

4th-Graders Losing Ground on Literacy

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The Associated Press

Wednesday, November 28, 2007; 1:28 PM

WASHINGTON -- U.S. fourth-graders have lost ground in reading ability compared with kids around the world, according to results of a global reading test.

Test results released Wednesday showed U.S. students, who took the test last year, scored about the same as they did in 2001, the last time the test was given _ despite an increased emphasis on reading under the No Child Left Behind law.

Still, the U.S. average score on the Progress in International Reading Literacy test remained above the international average. Ten countries or jurisdictions, including Hong Kong and three Canadian provinces, were ahead of the United States this time. In 2001, only three countries were ahead of the United States.

The 2002 No Child Left Behind law requires schools to test students annually in reading and math, and imposes sanctions on schools that miss testing goals.

The U.S. performance on the international test of 45 nations or jurisdictions differed somewhat from results of a U.S. national reading test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the nation's report card. Fourth-grade reading scores rose modestly on the most recent version of that test, taken earlier this year and measuring growth since 2005. During the previous two-year period, scores were flat.

On the latest international exam, U.S. students posted a lower average score than students in Russia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Luxembourg, Hungary, Italy and Sweden, along with the Canadian provinces of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario.

Last time, Russia, Hong Kong and Singapore were behind the United States.

Hong Kong and Singapore have taken steps since then, such as increasing teacher preparation, providing more tutoring and raising public awareness about the importance of reading, said Ina Mullis, co-director of the International Study Center at Boston College, which conducts the international reading literacy study.

The results also showed:

_Among jurisdictions that took the test in 2001 and 2006, scores improved in Germany, Hong Kong, Hungary, Italy, Russia, Singapore, the Slovak Republic and Slovenia.

_Average test scores declined in England, Lithuania, Morocco, the Netherlands, Romania and Sweden. England, the Netherlands and Sweden were the top three performers in 2001. Sweden still outperformed the United States this time, but average scores in England and the Netherlands were not measurably different from the U.S. average.

_Girls scored higher than boys in the United States and all other countries except for Luxembourg and Spain, where the boy-girl scores were the same.

The average U.S. score was above the average score in 22 countries or jurisdictions and about the same as the score in 12 others. The U.S. average fell toward the high end of a level called "intermediate." At that level, a student can identify central events, plot sequences and relevant story details in texts. The student also can make straightforward inferences from what is read and begin to make connections across parts of the text.

Background questionnaires administered to students, teachers and school administrators showed that the average years of experience for fourth-grade teachers in the United States decreased from 15 years to 12 years between 2001 and 2006. The international average was 17 years.

U.S. kids seem to get more reading instruction than others. U.S. teachers were more likely to report teaching reading for more than six hours per week than those elsewhere.

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