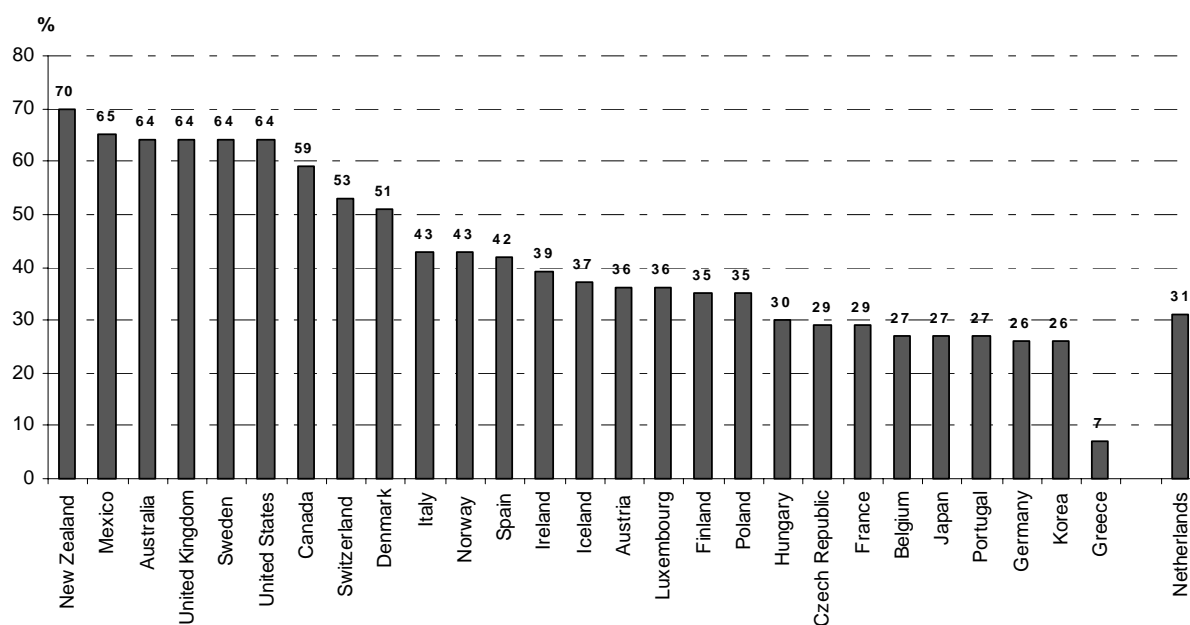
### **Improving teacher effectiveness: teachers as lifelong learners**

22. The demands on schools and teachers are becoming more complex. Society now expects schools to deal effectively with local community needs and a more diverse student population, to be sensitive to culture and gender issues, to promote tolerance and social cohesion, to respond effectively to disadvantaged students, to use new technologies, and to keep pace with rapidly developing fields of knowledge and approaches to classroom management and student assessment. The changing context of schooling brings its own challenges for ensuring a quality education. It brings a challenge for teachers to have the necessary knowledge, support and resources to meet students' needs effectively.

23. There are long-standing concerns in many countries about whether initial teacher education is sufficiently attractive to high-quality entrants, and whether it provides the skills and knowledge needed for effective teaching and learning. Reforms underway include providing more flexible pathways into teacher education, strengthening its research and knowledge base, lifting the status of teaching qualifications, and giving trainee teachers closer contact with schools. The teaching career is increasingly being seen in lifelong learning terms. Therefore, as well as attempting to lift the quality of initial teacher education, countries are seeking ways to provide systematic induction and support for beginning teachers, and opportunities and incentives for on-going professional development. Teachers' participation in professional development varies widely across countries (see Figure 5) as well as within countries. Most of those who will be teaching in 10 years are already working in schools. There are substantial challenges in ensuring that all teachers, and not only the most motivated ones, are lifelong learners, and in linking individual teacher development to school needs. A key strategy involves finding ways for teachers to share their expertise and experience more systematically. In some countries, far too many teachers do not have access on a continuing basis to research and information on effective practice. There is growing interest in ways to build cumulative knowledge across the profession, for example by strengthening connections between research and practice and encouraging schools to develop as learning organisations.

**Figure 5. There are large differences in teachers' participation in professional development programmes**

Percentage of teachers who attended a professional development programme in the previous 3 months, PISA schools 2000



**Note:** The Netherlands' response rate is too low to ensure comparability.

**Definition:** Principals were asked what percentage of teachers in their school have attended a programme of professional development in the last three months. The average country figure was computed weighting each school figure by the number of students enrolled in that school. Professional development was defined as: "Professional development is a formal programme designed to enhance teaching skills or pedagogical practices. It may or may not lead to a recognised qualification. The total length of the programme must last for at least one day and have a focus on teaching and education."

**Source:** OECD PISA 2000 at [www.pisa.oecd.org](http://www.pisa.oecd.org)

24. As "learning professionals", teachers need to possess a sophisticated understanding of the nature of teaching and learning in an increasingly diverse student population. They need to be able to relate this to a detailed profile of the learning achievements and difficulties faced by their students. They need to engage actively in shaping their teaching to such learning profiles — for example, through on-going formative evaluation, and understanding of the factors that influence individual student performance. This is a demanding agenda, and there is evidence that schools differ markedly in their capacity to respond effectively to it. The quality of school-level leadership is critical. Principals and other school leaders are important influences on how effectively schools improve student learning. They also significantly influence the extent to which teachers perform well, achieve job satisfaction, and continue to develop professionally. Improving the recruitment, training and support of school leaders is a key means of building teachers' skills and making teaching more effective.

*Questions for discussion*

- What strategies, structures and mechanisms are countries using to identify and disseminate effective teaching and assessment practices that lead to school improvement?
- How are countries ensuring that all teachers have the opportunities and incentives to be active lifelong learners, that schools develop as learning communities and that there are close connections between initial teacher education and schools?
- What criteria and processes are countries using to develop professional standards for teachers? How are these standards being used in teacher education, teacher evaluation and career development? What is the evidence on their impact?

## **FORUM: EDUCATION AND SOCIAL COHESION**

1. Raising the quality of learning for all is a challenging objective in the face of increasing diversity in student populations. The potential role of education in providing opportunities for all is widely recognised, while failure in this regard puts social cohesion at risk. A wide range of education policies support social cohesion, a complex and challenging objective with many policy dimensions. These bear on: status, income and cultural inequality; levels of social and civic participation; poverty; urban violence; crime; minorities; migration; children's learning difficulties; social exclusion and inclusion; and inequity in the distribution of educational opportunities.

### **Education can contribute to social cohesion**

2. The achievement of an equitable distribution of opportunities in both the economy and society, and the promotion of mutual respect and tolerance, are longstanding goals in themselves and essential to reach social cohesion. A number of education and training policies have the potential to contribute to these objectives. Schools and other educational institutions can play a key role, both as community meeting places and, more directly, in engaging potentially excluded individuals and groups in learning. A co-ordinated approach to school and home learning is particularly important.

3. Education interacts with social cohesion in a complex fashion. Interventions need to be implemented with caution, as they can have contradictory impacts. For example in some OECD countries, efforts to promote cultural identity can make individuals and ethnic groups feel more secure but they may also exacerbate social division. Some decentralisation policies can promote greater local initiative and control but they can also increase regional disparities. An approach geared to the particular requirements of individuals may conflict with the need to convey a shared culture through education.

### *Questions for discussion*

- What policies have countries introduced in their educational and training systems to enhance social cohesion and what were the major obstacles faced in introducing them? How have countries dealt with contradictory impacts: what do they give more importance to and why, with what results? What are the most effective mechanisms of coordination among social partners and other stakeholders in the implementation of policy measures?
- How can educational and training policies be best articulated with policies in other areas to promote social cohesion? Do countries have adequate mechanisms to evaluate the impact of these policies?

### **Dealing with increasingly diversified populations of learners**

4. Along with large and rapid changes in the social structure such as fewer children and globalisation, the social and cultural backgrounds of those who receive education are more varied than ever. Improved access to post-compulsory education has brought a new range of learners into that phase of education, personal interests have diversified, and a whole range of new skill requirements have emerged as a result of economic change. During the last decade, some OECD countries have experienced substantial increases in the proportion of immigrants. The school-age children of migrants often find themselves in a

new cultural environment, studying in a language of instruction that is unfamiliar to them and to their parents. Children with learning difficulties and other special needs are increasingly included in the mainstream educational system. Increasing diversity is a strength in terms of cultural richness and the range of skills available, and a challenge for lifelong learning.

***Questions for discussion***

- What are the main challenges that increasingly diverse populations of learners pose to education systems? What policy responses are necessary to address these challenges?
- How are increasingly diverse populations of learners seen as opportunities for social progress as well as economic growth? How can education policy enhance the capacity of teachers and schools to benefit from the diversity of the student population?