

# AI Use Contributes to Global Decline in Student Reading Skills, OECD Says

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[Paul Hannon](#) Sept. 8, 2026 at 4:48 am



The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development on Tuesday said tests taken last year by 760,000 15-year-olds in 91 countries and economies revealed a big drop in scores compared with a decade earlier, reflecting a reduced ability to evaluate information, think critically and bring

together multiple pieces of evidence.

Between 2015 and 2025, the average reading score dropped by 28 points for students from OECD members—which are mostly rich countries—and by 16 points elsewhere. A decline of 20 points is roughly equivalent to losing one year of education.

According to the OECD's director for education and skills, students have become increasingly "hasty" in their engagement with texts, giving fast but often incorrect responses, a development he attributed to digitalization and screen use.

"Students become quicker but less accurate readers," Andreas Schleicher said. "They are no longer good at reflection and critical thinking. A majority of 15-year-olds, when evidence and common sense collide, they go for common sense."

As part of the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment, students were also tested on their abilities in science and math, and also proved less able than their 2015 counterparts, but the deterioration was not as sharp. In science, OECD members saw a seven-point drop in average scores across the decade, while other countries were unchanged. OECD scores in math fell by 22 points, and elsewhere by just eight.

The decline in reading ability is particularly concerning because it is a gateway to learning. Schleicher called it "the mother of all skills."

"The stronger a student's reading ability, the easier it becomes to develop knowledge in every subject area," he said. "According to PISA, the education systems that experienced the biggest drops in reading also tended to see larger falls in maths and science performance."

One surprising feature of the decline in reading ability since 2018 is that it has been greatest among what the OECD terms “advantaged” students, or those whose parents are high-earners. Those students continue to perform better than their counterparts from poorer homes in the PISA tests, but the gap has narrowed.

“This suggests a new phenomenon, with the biggest factor in the overall drop in scores being advantaged students who are performing below what one would expect given their background,” said Schleicher.

The decline in student performance is a worrying development for the long-term economic outlook, since most economists believe that growth is partly driven by improvements in education levels. There is evidence that a rise in PISA scores helps boost growth.

The OECD found that 46% of students use AI chatbots weekly or more to help them learn. Jeff Pachoud/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images

While new AI tools promise to raise productivity levels among existing workers, the PISA results suggest they could already be lowering productivity levels among future workers.

The results of the latest PISA round will likely increase scrutiny of the use of generative AI by students, as well as smartphones during school hours. Indeed, Schleicher said there is evidence that banning the use of smartphones in school helps halt the deterioration in learning.

"It's the only thing that works," he said. "The only reduction of destruction was the cell-phone ban."

In the course of conducting the tests, the OECD found that 46% of students use AI chatbots weekly or more to help them learn, although they may do so in ways that do more harm than good.

"Technology erodes precisely the kind of capabilities it seeks to build," Schleicher said.

Rather than use generative AI to provide the correct answers, school systems would perform better if it were used to aid research and learning. Schleicher cited some Asian school systems—including those of China and South Korea—as examples of the correct use of the new tools.

However, even in China there is evidence that AI use can harm learning. A recent study of 26,811 students in grades 7 to 12 in a county in central China by academics in Sweden and Hong Kong found that while AI use boosted grades for homework, subsequent performance in closed-book exams declined sharply.

In the latest round of PISA tests, students from four Chinese provinces continued to be top performers in science and math, while students from Singapore topped the rankings for reading.

U.S. students ranked 13th in reading, having performed worse than in 2022. While they performed about as well in math as in 2022, they climbed the rankings to 27th as students from other countries saw their scores fall. They also ranked 13th in science, another improvement. Among other rich countries, the U.K. recorded improvements across all three subjects, and moved into the top 10 in each.