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# England plunges in rankings for reading

- Pupils shun stories at home for computer games
- Ministers to spend £5m on more books for nurseries

**Polly Curtis**, education editor  
The Guardian, Wednesday 28 November 2007

England has plummeted from third to 19th in an international league table of children's literacy levels as pupils replace books with computer games, according to a global study of reading skills. A generation of 10-year-olds are losing confidence in books, spending fewer hours a week reading at home and enjoying it less than five years ago, the study published yesterday found.

Ministers immediately announced a £5m scheme to make more books available in nurseries and promised more radical reforms to the controversial literacy strategy. They also called on parents to read with their children

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Headteachers said that the government's literacy strategies - under fire after a series of critical reports - were to blame for taking the "buzz" out of reading and putting children off.

In 2001, England ranked third in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (Pirls) study. The results for 2006, published yesterday simultaneously in each of the 45 countries and provinces included, put it at 19th. Only Morocco and Romania fell more rapidly than England. Scotland fell from 14 in 2001 to 26 last year.

The study, based on questionnaires and reading, writing and comprehension tests taken by 215,000 children around the world, found that in England children have less confidence in reading and writing than in 2001. They also have the biggest computer game habits; 37% spend more than three hours a day playing games.

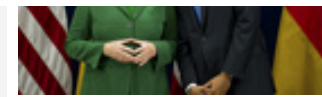
Reading skills declined most for high achievers, and faster for girls than boys. Just 2% of pupils in English schools receive extra support to encourage an enthusiasm for reading, compared with a quarter of many other countries.

The proportion of pupils getting daily reading homework is down from 26% in 2001 to 17%. Pupils in English schools are the least likely to do reading comprehension exercises regularly.

Under the government's literacy strategy, there has been a significant shift away from whole-class teaching to small ability group lessons in reading and writing. About 25% of pupils were mainly taught in mixed ability groups in 2001, compared with 6% in 2006 - a much lower proportion than in other countries. The children's secretary, Ed Balls, said he accepted some responsibility for the decline in standards but also blamed parents.

"It's outside school and in children's attitudes where we have seen more changes since 2001. Today's 10-year-olds have more choice than in 2001 about how they spend their free time. Most of them have their own TVs and mobiles, and 37% are playing computer games for three hours or more a day - more than in most countries in the study. I'm calling

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today for everyone's help to get our children reading more and to kick-start a new national debate about the value of reading."

A series of reports from the Cambridge University Primary Review have been highly critical of the government's reading strategy. Steve Sinnott, general secretary of the National Union of Teachers, Europe's largest teaching union, said: "A bookless house is a massive disadvantage for a child learning to read. Likewise, our prescribed and overloaded curriculum and testing system is sapping young people's enthusiasm of reading for pleasure."

Mick Brooks, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: "Unless children get a buzz out of reading, the computer will remain much more interesting to them. The national literacy strategy has made for an incredibly full timetable where children are taught to pass tests, not love reading."

The shadow children's secretary, Michael Gove, said: "It's time the government stopped blaming parents and accepted the case we've been making for a new focus on teaching reading, using tried and tested methods."

The Liberal Democrat spokesman for schools, David Laws, said: "Ministers should be ashamed that England has plummeted down the international league table."

Researchers in 45 countries and regions tested 215,000 10-year olds on their reading and writing skills and quizzed them on their reading habits, including how many books they have at home. Researchers from the National Foundation for Educational Research conducted the study in 150 schools in England and 130 more in Scotland in May and June 2006. A total of 4,036 pupils in England took part and 3,775 in Scotland.

### The literacy league:

1 Russian Federation **565**

2 Hong Kong **564**

3 Canada, Alberta\*\* **560**



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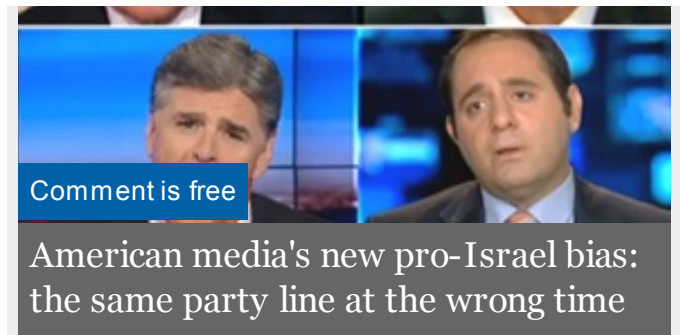


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\*The average reading, writing and comprehension test score per pupil

\*\* Canadian provinces have different education systems and were tested separately



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