

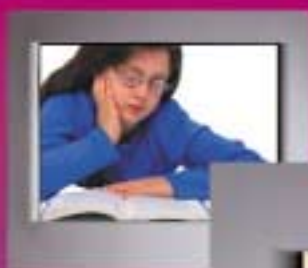


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# Student Engagement at School

A SENSE OF BELONGING  
AND PARTICIPATION

RESULTS FROM PISA 2000



OECD

Programme for International Student Assessment



*The PISA survey not only measures the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds, but also asks them about whether they feel they fit in at school, and about their class and school attendance.*

## A measure of engagement at school

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a powerful tool for measuring internationally the outcomes of education systems. The first three-yearly survey was conducted in 2000 with results first published in 2001 (see box below).

The countries that collaborate in this programme want to provide comparable evidence on a range of characteristics of students approaching the end of compulsory education. This means not just assessing their literacy in reading, mathematics and science, but also using a questionnaire to examine some of the wider attributes of students, their

attitudes and their activities. These characteristics can have a bearing on students' current performance as well as their longer-term development as lifelong learners.

This report looks at what PISA 2000 found out about the engagement at school of 15-year-old students. Specifically, it looks at two measures: their sense of belonging in terms of whether they feel they fit in at school, and their participation in terms of their class and school attendance. These are not the only possible measures of school engagement: students who are disengaged or disaffected might also be

identified for example as those who do not do their homework, are involved in disruptive activities or display negative attitudes to teachers and other students. However, research shows that the questions on belonging and participation posed to students in the PISA questionnaire give useful indications about the degree to which students are more generally engaged and able to benefit from their schooling. PISA makes it possible, for the first time in such a large international survey, to look at these characteristics alongside the actual performance of students in acquiring knowledge and skills.

### What is PISA?



- A three-yearly survey, starting in 2000, of knowledge, skills and other characteristics of 15-year-olds in the principal industrialised countries and in other countries around the world. Around 315,000 students in 43 countries have completed pencil-and-paper tests in their schools, and filled out questionnaires about themselves. Schools also provided background information through questionnaires.

- A new way of looking at student performance, assessing young people's capacity to use knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. PISA assesses literacy in reading, mathematics and science, as well as asking students about their attitudes and approaches to learning.

- A unique collaboration among countries to monitor educational outcomes. Co-ordinated by the participating governments through the OECD, the survey drew on leading expertise throughout the world to improve information on student outcomes and give countries benchmarks for improvement.

Participating in PISA 2000: 43 countries (see list on next page) – 32 in a first wave and a further 11 administering the same survey in 2001. The results reported here are on 42 countries. Romanian results are excluded due to delayed submission of data. In the Netherlands, the school response rate was too low to ensure international comparability, but the Netherlands results are reported here.

*For secondary education to have satisfactory outcomes, students need to feel that they belong, and participate, at school.*

School is central to the daily life of most 15-year-olds. They view schooling as essential to their long-term well-being. Yet not all young people feel that they belong at school, and some show a lack of engagement in terms of their **attitudes** and **behaviours**. Researchers have recently identified the importance of these twin aspects of engagement.

On the one hand, a psychological element of engagement refers for example to what students think about school, about teachers and about themselves in the school environment. This can be examined with measures of students' "sense of belonging".

On the other, a behavioural element of

engagement refers for example to school and class attendance, completing homework, paying attention and involvement in extra-curricular activities. This is examined with measures of student "participation".

Students who are not engaged in school may under perform and leave school with inadequate qualifications. Much research on engagement has focused on this link with academic performance. However, this report treats belonging and participation as important school outcomes in their own right. Evidence points to the likelihood that students who are not engaged at school will continue to experience difficulties in adulthood, with a lower chance of

participating in further education beyond secondary school and greater chance of experiencing further psychological and social difficulties. Thus meeting the needs of young people who have become or risk becoming disaffected with school is one of the biggest challenges facing teachers and school administrators.

## Analysis of the results

The following pages summarise the OECD's analysis of PISA's key findings on engagement (presented in full in **Student Engagement at School – A Sense of Belonging and Participation** - order details on the back cover), in terms of:

- ▲ the extent of students' sense of belonging at school, in different countries and among schools within each country (pages 4-5);
- ▲ the extent to which students participate by attending school and classes, in different countries and among schools within each country (pages 6-7);
- ▲ the relationship between students' sense of belonging, their participation and their performance at school (pages 8-10);
- ▲ the relationship between the two aspects of students' engagement and their family backgrounds and other characteristics (pages 11-13);
- ▲ the relationship between students' engagement and characteristics of their schools (pages 14-15).
- ▲ Conclusions from the study and policy implications are considered on pages 16-17.

### The countries taking part

OECD member countries (all OECD members except the Slovak Republic and Turkey):

Australia	Japan
Austria	Korea
Belgium	Luxembourg
Canada	Mexico
Czech Republic	Netherlands
Denmark	New Zealand
Finland	Norway
France	Poland
Germany	Portugal
Greece	Spain
Hungary	Sweden
Iceland	Switzerland
Ireland	United Kingdom
Italy	United States

Non-OECD members:

Albania  
Argentina  
Brazil  
Bulgaria  
Chile  
Hong Kong-China  
Indonesia  
Israel  
Latvia  
Liechtenstein  
FYR Macedonia  
Peru  
Romania  
Russian Federation  
Thailand

## HOW STRONG IS STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING?

*On average nearly a quarter of students aged 15 express negative views about how well they fit in at school. Within each country, and within most schools, a significant proportion of students have a low sense of belonging.*

Students' sense of belonging was measured by asking them about their feelings about school as a place. The questions are shown opposite.

Students' answers are likely to depend on their own social confidence as well as on their feelings about school. However, research evidence on engagement supports the use of the overall response to these questions as an indicator of whether students feel that they belong in the school environment, and as a consequence are well placed to develop personally and academically. Those students with the most negative responses risk becoming disaffected.

The findings show major variations among students within countries in terms of their sense of belonging (see page 5), with significant proportions in each country reporting that it is low. Most countries were strikingly similar in this respect, with between a fifth and a quarter of 15-year-olds having low

sense of belonging in the majority of OECD countries, and the average score for sense of belonging (not shown) being similar across countries. However in three countries, Japan, Korea and Poland, the average is much lower, and well over a third of students have a low sense of belonging.

To what extent are students who feel that they do not belong at school concentrated in particular schools within each country? This question is important for education policy, since it helps establish the extent to which disaffection is associated with features of the school system itself or the way it interacts with students and schools in particular circumstances.

The table to the right of the graph on page 5 gives an indication of between-school differences in each country. It shows the proportion of students with low sense of belonging in two contrasting schools in each country,

based on their ranking in terms of how many students have low sense of belonging. The first column is the "5th percentile" school - only 5% of schools have fewer students who express low sense of belonging than this one. The second is the "95th percentile" - where more students show low sense of belonging than in 95% of schools.

In some countries there are wide between-school differences. In Poland for example, well over half of students in some schools and only just over a quarter in others have low sense of belonging. In Portugal the range is from 13% to 31%. In other countries such as New Zealand and Sweden there is almost no difference. Importantly, there are few schools in any country in which fewer than about 10% to 15% of students have low sense of belonging. Therefore, no school is immune from this problem, and a strategy that is only targeted at certain schools will not be able to address it fully.



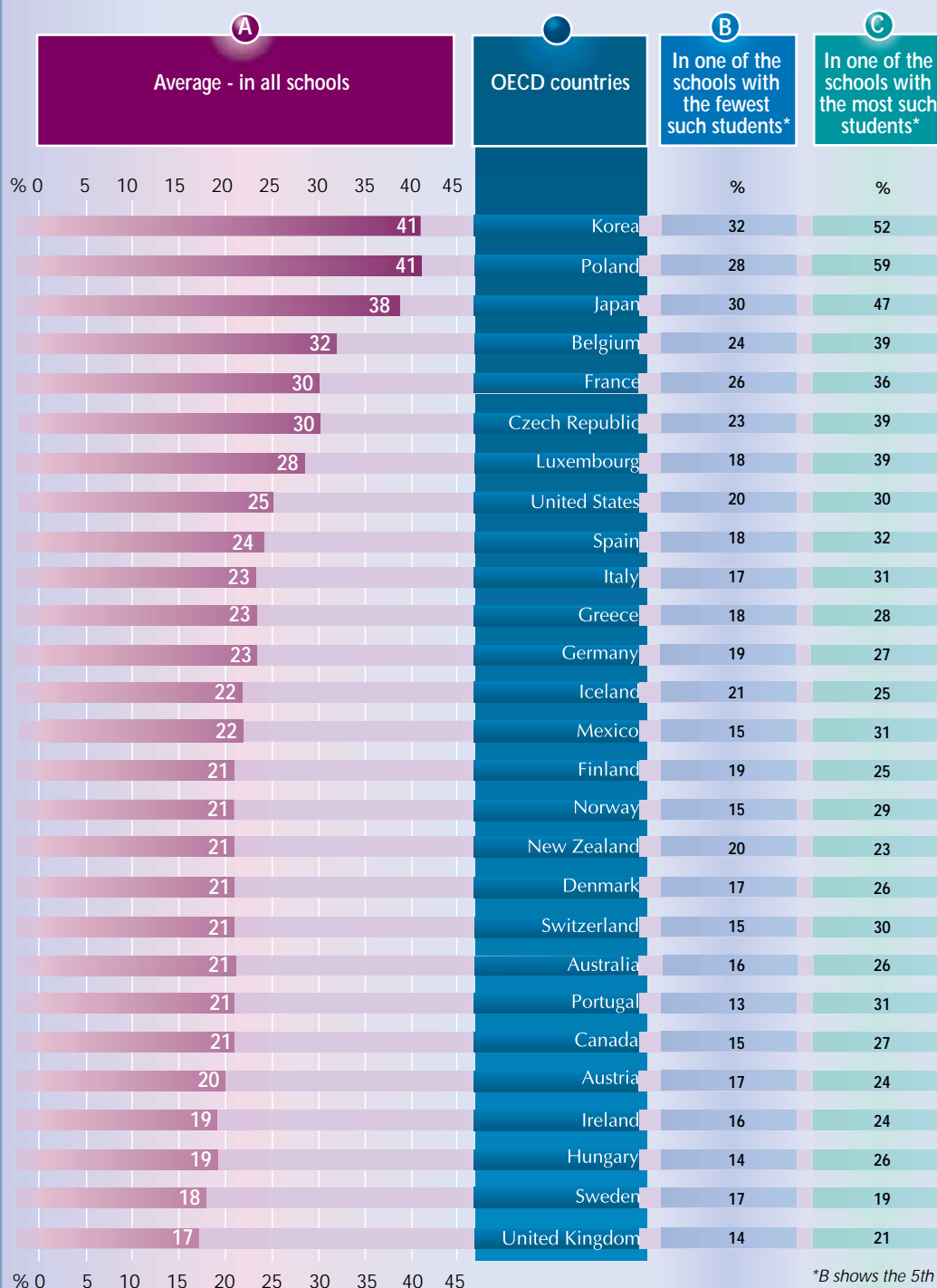
## Percentage of students in each OECD country who have a low sense of belonging

### "Sense of belonging"

Students were asked whether they strongly agree, agree, disagree or disagree strongly, in each case, that:

- School is a place where:  
 a. I feel like an outsider (or left out of things)  
 b. I make friends easily  
 c. I feel like I belong  
 d. I feel awkward and out of place  
 e. Other students seem to like me  
 f. I feel lonely

A score for each student's sense of belonging was calculated based on their answers. Students who feel that they "belong" can be expected on average at least to "agree" with the positive statements and "disagree" with the negative ones. Those with a lower average score are classified as having a "low sense of belonging". This does not mean that they express negative attitudes overall, but they do in at least one respect.



\*B shows the 5th percentile school: in only 5% of schools do fewer students have a low sense of belonging. C is the 95th percentile: more students have a low sense of belonging than in 95% of other schools.



## HOW GOOD IS STUDENT ATTENDANCE OF SCHOOL AND CLASSES?

*On average one 15-year-old student in five has recently been missing school, been arriving late or been skipping classes. The rate varies widely across countries, and among different schools within countries.*

PISA measured student participation using a self-reported measure of absenteeism, described opposite. This is an imperfect measure. Its accuracy may be affected by whether students reply honestly and the fact that some absent students do not answer the survey – in both cases this makes it likely that PISA under-estimates the rate of low participation. On the other hand, some absence may be caused by legitimate reasons like illness, rather than disaffection. Another imperfection is that non-participation has many facets, and students may start out not doing homework or participating in class and end up playing truant regularly. Absenteeism measures the latter, more serious end of this sequence. Thus the PISA measure shows relevant and valuable comparative information about participation, without claiming to measure it comprehensively.

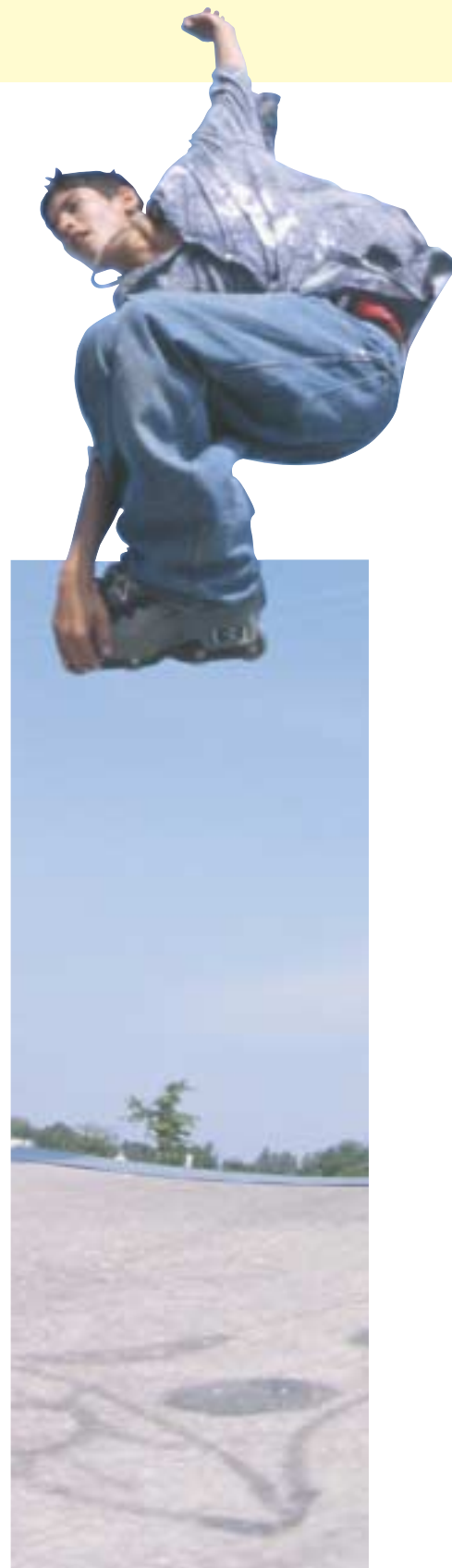


The findings show that significant numbers of students have recently experienced multiple episodes of missing school or classes, or lateness. In most countries at least 15% report this; in six countries it is over 25%, including Spain, where it is around a

third of students. On the other hand, only a tiny minority of Korean and Japanese students report such absences – only 8% and 4% respectively. Interestingly, these are countries where some of the highest proportions of students report low sense of belonging at school, while Sweden has relatively high absenteeism but fewer students who do not feel they belong.

Overall, students in countries with **lower** participation levels tend to have on average a **higher** sense of belonging, and vice versa: there is a significant negative association between these two variables at the country level. However this does not mean that an individual student who scored well on one measure was likely to have a low score on the other (see page 8). Rather, it suggests that the general conditions that are favourable to students attending school in a particular country are not necessarily favourable to them feeling positive about being at school.

Absentee rates typically vary more than low sense of belonging rates across different schools within a country. The table to the right of the diagram gives an idea of the range – showing the rates for schools at the 5th and 95th percentiles in each country (see explanation on page 4). Although in most countries the great majority of schools have at least 10% of “absentee” students, the problem tends to be substantially greater in certain schools than in others. For example in Belgium, some schools have over a third of students reporting absence, while others have only 4%. In some Spanish schools over half of students are absentees, in others fewer than one in five. Only in Sweden is this difference very narrow, with 90% of schools within about three percentage points of the average absentee rate of 24%.



## Percentage of students in each OECD country with low participation at school

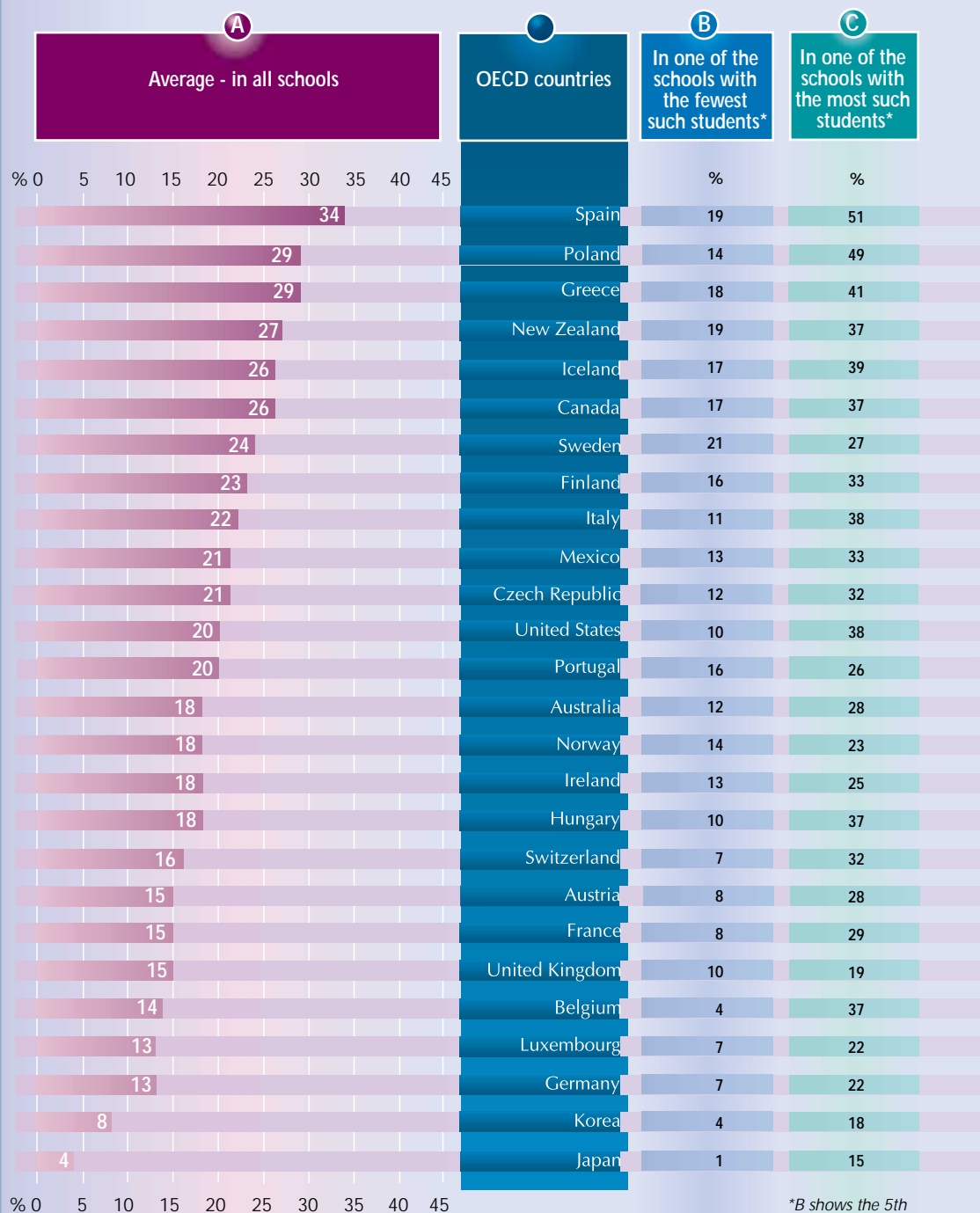
### "Participation"

*Students' participation is measured according to how many times in the past two weeks they say that they:*

- missed school
- skipped classes
- arrived late

*Students have "low participation" if they report a frequency of at least:*

- "1 or 2 times" to all three items, OR
- "3 or 4 times" to "missed school", OR
- "3 or 4 times" to both "skipped classes" and "arrived late for school".

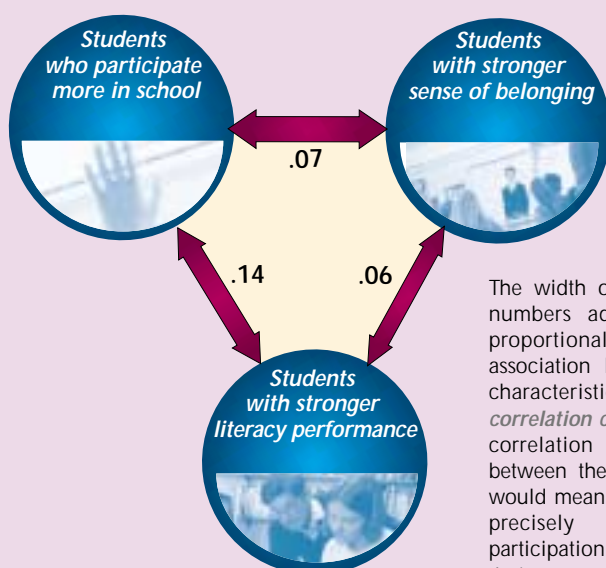


# HOW DOES STUDENT ENGAGEMENT RELATE TO ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE?

*Students who are not engaged at school perform on average somewhat below their peers, but the main benefit of engaging students is unlikely to be a dramatic improvement in their performance.*

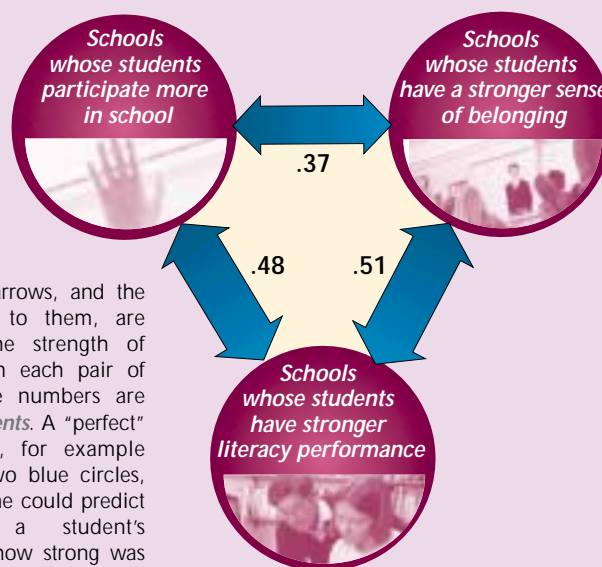
## Associations between engagement and performance

### a. Among individual students



The width of the arrows, and the numbers adjacent to them, are proportional to the strength of association between each pair of characteristics. The numbers are *correlation coefficients*. A “perfect” correlation of 1.0, for example between the top two blue circles, would mean that one could predict precisely from a student’s participation level how strong was their “sense of belonging”. A correlation of zero means no discernible association.

### b. Among schools



PISA identified wide variation in the reading, mathematical and scientific literacy levels of students within each country. To what extent can this be attributed to the fact that some students are more engaged at school than others?

The diagram above shows that there is only a very weak association between students who have a stronger sense of belonging and those who perform better in the PISA assessments. (The results for mathematical and scientific literacy performance are very similar to those shown for reading in the diagram.) There is a more distinct, but still weak association between participation and performance among individuals. However, in both cases there is a moderately strong association between **schools** in which students are engaged

and those with good overall student results.

These findings do not show the direction of causation, and it cannot therefore be inferred, for example, that efforts to increase school engagement are likely to lead to better academic performance. However, they do provide strong evidence that an emphasis on engagement of students at a school – ensuring that they feel that they belong and that they participate in school activities – is unlikely to be at the expense of academic performance, or vice versa. Positive attitudes among students appear to be complementary to school success.

Another notable feature of the diagram is that relationships between the two aspects of student engagement – sense

of belonging and participation – are not in general strong. In other words, different students tend to have difficulties in these two respects. A closer analysis of groups of students is therefore helpful, to identify different “clusters” of students with various sets of characteristics. The results, shown in the diagram on page 10, have been obtained by creating a typology of students using “cluster analysis”, a technique to classify a population group according to similarities in terms of a range of characteristics.

- ▲ “Top students” comprise a group of high performers in reading and mathematical literacy, who also have above-average levels of engagement (ie high participation and sense of belonging).



- ▲ Another group of students is also “engaged”, but has only average literacy performance. Note that there are about as many students in this category as “top students”, for whom high engagement and high performance goes together.
- ▲ Many of the most disengaged students fall in the next two groups, with respectively a low sense of belonging and a high absentee rate. However, in each case they are not necessarily weak in the other aspect of engagement or in performance. Conversely, the weakest performers, characterised as “non-academic”, are not always disengaged.
- ▲ Most students with a low sense of belonging (as defined on page 4) are in the “students feeling isolated” cluster. On average they do not have difficulties in the other respects.
- ▲ About half of the students with low participation fall in the “Absent students” group; they tend to under-perform academically, although not by a huge amount. Many of these students may already have decided upon a post-secondary destination that does not require high secondary school grades. It is important to note that most students who have very low academic performance at age 15 are **not** absent from school or class on a regular basis.



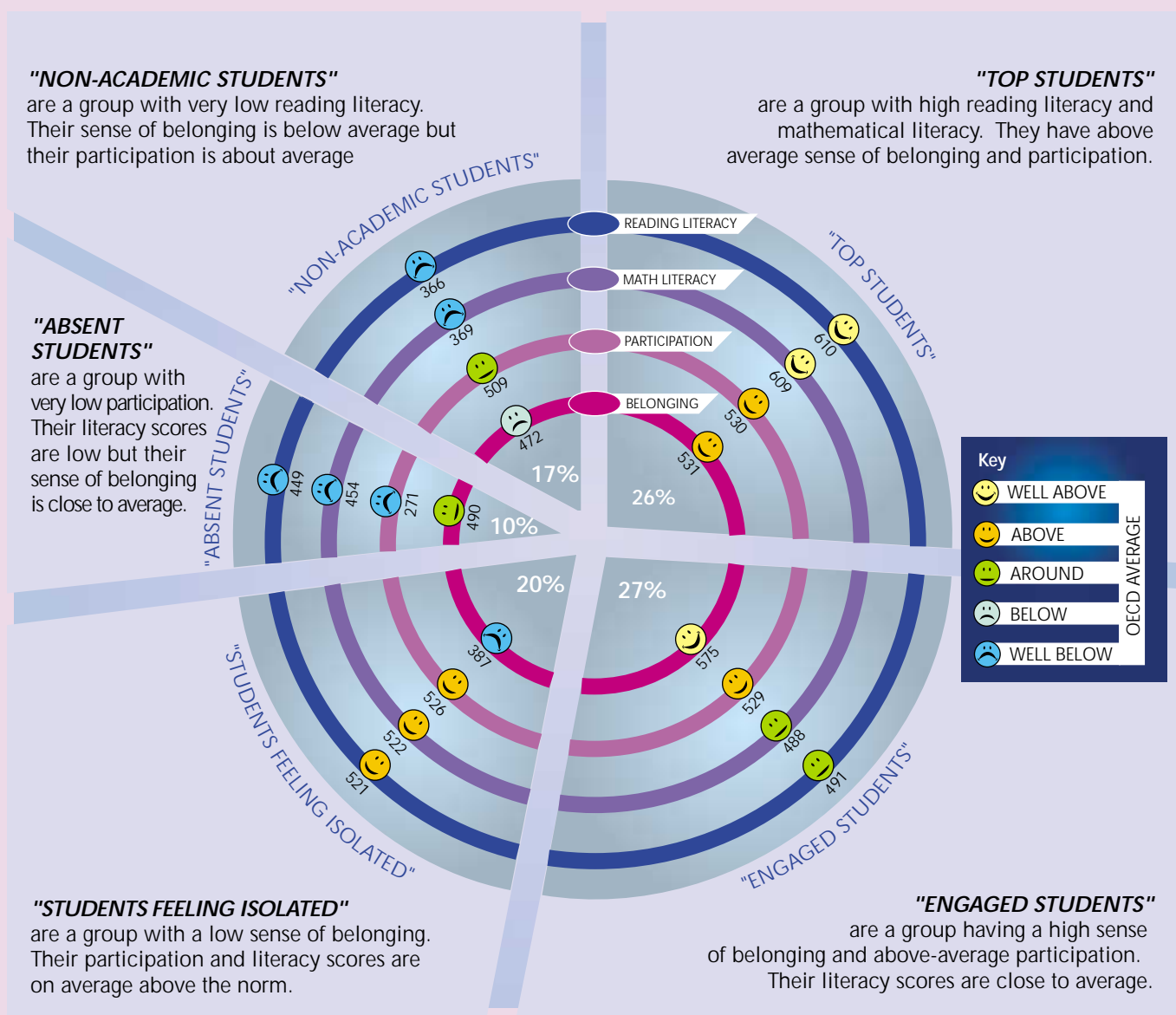
These findings contradict certain conceptions about disengagement from school. The feeling that one does not belong at school is not simply an attitude that feeds poor performance, but one that can be felt by students at all performance levels. Moreover, while students from more advantaged social backgrounds are much more likely to do well academically (more likely to be in the first and less likely to be in last group shown in the diagram - page 10), social background is more weakly associated with engagement than it is with performance (see page 11). In particular, the chance of being in one of the clusters of students characterised by low engagement (the third and fourth groups shown - page 10) is similar across socio-economic groups.

Two particular messages for policy arise from this picture. One is that different kinds of school intervention are needed to help people with different kinds of problem – those just targeted at lower-performing students, for example, will not reach most of those students who lack a sense of belonging or who are regularly absent. The other is that efforts to increase school engagement may not result in large gains in academic performance. Rather, the justification for such interventions needs to derive from the benefit of school engagement as an outcome in its own right – and one that will affect students’ futures as adults.



## Five types of student

Characterised by their engagement and performance  
(relative to an OECD average of 500\*)



\* The numbers shown here indicate, as an average score for each cluster, the literacy performance and engagement of students relative to others from OECD countries participating in PISA 2000. They are calculated on scales for which 500 is the OECD average and two-thirds of OECD students score between 400 and 600.

*Students with certain backgrounds are more likely to be disengaged, but the differences are often modest.*



To what extent do students who are regularly absent from school or class, or who have a low sense of belonging at school, come from less advantaged family backgrounds? The findings from this study show a degree of association between certain family factors and disengagement. However it is important to note

- a) that this effect is not as great as the association between family background and student performance – and thus it would be wrong to claim that students with home disadvantages perform worse mainly because they are not engaged at school;
- b) that a large proportion of students

who are disengaged are not from disadvantaged homes, so it would be misguided to tackle disengagement only by concentrating on students from certain backgrounds.

Nevertheless, the extra difficulties faced by some disadvantaged groups less likely to be engaged in school are significant and should not be ignored. The graphs below show that students with three types of characteristic are on average between a quarter and over a third more

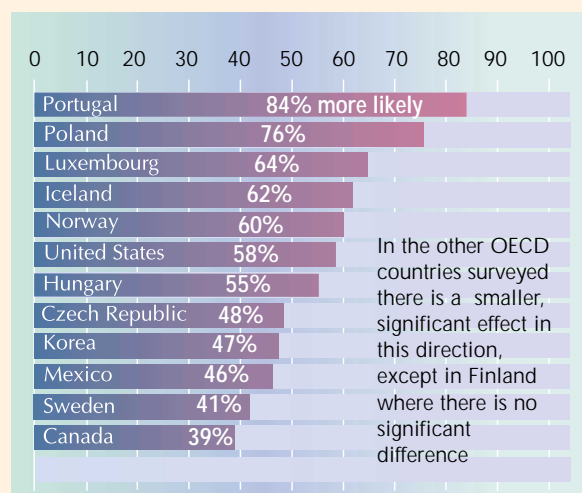
likely to have low participation, low sense of belonging, or both. Students from less advantaged socio-economic and from foreign-born backgrounds are particularly more likely to feel they do not belong, while those with a single parent are more likely than their peers to have high absence rates. Note however that only in the case of socio-economic background is a significant difference noted in most countries for both sense of belonging and participation.

### Three student characteristics associated with sense of belonging and participation

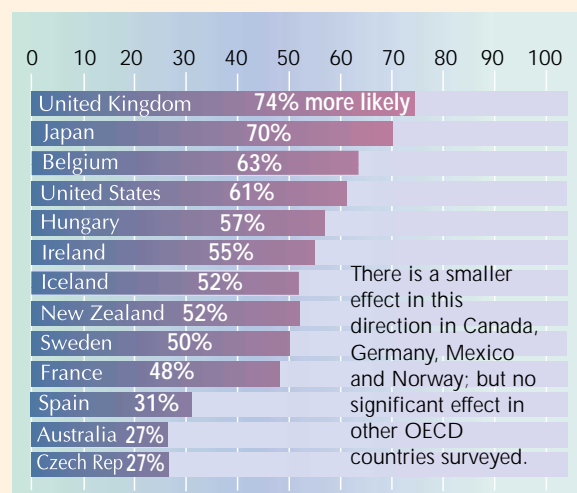
#### 1. Having a disadvantaged social background

The quarter of students with least favourable backgrounds, measured by parental occupation and education, are:

- ▲ **38% more likely** than students of medium social background to have *low sense of belonging*, on average in OECD countries; and more so in:



- ▲ **26% more likely** than students of medium social background to have *low participation*, on average in OECD countries; and more so in:





## ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT BACKGROUND

*Students with certain backgrounds are more likely to be disengaged, but the differences are often modest.*

In the case of students with single parents or who are foreign-born, which in some countries are quite small groups of students for which sample sizes are therefore limited, it is often impossible to say with confidence whether this association exists.

The results also show that:

- ▲ Students from the quarter of students with the **highest** socio-economic status are about 14% **less likely** to feel they do not belong at school than students from average social backgrounds. This is a

significant difference, but much smaller than the **disadvantage** experienced by the least advantaged students compared to the average (a 38% greater chance of low sense of belonging). The most advantaged group is, on average across the OECD, no less likely to have low participation; although in some countries they are significantly less so, in three countries, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland, privileged students are significantly **more likely** to report absences. Thus overall, there is not a continuous increase in the likelihood of being engaged among students with progressively

higher socio-economic status, but rather a particular risk factor for the students from the worst-off families.

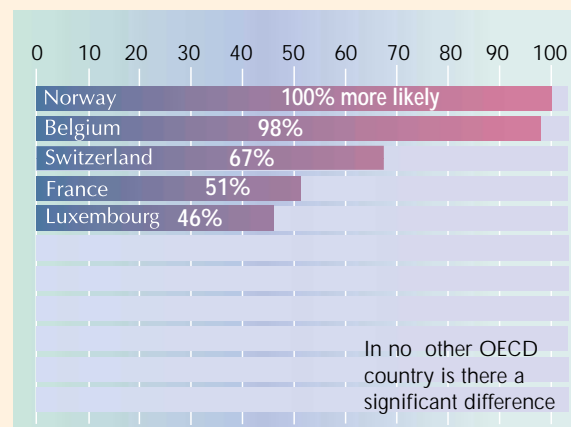
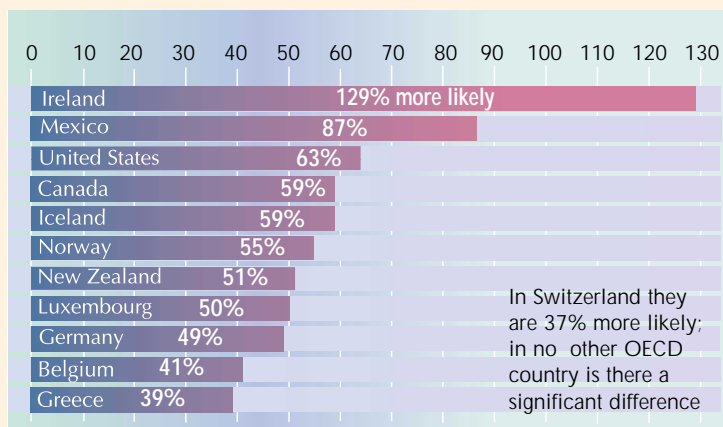
- ▲ The compounded effect of multiple disadvantages on the chance of having low engagement can be considerable. For example a foreign-born student whose parents have low socio-economic status can be estimated to be nearly 90% more likely on average to have a low sense of belonging
- ▲ Girls are 7% less likely on average to have low participation than boys. There is no overall difference in the

### Three student characteristics associated with sense of belonging and participation

#### 2. Being foreign-born

Foreign-born students are:

- ▲ **37% more likely** than native-born students to have **low sense of belonging**, on average in OECD countries, and more so in:
- ▲ **30% more likely** than native-born students to have **low participation**, on average in OECD countries, and more so in:



The graphs above show those associations found to be strongest, on average in OECD countries, and identify the individual countries that exceed these averages.

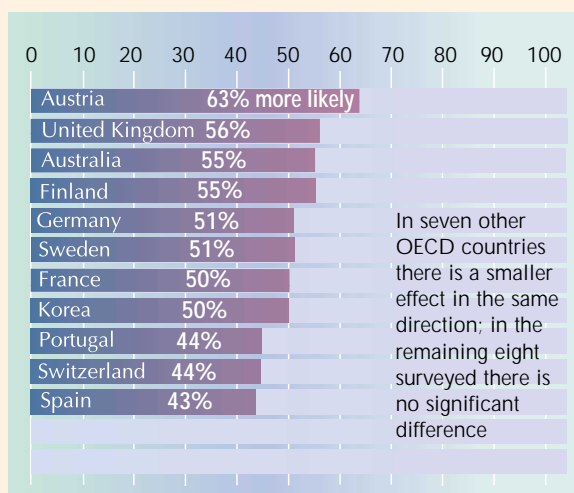


chances of boys and girls having low sense of belonging, but significant differences in some countries. In Korea girls are 40% more likely; in the United States 25% less likely than boys to feel they do not fit in. There are also considerable differences within countries in the relative chance of boys and girls having this characteristic in different schools. These variations in the relative degree to which boys and girls have a sense of belonging in a school environment points to a need for deeper analysis within countries of underlying causes of school disaffection.

### 3. Having a single parent

Students with single parents are:

- ▲ **40% more likely** than other students to have *low participation*, on average in OECD countries, and more so in:



NB: The figures in this diagram and those on two preceding pages represent "relative odds". For example if 20% of girls and 30% of boys have a certain attribute, boys are said to be 50% (not 10%) more likely to have it than girls.



*The chance of students not feeling that they belong at school or being absent is greater in schools with certain features.*

The PISA study has shown that where one goes to school makes a difference to predicted performance. An important finding of the first report on PISA 2000 (*Knowledge and Skills for Life, OECD, 2001*) was that student literacy levels are closely associated with socio-economic background, not just of the individual student but of his or her peers. Other things being equal, students do better if they go to school with people from more advantaged homes, and this is particularly true for individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Student performance is also associated with a wide range of characteristics of schools relating to resources, school practices and climate. No one such factor has a decisive influence.

Does where you go to school also make a difference to predicted levels of engagement? The graphs on pages 5 and 7 above show considerable variation in the proportion of students with low engagement in different schools within each country. Further analysis, whose results are summarised in the graph opposite, identifies characteristics of schools associated with student engagement. In each case, the effect on the probability of a student having low engagement is shown for each factor. A wide range of characteristics were considered, including student-teaching staff ratios, quality of school infrastructure and teacher morale, but only the results where substantial differences were observed are shown. (These calculations “control” in each

case for the interaction with other factors: they show, for example, the separate effect of good student relations on the chance of low participation, after taking account of the fact that in schools where students get on with their teachers, there may also be a stronger disciplinary climate which could contribute to student attendance.)

These results reinforce the importance of student background at the school level. They show that students attending schools where many other students are in the bottom quarter by socio-economic status are more likely than those at other schools to feel that they do not belong and to miss school or lessons. However, it is notable that the converse was not observed: schools with more students in the top quarter socio-economically do not systematically have fewer disengaged students.

Only a small number of characteristics of school life are clearly associated with engagement levels across countries, but the nature of these characteristics is interesting. None of them reflect directly the resources being spent on a school; rather, three factors relating to school and classroom climate are significant. This shows that there are things that schools can do to help keep students engaged that do not necessarily require spending more money – maintain a strong disciplinary climate, good teacher relations and high expectations for student success.



## The most pronounced school effects

Certain characteristics of schools are associated with a reduced risk of students experiencing a low sense of belonging or low participation. Fewer students show these characteristics in schools where:

- The **social profile** of the school is more favourable



**The indicator that was used:**  
percentage of students in the school whose parents are in the bottom quarter of the socio-economic distribution



**The effects observed:**

In a school where the proportion of less-advantaged students is 10 percentage points lower than another school (eg 30% rather than 40% are in the bottom quarter), students are:

5 per cent less likely to have low sense of belonging, and

7 per cent less likely to have low participation

- **Student-teacher relations** are relatively strong



**Indicator:**  
ranking of school, internationally, according to scores showing the extent to which students say they get on with teachers and find them helpful and fair



**Effects:**

In a school that is 10 percentage points higher up these rankings than another school (e.g. scores better than 50% of schools rather than 40%), students are:

5 per cent less likely to have low sense of belonging; and

4 per cent less likely to have low participation

- The **disciplinary climate** is relatively strong



**Indicator:**  
ranking of school, internationally, according to scores showing whether or not students feel their classes are disrupted



**Effects:**

In a school that is 10 percentage points higher up these rankings than another school, students are:

2 per cent less likely to have low sense of belonging; and

5 per cent less likely to have low participation.

- Students feel greater **pressure to achieve**



**Indicator:**  
ranking of school internationally, according to whether students say that teachers want them to work hard and do well



**Effects:**

In a school that is 10 percentage points higher up these rankings than another school, students are:

No less likely to have a low sense of belonging, but

3 per cent less likely to have low participation.

## KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Student engagement at school can be seen as a **disposition** that allows one to learn, work and function in a social institution. The PISA survey found that significant proportions of students have low levels of engagement at age 15, which limit their capacity to benefit from school and constrain their potential in the future. One in four students feel that they do not belong in a school environment in at least one respect, and about one in five report being regularly absent from school. On the other hand, this should not hide the fact that just over half of students, as classified on page 10 above, belong to groups that combine high engagement in school with average or high performance.



Seven key findings of this report are that:

- ▲ The prevalence of disaffected students (with low sense of belonging or low participation) varies significantly across schools in each country. This is only weakly linked to students' social background; there is thus scope for school policy and practice to help engage more students.
- ▲ Students in schools with strong levels of engagement tend to perform well, showing that academic performance and engaging students are complementary rather than alternatives.
- ▲ However, for individual students, performance and engagement do not always go hand in hand. While a quarter of students are both highly engaged and high achievers, a similar proportion are highly engaged but have average achievement. Students with lower levels of engagement are spread among those with high, low and medium literacy performance.
- ▲ The quarter of students from families with the lowest socio-economic status, students from lone parent families and foreign-born students are more likely to be disaffected. However, those from the quarter of families with the highest socio-economic status are not much less likely than average to show low levels of engagement.
- ▲ Students attending schools where there is a concentration of students from families with low socio-economic status are more likely to be disaffected, suggesting probable peer effects.
- ▲ In schools with a strong disciplinary climate, good student-teacher relations and high expectations of students, engagement is on average higher. This suggests that the culture of schools plays a key role.

### Implications for public policy

When looking at student engagement at age 15, it could be argued that one gets a distorted picture of students at the peak of disaffection as a normal part of adolescent development. Does engagement at this age therefore matter? One reason it may do is that disaffection at this age can potentially be a precursor to the onset of more serious problems among vulnerable young people. If family and school interventions can at least dampen the rise of disaffection at this stage, subsequent benefits can result. Moreover, the last few years of secondary school comprise a critical transition stage in which young people prepare for entry into further education or the labour market. Engagement at this age is likely to influence young people's futures greatly. Furthermore, other research suggests that feeling included and being engaged in one's social environment are essential to people's health and well-being.





Can schools influence student engagement? This study shows clearly that many schools have indeed managed to engage their students, and that in some countries there are wide differences in the performance of different schools in this respect. The findings suggest that the climate of schools, more than resources, can make a significant difference. However, individual countries need to study more closely what factors lie behind these differences and what school policies and practices are helping to engage students.

More generally, reforms across education systems need to find ways of designing and targeting effective interventions to engage disaffected students. This is not easy, given that the findings show a surprisingly large number of students who lack a sense of belonging or have low levels of participation even though they cannot be identified by low achievement or social disadvantage. This suggests that programmes in schools to meet particular needs of disaffected students

will have to pay considerable attention to access and selection. Some such programmes might aim to enhance knowledge of post-secondary education and employment opportunities; others might focus more on building social skills.

Some educators argue that only a wholesale restructuring of schools can today succeed in engaging the most disaffected teenagers. PISA cannot provide a blueprint for such restructuring, but suggests some key characteristics that it might aim to foster. In particular, it points to the importance of an orderly and positive

school climate in keeping students engaged, and the potentially damaging effect of policies that lead to a concentration of students from the least advantaged backgrounds in particular schools.

Thus PISA has shown that there is a significant minority of students who are disaffected from school in each country, and identified some of the tools to tackle the task of raising student engagement. However, it provides only a broad understanding, and challenges countries to study more closely the nature of the problem locally, along with which solutions work best.

# Student Engagement at School

## A SENSE OF BELONGING AND PARTICIPATION

### RESULTS FROM PISA 2000

How widespread is student disaffection with school in different education systems? What policies and practices are most effective in fostering students' sense of belonging and participation in school? These questions are of great concern to educators in many countries, not only because of the interrelationship between student engagement at school and learning outcomes, but also because student engagement represents a valued outcome in itself.

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) offers a unique opportunity to study student engagement within an internationally comparative framework as students approach the end of compulsory schooling. PISA provides not only information on students' literacy skills, but also on their attitudes and values, their social backgrounds, and on important features of the schools they attend.

This report examines several aspects of student engagement at school. The results indicate that the prevalence of disaffected students varies considerably both within and among schools in most countries, and that this variation is not attributable solely to students' family backgrounds. The analyses also identify some of the school factors related to student engagement and provide evidence that achieving strong student engagement at school does not have to be at the expense of academic performance.

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a collaborative process among the 43 participating countries, bringing together scientific expertise from the participating countries and steered jointly by their governments on the basis of shared, policy-driven interests. PISA is an unprecedented attempt to measure student performance across countries, as is evident from some of its features:

**The literacy approach:** PISA aims to define each domain (reading, mathematics and science) not merely in terms of mastery of the school curriculum, but in terms of the knowledge and skills needed for full participation in society.

**A long-term commitment:** Over the decade to come, it will enable countries regularly and predictably to monitor their progress in meeting key learning objectives.

**The age-group covered:** By assessing 15-year-olds, i.e. young people near the end of their compulsory education, PISA provides a good indication of the overall performance of school systems.

**The relevance to lifelong learning:** PISA does not limit itself to assessing students' knowledge and skills but also asks them to report on their own, self-regulated learning, their motivation to learn and their preferences for different types of learning situations.

#### Further information and on-line ordering:

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