



**PIRLS**  
**2026**



**PIRLS 2026**

# **ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORKS**

**Matthias von Davier**  
**and Ann Kennedy,**  
**Editors**

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Matthias von Davier, Ann Kennedy, Editors

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For more information about PIRLS contact:

TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center

Lynch School of Education and Human Development

Boston College

Chestnut Hill, MA 02467

United States

tel: +1-617-552-1600

e-mail: [timssandpirls@bc.edu](mailto:timssandpirls@bc.edu)

[timssandpirls.bc.edu](http://timssandpirls.bc.edu)

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# Foreword

IEA (The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) implements large-scale assessments with partner organizations worldwide to better understand education practices, processes, policies, and educational outcomes. By providing expertise and continually innovating and improving sound research within its expanding global network, IEA studies provide a foundation for learning about education across and within these systems. IEA strives to improve quality teaching and learning around the world through the collection and provision of reliable, valid, and comparable data on a variety of subjects.

Investigations into reading comprehension have been conducted by IEA since as early as 1960, as it was one of the five subject domains assessed within the IEA Pilot Twelve-Country Study conducted with 13-year-olds. This evolved further in 1970 and 1971 under the umbrella of the Six Subject Survey, which assessed 14-year-olds in two areas of reading-related education: a continuation of reading comprehension as well as the additional topic of literature education. IEA also supported the Faculty of Education at the University of Hamburg in 1990 and 1991 in investigating the reading literacy of 14-year-olds in the Reading Literacy Study.

It was clear that the need for data on how well students were reading was essential to the utility of education data, and there was support to see this grow in a way that could measure trends over time in a consistent and reliable manner. This idea evolved into PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study), which was launched in 2001 with 35 participants spanning five continents. Unlike its predecessors, this study focused on fourth-grade students in the critical period when they are transitioning from learning to read to reading to learn.

From its origin, PIRLS has assessed the cognitive processes involved in comprehension, the various purposes that drive reading, and investigated the behaviors and attitudes that underlie reading literacy. Examining reading comprehension focuses on how students process and understand written information and the reasons they engage with texts. Meanwhile, the student questionnaire examines students' reading behaviors and attitudes. Additionally, the parent, teacher, and school questionnaires provide insights into the home and school environments that support or hinder reading literacy development.

PIRLS has continued to monitor progress in reading literacy every five years since 2001, with a steady increase in global participation that reached 65 education systems in 2021. The study's evolving design showcases the innovation and updates that keep each cycle at the forefront of research in education whilst still maintaining trend capabilities. This is exemplified in the shift from

a paper assessment to a digital assessment, which began with some countries in PIRLS 2016 and will be fully implemented for all participants in the 2026 cycle. Regardless of assessment medium and cycle, PIRLS continues to provide internationally comparative data on how well children read by assessing fourth-grade students' reading achievement and offers policy-relevant information for improving teaching and learning.

The results from PIRLS 2021 offered valuable insights into the state of reading literacy among fourth-grade students globally. While most students attained at least basic reading proficiency around the world, the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education was evident. Achievement trends showed declines in reading performance in 21 out of 32 countries with comparable data between 2016 and 2021. The disruptions caused by the pandemic adversely affected learning for two-thirds of students on average, according to their parents.

Despite these challenges, PIRLS 2021 highlights some positive findings. Results underscored the importance of early literacy activities and a conducive learning environment at home. Most students attended schools with supportive environments that emphasized academic achievement and minimized resource shortages or disciplinary issues.

As we continue to learn from these results through thematic reports and trend analysis in future cycles, it is crucial to address the pandemic's effects and continue promoting equitable access to quality education worldwide. With 58 education systems set to participate, the fully digital PIRLS 2026 offers a comprehensive, global perspective on reading comprehension among fourth-grade students.

Because PIRLS 2026 completes the transition to a fully digital assessment, all students from the participating education systems will get to participate in an engaging and interactive reading assessment. This system will enable students to participate in a unified reading assessment that reflects their diverse reading experiences both in and out of school. The digital environment also provides the opportunity to collect process data which can give insights on how students interact with the digital assessment. This allows for opportunities to make inferences about the response strategies and processes used by students. The innovation in PIRLS development is also reflective in the use of a group adaptive design model as well as the use of automated scoring.

These frameworks provide further context about the different aspects of PIRLS 2026. These frame the context of the research and data that will be collected during the assessment cycle. IEA studies develop their assessment frameworks alongside countries cooperatively, which is an important cornerstone of keeping them involved and the content relevant for all involved. This also reflects the collaborative efforts behind studies like PIRLS. I am grateful for all of the National Research Coordinators and their teams who participated in these efforts in particular, as well as all of the work they do through the other aspects of the PIRLS cycle.

These endeavors are also greatly supported by the pioneering and innovative work of the TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development and especially the authors of the assessment framework: Matthias von Davier, Ann Kennedy, Erin Wry, John Sabatini, Katherine A. Reynolds, Audrey Gallo, Maya Komakhidze, Liqun Yin, and Pierre Foy. Thank you as well to the IEA Amsterdam and IEA Hamburg colleagues who continue to support this study through its twenty-five years of trend data.

I further extend my thanks for the high-quality creation of PIRLS 2026's assessment items and context questionnaires, led by the PIRLS team at Boston College, and supported by the outstanding expertise of international development partners as well as the PIRLS 2026 Reading Development Group and Questionnaire Development Group. The Expertisecentrum, Netherlands, as well as reading literacy experts from the University of Memphis, USA, also provided great assistance for PIRLS passages, and I am likewise grateful for the important sampling support from Research Triangle Institute International.

IEA's Publications and Editorial Committee, chaired by Seamus Hegarty, provided review and guidance for the authoring, reviewing, and publication process, while IEA's Technical Executive Group remained an important consultation source for technical aspects of the study to ensure sound design and implementation.

The high-quality information in *PIRLS 2026 Assessment Frameworks* is supported by many teams and individuals worldwide coming together. Thank you all for your contributions, insights, and hard work. I am especially thankful to the countries who chose to participate in this study. The commitment to collect scientifically sound data about the experiences of students, teachers, parents, principals, and schools remains at the heart of this important work. Thank you to each individual involved in this endeavor and became part of the tapestry that is PIRLS 2026 data.

Dirk Hastedt  
Executive Director, IEA

# Introduction

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has been monitoring international trends in reading achievement among fourth-grade students for 25 years. As a critical point in a student's education, the fourth year of schooling establishes the foundations of literacy, with reading becoming increasingly central to learning across all subjects.

PIRLS complements the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) at the fourth grade. Both studies are directed by the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College, which works closely with IEA Amsterdam and IEA Hamburg.

PIRLS serves as a cornerstone in assessing the reading proficiency of fourth graders, providing a critical benchmark to understand young learners' reading achievement in a dynamic global landscape. In 2021, PIRLS introduced a targeted assessment design developed to allow adaptivity of the difficulty of the assessment to match students' reading achievement in participating countries. This transition also included integrating interactive, digital reading formats through ePIRLS blocks that simulate web-based reading. Over half of the participants made the shift to a digital format, while a linking (bridge) sample facilitated the transition.

PIRLS 2026 represents a significant milestone in the assessment's history by completing the transition to a fully digital reading assessment. This move reflects PIRLS' commitment to leading the field and staying relevant in an era where digital literacy is essential for every child's education. By embracing the digital reading assessment format, PIRLS 2026 aims to create an engaging, authentic assessment experience that aligns with young learners' daily digital reading practices. Additionally, technology enhances assessment practices, including more efficient data collection, innovative test design, and automated scoring.

The *PIRLS 2026 Assessment Frameworks* consist of three chapters covering major assessment components:

1. Reading Assessment Framework (Chapter 1): Describes the aspects of reading literacy assessed in PIRLS.
2. Contextual Framework (Chapter 2): Addresses topics covered in the PIRLS 2026 context questionnaires and Encyclopedia.
3. Assessment Design (Chapter 3): Presents the rationale and procedures for the group-adaptive assessment design.

Updates to the PIRLS 2026 framework chapters involved contributions from National Research Coordinators (NRCs) in participating countries and from experts at partner institutions who assisted in developing item drafts and framework chapters. Their input informed new constructs of interest for the questionnaires, ensuring the frameworks remain relevant for measuring and reporting on reading achievement over time. Expert committees—the Reading Development Group (RDG) and Questionnaire Development Group (QDG)—guided revisions based on evolving theories and policy-focused research.

# CHAPTER 1

## PIRLS 2026 Reading Assessment Framework

John Sabatini, Ann Kennedy, Erin Wry, Matthias von Davier

### Overview

In 2026, IEA's PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) conducts its sixth reading assessment, providing data on 25 years of trends in comparative reading achievement across countries. Reading literacy is the foundation for student academic success and personal growth, and PIRLS is a valuable vehicle for studying whether new or revised policies impact achievement. The PIRLS 2026 Reading Assessment Framework and the instruments developed to assess this framework reflect IEA's commitment to continuous improvement and innovation.

For 2026, PIRLS has completed its transition from paper-based booklets to a digital delivery format. Presenting PIRLS reading passages and items via computer allows for an engaging and visually attractive experience to appeal to students. It increases operational efficiency for the delivery of the tasks and the recording and scoring of student responses. Also, the PIRLS 2026 Framework has now integrated what was previously referred to as ePIRLS,<sup>a</sup> in acknowledgment that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, understanding children's reading achievement requires us to learn how students process, locate, comprehend, and evaluate text information when presented in digital format, such as a website or other formats commonly presented on a computer.<sup>1,2</sup> However, while PIRLS 2026 is a fully digital assessment, it is not an assessment of digital or internet skills: It continues to be a study of reading comprehension as described in this assessment framework.

PIRLS is based on a broad notion of what the ability to read means—a notion that includes reading not only for the pleasure it provides but also for the way it allows one to experience different worlds, other cultures, and a host of new ideas, thus broadening a child's understanding of multiple perspectives and points of view. It also encompasses reflecting on a variety of texts

<sup>a</sup> Initiated in 2016, ePIRLS was a computer-based assessment of online reading in a simulated internet environment.

and text features as tools for attaining individual and societal goals, also known as “reading to do.”<sup>3</sup> This view is increasingly relevant in today’s society, where greater emphasis continues to be placed on students’ ability to use the information they gain from reading.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> Emphasis is shifting from demonstrating fluency and basic comprehension to also demonstrating the ability to apply what is understood to new situations or individual purposes (see also the [PIRLS 2021 Encyclopedia](#)).<sup>8,9,10,11,12</sup>

The PIRLS framework for assessing reading achievement was initially developed for the first assessment in 2001, using IEA’s 1991 Reading Literacy Study as the basis for the PIRLS definition of reading literacy and for establishing the aspects of reading comprehension to be assessed.<sup>13,14,15</sup> Since then, the PIRLS assessment framework has been updated for each subsequent assessment cycle and now for PIRLS 2026.<sup>16,17,18,19,20</sup>

## A Definition of Reading Literacy

The PIRLS definition of reading literacy is grounded in IEA’s 1991 study, in which reading literacy was defined as “the ability to understand and use those written language forms<sup>b</sup> required by society and/or valued by the individual.”

With successive assessments, this definition has been elaborated so that it retains its applicability to readers of all ages and a broad range of written language forms, yet makes explicit reference to aspects of the reading experience of young students as they become proficient readers, highlights the widespread importance of reading in school and everyday life, and acknowledges the increasing variety of text sources in today’s technological world. The current PIRLS definition of reading literacy is as follows:

*Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.*

This view of reading reflects numerous theories of reading literacy as a constructive and interactive process.<sup>21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29</sup> Meaning is constructed through the interactions between readers, text sources, and their purposes or tasks in the context of particular reading experiences.<sup>30,31</sup> Readers are regarded as actively constructing meaning, reasoning with the text, accessing and integrating background knowledge, knowing and applying effective reading strategies, and reflecting on what they read.<sup>32,33,34,35,36</sup> Before, during, and after reading, readers use a repertoire of linguistic skills, as well as other cognitive and metacognitive strategies, to construct meaning.<sup>37,38,39,40,41,42</sup> In addition, the circumstance or situation in which the reader finds themselves can support the construction of meaning by promoting engagement and motivation to read, or it can distract or impede the meaning construction process.<sup>43,44,45,46,47,48,49</sup>

<sup>b</sup> Which may include associated visuals such as photos, illustrations, tables, charts, and other iconography typical in literacy artifacts past and present.



Throughout the framework, various sources that have provided a research and scholarly basis for the framework are referenced. These references represent the volumes of literature and research that have informed the PIRLS framework, including considerable research by countries participating in PIRLS.

To acquire knowledge of the world and about themselves, readers can use various text types from various sources. Any given text type can take many forms and combinations of forms. These include books, magazines, documents, and newspapers. Reading on digital devices often implies interacting with text and media on websites or through offline resources stored locally.

Increasingly, reading and learning from internet sources has become an essential aspect of school curricula and one of the central ways students acquire information in and outside of school. Reading skills and strategies adapted or learned in order to read and navigate online texts and their accompanying features and structures are necessary for reading success.<sup>50,51,52,53,54</sup> Websites often contain multiple pages or tabs and embedded links that allow one to navigate across text and other information in a nonlinear fashion. This online environment may present unique challenges relative to reading and learning.<sup>55,56,57,58</sup> For example, efficiently locating and comprehending information within a website, or across

multiple sites, often requires higher levels of self-regulation and evaluation skills to determine whether information is appropriate given the needs of the reader. Thus, the construction of meaning in online environments requires a blending of new skills with the foundational reading comprehension processes.<sup>59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68,69</sup>

As young students begin to expand the contexts in which they are reading to learn, they often construct richer meanings of the texts when having an opportunity to discuss or share what they have read with different groups of individuals. Social interactions involving reading in one or more communities of readers can be instrumental in helping young students gain an understanding and appreciation of texts, different perspectives, new sources of information, and alternate interpretations of meaning.<sup>70,71,72,73,74,75,76</sup> Socially constructed environments can be physically located in or outside the classroom (such as school or public libraries) or remotely established via computer or web-mediated communication tools or platforms.

Formal and informal opportunities for social communication among young students can broaden their perspectives and help them see reading as a shared experience with their classmates and others. These activities can be extended to communities outside of school as young students talk with their families and friends about ideas, stories, or information acquired from reading. Although this social aspect of reading comprehension is highlighted in the definition of reading, PIRLS does not assess this aspect directly in the achievement portion of the assessment. However, it is addressed in the context questionnaires as an important factor for understanding home and school environments for learning.

## The PIRLS Framework for Assessing Reading Achievement

This document provides the foundation for the PIRLS international assessment of students' reading achievement in their fourth year of schooling. The framework focuses on the two overarching purposes for reading that account for most of the reading done by young students both in and out of school: for literary experience, and to acquire and use information. In addition, the PIRLS assessment integrates four broad-based comprehension processes within each of the two purposes for reading: focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, and evaluate and critique content and textual elements.

It should be recognized that the purposes for reading and the processes of comprehension do not function in isolation from one another, nor from the context in which students live and learn. The processes describe increasingly demanding operations that students need to engage in to understand texts of varying complexities; the purposes describe a classification of texts into two broad categories in which these processes get applied. It should also be noted that these purposes and processes have been expanded and elaborated to be inclusive of online reading literacy environments.<sup>77</sup>

## PIRLS Framework Emphases

The two reading purposes and four comprehension processes form the basis for assessing reading in PIRLS. Exhibit 1 presents the percentages of reading purposes and approximate percentages of tasks aligned with each process assessed by PIRLS.

**Exhibit 1: Percentages of the PIRLS Reading Assessment Devoted to Each Reading Purpose and Comprehension Process**

Purposes for Reading	
Literary Experience	50%
Acquire and Use Information	50%
Processes of Comprehension	
Focus on and Retrieve Explicitly Stated Information	20%
Make Straightforward Inferences	30%
Interpret and Integrate Ideas and Information	30%
Evaluate and Critique Content and Textual Elements	20%

Reading achievement in PIRLS is reported overall, as well as by reading purpose and comprehension process subscales. The comprehension processes are combined to report two subscales: retrieving and straightforward inferencing; and interpreting, integrating, and evaluating. More details of reporting reading achievement are described in Chapter 3.

## Purposes for Reading

Throughout the world, reading literacy is directly related to the reasons people read; broadly, these reasons include reading for pleasure or personal interest, for learning, and for participation in society. Reading can also involve social communicative interactivity, as readers discuss what they have read with others to share experiences and perspectives. The early reading of most young students often includes reading narrative texts that tell a story (e.g., storybooks or picture books) or informational texts that tell students about the world around them. Increasingly, this reading is done on a device (e.g., computer, tablet, or smartphone), with all the accompanying affordances and challenges of learning non-static text navigation skills, functions, features, and actions. As young students develop their literacy abilities and are required to read to learn across the curriculum, reading to acquire information from books, other physical materials, and other digital sources (e.g., the internet) becomes more important.<sup>78</sup>

Aligned with these reading purposes, PIRLS focuses on reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information. Because both purposes for reading are important for young students, PIRLS contains an equal proportion of material assessing each purpose. The PIRLS texts are classified broadly as literary or informational, and the accompanying questions address text characteristics aligned with each respective purpose for reading. That is, texts classified as literary have questions addressing theme, plot events, characters, and setting, and those classified as informational are accompanied by questions about the information contained in the texts. Although the texts distinguish between purposes for reading, the comprehension processes readers use are more similar than different for both purposes; therefore, the comprehension processes are evaluated across all texts in PIRLS.

The two categories of texts used in the PIRLS assessment (literary and informational) are consistent with the types of texts associated with certain reader purposes. For example, reading for literary experience is often accomplished through reading fiction, while reading to acquire and use information is generally associated with informative articles and instructional texts. However, the purposes for reading do not always align strictly with text types. For example, biographies or autobiographies can vary in characteristics that serve both literary and informational purposes. In addition, the reader's personal purpose for reading these or any text type may be for leisure or personal interest, for learning, to be able to do something, or a combination of aims.

Different types of text often differ in systematic ways in which the ideas are organized and presented, eliciting a variety of ways to construct meaning. Text organization and format can involve sequential ordering of written material or snippets of words and phrases arranged with pictorial and tabular data. For example, within informational texts, authors may describe, explain, compare and contrast, or present an argument intended to persuade the reader. The content, organization, or style of text content can have implications for the reader's approach to understanding the text.<sup>79,80,81,82</sup>

As noted, it is in the interaction between readers, texts, and goals or tasks that meanings are constructed and purposes are achieved. In selecting texts for PIRLS, the aim is to present a wide range of text types within each broad purpose for reading. The goal is to create a reading experience for students participating in the assessment that, as much as possible, is similar to authentic reading experiences they may have in and outside of school.

## Reading for Literary Experience

In literary reading, readers engage with the text to become involved in events, settings, actions, consequences, characters, atmosphere, feelings, and ideas, and to enjoy language itself. To better understand and appreciate literature, each reader needs to bring to the text their own experiences, feelings, appreciation of language, and knowledge of literary forms. For young readers, literature can offer the opportunity to explore situations and feelings they have not yet encountered, helping them to understand and analyze alternative perspectives or points of view.<sup>83</sup>

Events, actions, and consequences depicted in narrative fiction allow readers to experience vicariously and reflect upon situations that, although they may be imagined, illuminate those of real life. The text may present the perspective of the narrator or a principal character, and a more complex text may even have several viewpoints. Information and ideas may be described directly or through dialogue and events. Short stories or novels sometimes narrate events chronologically or sometimes make more complex use of time with flashbacks or time shifts. Illustrations accompanying literary texts enrich the reading experience and play a role in engaging readers and deepening their connection to the text.

The main form of literary texts used in PIRLS is narrative fiction. Given differences in curricula and cultures across the participating countries, it is difficult for PIRLS to include some forms of literary texts. For example, poetry is difficult to translate and is therefore avoided.

## Reading to Acquire and Use Information

Informational texts are both read and written for a wide variety of functions. While the primary function of informational text is to provide information, writers often address their subject matter with different objectives. The kinds of informational texts presented to children in schools are typically selected from trustworthy, credible sources such as scholastic publishing companies. These texts are intended to convey information that is primarily factual or at least not intentionally misleading. For example, authors may elect to convey facts and explanations through an expository summary, a persuasive essay, or a balanced argument.<sup>84</sup> Even with such credible sources, readers must bring a critical mind to these texts to form their own opinion or view, which will impact how they form or update their understanding with information provided in the texts.<sup>85</sup>

When readers venture out from trusted sources, their critical and evaluative skills must be even sharper and brought to the forefront of comprehension processing. There is a universe of valid, useful information to be found on the internet; there are also websites and text sources that may appear credible and truthful, but some or all of the information is not so. All PIRLS texts are derived from credible sources.

To best address the various functions of texts, information can be presented differently, such as by varying the content, organization, and form. Young students may read informational texts that cover a range of content, including those that are scientific, historical, geographical, or social.<sup>86</sup> These texts also may vary in the organization of the content conveyed. For example, historical facts may be organized chronologically, instructions or procedures sequenced step-by-step, and an argument presented logically, such as employing cause-and-effect or compare-and-contrast text structures.

Information can be presented in many different formats. Both static texts (e.g., manuals and newspapers) and websites present a considerable amount of information via lists, charts, graphs, diagrams, video, and other multimodal formats.<sup>87,88</sup> Also, there is a wide variety of approaches to structuring supplemental or supporting information, such as advertisements, announcements, sidebars, or timelines.

As noted, online information is often presented multimodally. Websites may include interactive and experiential features that are impossible in print. Multimodal texts utilize multiple communicative modes, which are then integrated by the reader to extract meaning from the text. For example, online text presentations may integrate dynamic elements for visual interest, illustration, or as primary sources of information. Common elements include videos or audio clips, animated graphics, hyperlinks, and pop-up windows. Online texts may also use a variety of visual cues, such as information that appears and disappears, revolves, or changes color.

Looking for and learning from written text sources on the internet involves comprehending information arranged within this complex reading environment. Effective learning when reading online necessitates the integration of multiple texts, which may contain different or contradictory points of view or incomplete information. Textual elements and attributes—such as source information, relevance to the assigned task, and relationships to other sources—must be recognized and evaluated to integrate texts successfully. The informational texts used in PIRLS reflect students' authentic experiences with reading informational text in and out of school. Some PIRLS informational texts include animated graphics, hyperlinks, and pop-up windows. Typically, these texts and websites have been written by authors who understand writing for a young audience. Moreover, many of the texts are provided by the participating countries as representative of the informational materials their students read.

A fundamental component of successful internet research and comprehension is the ability to locate information that meets one's goals. Readers need to be able to evaluate one or more sources to select the web pages or websites that will provide the target information, navigate to the relevant web pages, and follow links to new content. Evaluating sources requires the additional comprehension demands of inferring the potential usefulness of yet unseen texts (e.g., when evaluating search engine results or links). Once on a given website or page, readers must continue to infer the relevance of the various types of information and texts presented, while ignoring a barrage of advertisements and other distracting displays. This may involve self-regulatory processes to maintain focus on the task at hand, so as not to be distracted by other interesting topics or advertising.

Indeed, finding information online may be different in terms of tools used and volume of available sources, but in terms of the goal of the search, it is not unlike looking for a book or an article in a library, searching through shelves of books and library catalogs located in a physical brick-and-mortar building. While the additional complexities of searching for information are part of the reader's experience and require skills related to the experience of reading, these are not the focus of the PIRLS assessment.

## Processes of Comprehension

PIRLS assesses four broad-based processes of comprehension typically used by fourth-grade readers: 1) focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information; 2) make straightforward inferences; 3) interpret and integrate ideas and information; and 4) evaluate and critique content and textual elements. Transcending these processes are the metacognitive processes and strategies that allow readers to examine their understanding and adjust their approach and reading goals.<sup>89,90,91,92,93</sup> In addition, the knowledge and background experiences that readers bring to reading equip them with an understanding of language, texts, and the world, through which they filter their comprehension of the material.

In PIRLS, these four comprehension processes are used as a foundation for developing the comprehension questions, which are based on each text (or set of texts) or task. Across the passages, the variety of questions measuring the range of comprehension processes enables students to demonstrate a range of abilities and skills in constructing meaning from written texts. In addition, the questions included in PIRLS 2026 capitalize on the digital platform to use response formats that go beyond standard multiple-choice and written-response formats (e.g., drag-and-drop, matching).

In thinking about assessment questions, there is, of course, a substantial interaction between the length and complexity of the text and the sophistication or complexity of the comprehension processes required by the reading task. Generally, locating and extracting explicitly stated information can be expected to be less difficult than, for example, making interpretations across an entire text and integrating those interpretations with external ideas and experiences. However, texts and tasks can vary with regard to length, syntactic complexity, abstractness of ideas, organizational structure, and cognitive demand. Certainly, locating and extracting information from a website with multiple pages and complex sentences, for example, is cognitively more demanding than from a short narrative story with simple sentence structure. Thus, the nature of the text impacts the complexity of the questions asked, across and within the four types of comprehension processes.<sup>94,95</sup>

### Focus on and Retrieve Explicitly Stated Information

Readers vary the attention they give to explicitly stated information in the text. Some ideas in the text may elicit a particular focus, and others may not. For example, readers may focus on ideas that confirm or contradict predictions they have made about the text's meaning, become captivated by an interesting detail, or skim and scan a text to identify information related to their general purpose for reading. In school tasks, readers often need (or are asked) to retrieve information explicitly stated in the text to answer a question they bring to the reading task, or to check their developing understanding of some aspect of the text's meaning.<sup>96,97</sup>

Successful retrieval requires a fairly immediate or automatic understanding of the words, phrases, or sentences, in combination with the recognition that they are relevant to the information sought.<sup>98</sup> In classifying items for PIRLS, it is essential to examine the item stem and correct response in relation to the text. If the item stem and the correct response both use exact words from the text and are located within a sentence or two of each other, the item is classified as

“focus on and retrieve.” If some synonyms are used, the item still is “focus on and retrieve.” As the relationship becomes less literal, the item may be classified as requiring a straightforward inference.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- identifying and retrieving information that is relevant to the specific goal of reading,
- looking for specific ideas,
- searching for definitions of words or phrases,
- identifying the setting of a story (e.g., time and place),
- finding the topic sentence or main idea (when explicitly stated), and
- identifying specific information in a graphic or on a web page (e.g., graph, table, or map).

### Make Straightforward Inferences

As readers construct meaning from text, they make inferences about ideas or information not explicitly stated. Making inferences allows readers to move beyond the surface of texts and to resolve the gaps in meaning that often occur in texts. Some of these inferences are straightforward in that they are based primarily on information that is contained in one place in the text—readers may merely need to connect two or more ideas or pieces of information. The ideas themselves may be explicitly stated, but the connection between them is not, and thus must be inferred. Furthermore, despite the inference not being explicitly stated in the text, the meaning of the text remains relatively clear.<sup>99,100</sup>

Skilled readers often make these kinds of inferences automatically. They may immediately connect two or more pieces of information, recognizing a relationship even though it is not explicitly stated in the text.<sup>101,102,103</sup> In many cases, the author has constructed a text to lead readers to an obvious or straightforward inference. For example, the actions of a character at a point in the story may clearly point to a particular character trait, and most readers would arrive at the same conclusion about that character’s personality or viewpoint.<sup>104,105</sup>

With this type of processing, readers typically go beyond the word-, phrase-, or sentence-level meaning in focusing on the local meaning residing within one part of the text. In online reading, this often involves making some inferences about the best approaches to use in searching for information. On the web, readers also may infer whether it is necessary or useful to follow a link to a definition or another page.<sup>106,107</sup>

When classifying items, if the item stem and correct response use paraphrases of the original phrases or sentences in text, then the item is classified as “straightforward inferencing.” Also, if the correct answers to the item are located in several places within the text, but the item stem and the correct response both use exact words from the text, then the item is classified as a straightforward inference.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- inferring that one event caused another event,
- giving the reason for a character’s action,

- describing the relationship between two characters, and
- identifying which section of the text or web page would help for a particular purpose.

## Interpret and Integrate Ideas and Information

As with the more straightforward inferences, readers who are engaged in interpreting and integrating ideas and information in text may focus on local or global meanings, or they may relate details to overall themes and ideas. In any case, these readers may be making sense of the author’s intent and are engaged in developing a more complete understanding of the entire text.<sup>108,109</sup>

As readers interpret and integrate, their goal is to construct a more specific or more complete understanding of the text by reflecting on and incorporating personal knowledge and experience with meaning that resides within the text, and then perhaps to go beyond that by interrogating other interpretations of the meaning. For example, readers may go beyond the literal text content itself to draw on their own experience to infer a character’s underlying motive or to construct a mental image of the information conveyed.<sup>110,111</sup>

As readers engage in this interpretive process, they are making connections that are not only implicit, but that may vary across individuals based on differences in perspective. Because of this, meaning that is constructed through interpreting and integrating ideas and information is likely to vary among readers, depending upon the experiences and knowledge they bring to the reading task.<sup>112,113</sup> Learning is about acquiring new knowledge, as well as updating and revising one’s prior knowledge based on the evidence that is either explicitly or implicitly provided in the text. However, individual interpretations that depend solely on personal perspectives or individual experiences are not appropriate for an assessment of reading. In PIRLS, interpretations elicited through comprehension questions must be derived from the text and provide plausible explanations of aspects described in the text with relevant evidence.

Using the internet requires the ability to read and digest information from multiple online sources. Integrating and synthesizing information across texts is challenging no matter the source of the content, because readers need not only to comprehend one text, but to consolidate information across two or more texts. In an online environment, this includes integrating relevant written information across web pages that may also include graphics, animations, or videos, as well as pop-up windows and rollover text and graphics.<sup>114,115</sup>

Items classified as “interpret and integrate ideas and information” use concepts and generalizations not explicitly stated, but still grounded, in the text. The new ideas or derived inferences may be based on information included in the item stem, the text, or both. A full-credit response requires showing comprehension of the entire text, or at least significant portions of it, as well as providing ideas or information that go beyond the literal text content.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- discerning the overall message or theme of a text,
- considering an alternative to actions of characters,
- comparing and contrasting text information,



- inferring a story’s mood or tone,
- interpreting a real-world application of text information, and
- comparing and contrasting information presented within and across texts or websites.

## Evaluate and Critique Content and Textual Elements

As readers evaluate the content and elements of a text, the focus shifts from constructing meaning to critically considering the text itself. Readers engaged in this process step back from a text in order to evaluate and critique it.

The text content, or meaning, may be evaluated and critiqued from a personal perspective or with an objective view. This process may require readers to make a justified judgment, drawing on their interpretations and weighing their understanding of the text against their understanding of the world—rejecting, accepting, or remaining neutral to the text’s representation. For example, readers may counter or confirm claims made in the text or make comparisons with ideas and information found in other sources.

In evaluating and critiquing elements of text structure and language, readers draw upon their knowledge of language use, presentational features, and general or genre-specific features of texts.<sup>116</sup> The text is considered a way to convey ideas, feelings, and information.

Readers may reflect on the author’s language choices and devices for conveying meaning and judge their adequacy. Relying on their understanding of language conventions, readers may find weaknesses in how the text was written or recognize the successful use of the author’s craft. Further, readers may evaluate the mode used to impart information—both visual and textual features—and explain their functions (e.g., text boxes, pictures, or tables). In evaluating the organization of a text, readers draw upon their knowledge of text genre and structure. The extent of past reading experience and familiarity with the language are essential to each piece of this process.

With respect to text sources found in environments such as the internet, evaluate-and-critique skills are often brought to the forefront, as one searches and locates relevant information that align with the reader or task goals. Because internet sources vary widely in purpose and intent of the website producers, readers must make judgments about the relevance of the source of the information, as well as determine the perspective, point of view, and potential bias in written content as conveyed by the producers of the website. Students must learn to identify, evaluate, and integrate information within and across various texts that may contain overlapping, unique, or conflicting messages. They will need not only to expend resources on identifying relevant information and credible sources, but also to build mental models of individual texts as well as connections across texts. The visual, textual, and multimodal features on websites can be more varied than found in static written texts. Thus, evaluate-and-critique processes are a prominent part of online reading.<sup>117,118</sup>

For an item to be classified as “evaluate and critique,” an acceptable response to that item involves a *justified judgment* about some aspect of the text. For example, the item stem can present more than one point of view where it is possible for students to argue either point of view (or both) based on the text. Or, an item stem can ask for a judgment and the evidence to support it.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- judging the completeness or clarity of information in the text;
- evaluating the likelihood that the events described could really happen;
- evaluating how likely an author’s argument would be to change what people think and do;
- judging how well the title of the text reflects the main theme;
- describing the effect of language features, such as metaphors or tone;
- describing the contribution of the graphic elements to understanding the text or website;
- determining the point of view or bias of the text or website; and
- determining an author’s perspective on the central topic.

## Selecting Texts for PIRLS 2026

While a large proportion of the content from the previous cycle is maintained for measuring trends in reading achievement, each cycle of PIRLS involves new development. The initial stage of the development process focuses on the selection of texts, which is driven by the assessment design (see Chapter 3) as well as an established set of text criteria based on the PIRLS reading assessment framework and guiding principles of test development. The text selection process for PIRLS 2026 continues to emphasize the importance of including a range of text types, formats, and content that provide opportunities for questions that adequately measure the processes of comprehension outlined in this framework.

The PIRLS texts undergo extensive review by the Reading Development Group and the National Research Coordinators. Considerable effort is expended to ensure that the texts have the following characteristics:

- appropriateness for the target grade of the PIRLS student population;
- clarity and coherence;
- appropriate content across countries and cultures;
- interesting, engaging content for a wide range of students; and
- adequate basis for assessing the full range of comprehension processes.

To reflect the goal of approximating an authentic reading experience in the assessment, the reading passages in PIRLS reflect those read by students in their everyday experiences in and outside of school. The selected texts, which are usually authored by published writers, are typically provided and reviewed by the participating countries and are thus representative of the literary and informational materials their students read.

The assessment’s time constraints impose limitations on text length, as students require ample time to read the entire passage and respond to comprehension questions. Reflecting the range in difficulty levels in PIRLS, passages typically range from 500 to 800 words. Other text features also contribute to the rate at which students read texts and complete the assessment.

With the transition to digital format, the aim is to increase the range of text types included in PIRLS 2026. For example, PIRLS may include texts from magazines and newspapers as well as online texts, emails, and short messages. Also, information can be presented in many different formats. Texts may present some of the information via lists, charts, graphs, and diagrams, with some websites and digital text formats possessing more multimedia elements.

The online texts in PIRLS are adapted from informational science or social studies websites. Each task involves approximately three different websites totaling about 5 to 10 web pages. Reflecting the fact that online reading often involves sorting through more information than is actually necessary to achieve one's goal, each online task in PIRLS averages about 1000 words in total. Recognizing that being able to locate information underlies all the reading processes, the emphasis for internet tasks is on assessing reading comprehension rather than navigation skills. Moreover, because students have a range of internet experiences, the PIRLS online tasks use a teacher avatar to help guide students through the web pages so that students have the opportunity to accomplish the reading tasks in the allotted assessment time. Throughout the assessment, the teacher avatar points students toward websites and provides additional assistance when students have difficulty locating web pages.

Clarity and coherence are essential criteria for PIRLS texts. Typically, the passages and websites have been authored by people who understand writing for a young audience, such that the texts have an appropriate level of linguistic features and density of information. In the context of an international study, attaining authenticity in assessing reading experience may be somewhat constrained by the need to translate the texts into numerous languages. Thus, care is taken to choose texts that can be translated without loss of clarity in meaning, or in potential for student engagement.

In selecting texts for use in an international reading assessment, it is crucial to pay close attention to the potential for cultural bias. Texts that depend heavily on culture-specific knowledge are typically identified and excluded early in the development process. Text selection involves collecting and considering texts from as many of the participating countries as possible. The goal is for the texts to be universally applicable across cultures, and for the set of texts in the assessment to vary as widely as possible across nations and cultures, such that no country or culture is overrepresented in the assessment texts. The final selection of texts is based, in part, on the national and cultural representation of the entire set of assessment texts.

The appropriateness and readability of texts for the PIRLS assessment primarily is determined through iterative reviews by educators and curriculum specialists from countries participating in the assessment. Considering fairness and sensitivity to gender, racial, ethnic, and potential religious concerns, every effort is made to select texts that are topic and theme appropriate for the grade level and that elicit the full range of comprehension processes.

Finally, it is extremely important for the texts to be interesting to the greatest number of students. As part of the field test, students routinely are asked how well they like each of the texts or tasks, and a high level of positive response is fundamental for a text or task to be selected for the final set of assessment instruments.

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# CHAPTER 2

## PIRLS 2026 Contextual Framework

Katherine A. Reynolds, Audrey Gallo, Maya Komakhidze

### Overview

In addition to measuring trends in students' achievement in reading comprehension, PIRLS collects information about the environments in which children learn to read. Decades of educational research, including five previous assessment cycles of PIRLS, provide evidence that various contextual factors are related to students' reading achievement both across and within countries. Broadly speaking, greater opportunities to learn and supportive environments at home and at school are often associated with higher reading achievement.

PIRLS contextual data are an important resource for research on improving reading education, and a wealth of this information accompanies PIRLS reading achievement results. Some information has been collected for many cycles of PIRLS because of ongoing relevance, and other information is added each cycle to address emerging areas of research and policy interest.

The PIRLS 2026 Contextual Framework describes the different types of contextual information to be collected in PIRLS 2026 and builds on the context questionnaire frameworks of previous PIRLS cycles. It begins with an overview of how these data are collected and a short summary of instrument development procedures. A brief discussion of analytic procedures employed to analyze select data from the PIRLS 2026 Context Questionnaires is also provided. The remainder of the framework describes five areas of influence on students' reading development: home contexts; school contexts; classroom contexts; student characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors; and national contexts. Relationships among these contexts are discussed, and specific topics within each context that are included in the PIRLS 2026 questionnaires are outlined.

### Collecting Contextual Data in PIRLS 2026

PIRLS 2026 collects data from various participants in countries' education systems. These participants include students themselves, students' parents or caregivers, school principals, and reading teachers. Each of these respondents represents an area of influence on students' reading

development. Additionally, PIRLS 2026 obtains information about national education policies from countries' National Research Coordinators (NRCs). The majority of contextual information in PIRLS 2026 is collected through questionnaires completed by these different individuals. Each questionnaire administered as a part of PIRLS 2026 is described below.

- The Home Questionnaire, entitled the Early Learning Survey, is completed by the parents or primary caregivers of each student participating in PIRLS 2026. This questionnaire collects information about a student's home background, such as languages spoken in the home, parents' reading activities and attitudes toward reading, and parents' education and occupations.
- The School Questionnaire is completed by the principal of each sampled school participating in PIRLS 2026. This questionnaire collects information about school characteristics, including student demographics and the availability of different types of resources.
- The Teacher Questionnaire is completed by students' reading teachers. This questionnaire collects information about classroom factors related to reading instruction, such as instructional approaches and the availability and integration of technology. The questionnaire also asks about teacher characteristics, such as career satisfaction, education, and recent professional development activities.
- The Student Questionnaire is completed by all students participating in PIRLS 2026 following the reading assessment. The questionnaire collects information about students' home environment, as well as students' experiences in school and attitudes towards reading.
- The Curriculum Questionnaire is completed by the NRCs of countries participating in PIRLS 2026, in consultation with policymakers or curriculum experts as needed. The questionnaire collects information about the structure of the country's education system and reading curriculum.

In addition to the five questionnaires described above, PIRLS 2026 collects further qualitative information about national contexts for learning in the *PIRLS 2026 Encyclopedia*. Each PIRLS 2026 country contributes a chapter to the Encyclopedia that provides additional details about their education systems and reading curricula. This country-level information gives insight into the broader educational ecosystems in which PIRLS reading achievement and context questionnaire results should be interpreted.

The final piece of contextual data in PIRLS 2026 concerns students' feelings about the texts in the reading assessment. After completing assessment items related to a particular text, students are asked to indicate how much they liked the texts.

## Developing Instruments to Collect Contextual Data in PIRLS 2026

As noted above, the majority of contextual data in PIRLS 2026 is collected via questionnaires. These questionnaires are developed through a collaborative and iterative process, using the previous PIRLS cycle's materials as a starting point. The TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center works with the PIRLS 2026 Questionnaire Development Group (QDG) and National

Research Coordinators (NRCs) to revise the PIRLS 2021 questionnaires for PIRLS 2026. These revisions include adding questionnaire items to measure new topics and refining items to improve measurement of existing topics. Selection of new topics is largely driven by countries' interests, input from the QDG, and practical considerations for developing items that are relevant across a diverse set of countries. Questionnaire items are also deleted each cycle to accommodate new additions without a dramatic increase in response burden. The outline that guides countries' Encyclopedia chapters is also revised for each PIRLS cycle. Staff at the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center meet with QDG members three times throughout the PIRLS 2026 cycle to work on these revisions. NRCs also have the opportunity to review drafts of the questionnaires and Encyclopedia chapter outline at different stages in the assessment cycle.

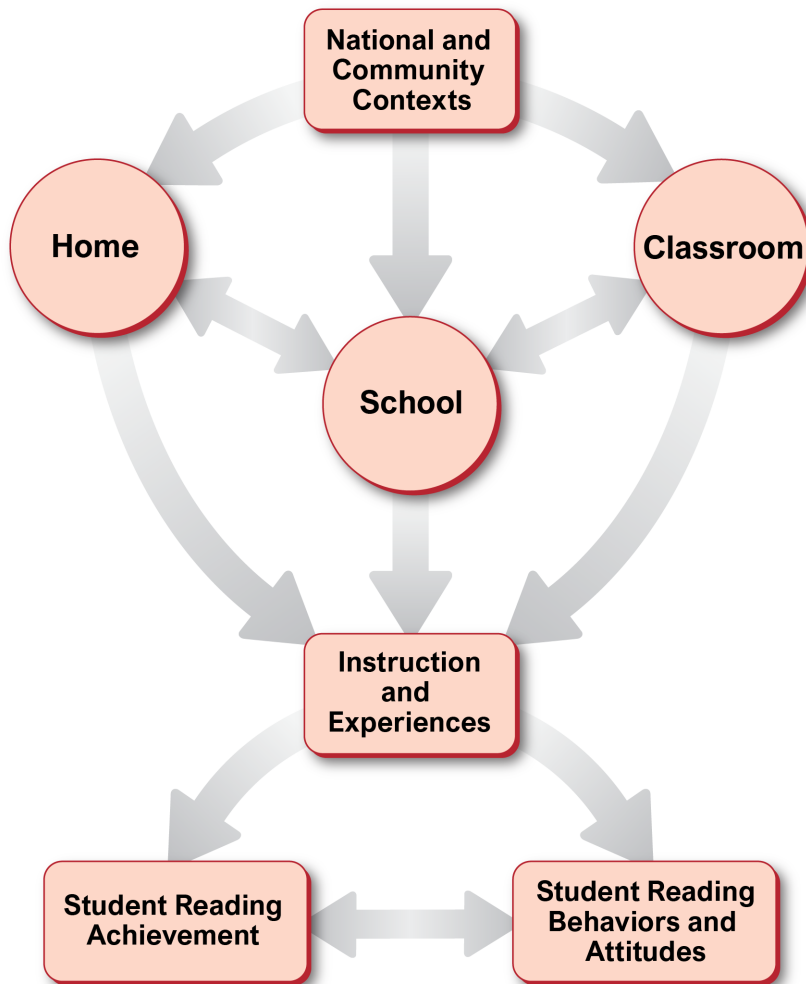
### Analytic Procedures in the PIRLS 2026 Context Questionnaires

Some items in the PIRLS 2026 Home, School, Teacher, and Student Questionnaires are analyzed together using item response theory methods to develop background scales that measure specific constructs.<sup>1,2</sup> These scales summarize select questionnaire data more reliably than the responses to individual questions and enhance the interpretability of different constructs' relationships with reading achievement. Improving the content and measurement properties of the context questionnaire scales is a priority in each assessment cycle. For PIRLS 2026, potential improvements include exploring the use of the generalized partial credit model<sup>3</sup> for scale creation, as well as the exploration of new approaches for creating scale categories to classify respondents. Further details about context scale analysis procedures will be available in the *Methods and Procedures: PIRLS 2026 Technical Report*.

## Contexts for Students' Reading Development

Similar to previous cycles, the PIRLS 2026 Contextual Framework captures five broad areas of influence on students' reading development. These are represented visually in Exhibit 1.

**Exhibit 1: Contexts for Developing Children's Reading Literacy**



Students' reading achievement, behaviors, and attitudes are a result of their instructional and personal experiences, which are in turn shaped through a complex interaction of the contexts at home, in school, in the community, and in society at large. Exhibit 1 depicts these interactions. The bottom layer of Exhibit 1 depicts the relationship between students' reading achievement and their reading attitudes and behaviors. These have a reciprocal relationship (indicated with the bidirectional arrow), meaning that they influence each other. In addition to exerting these influences on each other, students' reading achievement, behaviors, and attitudes are shaped by the instruction and experiences that students have at school. Moving further up Exhibit 1, there are three areas that have a direct influence on the students' instruction and school experiences: home, school, and classroom. These three contexts are also related to each other. The school context is central to students' instruction and experiences. It both shapes and is influenced by home and classroom contexts, as illustrated with the bidirectional arrows in Exhibit 1. Home and

classroom factors also exert a direction influence on instruction and student experiences. Finally, home, school, and classroom contexts are themselves influenced by the national and community contexts within which families live and schools function.

Broadly speaking, the components included in Exhibit 1 illustrate the areas represented in the PIRLS 2026 context questionnaires. Specific topics that are addressed within each area are detailed in the remainder of the PIRLS 2026 Contextual Framework.

## Home Contexts

As shown in Exhibit 1, students' home contexts influence their learning experiences directly, as well as indirectly by contributing to school contexts. Items in the PIRLS 2026 questionnaires cover topics related to students' home learning environments, including their informal early learning experiences, socioeconomic resources, parental support for reading, and the language(s) spoken at home. PIRLS 2026 collects information about different aspects of students' home environments in the Home and Student Questionnaires, which is summarized in Exhibit 2.

### Exhibit 2: Summary of Home Context Topics and Sub-Topics

Home Context Topics	Home Context Sub-Topics
Early Learning Experiences	Early Literacy Activities and Tasks
	Home Socioeconomic Status
Home Environment for Learning	Parents' Reading
	Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Home
	Language Spoken in the Home

## Early Learning Experiences

### Early Literacy Activities and Tasks

Research has shown that early childhood literacy activities are important for fostering school-age students' achievement in reading.<sup>4,5,6,7,8</sup> Examples of these activities include parents reading books, telling stories, playing with alphabet toys, talking with their children, helping children write letters or words, and reading aloud signs and labels. Perhaps the most common and important early literacy activity involves adults and older children reading aloud to young children.<sup>9,10,11</sup> By being read aloud to, children are exposed to oral language, which also is important for literacy acquisition.<sup>12,13,14</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about students' early literacy experiences in the Home Questionnaire.

## Home Environment for Learning

### Home Socioeconomic Status

Measures of socioeconomic status are consistently related to students' achievement in educational research, with students from more advantaged backgrounds having better academic performance.<sup>15,16,17,18,19</sup> Socioeconomic status is often indicated through proxy variables such as parental level of education, income, and occupational class. Although they have some limitations



in terms of cross-cultural comparability, these types of variables have been used as measures of socioeconomic status for many decades.<sup>20</sup> Specific to reading, home socioeconomic status can shape students' access to appropriate reading materials for their reading level.<sup>21</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about home socioeconomic status and related resources for learning in the Home and Student Questionnaires.

### Parents' Reading

Parents who like reading and read themselves can serve as role models for their children as readers. Parents are their children's first role models, and children learn by observing them.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, parents' own reading behaviors and beliefs about reading can shape their child's reading habits and motivation to read, as well as promote reading achievement.<sup>23,24,25,26</sup> As noted in Chapter 1, social interactions surrounding reading are important for developing reading literacy. Reading socialization can be more overt (e.g., reading together) or subtle (e.g., young children seeing adults reading or using texts in different ways learn to appreciate and use printed material), and this process can have long-term effects on students' academic performance.<sup>27</sup> Parental involvement in activities to develop their child's reading skills has a positive effect on their reading comprehension, motivation, and attitude toward reading. Specifically, parent-child reading contributes to psychological growth and students' language and literacy skills.<sup>28,29</sup> Parents are typically more involved when their child is first learning to read, but the time parents spend reading with their children declines as children age.<sup>30</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about parents' attitudes toward reading, reading practices, and reading activities with their children in the Home Questionnaire.

### Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Home

As with reading, parents play an important role in shaping how their children interact with digital devices and online environments. There are a variety of strategies that parents can employ to monitor their children's use of digital devices. Some research has shown that restricting the time children spend using digital devices is particularly prevalent.<sup>31</sup> Beyond imposing restrictions, parents may also engage their children in conversations about topics such as safety and privacy or reliability of information on the internet. PIRLS 2026 collects information about parents' conversations about, and monitoring of, digital device use with their children in the Home Questionnaire.

### Language Spoken in the Home

Depending upon a country's historical and cultural context, it may be common for some students to speak one language at home and another at school, especially among immigrant families. Some parents may prioritize multilingualism and make great efforts to ensure their child is exposed to more than one language in the home. Because learning to read is dependent on children's early language experiences, the language or languages spoken at home and how they are used are important factors in reading literacy development.<sup>32</sup> If students are not fluent in the language of instruction, often there is an initial learning gap because students must learn the concepts and content of the curricula through a new language.<sup>33,34</sup> High-quality research on academic literacy

practices and instruction is needed to support students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.<sup>35</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about the languages students speak at home in the Home and Student Questionnaires.

## School Contexts

As the formal providers of instruction, schools play an essential role in students' educational experiences (shown in Exhibit 1). There are many ways in which schools can differ both across and within countries, including institutional characteristics such as school size, resources available to support instruction, and quality of learning environment. PIRLS 2026 collects a variety of information about school contexts from multiple sources, including the School, Teacher, and Home Questionnaires. This information is summarized in Exhibit 3.

**Exhibit 3: Summary of School Context Topics and Sub-Topics**

School Context Topics	School Context Sub-Topics
School Characteristics and Composition of Student Body	School Size and Geographic Location
	Socioeconomic Background of Student Body
	Language Spoken by Student Body
	Literacy Skills of Entering Student Body
School Resources	Resources and Supports for Reading Instruction
	School Library and Technology Resources
	Resources for Student Support
School Climate	School Safety
	School Emphasis on Academic Success
	Teacher Job Satisfaction and Challenges
	Parents' School Involvement
	Principals' Preparation and Experience

## School Characteristics and Composition of Student Body

### School Size and Geographic Location

Schools vary in size and are located in a variety of geographical areas (e.g., urban, suburban, and rural). These school characteristics and their implications vary both within and across countries participating in PIRLS. It is not possible to make internationally applicable generalizations about the impacts of school size or location on students' academic achievement; however, these variables still provide important information that characterizes students' school experiences. Smaller schools in rural areas may face particular challenges, such as lower budgets and difficulty recruiting highly qualified teachers; however, there is great diversity in resources among rural schools.<sup>36,37,38</sup> Depending on the country, students attending schools in urban or suburban areas may have access to more learning environments outside of school (e.g., museums, libraries, and bookstores) than students attending schools in rural areas. PIRLS 2026 collects information about school size and geographic location in the School Questionnaire.

### Socioeconomic Background of Student Body

Since the publication of the Coleman report in the United States,<sup>39</sup> there has been sustained interest in how the socioeconomic composition of schools is related to individual student achievement.<sup>40,41,42</sup> There is evidence that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may have higher achievement if they attend schools where the majority of students are from advantaged backgrounds, which some research has attributed to peer effects.<sup>43,44,45</sup> The impacts of socioeconomic composition of schools are not necessarily uniform across countries and may be themselves impacted by country-level factors, such as use of student tracking.<sup>46</sup> The mechanisms that promote socioeconomic segregation across schools (e.g., school choice policies<sup>47</sup>) and contribute to its effects on schools are also likely to vary across countries (e.g., fundraising practices or access to highly qualified teachers).<sup>48,49</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about socioeconomic composition of the student body in the School Questionnaire.

### Language Spoken by Student Body

The PIRLS 2026 reading assessment is administered in students' primary language of instruction. Schools vary in their linguistic diversity, and schools where many students speak a language other than the primary language of instruction may need to have policies and resources that provide extra support for these students. PIRLS 2026 collects information about the percentage of students in the school who speak the primary language of instruction as their first language in the School Questionnaire.

### Literacy Skills of Entering Student Body

Students who enter the primary grades well-equipped with basic literacy skills have a stronger foundation for formal reading instruction, and stronger early literacy skills can positively contribute to young children's reading skill development.<sup>50,51</sup> Schools where a larger proportion of students begin primary education without these skills may need to expend additional resources to enable students to effectively engage with on-grade reading instruction. PIRLS 2026 collects information about the literacy skills of the entering student body in the School Questionnaire.

## School Resources

### Resources and Supports for Reading Instruction

Adequate facilities and sufficient instructional resources are both important for maintaining a favorable learning environment in schools.<sup>52</sup> Although "adequacy" in terms of resources can be relative and perceptions of adequacy may vary across countries, the extent and quality of school resources have been shown to be critical for quality instruction.<sup>53,54,55,56</sup> Instructional resources can be conceptualized generally or specific to reading instruction. Such resources can include well-maintained school facilities, qualified staff, and access to high-quality instructional materials. In addition to material resources, schools may provide additional supports for reading instruction, such as remedial or enrichment programs for reading, and support staff during reading lessons. PIRLS 2026 collects information about resources and supports for reading instruction in the School Questionnaire.

## School Library and Technology Resources

School libraries can be an important resource for facilitating students' access to reading materials. Some research suggests that access to and use of school libraries may be particularly beneficial for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>57</sup> Libraries that contain a variety of materials of interest to students are more likely to be used and also more likely to be beneficial for promoting reading achievement.<sup>58</sup> In addition to books, it is important to acknowledge the rapidly changing landscape of information technology resources within schools, including the allowance or prohibition of students' personal mobile phones at school. Both within and across countries, there is likely to be variation in the technological resources available to students and the policies that regulate their use. PIRLS 2026 collects information about school libraries and technology resources in the School Questionnaire.

## Resources for Student Support

Concerns about student well-being and mental health have increased in recent years, especially in light of the decreases in well-being observed following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shutdowns.<sup>59</sup> Because students spend so much time at school, schools are uniquely positioned to promote students' well-being, which has a reciprocal relationship with academic achievement (i.e., student well-being and academic achievement can influence each other).<sup>60</sup> School-based resources for promoting student well-being can include access to professionals collaborating with teachers, such as counselors or nurses.<sup>61,62</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about school resources for student support in the School Questionnaire.

## School Climate

### School Safety

School safety is a major contributor to school climate, and different school community members may perceive its safety differently.<sup>63</sup> The sense of security that comes with a safe school environment is essential for effective learning.<sup>64</sup> Research shows that schools where rules are clear and enforced fairly tend to have atmospheres of greater discipline and safety.<sup>65,66</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about school safety in the School and Teacher Questionnaires.

### School Emphasis on Academic Success

Teaching, learning, and the organizational culture surrounding these processes are important contributors to school climate.<sup>67</sup> A school atmosphere of academic optimism and high expectations for academic excellence can contribute to school success.<sup>68</sup> Research has shown that there is a positive association between a school's emphasis on academic success and academic achievement.<sup>69,70</sup> Academic emphasis, collective efficacy in promoting academic performance, and trust among school staff, parents, and students are all indicators of academic optimism in a school.<sup>71,72,73</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about school emphasis on academic success in the School Questionnaire.

### Teacher Job Satisfaction and Challenges

Fostering teacher job satisfaction is important for retaining qualified teachers in the classroom.<sup>74</sup> Teachers who remain in the classroom are often motivated by collaboration with colleagues, strong principal leadership, and meaningful relationships with students.<sup>75,76,77</sup> In contrast, emotional exhaustion from work stress has been found to be negatively related to teacher job satisfaction and retention.<sup>78</sup> Research in recent decades has suggested that teacher well-being (and therefore, retention) is at risk due to factors such as increased demands on teachers from parents and administrators, lack of adequate supports, and politicization of the profession.<sup>79</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about teacher job satisfaction and challenges in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### Parents' School Involvement

Good relationships between students' families and schools can contribute to students' learning. Parental involvement in their child's school can be conceptualized as a continuum, ranging from involvement in routine contact with the school to deeper engagement in their child's learning.<sup>80</sup> Engagement between parents and the school can also promote students' literacy achievement;<sup>81</sup> however, the degree to which parents feel it is their role to frequently engage with their child's school is likely to vary across countries. PIRLS 2026 collects information about parents' engagement with and perception of their child's school in the Home Questionnaire.

### Principals' Preparation and Experience

Principals serve as instructional leaders within schools and manage school staff, students, and the school environment. Research has shown that effective principal leadership can foster student achievement by creating an atmosphere of collective efficacy through a positive school climate and trust among teachers.<sup>82,83</sup> Additionally, rapid principal turnover within a school can lead to decreases in student achievement.<sup>84,85</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about principal preparation and experience in the School Questionnaire.

## Classroom Contexts

Students are clustered into classrooms within the schools they attend. These classroom contexts contribute to students' reading achievement by shaping their learning experiences (see Exhibit 1). Important classroom-level factors include teacher characteristics, reading instructional practices, access to technology, and classroom climate. PIRLS 2026 collects information about these topics in the Teacher and Student Questionnaires. This information is summarized in Exhibit 4.

**Exhibit 4: Summary of Classroom Context Topics and Sub-Topics**

Classroom Context Topics	Classroom Context Sub-Topics
Teacher Qualifications	Teachers' Preparation
	Teachers' Years of Experience
	Teachers' Professional Development
Classroom Reading Instruction	Teachers Develop Students' Reading Comprehension Skills and Strategies
	Teachers Cultivate Motivation, Engagement, and Self-efficacy in Reading
	Organizing Students for Reading Instruction
	Classroom Libraries
Information Technology in the Classroom	Classroom Access to Digital Devices for Reading Instruction
	Instruction in Online Reading
Classroom Climate	Classroom Disruptions
	Factors Limiting Instruction

## Teacher Qualifications

### Teachers' Preparation

Quality teacher preparation is critical for effective teaching.<sup>86</sup> Teachers' subject-specific knowledge can positively impact student achievement in conjunction with their pedagogical skills; analysis conducted using PIRLS data showed a relationship between teachers' reading coursework and PIRLS reading achievement.<sup>87,88</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about teacher preparation in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### Teachers' Years of Experience

In addition to teacher education and training, teaching experience is important for teacher development. Gaining experience is especially important for early-career teachers, and they develop their skills in the classroom.<sup>89,90,91</sup> Research has also found that more experienced teachers continue to develop pedagogical skills after five years of experience and that this development can positively affect student achievement.<sup>92,93</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about teachers' years of experience in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### Teachers' Professional Development

Research-based instruction in reading has been shown to provide significant benefits for student achievement,<sup>94</sup> so teacher professional development specifically related to reading instruction is an important component of ensuring teaching quality.<sup>95</sup> For example, professional development can improve teachers' skills in explicit instruction of reading comprehension strategies,<sup>96</sup> integration of reading comprehension into content instruction,<sup>97</sup> and incorporation of online reading into their classroom practices.<sup>98</sup> It is important to acknowledge that professional development opportunities vary in quality and that participation in professional development may not have a uniform influence on student achievement. PIRLS 2026 collects information about teacher participation in and needs for professional development in the Teacher Questionnaire.

## Classroom Reading Instruction

### Teachers Develop Students' Reading Comprehension Skills and Strategies

Reading comprehension involves basic skills of word decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and reading fluency,<sup>99</sup> as well as more complex skills such as understanding the plot or the line of reasoning, recognizing the text structure, locating information in the text, analyzing perspectives, and developing one's own understanding of the text.<sup>100</sup> Instruction that explicitly provides opportunities for students to develop these skills is most likely to be effective in developing high-level comprehension.<sup>101</sup> To aid comprehension, it is important that teachers help students monitor their own comprehension when reading, connect new text with prior knowledge, and develop a deep understanding of the text through questions and discussions.<sup>102</sup> Reading comprehension is an active process; therefore, what students are asked to do or produce after reading influences their understanding. Students who engage in a read-aloud approach have better outcomes on vocabulary, comprehension, and language outcomes.<sup>103</sup> Orally summarizing what they have read, producing a written response, enacting stories, or playing games using information from texts are some of the instructional strategies that support comprehension.<sup>104,105</sup> Deep engagement with texts involves discerning and challenging the author's perspective and intentions, as well as understanding and questioning characters' motivations. Effective reading instruction encourages students to engage in these activities to develop deeper understanding.<sup>106</sup>

How students are asked to use the information that they read may differ across different types of texts.<sup>107</sup> For example, when reading literary fiction, students may learn to distinguish the plot and understand motivations. In argumentative nonfiction texts, they may learn to discern the logic of the argument and challenge its premise or implications. PIRLS 2026 collects information about how teachers develop students' reading comprehension skills in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### Teachers Cultivate Motivation, Engagement, and Self-efficacy in Reading

An important measure of teaching effectiveness is the degree to which students are engaged in class activities and learning.<sup>108</sup> Fostering student motivation in reading is fundamental, because students who are motivated to read more, especially at a young age, become better readers.<sup>109</sup> Student motivation and engagement can be facilitated by creating a supportive environment that fosters a sense of relatedness, competence, and autonomy.<sup>110</sup> Instructional strategies that cultivate such an environment include giving students a choice of what to read, selecting culturally varied texts to match students' experiences, creating opportunities for them to see themselves as successful readers, encouraging small-group discussions, and cultivating the enjoyment of reading.<sup>111</sup> Innovative approaches such as blended reading, which incorporates student drama performances, increase students' motivation to read, providing opportunities for creativity, communication, and cooperation.<sup>112</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about how teachers motivate and engage students in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### Organizing Students for Reading Instruction

Teachers may organize students in different ways to attempt to maximize the effectiveness of their reading instruction. Small-group instruction is generally viewed in literature as a crucial part of effective teaching that is conducive to improved student outcomes.<sup>113,114</sup> Working with students

in small groups, teachers can focus on a specific skill or strategy, tailor instruction to students' varying needs, and ensure that all students are engaged.<sup>115,116,117</sup> Homogeneous grouping by ability is another type of grouping thought to support students in learning at a pace that reflects their skills in the subject.<sup>118</sup> However, research has found that grouping students according to the same reading ability in elementary school may benefit high-achieving students but have negative consequences for low-performing students.<sup>119,120</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about student grouping during reading lessons in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### **Classroom Libraries**

Students who have easy access to reading materials are more likely to read,<sup>121</sup> and for this reason, some countries have moved to create classroom libraries that provide a wide variety of texts and text types, including digital resources, as well as a special place for independent reading. The presence of an organized and readily accessible classroom library encourages students to read, improves their attitudes toward reading, and can aid teachers in incorporating literature into instruction and fostering positive reading habits and attitudes.<sup>122,123</sup> However, size of and access to classroom libraries can vary depending on the socioeconomic composition of the school, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds having access to fewer books than students from advantaged backgrounds.<sup>124</sup> In some countries, classroom libraries replace school libraries, especially in smaller schools, and in others, they complement school libraries. PIRLS 2026 collects information about classroom libraries in the Teacher Questionnaire.

## **Information Technology in the Classroom**

### **Classroom Access to Digital Devices for Reading Instruction**

Classroom access to computers for reading instruction likely has implications for students' online reading skills, as many online reading activities cannot be replicated with paper reading materials. Teachers may also choose to incorporate digital devices into other reading activities, depending upon the type of access available. PIRLS 2026 collects information about access to digital devices during reading lessons, as well as how those digital devices are used as part of instruction, in the Teacher Questionnaire.

### **Instruction in Online Reading**

Reading literacy in the 21st century must include reading in online contexts as digital content increasingly forms a larger share of students' overall reading.<sup>125</sup> Research indicates that there are important differences in reading processes and comprehension outcomes depending on the reading mode.<sup>126,127,128</sup> When reading online, students must use multimodal texts and interact with dynamic features of the online environment to navigate and locate information. Finding information online often means searching for and combining information across several sources. PIRLS 2026 collects information about instruction in online reading in the Teacher Questionnaire.



## Classroom Climate

### Classroom Disruptions

Classroom disruptions can be detrimental to student learning. Classroom management refers to noninstructional procedures that promote student learning and discourage disruptive behavior.<sup>129</sup> Although direct links between classroom management and student achievement are difficult to establish, some research suggests that effective classroom management has indirect, positive effects on student achievement.<sup>130</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about students' perceptions of classroom disruptions and management in the Student Questionnaire.

### Factors Limiting Instruction

Teachers may encounter a variety of student-level factors that limit their instruction. These can be directly related to academic preparedness (such as a lack of prerequisite skills), well-being (such as lack of basic nutrition or frequent absences), or behavior in the classroom (such as distraction or disruption). These factors not only limit teachers' abilities to provide effective instruction but may also directly influence student achievement. For example, research has shown that students lacking basic nutrition tend to have lower academic achievement.<sup>131,132</sup> Specific to reading, proficiency in different types of phonological processing play an important role in further developing reading skills.<sup>133</sup> Frequent absences limit students' opportunities to learn and participate in reading instruction. PIRLS 2026 collects information about factors potentially limiting reading instruction in the Teacher and Student Questionnaires.

## Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors

There are many student-level attributes that can contribute to reading achievement, including experiences at school and reading attitudes or behaviors (see Exhibit 1). PIRLS 2026 collects information about these areas in the Student Questionnaire, which is summarized in Exhibit 5.

### Exhibit 5: Summary of Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors and Sub-Topics

Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors	Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors Sub-Topics
Student Demographics	Age
	Gender
	Language Spoken at Home
	Citizenship
Student Experiences at School	School Belonging
	Bullying
	Feelings at School
	Engagement in Reading Lessons

**Exhibit 5: Summary of Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors and Sub-Topics (Continued)**

Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors	Student Characteristics, Attitudes, and Behaviors Sub-Topics
Student Reading Attitudes and Behaviors	Students Like Reading
	Students' Confidence in Reading
	Time Spent Reading
	Reading Purposes and Types of Texts Read Outside of School
Student Use of Information Technology	Reading Formats and Mediums
	Use of Digital Devices and the Internet

## Student Demographics

Information about students' demographic characteristics allows for exploration of achievement gaps between different groups of students. Student gender is of particular interest when examining reading achievement. Over the last five cycles of PIRLS, the gender gap in reading achievement has favored girls over boys in the majority of participating countries, reflecting a pattern seen in research.<sup>134,135</sup> Students at different ages may also perform differently on PIRLS depending on their academic history. In countries where students are admitted to primary school strictly on the basis of age, older students may be more skilled in reading comprehension compared to younger peers because of greater maturation. However, depending on retention policies, older students who have repeated a grade may struggle more with reading comprehension than students who have not done so. PIRLS 2026 collects information about student demographics in the Student Questionnaire.

## Student Experiences at School

### School Belonging

Students' sense of school belonging has been found to contribute to general well-being and academic achievement.<sup>136,137,138</sup> Sense of school belonging is shaped by how students perceive themselves and their relationships with others (teachers, other students, etc.) within the school, as well as their relationship with the school community itself.<sup>139</sup> These social connections are an important component of student well-being at school.<sup>140</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about students' sense of school belonging in the Student Questionnaire.

### Bullying

Bullying is a unique aspect of school safety because it involves repeated aggressive behavior intended to intimidate or harm students. Bullying can take a variety of forms, both mental and physical, and may occur in person or virtually. Online bullying through social media has become more prevalent as access to digital devices among children has increased.<sup>141,142,143</sup> Experiencing bullying in person or online causes distress to victims and is associated with poorer academic achievement and mental health outcomes.<sup>144,145,146,147</sup> It is important to acknowledge that students can be both victims and aggressors of bullying.<sup>148</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about students' experiences with bullying in the Student Questionnaire.

## Feelings at School

In addition to the interpersonal relationships described above, students' experiences and well-being at school are also shaped by their affective feelings.<sup>149</sup> Subjective well-being refers to a student's own evaluation of feelings contributing to their well-being.<sup>150</sup> These feelings can be positive (e.g., joy, enthusiasm, and interest) or negative (e.g. sadness, anger, and anxiety).<sup>151,152</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about students' feelings at school in the Student Questionnaire.

## Engagement in Reading Lessons

Student engagement in classroom instruction is one of many ways of thinking about school engagement, and research suggests that students' experiences within the instructional environment contribute to their engagement.<sup>153,154,155</sup> Instructional clarity is based on students' perceptions of teachers' instructional strategies.<sup>156</sup> Teachers with a high degree of instructional clarity provide straightforward explanations of content and effectively monitor student understanding, employing a variety of pedagogical techniques as required.<sup>157,158</sup> Instructional clarity is also related to establishing a supportive classroom climate where teachers engage in practices such as providing helpful feedback and clearly addressing student questions.<sup>159</sup> All of these factors contribute to student engagement in the classroom. PIRLS 2026 collects information about student engagement in reading lessons in the Student Questionnaire.

## Student Reading Attitudes and Behaviors

### Students Like Reading

Students who are motivated to read and have a strong reading self-concept tend to have better reading comprehension,<sup>160</sup> and cultivating these attitudes also may support students in becoming lifelong readers. Student readers who are intrinsically motivated find reading interesting and enjoyable for its own sake. Intrinsic motivation is the “energizer of behavior,”<sup>161</sup> and research has shown that intrinsic motivation (in this case, enjoyment of reading) is more closely related to reading achievement than extrinsic motivations such as praise and money.<sup>162,163</sup> Students' attitudes toward reading improve with time spent on leisure reading, and liking reading is positively associated with reading achievement.<sup>164,165</sup> The relationship between reading motivation and achievement is likely to be reciprocal; students who read more become better readers, and students who are better readers get more enjoyment from reading.<sup>166,167</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about how much students like reading in the Student Questionnaire.

### Students' Confidence in Reading

Research has shown that student confidence in reading is positively associated with reading achievement.<sup>168,169</sup> Students tend to have distinct views of their own reading ability, and their self-appraisal is often based on their prior performance and how they see themselves compared with their peers.<sup>170</sup> Students who are confident in their ability may persevere in completing a school task because they believe they can be successful.<sup>171</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about students' confidence in reading in the Student Questionnaire.

## Time Spent Reading

The time that students spend reading is likely to be influenced by their attitudes toward reading, and both can work together to positively impact reading comprehension.<sup>172</sup> Some research has found that time spent reading mediates the relationship between reading motivation and comprehension, although these findings are not consistent, and the relationship between students' reading attitudes, time spent reading, and reading achievement requires further investigation.<sup>173</sup> There are also additional factors that impact the amount of time students spend reading, such as the availability of library or home literacy resources.<sup>174</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about the time students spend reading in the Student Questionnaire.

## Reading Purposes and Types of Text Read Outside of School

As described in the PIRLS 2026 Reading Assessment Framework, students can read for a variety of reasons, which fall under the two overarching purposes: literary experience and acquiring and using information. A variety of text types are encompassed in each of these purposes. For literary experience, students may read storybooks with pictures, chapter books, or other types of fiction. Students may find information in nonfiction books, online articles, or informational websites. PIRLS 2026 collects information about the types of texts students read outside of school in the Student Questionnaire.

## Reading Formats and Mediums

Students read in many different formats, including on paper, computers or tablets, and mobile phones. Access to multimodal texts in comparison to print text alone can improve a student's ability to summarize information.<sup>175</sup> Some research suggests that reading on paper is associated with greater comprehension.<sup>176,177,178,179</sup> In particular, reading paper-based text supports comprehension for longer texts.<sup>180</sup> This may be because reading on digital devices is more likely to promote short and fast engagement rather than deeper thinking.<sup>181</sup> Despite this finding, some research has shown children prefer reading on digital devices.<sup>182</sup> PIRLS 2026 collects information about the formats and media that students use for reading in the Student Questionnaire.

## Student Use of Information Technology

### Use of the Digital Devices and the Internet

Engagement with both information and other people online has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon. Students may use the digital devices and the internet for a variety of purposes, including social communication, looking up information, or accessing schoolwork through a digital platform.<sup>183</sup> Some of these purposes can be directly related to schoolwork, while others are not. Many of these purposes involve reading in some form, and therefore, online activities may be related to students' reading comprehension skills. The PIRLS 2026 Student Questionnaire collects information about students' use of the internet at school and at home to better understand the frequency and nature of technology use in students' learning and personal activities.

## National Contexts

As illustrated in Exhibit 1, students' families, classrooms, and schools are all situated within a broader national context. Country-level policies about the organization of the education system and reading curriculum are important contributors to students' school experiences and learning. All information about national contexts in PIRLS 2026 is collected through the Curriculum Questionnaire, the general contents of which are summarized in Exhibit 6. This information is also complemented by countries' chapters in the *PIRLS 2026 Encyclopedia*.

**Exhibit 6: Summary of National Contexts and Sub-Topics**

National Contexts Topics	National Contexts Sub-Topics
Organization of Education System	Number of Years in School
	Age of School Entry and Grade Retention
	Preprimary Education
	Language(s) of Instruction
	Teacher and Principal Preparation
Reading Curriculum	Curriculum Specifications
	Instructional Materials and Use of Digital Devices
	Areas of Emphasis in the Language/Reading Curriculum

### Organization of Education System

#### Number of Years of School

Although only fourth-grade students participate in PIRLS 2026, the fourth grade is situated within a sequence of schooling that shapes the national contexts in which students learn. Countries vary not only in the number of years of schooling provided for students, but also in the number of those years that are compulsory.

#### Age of School Entry and Grade Retention

Policies about the age of entry into formal education (first year of primary school, ISCED Level 1) are important for understanding achievement differences, as well as the variation in fourth-grade students' ages.<sup>184</sup> Promotion and retention policies also impact when students enter particular grades. Grade retention is a controversial practice, and some research has shown that it has negative relationships with student well-being and achievement, particularly in the short term.<sup>185,186,187</sup> However, the impact of grade retention varies based on other system-level factors that may vary across countries, such as tracking or other forms of student grouping.<sup>188</sup>

#### System for Preprimary Education

Preprimary education can expose children to formal literacy activities before they begin primary school and has been an area of active investment for many countries in recent years. For example, the European Union legislated that member countries provide universal access to preprimary education.<sup>189</sup> Attendance in preprimary programs can have a positive effect on academic outcomes.<sup>190</sup> However, the effect of preprimary education on later academic and life

outcomes is dependent on the quality of the preprimary program.<sup>191,192,193</sup> The structure and types of preprimary education programs available for students to attend vary across countries. For example, some countries have special preprimary programs available for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Language(s) of Instruction**

Some countries have one commonly spoken language, while others are historically multilingual. Immigration can also increase language diversity. Different multilingual countries have different policies for educating their population and may have policies specifically related to language literacy. All policies related to language(s) of instruction are shaped by a country's historical and cultural context.

### **Teacher and Principal Preparation**

Countries vary in their mandated or typical preparation routes for teachers and principals. Information about the preparation of teachers and principals whose students participate in PIRLS is collected in the School and Teacher Questionnaires; this is further contextualized with information about the most common preparation routes across countries.

## **Reading Curriculum**

### **Curriculum Specifications**

Countries' reading curricula define what students should be taught and provide expectations for students in terms of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be developed or acquired through their formal reading instruction. The level at which the reading curriculum is defined (e.g., national, state/provincial) varies across countries. Countries also differ in the components recommended or prescribed by the curriculum, such as teaching activities or assessments.

### **Instructional Materials and the Use of Digital Devices**

Access to a wide variety of reading materials, as well as differentiation policies and practices for accelerated and struggling readers, are important components of the reading curriculum. Strategies for incorporating digital devices and online resources in the reading curriculum are also becoming more prevalent as the use of technology is increasingly emphasized in educational systems internationally.<sup>194</sup>

### **Areas of Emphasis in the Reading/Language Curriculum**

Countries' reading curricula vary in the degree to which they emphasize specific reading skills. The standards or benchmarks established for reading development are particularly important. A coherent progression of instruction and comprehension strategies for reading development can include a change in emphasis from decoding to comprehension strategies as students progress through the primary grades and develop their skills.

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## CHAPTER 3

# PIRLS 2026 Assessment Design

Liqun Yin, Pierre Foy

### Overview

PIRLS is an international large-scale assessment of fourth-grade students' reading achievement. Conducted on a five-year cycle since 2001, with each assessment linked to those preceding it, PIRLS provides regular and timely data on trends in students' reading literacy on a common achievement scale.

The PIRLS assessment design uses a matrix-sampling technique to lessen the burden on individual students while ensuring coverage of a broad range of reading texts. Each text and its accompanying questions (known as items) and online informational reading task is assigned to a block, and the blocks are then systematically distributed among individual student booklets. The PIRLS 2026 assessment consists of 18 blocks, half assessing reading for literary experience (“literary”) and half assessing reading to acquire and use information (“informational”). Under the group adaptive design, one-third of the blocks are relatively difficult, one-third are of medium difficulty, and one-third are relatively easy.

To minimize the assessment burden on individual students, each student is presented with two assessment blocks, one literary and one informational, according to a systematic booklet assembly and rotation procedure described in the next section. Following data collection, student responses to the assessment items are placed on the PIRLS reading achievement scale using item response theory methods that provide an overall picture of the assessment results for each country.<sup>1,2</sup>

PIRLS uses a group adaptive assessment design to better match assessment difficulty to student ability in each participating country. Using different test forms (booklets) to balance respondent burden and content coverage, the group adaptive design adjusts the sampling of booklets in each country to provide better coverage of the diverse range of ability distributions encountered in such assessments.

The group adaptive design improves the match between assessment difficulty and student ability in each country's population by allowing a greater proportion of more difficult booklets in countries with relatively high achievement and a greater proportion of less difficult booklets in countries with relatively low achievement. Accordingly, this design increases the information obtained from the assessment while maintaining standard test administration procedures and time requirements.<sup>3</sup> This proportional distribution approach can also be applied within a country if the country has clearly defined subpopulations that differ substantially in student achievement.

PIRLS 2026 emphasizes a fully digital delivery format for an operationally efficient and more engaging assessment. Increasingly, online texts, such as websites, are included in school curricula, and the internet is a central way that many students acquire information in and out of school. Online informational reading tasks were first introduced in PIRLS 2016 as an extension of the reading framework. They were reported in PIRLS 2021 as part of the overall reading scale as PIRLS transitioned to a digital assessment. PIRLS 2026 further incorporates this online content in the PIRLS reading assessment framework in recognition that reading literacy encompasses a variety of text forms and requires skill development in both digital and non-digital environments. Accordingly, the PIRLS 2026 group adaptive assessment design includes online informational reading tasks as part of the acquire and use information purpose.

Similar to previous PIRLS assessments, PIRLS 2026 includes a series of context questionnaires to gather information about community, home, and school contexts for developing reading literacy.

## Student Population Assessed

PIRLS assesses students' reading achievement in their fourth year of formal schooling. This student population was chosen for PIRLS since its inception in 2001 because it is an important transition point in children's development as readers. Typically, at this point, students have mastered the basics of learning to read and are now reading to learn.

PIRLS defines the fourth year of formal schooling according to the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) developed by UNESCO.<sup>4</sup> The ISCED classification provides an international standard for describing levels of schooling across countries. It covers the full range of schooling, from early childhood education (Level 0) to doctoral or equivalent level study (Level 8). The target population for PIRLS is defined as follows:

*The PIRLS target grade should be the grade that represents four years of schooling, counting from the first year of ISCED Level 1.*

ISCED Level 1 corresponds to primary education, or the first stage of basic education, and is considered the first stage of formal schooling. The PIRLS target grade is four years after the beginning of Level 1, which is the fourth grade in most countries. However, given the linguistic and cognitive demands of reading, PIRLS wants to avoid assessing very young children. Thus, if the average age of fourth-grade students at the time of testing is expected to be less than 9.5 years, PIRLS recommends that countries assess students in the next higher grade (i.e., fifth grade).

## Reporting Reading Achievement

PIRLS is designed to provide a comprehensive picture of the students' reading achievement in each participating country. This includes achievement by reading purpose and comprehension process as well as overall reading achievement (as defined in Chapter 1), which requires a wide range of reading material that fourth-grade students encounter in school and their everyday lives, including a range of static text types and formats, while also incorporating dynamic graphics and video.

The PIRLS reading achievement scale provides a common metric on which countries can compare their fourth-grade students' progress in reading over time from assessment to assessment. The PIRLS achievement scale was established in 2001 so that 100 points on the scale corresponded to one standard deviation across all the countries that participated in 2001, and the scale midpoint of 500 was located at the mean of this international achievement distribution. Using texts and items that were administered in both the 2001 and 2006 assessments as a basis for linking the two sets of assessment results, the PIRLS 2006 data were also placed on this scale so that countries could gauge changes in students' reading achievement since 2001. Using similar procedures, the PIRLS 2011, PIRLS 2016, and PIRLS 2021 data were placed on the PIRLS scale, each linked to the previous cycle, as will be the data from PIRLS 2026. This will enable countries that have participated in PIRLS since its inception to have comparable achievement data from each of the six PIRLS administration cycles and depict performance changes over 25 years.

The PIRLS reading achievement scale is an overall measure of reading proficiency which includes reading purposes and comprehension processes. In addition to the overall scale, PIRLS 2026 also provides separate achievement scales on the same metric for the subscales describing reading purposes and comprehension processes. More specifically, there are two subscales for reading purposes:

- reading for literary experience
- reading to acquire and use information

There also are two subscales for processes of reading comprehension:

- retrieving and straightforward inferencing
- interpreting, integrating, and evaluating

The *retrieving and straightforward inferencing* subscale combines items from the *focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information* and *make straightforward inferences comprehension* processes. Similarly, the *interpreting, integrating, and evaluating* scale is based on items from the *interpret and integrate ideas and information* and *evaluate and critique content and textual elements* processes (as described in Chapter 1).

## PIRLS 2026 Group Adaptive Design

The PIRLS 2026 assessment design preserves the main aspects of the PIRLS 2021 group adaptive design with three levels of text block difficulty within each of the two subscales for reading purposes. The PIRLS 2021 group adaptive design reduced item level non-response and provided a more precise measurement of student reading achievement. The adaptive design is

expected to increase student motivation and reduce item-level nonresponse to enable a more precise measurement of student reading achievement. The design combines three levels of block difficulty—difficult, medium, and easy—into two levels of booklet difficulty. More difficult booklets are composed of two difficult blocks or one medium and one difficult block, while less difficult booklets consist of an easy and a medium block or two easy blocks. Each country administers the set of booklets that represents the entire PIRLS 2026 assessment, but the balance of more difficult and less difficult booklets varies with the expected reading achievement level of the students in the country.

## PIRLS 2026 Assessment Blocks

Of the 18 blocks included in the PIRLS 2026 group adaptive design, 14 were administered previously in PIRLS 2021 and are brought forward for 2026 to support the measurement of trends. In addition, four new blocks will be developed for first-time use in PIRLS 2026. Exhibit 1 shows how the existing trend and new blocks fit into the purpose-by-difficulty scheme.

Exhibit 1 also includes a label for each block to illustrate more clearly the assignment of blocks to booklets. The block labels in PIRLS 2026 are based on the reading purposes (Lit for literary and Inf for informational), block difficulty levels (D for difficult, M for medium, and E for easy) and a sequential number (1, 2, or 3). Of the four new blocks for PIRLS 2026, there is one new literary block in each of the three difficulty levels. The fourth one is an easy informational block.

**Exhibit 1: Reading Purpose and Difficulty Level for PIRLS 2026 Text Blocks**

Reading Purpose	Difficulty Level	Block Label
Literary	Difficult	LitD1 (16)
		<b>LitD2 (26)</b>
		LitD3 (21)
	Medium	<b>LitM1 (26)</b>
		LitM2 (21)
		LitM3 (16)
	Easy	LitE1 (11)
		<b>LitE2 (26)</b>
		LitE3 (16)

**Exhibit 1: Reading Purpose and Difficulty Level for PIRLS 2026 Text Blocks (Continued)**

Reading Purpose	Difficulty Level	Block Label
Informational	Difficult	InfD1 (16)
		InfD2 (21)
		InfD3 (21)
	Medium	InfM1 (16)
		InfM2 (21)
		InfM3 (16)
	Easy	InfE1 (11)
		<b>InfE2 (26)</b>
		InfE3 (16)

\* The number in parentheses is the assessment year in which the text was first introduced. To maintain assessment integrity, the PIRLS 2026 framework intentionally withholds passage names. This prevents inadvertent disclosure of assessment materials through titles or keywords. In today's digital age, even seemingly innocuous titles can lead to specific texts being found online. The omission of passage names ensures fairness and prevents bias.

## Text Block Difficulty Levels

For the design to be effective, there must be distinct differences between the average item difficulties of the blocks assigned to a difficulty level and the average difficulties of blocks in the other levels. The difficulty goals in terms of average percent correct across the student population of all countries are 40% for the difficult blocks, 60% for the medium blocks, and 80% for the easy blocks. Meeting these targets is an evolutionary process that started in PIRLS 2021 as older blocks were replaced with new ones. Exhibit 2 shows the average difficulty achieved in PIRLS 2021 across the three block-difficulty levels based on the trend blocks and the new blocks introduced in 2021. The estimated difficulty is an average percentage correct aggregated across all blocks of a particular difficulty level. The difficulty estimates for PIRLS 2021 are based on the digital assessment in PIRLS 2021. The projections were used to estimate the contribution of countries with a paper-based administration in PIRLS 2021 rather than the digital assessment administration.

As only the new texts and items could be purposefully developed to meet the difficulty targets, the achieved outcomes in 2021 were a first step towards reaching the targets. The development of the new text and item sets for PIRLS 2026 will aim to get closer to the stated targets, as shown in the last column of Exhibit 2.



**Exhibit 2: Average Difficulty of Text Blocks in PIRLS 2021 and Target Difficulty for PIRLS 2026**

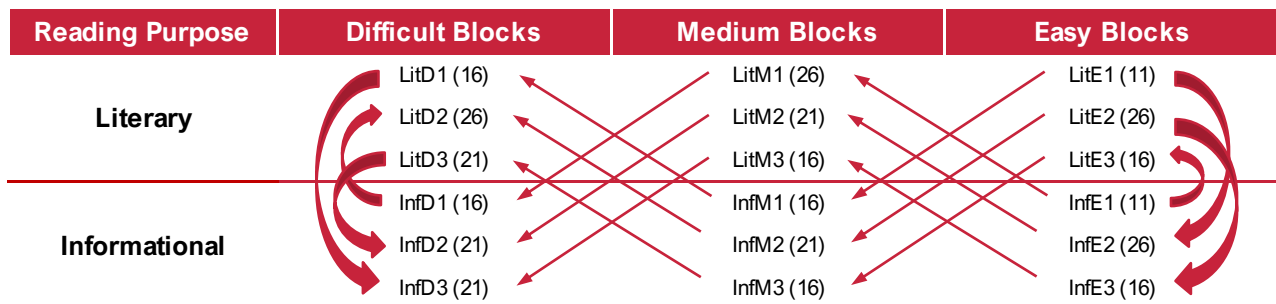
Block Difficulty Level	Average Difficulty in PIRLS 2021	Target Difficulty for PIRLS 2026
Difficult	47%	45%
Medium	58%	58%
Easy	69%	74%

### Booklet Design

In the PIRLS assessment, each student is randomly assigned a test booklet consisting of two text blocks, one literary and one informational. In PIRLS 2026, the 18 blocks are arranged into 18 booklets, with each block appearing in two booklets. Exhibit 3 summarizes the block pairs that make up each booklet. All difficult blocks are paired with either another difficult block or a medium block, while all easy blocks are paired with either another easy block or a medium block. All medium blocks are paired with either a difficult block or an easy block. In addition, all new blocks are paired with a trend block to maximize the number of students presented with a new block.

In Exhibit 3, the directions of the arrows show which block comes first in the booklet. For example, an arrow points from block InfM1 to LitD1, indicating that these two blocks share a booklet, with InfM1 preceding LitD1. Note that when blocks of different difficulty levels are paired in the same booklet, the easier of the two always comes first.

**Exhibit 3: Block Pairings for Each Assessment Booklet**



The 18 booklets are divided into two levels of difficulty, as follows:

- more difficult booklets (9), composed of either two difficult blocks or one medium and one difficult block; and
- less difficult booklets (9), composed of either two easy blocks or one easy and one medium block.

Exhibit 4 shows the block assignments and order (Part 1 or Part 2) for the 18 booklets, with booklets 1 through 9 being the more difficult booklets and booklets 10 through 18 being the less difficult ones.

**Exhibit 4: Block Assignments for PIRLS 2026 Assessment Booklets (with Block Labels)**

Student Assessment Booklets	Part 1	Part 2	
<b>More Difficult Booklets</b>	Booklet 1	InfM1 (16)	LitD1 (16)
	Booklet 2	LitD3 (21)	InfD2 (21)
	Booklet 3	LitM1 (26)	InfD1 (16)
	Booklet 4	InfM2 (21)	LitD2 (26)
	Booklet 5	LitD1 (16)	InfD3 (21)
	Booklet 6	LitM2 (21)	InfD2 (21)
	Booklet 7	InfM3 (16)	LitD3 (21)
	Booklet 8	InfD1 (16)	LitD2 (26)
	Booklet 9	LitM3 (16)	InfD3 (21)
<b>Less Difficult Booklets</b>	Booklet 10	LitE1 (11)	InfM1 (16)
	Booklet 11	InfE2 (26)	LitM2 (21)
	Booklet 12	InfE1 (11)	LitE3 (16)
	Booklet 13	LitE2 (26)	InfM2 (21)
	Booklet 14	InfE3 (16)	LitM3 (16)
	Booklet 15	LitE1 (11)	InfE2 (26)
	Booklet 16	LitE3 (16)	InfM3 (16)
	Booklet 17	InfE1 (11)	LitM1 (26)
	Booklet 18	LitE2 (26)	InfE3 (16)

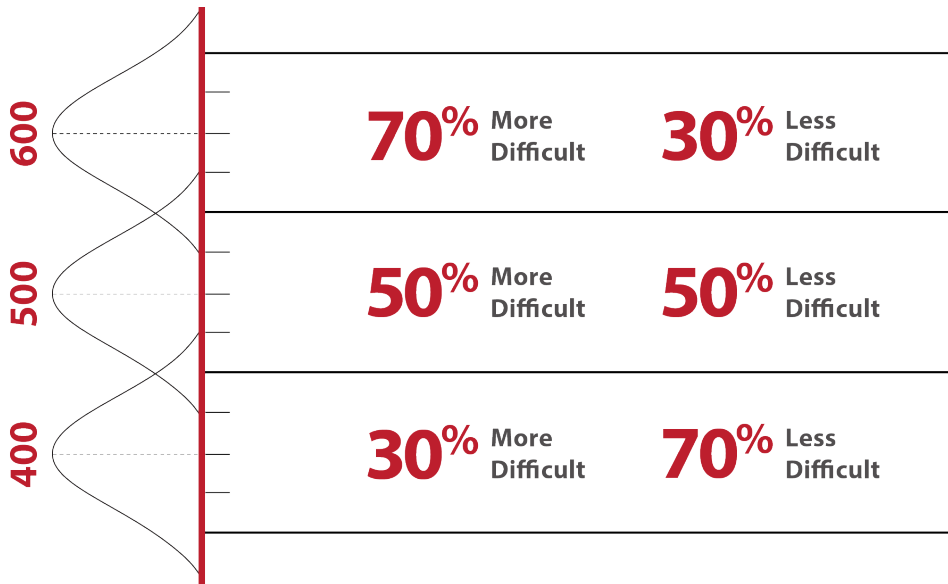
## Booklet Assignment within Countries

All 18 booklets are distributed in every country, ensuring that all countries administer the same assessment, but with varying proportions of the more and less difficult booklets depending on the average reading ability of each country's student population. This average reading ability is estimated based on performance in prior PIRLS assessments, or from the field test for countries participating for the first time. Higher-performing countries will assign proportionally more of the more difficult booklets, while lower-performing countries will assign proportionally more of the less difficult booklets, with the goal of a better match between assessment difficulty and student ability in each country.

Exhibit 5 illustrates the differential booklet assignment plans for higher, medium, and lower performing countries. Countries with an average performance of 550 or higher on the PIRLS achievement scale would assign proportionally more of the more difficult booklets (e.g., 70%), and fewer of the less difficult booklets (e.g., 30%). Countries with average performance of 450 or lower on the PIRLS scale would assign proportionally more of the less difficult booklets (e.g., 70%) and fewer of the more difficult booklets (e.g., 30%). Countries with performance between 450 and 550 would assign equal proportions of the more and less difficult booklets. For new countries

participating in PIRLS 2026, the booklet assignment plans are based on their performance in the PIRLS 2026 field test. Other, more extreme, proportions may be considered on a country-by-country basis. The group adaptive design aims to improve measurement accuracy in countries participating in PIRLS by allowing booklets that vary in difficulty to be assigned at country-specific rates.

**Exhibit 5: PIRLS 2026 Booklet Assignment Plan for Higher, Middle, and Lower Performing Countries**



While the PIRLS 2026 group adaptive design was developed to provide a better match between assessment difficulty and student ability at the country level, it is possible to apply the group adaptive approach for subgroups within a country, provided the country has clearly defined subpopulations that are known to differ substantially in student achievement.

IEA's within-school sampling software (WinW3S) assigns booklets to individual students within each school. The 18 booklets are distributed among the students in sampled classes using a systematic random assignment process that ensures that the proportions of more and less difficult booklets conform to the rates established for the country.

## Student Testing Time

As summarized in Exhibit 6, each student participating in PIRLS completes one student achievement booklet consisting of two parts, followed by a student questionnaire. The individual student response time for the PIRLS 2026 assessment is the same as in previous PIRLS cycles.<sup>5,6</sup> The PIRLS administration consists of two 40-minute sessions, one for each part, separated by a short break, and then a 30-minute session for the student questionnaire.

**Exhibit 6: PIRLS 2026 Student Testing Time**

Activity	Testing Time
Student Achievement Booklet – Part 1	40 minutes
Break	
Student Achievement Booklet – Part 2	40 minutes
Break	
Student Questionnaire	30 minutes

## References

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- 6 Mullis, I. V. S., & Martin, M. O. (Eds.). (2019). *PIRLS 2021 Assessment Frameworks*. Boston College, TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center. <https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2021/frameworks/>

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With each cycle of PIRLS, one of the most important tasks is to update the assessment frameworks. Updating the PIRLS assessment frameworks for 2026 began in October 2022, and has involved extensive input and reviews by individuals at the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, IEA, the PIRLS 2026 National Research Coordinators, and the two PIRLS expert committees—the PIRLS 2026 Reading Development Group and the PIRLS 2026 Questionnaire Development Group. This section acknowledges the contributions of these individuals for preparation of the *PIRLS 2026 Assessment Frameworks*.

## PIRLS 2026 Framework Development at the TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center at Boston College

**Matthias von Davier** — Executive Director

**Pierre Foy** — Senior Director of Sampling, Psychometrics, and Data Analysis

**Ann Kennedy** — Senior Research Director, Project Management

**Audrey Gallo** — Senior Research Specialist, Development and Reporting

**Maya Komakhidze** — Graduate Research Assistant

**Katherine A. Reynolds** — Associate Research Director, Context Questionnaires and Reporting

**Erin Wry** — Senior Research Specialist, PIRLS Coordinator

**Liqun Yin** — Senior Research Psychometrician

## PIRLS 2026 Reading Development Group

The PIRLS Reading Development Group (RDG) is a panel of internationally recognized experts in reading research, instruction, and assessment. The RDG provides guidance on updating the PIRLS Reading Assessment Framework and on assessment development.

Julian Fraillon  
IEA Amsterdam  
**Australia**

Marc Colmant  
**France**

Emer Delaney  
Educational Research Centre  
Dublin City University  
**Ireland**

Eliane Segers  
Radboud University  
**The Netherlands**

Elizabeth Pang  
Curriculum Planning and Development  
Division  
Ministry of Education  
**Singapore**

Veronica Díez Girado  
National Institute for Educational Assessment  
Ministry of Education  
**Spain**

Jenny Wiksten Folkeryd  
Uppsala University  
**Sweden**

Aisha Al Jesmi  
Emirates Schools Establishment  
**United Arab Emirates**

John Sabatini  
University of Memphis  
**United States**

## PIRLS 2026 Questionnaire Development Group

The PIRLS Questionnaire Development Group (QDG) is a panel of educational policy analysis experts and National Research Coordinators who provide guidance on updating the PIRLS Contextual Framework and context questionnaires for PIRLS 2026.

Anne Matoul  
Université de Liège  
**Belgium (French)**

Luciana Fonseca de Aguiar Morais  
Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas  
Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP)  
Ministry of Education  
**Brazil**

Yu-Wen Chang  
National Taipei University of Education  
**Chinese Taipei**

Kaisa Leino  
Finnish Institute for Educational Research  
University of Jyväskylä  
**Finland**

Antra Ozola  
University of Latvia  
**Latvia**

Megan Chamberlain  
Educational Measurement and Assessment  
Team  
Ministry of Education  
**New Zealand**

Fathiya Mohammed Amour Al Mawali  
Ministry of Education  
**Oman**

Anabela Serrão  
Instituto de Avaliação Educativa, I.P.  
**Portugal**

## PIRLS 2026 National Research Coordinators

The PIRLS 2026 National Research Coordinators (NRCs) are responsible for implementing the study in their countries and participated in a series of reviews of the updated frameworks.

### Australia

Kylie Hillman  
Australian Council for Educational Research

### Austria

Juliane Schmich  
Federal Institute for Quality Assurance of  
the Austrian School System (IQS)

### Azerbaijan

Royal Mahmudov  
The Institute of Education of the Republic of  
Azerbaijan

### Bahrain

Samah Mohd Al Ajjawi  
Ministry of Education

### Belgium (Flemish)

Katrijn Denies  
KU Leuven

### Belgium (French)

Anne Matoul  
Université de Liège

### Brazil

Aline Fernandes Muler  
Luciana Fonseca de Aguiar Morais  
Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas  
Educacionais Anísio Teixeira (INEP)  
Ministry of Education

### Bulgaria

Marina Vasileva Mavrodieva  
Center for Assessment in Pre-School and  
School Education (CAPSE)

### Canada

Tanya Scerbina  
Council of Ministers of Education, Canada  
(CMEC)

### Chinese Taipei

Ming-Lei Chen  
National Tsing Hua University

### Cyprus

Yiasemina Karagiorgi  
Center for Educational Research and  
Evaluation  
Cyprus Pedagogical Institute

### Czech Republic

Zuzana Janotová  
Josef Basl  
Czech School Inspectorate

### Denmark

Simon Skov Fougts  
University of Aarhus

### England

Grace Grima  
Pearson UK

### Finland

Kaisa Leino  
Marjo-Riina Sirén  
Finnish Institute for Educational Research  
University of Jyväskylä

### France

Julien Desclaux  
Direction de l'Évaluation, de la Prospective  
et de la Performance (DEPP)  
Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la  
Jeunesse

### Georgia

Sophio Dolidze  
Nino Tsulaia  
National Center for Education Research  
(NCER)

### Germany

Nele McElvany  
Institut für Schulentwicklungsforschung  
(IFS)  
TU Dortmund University

**Hong Kong SAR**

Madeline Xiaoming Xi  
Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment  
Authority

**Hungary**

Emese Suhajda  
Department of Assessment and Evaluation  
Educational Authority

**Iran**

Masoud Kabiri  
Research Institute for Education

**Ireland**

Fionnuala Shortt  
Lorraine Gilleece  
Educational Research Centre  
Dublin City University

**Israel**

Georgette Hilu  
Noa Schori-Eyal  
RAMA (National Authority for Measurement  
and Evaluation in Education)

**Italy**

Margherita Emiletti  
INVALSI (Istituto Nazionale per la  
Valutazione del Sistema Educativo di  
Istruzione e di Formazione)

**Jordan**

Loay Radwan Mohammad Shwashreh  
National Center for Human Resources  
Development

**Kazakhstan**

Nazym Smanova  
JSC National Center for Education Research  
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**Korea, Republic of**

Minhee Seo  
Korea Institute for Curriculum & Evaluation

**Kosovo**

Nizafete Kutllovci-Bardhi  
Ministry of Education, Science and  
Technology of Kosovo

**Kuwait**

Anwar Malallah Alawadhi  
Ministry of Education

**Latvia**

Antra Ozola  
University of Latvia

**Lithuania**

Ramutė Skripkienė  
National Education Agency

**Macao SAR**

Napier Kin Mou Wong  
Education and Youth Development Bureau  
(DSEDJ)

**Malta**

Jude Zammit  
Karen Grixti  
Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth,  
Research and Innovation

**Montenegro**

Marina Radović  
Examination Centre of Montenegro

**Morocco**

Anass El Asraoui  
Centre National de l'Évaluation, des  
Examens et de l'Orientation  
Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale de la  
Formation Professionnelle

**The Netherlands**

Joyce Gubbels  
Nicole Swart  
Dutch Center for Language Education

**New Zealand**

Megan Chamberlain  
Educational Measurement and Assessment  
Team  
Ministry of Education

**North Macedonia**

Biljana Mihajlovska  
State Examination Center



**Northern Ireland**

Grace Grima  
Pearson UK

**Norway**

Åse Kari H. Wagner  
Norwegian Reading Centre  
University of Stavanger

**Oman**

Massoma Habib Al Ajmi  
Ministry of Education

**Poland**

Wioleta Dobosz-Leszczynska  
Educational Research Institute

**Portugal**

Anabela Serrão  
Instituto de Avaliação Educativa, I.P.

**Qatar**

Asma Yousif Al-Harqan  
Ministry of Education and Higher Education

**Romania**

Oana Dubularu  
Laura-Maria Ierulescu  
University of Bucharest

**Saudi Arabia**

Abdullah Aljouiee  
Education & Training Evaluation Commission

**Scotland**

Grace Grima  
Pearson UK

**Serbia**

Branislav Randjelović  
Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation

**Singapore**

Lee Shan Chan  
Vanessa Chua  
Elizabeth Pang  
Sean Tan  
Ministry of Education

**Slovak Republic**

Romana Panáčková  
National Institute of Education and Youth

**Slovenia**

Eva Klemencic Mirazchiyski  
Educational Research Institute

**Spain**

Verónica Díez Girado  
National Institute for Educational  
Assessment  
Ministry of Education

**Sweden**

Cecilia Stenman  
Skolverket (Swedish National Agency for  
Education)

**United Arab Emirates**

Hessa Alwahabi  
Shaikha Ali Alzaabi  
Ministry of Education UAE

**United States (PIRLS 2021 team)**

Mary Coleman  
National Center for Education Statistics  
U.S. Department of Education

**Benchmarking Participants****Ontario, Canada**

Jeannette Amio  
Council of Ministers of Education, Canada  
(CMEC)

**Quebec, Canada**

Marie-Ève Proulx  
Pierre Rioux  
Ministry of Education, Quebec

**Dubai, United Arab Emirates**

Mariam Al Ali  
Knowledge and Human Development  
Authority

**Sharjah, United Arab Emirates**

Nada Abu Baker Husain Ruban  
Ministry of Education UAE



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