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## **OECD education systems leave many immigrant children floundering, report shows**

Many developed countries are failing to help children of immigrant families integrate into society through education. According to a new OECD study, immigrant children in some OECD countries lag more than two years behind their native counterparts in school performance, and a sizeable gap remains often even after accounting for socio-economic factors.

**Where immigrant students succeed** draws on the evidence of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tested 15-year-old students in 41 countries in mathematics, reading comprehension, science and problem-solving skills. It focused on 17 territories with large immigrant populations: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the U.S., among OECD countries, and three non-OECD PISA participants, the Russian Federation, Hong Kong-China and Macao-China.

The report spotlights the challenge facing education systems in helping immigrant populations integrate into their host societies. With migration likely to remain high and even increase, European countries, in particular, need to respond more effectively to socio-economic and cultural diversity in their student populations.

This means finding ways to ensure that immigrant children enter the labour market with strong basic skills and the capacity and motivation to continue learning throughout their lives. Doing nothing isn't an option, the data suggest: with unemployment rates in many countries two to three times higher among immigrants than among nationals, the cost of inaction may be far greater than the cost of action.

The report shows that more than a third of second-generation immigrant children in Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Norway and the United States, who have spent their entire schooling in the host country, perform below the baseline PISA benchmark for mathematics performance at which students begin to demonstrate the kind of skills that enable them to actively use mathematics. In all other OECD countries except Australia and Canada, at least 20% of second-generation immigrant children fall below this level.

And yet, at the same time, immigrant children express equal, if not more, motivation to learn mathematics than their native counterparts and very positive general attitudes towards school, suggesting that they bring with them a strong potential on which schools can build more effectively.

School systems differ widely in terms of their outcomes for immigrant children, the report makes clear. In some countries, such as Canada and Australia, immigrant children perform as well as their native counterparts. But in other countries, notably those with highly tracked education systems, they do substantially less well.

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Indeed, in many countries, the odds are weighted against students from immigrant families right from the start. They tend to be directed to schools with lower performance expectations, often characterised by disadvantaged student intakes and, in some countries, disruptive class-room conditions. In all but four countries under review, at least 25% of second-generation immigrant children attend schools where immigrants make up more than 50% of the roll-call. By comparison, this is the case for less than 5% of native children in all but two countries.

Language and the geographical origin of immigrant children may be additional factors, the report notes. But this is not sufficient to explain variations in performance between countries. Immigrant students whose families have come from Turkey tend to perform poorly in many countries. But they do significantly worse in Germany than they do in Switzerland.

Furthermore, in a number of countries, second-generation immigrant children still perform as badly as their first-generation counterparts. On the other hand, in some countries with high levels of immigration, the performance of second-generation immigrant children is much closer to that of native children and close to the national average, suggesting that public policy can make a difference. Many of the countries that do well on this measure have in common well-established language support programmes in early childhood education and primary school that have clearly defined goals, standards and evaluation systems.

For further information, journalists are invited to contact Andreas Schleicher, Directorate of Education (tel. 33 1 45 24 93 66 or <mailto:andreas.schleicher@oecd.org>).

*Where immigrant students succeed - A comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003* is available to journalists from the OECD's [Media Division](#) (tel.+ 33 1 45 24 97 00) or via the OECD's online library, SourceOECD, accessible through the [password-protected website](#). This report can be purchased in paper or electronic form through the OECD's [Online Bookshop](#). Subscribers and readers at subscribing institutions can access the online version via [SourceOECD](#).

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*Where immigrant students succeed - A comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003*  
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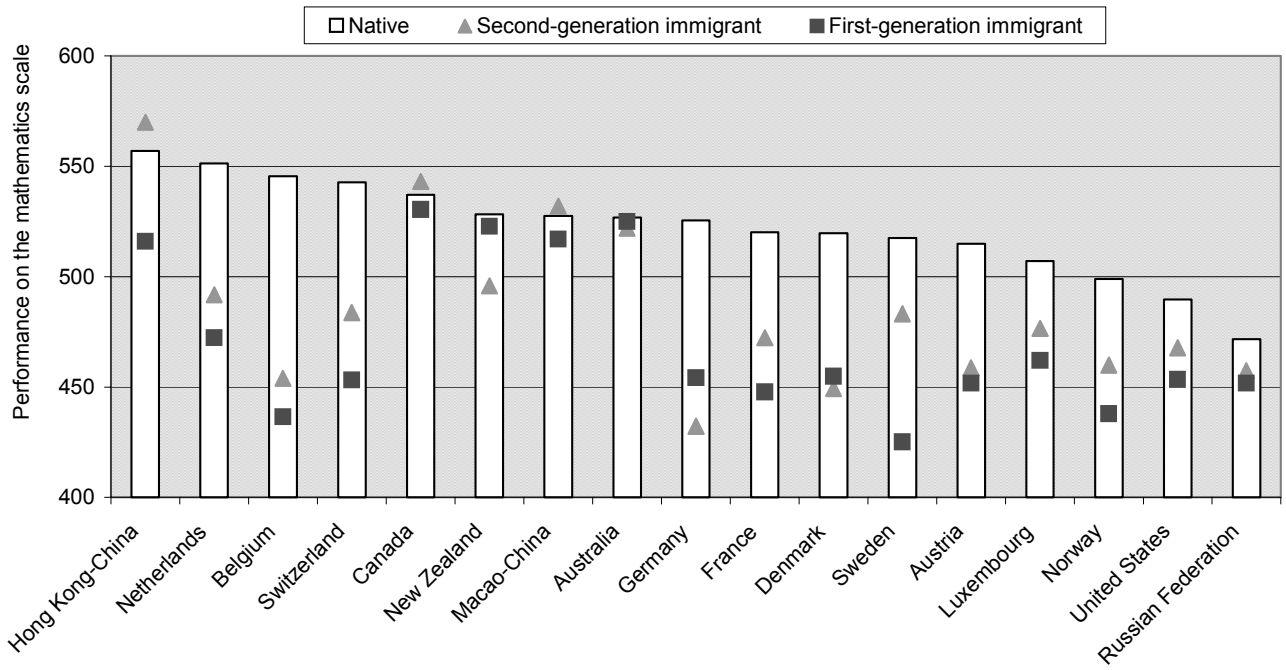
Table 2.1a  
Differences in mathematics performance by status (PISA 2003)

	Performance on the mathematics scale					
	Native		Second-generation immigrants		First-generation immigrants	
	Mean score	S.E.	Mean score	S.E.	Mean score	S.E.
<b>OECD countries</b>						
Australia	527	(2.1)	522	(4.7)	525	(4.9)
Austria	515	(3.3)	459	(8.8)	452	(6.0)
Belgium	546	(2.5)	454	(7.5)	437	(10.8)
Canada	537	(1.6)	543	(4.3)	530	(4.7)
Denmark	520	(2.5)	449	(11.2)	455	(10.1)
France	520	(2.4)	472	(6.1)	448	(15.0)
Germany	525	(3.5)	432	(9.1)	454	(7.5)
Luxembourg	507	(1.3)	476	(3.3)	462	(3.7)
Netherlands	551	(3.0)	492	(10.3)	472	(8.4)
New Zealand	528	(2.6)	496	(8.4)	523	(4.9)
Norway	499	(2.3)	460	(11.7)	438	(9.3)
Sweden	517	(2.2)	483	(9.8)	425	(9.6)
Switzerland	543	(3.3)	484	(5.0)	453	(6.1)
United States	490	(2.8)	468	(7.6)	453	(7.5)
<b>Average for the 17 OECD countries</b>	<b>523</b>	<b>(0.7)</b>	<b>483</b>	<b>(2.1)</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>(1.9)</b>
<b>Partner countries</b>						
Hong Kong-China	557	(4.5)	570	(4.6)	516	(5.3)
Macao-China	528	(5.9)	532	(4.1)	517	(9.2)
Russian Federation	472	(4.4)	457	(7.2)	452	(5.9)
Belgium (Flemish Community)	567	(2.9)	445	(10.7)	472	(10.0)
Belgium (French Community)	514	(4.3)	458	(9.6)	419	(14.4)

Notes:

1. Differences that are statistically significant are indicated in bold.
2. PISA did not test all 15-year-old students in all countries. The means are based on samples of 15-year-old students that represent the population of 15-year-old students in each country. The standard error (S.E.) denotes a level of confidence in how well the reported mean represents the whole population of 15-year-old students. A low figure means a higher level of confidence and a higher figure means a reduced level of confidence.

Figure 1. Performance in mathematics by status (PISA 2003)



Source: Where immigrant students succeed – A comparative review of performance and engagement in PISA 2003: Figure 2.2a.