

# FACTS ABOUT ASIA: Asia and Education

**Editor's Note:** *EAA* readers are invited to send material for this column. Please include a source for your "Asian fact."

## Reported Literacy Rates of Select Asian Countries (age 15 and over)

Taiwan	98.5%
China	96.4%
Indonesia	95.4%
Việt Nam	94.5%
Thailand	92.9%
Bangladesh	72.9%
India	71.2%
Pakistan	57.9%

Source: *CIA World Factbook* <https://tinyurl.com/hhhvnby>. Years of statistics compiled range from 2014–2017.

## Percent of Populations with Tertiary Educations (Ages 25–34)

### Select Asian Countries, US, and Canada

Tertiary education is defined as any type of formal education after high school and includes both academic and vocational programs.

Republic of Korea	69.8%
Canada	60.9%
Japan	60.4%
US	47.8%
Indonesia	16.1%

Source: *The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)* at <https://tinyurl.com/j5penpc>. Year of statistics: 2017.

## Program for International Student Assessment (PISA); Top Ten Countries Ranked Highest to Lowest by Mean Score in Science, Reading, and Mathematics (2015 data)

PISA is a triennial international survey that aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of fifteen-year-old students.

Science	Reading	Mathematics
Singapore	Singapore	Singapore
Japan	Canada	Hong Kong
Estonia	Hong Kong	Macao
Taiwan	Finland	Taiwan
Finland	Ireland	Japan
Macao	Estonia	China (B-S-J-G)*
Canada	Korea	Korea
Việt Nam	Japan	Switzerland
Hong Kong	Norway	Estonia
China (B-S-J-G)*	Macao (China)	Canada

\*B-S-J-G refers to a group of cities and regions: Beijing, a province-level municipality; Jiangsu, a province on the eastern coast of the country; Guangdong, a southern coastal province; and Shanghai, a province-level municipality that Chinese administrators use as the basis for PISA scores rather than the whole of China which would most probably result in a lower ranking.

The US ranked twenty-fourth in science, twenty-fourth in reading, and thirty-eighth in mathematics.

Source: *The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)*, <https://tinyurl.com/ydcnuxl8>.



Schoolkids at a rural school in Kanchipuram District, Tamil Nadu. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/yy49xb9f>. Photo by McKay Savage.

## India's Educational System: Challenges

Two-hundred sixty million children attend primary and secondary schools in India.

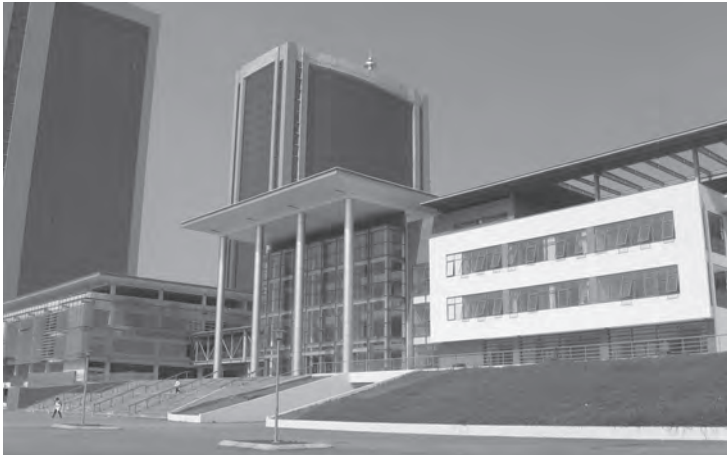
Secondary school attendance (69 percent of eligible children) lags behind that of China (96 percent). Primary school enrolment is nearly universal. Half of fifth-grade pupils (ten-year-olds) cannot read a story designed for second graders and only a quarter can do simple division. A rough analysis of PISA test results (2009) from fifteen-year-olds in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu puts them five years of schooling behind pupils in Shanghai and other high performers in East Asia.

About a quarter of teachers are absent when they should be at work. Public schoolteachers' salaries are often more than ten times the local median. Many Indian applicants bribe school boards to get a job, which they allegedly treat as a sinecure rather than a career. There are generous allowances for "sick leave," often taken as holiday. Political work is another cause of absenteeism. Teachers can spend several weeks a year urging voters to support their political patrons. Teacher unions are, in effect, guaranteed representation in the upper houses of some state legislatures. India's 17,000 teacher-training institutes are allegedly low-grade degree shops. Few trainees are taught how to manage a class.

By law, pupils are automatically promoted to the next grade each year, so teachers have little incentive to help them learn the curriculum. A 2016 study suggests that the knowledge of sixth-grade pupils in a poor area of Delhi is two and a half grades below what the math syllabus expects of them. By ninth grade, the gap is four and a half grades. Two-fifths of schools lack even electricity. Some reformers are trying to improve the public system. A program in Haryana, established in 2014, has reversed declining literacy in the state through regular assessment and more relevant curricula. In Delhi, the city government has doubled spending on schools and recruited "mentor teachers" to help other educators teach at the right level. Pratham, a large, nongovernmental education organization, is running learning camps in 5,000 schools in nineteen out of India's thirty-six states and union territories. The educational objective is limited to helping children learn basics.

Richer parents are opting out of public education: nearly half of urban children and a fifth of rural ones attend private primary schools. From 2010–11 to 2015–16, enrollment in public schools fell by thirteen million while the number in private establishments rose by more than seventeen million. A study in 2013 found that pupils at low-cost private schools in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh achieved the same scores in math and Telugu (the local language) as pupils at government-run schools. As private teachers are paid a lot less than public ones, they produced these results for a third of the cost. Privately educated pupils also did slightly better than their peers at public schools in tests in English, Hindi, science, and social studies.

Source: "Why the World's Biggest School System is Failing its Pupils", *The Economist*, June 8, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/y2wuqo7o>.



Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted.  
Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <https://tinyurl.com/y2b8fud2>.

### Việt Nam: Student Achievement and Competition for Higher Education

Intense competition for university places occur as the country undergoes a demographic boom. “We don’t have enough places in tertiary education,” says Pham Hiep, a researcher based in Hanoi who specializes in university education. “The supply doesn’t meet the demand.” The private universities in Việt Nam, he says, account for only about 15 percent of total enrollment, low compared to Việt Nam’s regional neighbors, including the Philippines, Malaysia, and China.

The World Bank’s rankings for Việt Nam are based on the PISA tests, run by the OECD and involving international tests taken by fifteen-year-olds. However, one critical observer tells the *Financial Times* the results are influenced by a sampling issue that makes Việt Nam’s results look better than they are because about half of children have left school by age fifteen. As the school leavers tend to be poorer and lower-achieving than average, the wealthier and more studious ones who are tested push the overall results up.

John Jerrim, a lecturer at University College London’s Institute of Education, says that Việt Nam will face a “paradox” moving forward, as improving education means more and more children remain in school. Its PISA scores are likely to decline rather than increase.

Thousands of students study in evening and weekend classes for the high school entrance exams that could grant them a place in Hanoi’s Foreign Language Specialized School (FLSS) or Hanoi-Amsterdam High School for the Gifted, but only around 5 percent are chosen each year.

Test scores determine placement, so students spend many hours outside of school in private classes on school subjects.

With rising income inequality and unemployment among college graduates in major cities, the subsequent job insecurity means parents and students place emphasis on getting into the best possible school, regardless of the sacrifices (financial for parents, time for students). In this environment, a degree from a recognized school constitutes human capital, and these graduates generally have an easier time finding work and a higher starting salary than their Vietnamese-educated counterparts.

Much like the extra classes taken to increase chemistry and math exam scores, students study nights and weekends for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the SAT, and other placement exams necessary for admission to universities around the world.

Sources: John Reed, “Education in Việt Nam: Very Good on Paper,” *Financial Times*, October 10, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y4qmwldr>; Cristina Bain, “Educational System of Việt Nam,” *National Association of Foreign Student Advisers (NAFSA)*, May 2015, <https://tinyurl.com/y25kjcjb>.

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— **Hu Ying, Professor**, East Asian Studies, University of California, Irvine, author, *Burying Autumn: Poetry, Friendship, and Loss*”

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