

# Can Educational Standards Increase Educational Equality?

Janna Teltemann & Reinhard Schunck

## The challenge of granting equal education

When talking about equality in education, the difficulties begin with defining what equality in education means. A basic function of education is societal integration: providing individuals with the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in society. In this regard equality in education means that everyone is granted a certain minimum level of education which is needed for participation in society. This can be a challenge for education systems, particularly in times of increasingly diverse student bodies.

Proponents of “standardization” suggest to increase equality in education by defining minimum educational standards and to regularly assess whether they are actually achieved. Critics of this approach are concerned that testing alone does not increase equality. In a recent study we have examined this issue empirically by comparing countries with different educational systems.

## Do educational standards help to achieve equality in education?

In our research, we scrutinized whether different strategies of standardization in education reduce the number of students at risk of not achieving such an educational minimum. We were particularly concerned about immigrant students because they are underperformers in many countries. In our study we use OECD PISA data and

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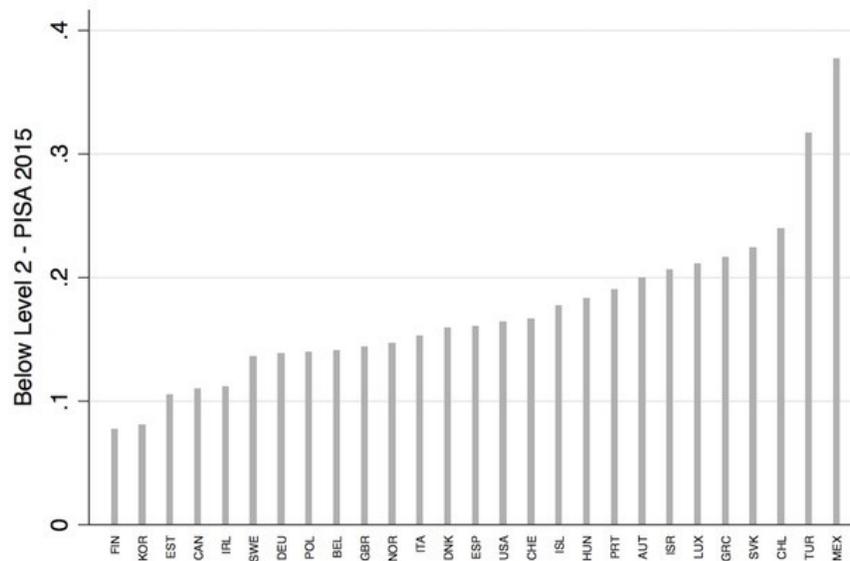
Janna Teltemann  
Universität Hildesheim, e-mail: [Janna.Teltemann@uni-hildesheim.de](mailto:Janna.Teltemann@uni-hildesheim.de)

Reinhard Schunck  
GESIS Leibniz Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, e-mail: [schunck@uni-wuppertal.de](mailto:schunck@uni-wuppertal.de)

define minimum education as performance below level 2 of reading scale. Students who perform below level 2 are unlikely to continue with education after mandatory schooling and will likely have severe difficulties in the labor market and with societal participation in general. Interestingly, educational systems differ greatly in the extent to which they are able to ensure such a minimum education for their students. As Figure 1 shows, the proportion of students who did not reach level 2 varied greatly between countries. Less than 10 percent of the Finnish but more than 30 percent of the Mexican students to not reach basic literacy.

While it is easy to come up with potential explanations for these differences, it is difficult to find robust empirical evidence for or against an explanation. Do the differences stem from features of the countries' education system? Do they stem from the composition of the student bodies? Or do they stem from other differences between the countries? Obviously, countries like Finland and Mexico differ in many respects. To circumvent this issue, we have combined data from three different rounds of the OECD PISA study (2003, 2009, 2015) and constructed a dataset for 27 countries with about half a million students. With data from different measurement points over time we are able to assess how changes of standardization within countries are associated with changes in student performance.

**Fig. 1** Proportion of students performing below level in reading, PISA 2015.



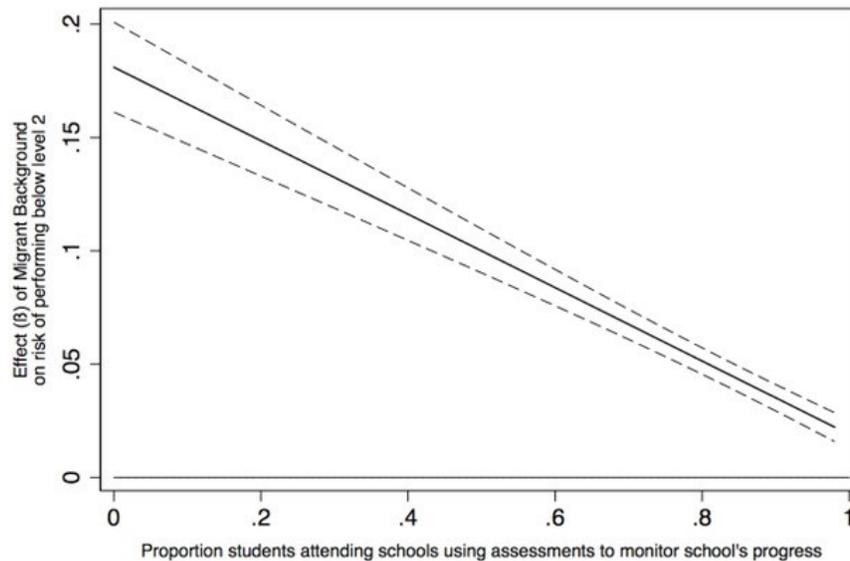
*Note.* Data source: OECD PISA 2015 database, own calculations.

## Standardization protects immigrant students against low performance

Our results show that indicators of standardization such as the proliferation of standardised tests for 15 year old students, the practice of using school assessment data for comparisons with regional or national performance data, or using assessment data to track school performance over time reduce the risk of low reading performance in PISA.

A closer look reveals that the risk of low performance is particularly high for immigrants. However, in countries with more widespread standardization practices, this risk is reduced. Figure 2 shows that in countries with an extensive use of assessment data for purposes of monitoring, immigrant students tend to have about the same risk of low performance as non-immigrants (the effect of immigrant background tends towards zero).

**Fig. 2** Effect of immigrant background on low performance by level of standardization (in terms of using school assessment data for the purpose of monitoring a school's progress over time).



*Note.* Estimated result based on a hierarchical four-level model with country-level fixed effects. Data source: OECD PISA database 2003, 2009, 2015.

This text has been posted on the blog [international-education.blog](https://international-education.blog) and it is available in different languages on [international-education.blog](https://international-education.blog)

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