

## AT A GLANCE

# PISA 2025: An encouraging result is not proof that reforms are working



*What the latest international assessment tells us about achievement, equity, and the limits of political claims*

Education Minister Erica Stanford has presented New Zealand's 2025 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results as part of the evidence that "we are turning things around". Speaking at the International Confederation of Principals convention hosted by NZPF in September 2026, she said the equity gap is "starting to close".

The improvement among our most disadvantaged students is welcome. But the Minister's conclusion goes further than the data allows. PISA records how achievement changed between 2022 and 2025. It does not explain why, and it cannot establish that recent reforms are responsible.

### What the results show

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The OECD released the 2025 PISA results on 8 September 2026. The assessment measured the science, mathematics, and reading skills of 15-year-olds across 91 countries and economies.

New Zealand's results were broadly stable compared with 2022. Science rose from 504 to 509, mathematics increased by one point to 480, and reading fell four points to 497. None of these changes was statistically significant.

The Ministry of Education's analysis found that the socio-economic achievement gap narrowed between 2022 and 2025, mostly because disadvantaged students achieved higher scores. In science, the share of disadvantaged students below the OECD's baseline level of proficiency fell by seven percentage points, while the share among advantaged students was essentially unchanged. This differs from the OECD average, where narrowing gaps largely reflected falling scores among advantaged students.

This is encouraging. The overall picture, however, is stabilisation rather than recovery. New Zealand's overall results remain well below where they were around 15 years ago, as the Minister acknowledged in her 9 September media release.

### Progress is not proof

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At the convention, the Minister said progress is "happening more quickly than we expected, and the results are showing that". In the same address, she cited early phonics gains and then turned to the PISA results, but the two concern different students. The phonics gains relate to five-year-olds learning under the new approach. PISA assessed 15-year-olds.

Timing matters. The students assessed in 2025 had little exposure to the current reforms. The new English and Mathematics and Statistics curriculum for Years 9 and 10 did not become official policy until 1 January 2026, after these students had sat the PISA assessment, and the senior secondary curriculum will be introduced progressively from 2028 to 2030. The PISA 2025 results cannot measure the impact of reforms these students had yet to encounter.

The Minister is right to recognise the contribution principals and teachers make to student achievement. At the convention, she went further. She credited secondary principals and teachers for New Zealand's PISA performance, in an address that presented the results as evidence that "we are turning things around". But praise for the profession's work is not evidence for the reforms, and results that reflect learning largely before the reforms cannot be credited to them.

More broadly, PISA identifies patterns but does not isolate causes. Results reflect learning over many years, teaching practice, attendance, family circumstances, and wider social and economic conditions. The Ministry's analysis shows that the gap narrowed. What caused it remains a separate question.

The Minister's 9 September media release also cited improving attendance as likely to be part of the picture, noting that regular attendance rose from 39.6 percent in Term 2, 2022 to 64.3 percent in Term 2, 2026. The 2026 figure postdates the PISA assessment and cannot explain its results. Attendance gains before the assessment may have contributed, but these figures cannot demonstrate that link.

At the convention, she also said New Zealand "did buck the worldwide trend of decline". The data support a narrower claim. New Zealand's scores held steady between 2022 and 2025 while the OECD average fell in mathematics and reading. But a plateau does not reverse a longer decline. Both reading and mathematics remain below their 2015 and 2018 levels, and the downward trend began well before COVID.

The same caution applies to blame as to credit. When the 2022 results were released, the Minister said the lower scores were predictable and that schools had been using incorrect methods for about 30 years. Yet the OECD reported substantial declines in mathematics and reading across many education systems between 2018 and 2022. Such changes cannot be traced to a single policy or group.

PISA supports neither sweeping blame for past performance nor unqualified credit for current reforms. This does not mean the reforms will have no effect. It means their impact must be examined using evidence from the students who experience them, not inferred from changes between two PISA cycles.

### The participation shortfall

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New Zealand did not meet the OECD's participation standards for PISA 2025. Only 52 percent of selected schools and 76 percent of selected students took part.

The Minister's media release acknowledged the "known participation issues" and said the Ministry had tested the result against them, with the narrowing of the equity gap remaining statistically significant. That analysis deserves consideration. New Zealand also fell short in 2022, so both results carry the same limitation, but that does not guarantee the two samples are comparable.

The narrowing of the gap should not be dismissed. But statistical significance does not reveal what caused it, nor does it remove the limits of the sample. The appropriate response is to recognise the improvement, note the shortfall, and investigate what lies behind it.

### What principals need

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Principals and teachers put policy into practice while responding to the needs of diverse learners. They deserve a clear and credible account of whether reforms are improving achievement and reducing disparities. That requires reliable data, sound evaluation, and enough time to see the effects of changes in classrooms. It also requires decision-makers to distinguish between an encouraging result, a plausible explanation, and evidence that a policy has worked.

**If disadvantaged students are making progress, that is a result to build on. The question is not whether to welcome improvement. We should. The question is whether PISA 2025 proves that the Government's reforms produced it. It does not.**

Judging the impact of education policy takes continuity: time to develop, implement, and assess changes without resetting direction before their effects are understood. That is why NZPF continues to advocate for a permanent, statutory Curriculum and Assessment Council. Charged with the long-term stewardship of curriculum and assessment, the Council could track major changes as they are introduced and build a reliable picture of what works.

PISA is an important source of evidence about how our students are doing. It is not a substitute for evaluating education policy. Principals, teachers, parents, and the public deserve conclusions that respect that distinction.