

# Home and School

**Family background accounts for less than half of the variation in PISA literacy scores.**

**By Sarah Schmidt**

In the spring of 2000, Canada participated in the Programme for International Assessment (PISA), primarily a survey of the reading skills of 15-year-old youth among member countries of the OECD. As shown in the top figure, Alberta students had the best literacy skills in Canada.

A new analysis of the PISA results concludes that the province's stellar performance is partly due to the socioeconomic (SES) background of its students, who tend to be wealthier than their counterparts in other provinces.

The bottom figure shows how the provinces would rank if their students had equal SES backgrounds. In terms of raw scores, Quebec placed third, but first when adjusted for SES.

An analysis of the PISA results show that Quebec does a good job of reaching its most vulnerable populations. Its results display a relatively narrow gap in achievement between students from affluent and modest backgrounds.

"Sometimes we get too complacent and say, "These schools can't do well because the kids are from poor backgrounds," said University of New Brunswick professor Douglas Willms who prepared the study for Statistics Canada.

Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Ontario have the widest gaps in performance between rich and poor, while Saskatchewan's results indicate the fewest inequalities in performance among students with different backgrounds, followed by Manitoba, British Columbia, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island.

"Overall, there's quite a strong relationship within Canada between reading performance and SES. If you look at kids with high SES backgrounds, they'll be a full grade level above by the time they're 15 years old," said Dr. Willms.

## Reading Scores\* PISA 2000

1. Alberta
2. British Columbia
3. Quebec
4. Saskatchewan
5. Ontario
6. Manitoba
7. **Canadian Average**
8. Nova Scotia
9. Newfoundland
10. Prince Edward Island
11. New Brunswick

\*Adjusted for :

- *Measurement and Sampling Error*

"That said, there are a lot of children who are resilient; they do well despite their SES background, and there are kids from relatively rich backgrounds that don't do well. It's just one factor that's to be considered."

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\*Adjusted for:

- *Measurement and Sampling Error*
- *Family Background*
- *School Context*

Dr. Willms compared students of similar SES backgrounds in each province, meaning wealthy students were compared with wealthy students and poor were compared with poor, to find out where an average student might have the best chance of success.

Using this type of analysis, Quebec students did the best in the country, Dr. Willms said, receiving a score of 539. Alberta's score dropped to 535 from the top of the pack at 550 when adjusted for SES, ahead of Saskatchewan (529), British Columbia (528), Manitoba (526), and New Brunswick (503).

Ontario, meanwhile, dropped from 533 to 519 points after adjusting for family wealth.

The study shows that while a student's SES background is a key factor, it accounted for less than half of the variation in provincial literacy scores.

Schools do make a difference, the survey concludes, pointing out there are exemplary schools in every province that do well regardless of the SES background of their students.

Dr. Willms said the best model is a mixed public school that blends kids from all SES levels.

"We don't need to have kids segregated in rich or poor schools. Some of the best schools are inclusive schools serving kids from a wide range of backgrounds. It really is possible to have high achievement in a strong public school system."

Important positive variables are: strong teacher-student relations, positive disciplinary climate, high expectations, and amount of time spent on literacy activities.

*(Adapted with permission from "Alberta students most literate, but poor left behind", National Post, July 15, 2004. The complete study is at [www.statcan.ca/cgi-bin/downpub/listpub.cgi?catno=81-595-MIE2004012](http://www.statcan.ca/cgi-bin/downpub/listpub.cgi?catno=81-595-MIE2004012))*