

READING STANDARDS IN ENGLAND

What do the DfE statistics on reading and phonics at the end of Key Stage 1 and 2; the English language GCSE results; and the PIRLS 2021 study tell us about standards in England after 20 years of SSP being the primary approach to teaching reading.

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DFE STATISTICS: A CAUSE FOR SERIOUS CONCERN

The Rose Report (2006) recommended teaching beginning reading in England using a systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) only approach.

Rose (2006) considered that SSP '*offers the vast majority of beginners the best route to becoming skilled readers*' (Rose, 2006 page:19, paragraph:47).

What do the DfE statistics tell us about the size of the minority Rose (2006) recognized would not make adequate progress with SSP?

DfE (2016) statistics

Peer reviewed journal article

Koutsouris, G., Norwich, B., and Bessudnov, A. (2021). 'Interpreting RCT, process evaluation and case study evidence in evaluating the Integrated Group Reading (IGR) programme: A teacher-led, classroom-based intervention for Year 2 and 3 pupils struggling to read'. *Educational Review*. Vol. 73, issue 3, 346–373.

Koutsouris et al (2021) reported that in 2016 **20%** of children entering Key Stage 2 in England were delayed or non-start readers.

DfE (2019) Pre-covid statistics based on the DfE statutory assessments for end of Key Stage Reading Standards and the Phonics Screening Check (PSC)

In 2019, 25% of children failed to meet the standards set for reading at the end of Year 2 (6-7 year old children). This 25% is made up of 9% who failed the phonics test in Year 2 and a further 16% who passed the phonics test. These statistics provide evidence that teaching systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) alone, is insufficient for reading success for the 16% who had demonstrated sufficient phonics knowledge to pass the test, as well as the 9% who failed the phonics test.

25%

failed to meet the standards set for reading at the end of Year 2 (end of Key Stage 1 ,England)

is made up of



9%

who failed the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) at the end of Year 2

+

16%

who passed the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) at the end of Year 2

DfE (2023) Post-covid statistics

DfE statistics published in October 2023 for the school year 2022/2023 found that 11% of children failed the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) at the end of Year 2, which is the end of Key Stage 1 in England, and 32% of children failed to meet the standards set for reading. Year 3 in Northern Ireland is equivalent to Year 2 in England.

In the school year 2022/2023, 27% of children did not meet the standards set for reading at the end of Key Stage 2 (11 years of age).

11% Failed the Phonics Screening Check (PSC) at end of Key Stage 1 (2022/23)	32% Did not meet the reading standards at end of Key Stage 1 (2022/23)	27% Did not meet the reading standards at end of Key Stage 2 (2022/23)
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[gov.uk — Phonics screening check and key stage 1 assessments: England 2016](#)

[Phonics screening check and key stage 1 assessments in England 2019](#)

[Explore education statistics — Key stage 1 and phonics screening check attainment 2022-23](#)

In England, after the 2022–23 school year, the statutory end-of-Key Stage 1 reading assessment became non-statutory. From 2023–24 onwards The Department for Education made the KS1 assessments optional. The Phonics Screening Check remains statutory.

ENGLISH GCSE 2026 – GRADE 4/C OR ABOVE ("STANDARD PASS")

- **England:** the proportion of 16-year-olds achieving a grade 4 or higher in English language fell slightly to 70.6%, down from 71.2% the previous year.
- **Northern Ireland:** 84% of students received grade C/4 or above in English Language, up from 82.5% the previous year.

70.6% England: grade 4+ in English (16-year-olds)	84% Northern Ireland: grade C/4+ in English
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Northern Ireland's English pass rate (84%) is noticeably higher than England's for 16-year-olds (70.6%) — this reflects a long-standing pattern of Northern Ireland outperforming England at GCSE overall.

CONCERNS ABOUT HOW THE PIRLS 2021 READING RESULTS WERE REPORTED IN SUPPORT OF SSP POLICY IN ENGLAND

Due to the variation in the collection of data because of COVID-19, interpretation of the PIRLS results is not straightforward and should be considered with caution because the results could not be reported in a precise way OUCEA (2023: p5).

England's performance on the PIRLS International scale in 2022 (England collected their data one year later in 2022 not 2021) was 558 which is one point **below** the score that they achieved when the data was collected in 2016. 'Pupils in Northern Ireland significantly outperformed those in 52 of the 56 other PIRLS participating countries' (NFER, 2023: p4) and that includes England who was 6th in the rankings.

England was one of the 52 countries who were significantly below the top 5 performing countries (Table 1). The Republic of Ireland scored 577 significantly outperforming Northern Ireland (566) and was the second highest performing country in the PIRLS (with Singapore rating highest). Significant specifically means statistically significant at the 5% level. It is important to note that unlike England, the Republic of Ireland did not adopt a systematic synthetic phonics approach to teaching early reading.

558 England PIRLS 2022 score	566 Northern Ireland PIRLS 2021 score	577 Republic of Ireland PIRLS 2021 score
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England was one of 6 countries who delayed their data collection by a year which may explain why their score from 2016 only dropped by one point allowing them to move up the rankings, whereas the International Median dropped 19 points between 2016 and 2021, and most education systems scored significantly lower in PIRLS 2021 than they did in PIRLS 2016 because of the disruption caused by Covid-19 and resulting school closures in the school year 2020-2021.

To be clear, 37 countries assessed *'fourth grade'* children the end of the school year 2021. 14 countries assessed these children a few months later after the summer break at the beginning of fifth grade in 2021 to ensure more participants (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland being 2 of these 14 countries). 6 countries delayed assessing children at the end of *'fourth grade'* until one year later in 2022 (England was one of these 6 counties).

Fourth grade is the term used by the Boston College, Massachussettes, USA who had a central technical and analytic role in PIRLS 2021 (see the attached table). The international age of participants was around 10 years old on average.

England and five other countries had a full school year of relatively uninterrupted teaching and learning in a normal classroom setting. It is reasonable to suggest that this was an unfair advantage given the greater stability in schools in the school year 2021/2022 compared to the disruptions and school closures in the school year 2020/2021. Even with an additional school year England did not outperform Northern Ireland and The Republic of Ireland who were two of 14 countries (highlighted in pink in Table 1) who delayed the collection of their data until after the summer break in 2021. This is unlikely to have resulted in any advantage for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland because both countries take all of July and August off and a fall-back in progress is common after a long summer break.

Wyse and Bradbury (2025) highlight how the PIRLS 2021 international ranking data were used selectively — for example, claiming success in 2023 with politicians in England claiming “best readers in the world”. These claims were later shown by fact-checkers to rely on excluding higher-scoring countries.

Table 1 on the next page shows the results for all 57 countries.

pirls2021.org — Results: Achievement Overall

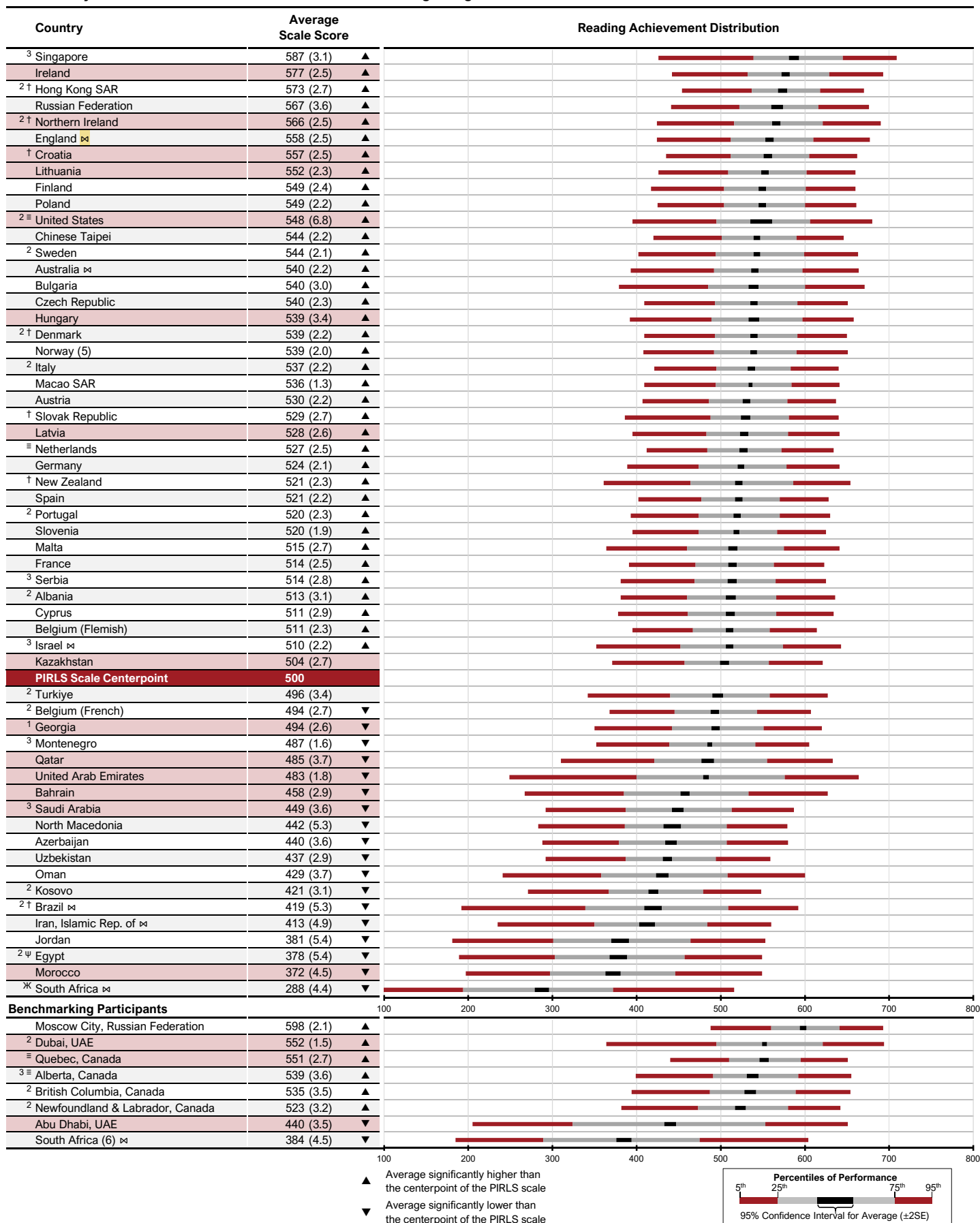
Exhibit 1.3: Average Reading Achievement and Scale Score Distributions

TABLE 1

Assessed Fourth Grade Students at the End of the School Year

✕ Assessed one year later than originally scheduled

■ Delayed Assessment of Fourth Grade Cohort at the Beginning of Fifth Grade



The PIRLS achievement scale was established in 2001 based on the combined achievement distribution of all countries that participated in PIRLS 2001. To provide a point of reference for country comparisons, the scale centerpoint of 500 was located at the mean of the combined achievement distribution. The units of the scale were chosen so that 100 scale score points corresponded to the standard deviation of the distribution.

() Standard errors appear in parentheses. Because of rounding some results may appear inconsistent.

See Appendix A.2 for population coverage notes 1, 2, and 3. See Appendix A.5 for sampling guidelines and sampling participation notes †, ‡, and ≡.

ψ Reservations about reliability because the percentage of students with achievement too low for estimation exceeds 15% but does not exceed 25%.

* Reservations about reliability because the percentage of students with achievement too low for estimation exceeds 25%.

Issues identified in Albania's data quality led to reduced comparability and framework coverage.

South Africa continued investigating its PIRLS 2021 results at the time of publication and will deal with the findings through its national report.

SOURCE: IEA's Progress in International Reading Literacy Study - PIRLS 2021

Downloaded from <https://pirls2021.org/results>

