

Teens Haven't Improved Math, Reading Scores

International test shows Canadian youth didn't enhance standings in these areas

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Canadian teenagers slipped slightly in reading and stayed the same in math in an international ranking, according to results released yesterday.

Despite significant gains in science announced last week, students did not make improvements to their relatively strong standings in literacy and mathematics in the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a comprehensive survey of 15-year-olds in 57 countries conducted in 2006.

"When you're world class, it's good to know you're still there. And probably once you reach a certain point at the top, success doesn't come in big leaps and bounds as it did when you were at the bottom," said Kelly Lamrock, New Brunswick's Education Minister and chair of the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. "But I also think, given our resources and our development, we could set a goal of being first in the world."

The provincial breakdown showed that Alberta was tops in science in Canada and second in the world only to Finland. Alberta was also the highest-ranking province in reading, while Quebec students were best in math.

Atlantic provinces dominated the bottom of the Canadian rankings, with New Brunswick lowest in science, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick tied for last in reading and PEI lowest in math. However, they were above the OECD average.

The test, which is known as PISA, assesses 15-year-olds in reading, math and science every three years. It is a key international benchmark that education officials look to for direction in developing policy.

Canada's decline in the reading standing - students were fourth over all in 2006, compared with third in 2003 - is due to large gains by Hong Kong. Canada's raw score was the same in the two testing cycles, meaning that student attainment has not declined.

"Although Canada's performance in reading is strong, in order to maintain its competitive edge in the future, the performance of Canadian 15-year-olds will need to improve at the rate of other leading countries," said Sange de Silva, Statistics Canada's director-general responsible for the Centre for Education Statistics.

In math, young Canadians were seventh both in 2006 and 2003. However, average scores slipped a bit, to 527 last year from 532 in 2003. PISA's scoring scale sets OECD countries' average performance at about 500.

On science, however, students made large gains, sitting in third place over all, compared with 11th in 2003. However, officials warned against comparisons for science because the nature of the assessments varied. PISA focuses on one of the three domains in each testing period, and the 2006 survey was the first to concentrate on science.

Douglas Willms, an education professor at the University of New Brunswick, said future tests may show gains for Canada because several provinces enacted reforms largely focusing on the early grades after the 2000 survey results. "I would remain optimistic that things will improve when we start to see some of those effects working their way through the system."

The test also found:

Girls and boys performed about the same on the combined science scale, except in Newfoundland and Labrador, where girls did better.

Nationally, boys had higher scores in math and girls were better in reading, but the gap between the two was much larger in reading.

Students in minority-language school systems in five provinces - specifically French schools in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Ontario and Manitoba, and English schools in Quebec - had lower science scores than those in majority-language school systems.

Non-immigrant students did better in science than immigrants, a gap that was especially pronounced in Quebec. However, Canadian newcomers do better than immigrants to other OECD countries.

Youngsters had higher science scores if they had at least one parent with a postsecondary education.

Students from families with higher socioeconomic status also did better in science, but socioeconomic status has a smaller effect on achievement in Canada than it does in other OECD countries.

In Canada, 22,000 students from about 1,000 schools wrote the PISA test last year.