

PIRLS 2021:
**Exploring the contexts for reading of
primary school pupils in Ireland**

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CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5: Reading Achievement by School Characteristics

As part of the administration of PIRLS 2021, participating pupils, their parents, school principals, and Fifth Class teachers were asked to complete questionnaires, as described in Chapter 1.

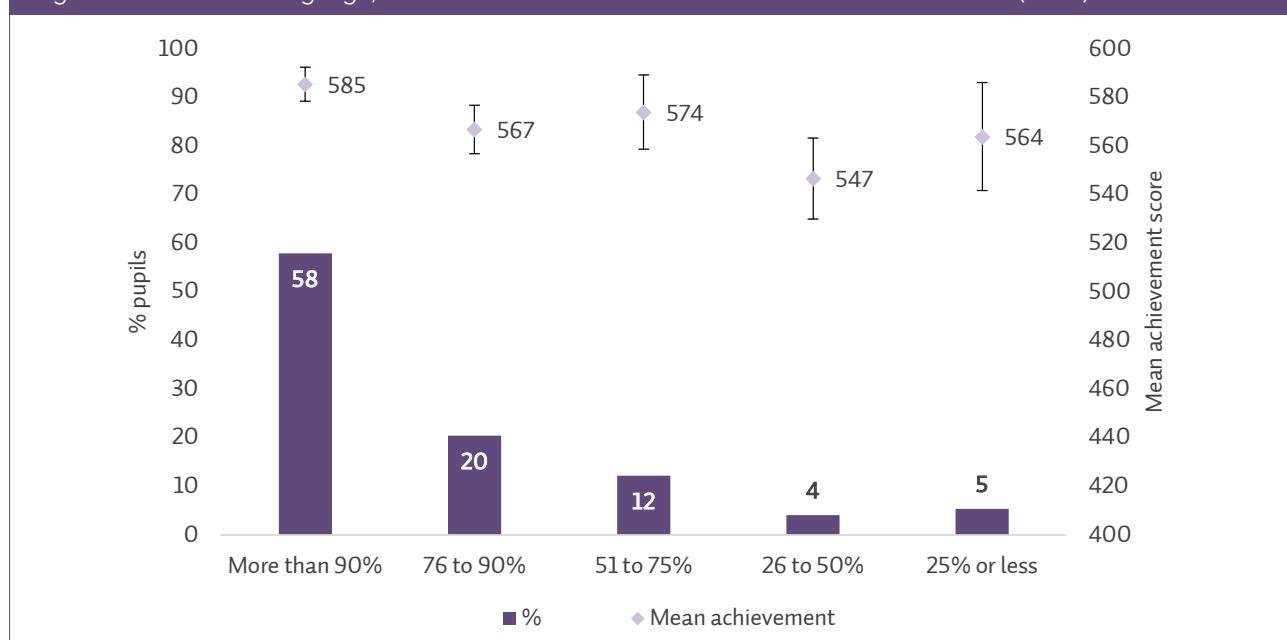
Drawing on these questionnaires, this chapter focuses on school-level factors that are relevant to the reading achievement of pupils in Ireland. Ireland's data are compared to those of selected reference countries and the corresponding averages across all PIRLS countries, while data from PIRLS 2011 and 2016 are also compared to those from 2021, where appropriate.

School composition

Pupils with English as their native language

School principals were asked to estimate the proportion of pupils in their school that had English, the language of the PIRLS assessment in Ireland, as their native language. Figure 5.1 shows the overall proportions of pupils within schools in Ireland that have English as their native language, along with the reading achievement scores of pupils within each category. In Ireland, 58% of pupils attended schools within which most pupils (*more than 90%*) spoke English as their native language, with a further 33% of pupils attending schools within which more than half (51 to 90%) spoke English as their native language. Although there was some variation in the reading achievement of pupils across categories, the highest achievement score (585) was for pupils in schools where *more than 90%* of pupils were native English speakers. Pupils across the rest of the categories tended to have similar achievement scores to schools where the majority spoke English, with only pupils from schools where 26 to 50% of pupils had English as their native language achieving a statistically significantly lower score (547) than their peers in schools where the majority of pupils (*more than 90%*) spoke English as their native language.

Figure 5.1: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the proportion of pupils in schools with English as their native language, with confidence interval around estimates of achievement (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.1.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Table 5.1 shows the overall proportions of pupils within schools in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021 that had the PIRLS assessment language as their native language, along with the reading achievement scores of pupils within each category. In Ireland, pupils in schools where the majority of pupils (*more than 90%*) spoke the language of the PIRLS assessment (i.e., English) as their native language had the highest mean score. This pattern was also found for some comparison countries such as Northern Ireland, Hong Kong, and Finland. For other comparison countries, such as Australia and New Zealand, the highest pupil achievement was for pupils attending schools where 76% to 90% of pupils spoke the language of the assessment as their native language.

Table 5.1: Percentages and mean reading achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by the proportion of pupils in schools with English as their native language (2021)

	Overall mean	More than 90%		76 to 90%		51 to 75%		26 to 50%		25% or less		
		%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	
	Ireland	577	58	585	20	567	12	574	4	547	5	564
Start G5	Northern Ireland	566	75	569	11	564	6	545	1	~	7	558
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	93	558	4	556	2	~	0	~	1	~
	<i>Lithuania</i>	552	86	550	10	551	1	~	1	~	2	~
End G4	Australia <i>✉</i>	540	47	538	15	552	18	539	13	542	7	529
	England <i>✉</i>	558	41	559	19	560	11	570	8	558	21	549
	Hong Kong SAR	573	93	576	5	536	2	~	0	n/a	0	n/a
	Poland	549	99	549	1	~	0	n/a	0	n/a	0	n/a
	<i>Finland</i>	549	70	554	18	547	9	522	3	518	1	~
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	49	527	16	534	22	530	6	481	8	506
	<i>Singapore</i>	587	0	n/a	0	n/a	0	n/a	0	n/a	100	587

Source: Appendix Table A5.1.

Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. PIRLS averages are not provided as several participating countries had no data on one or more of the categories of this variable, meaning that different numbers of countries would be included across the different categories.

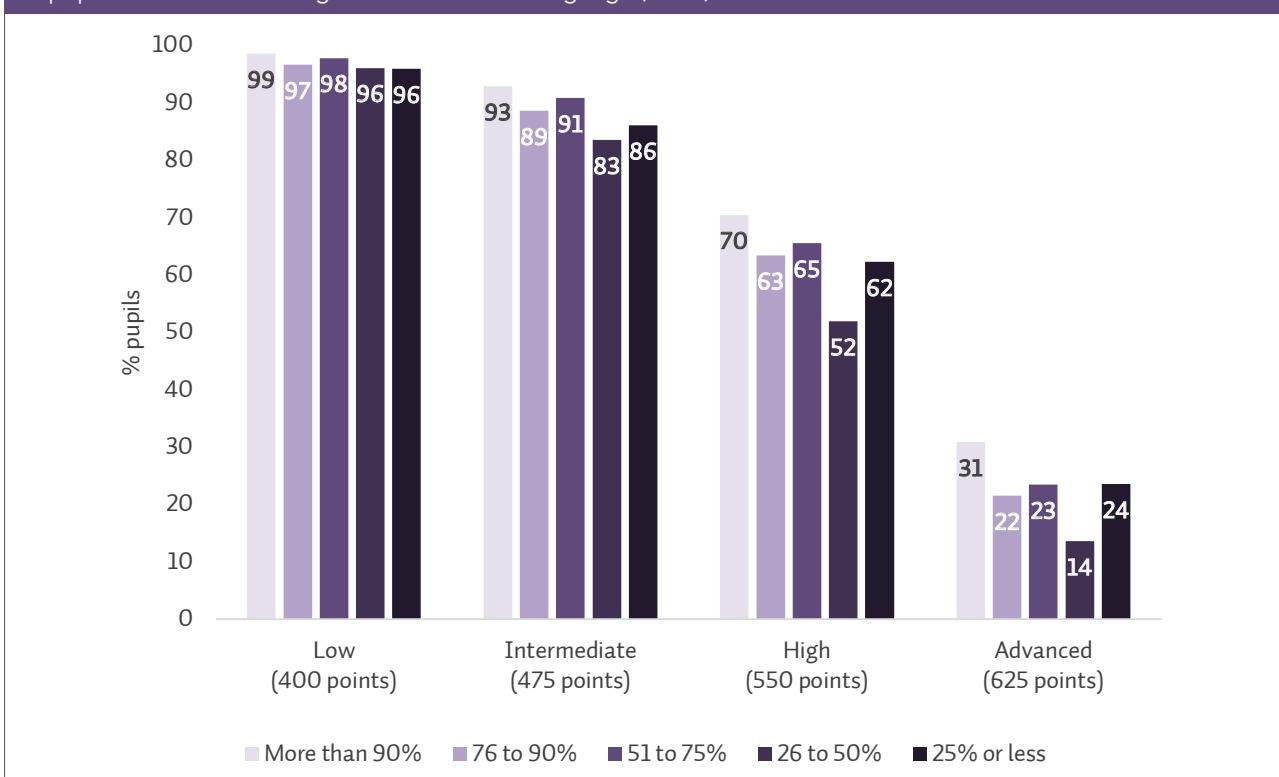
Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

✉ Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

~ Mean achievement is not reported due to insufficient data.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by the proportion of pupils in schools that had English as their native language is shown in Figure 5.2. While similar percentages of pupils across the categories reached the Low Benchmark (ranging from 96% to 99%), greater variation emerged in the percentages of pupils achieving higher benchmarks. Although there was a difference in the percentages of pupils reaching the Intermediate Benchmark, these were not statistically significantly different from each other. At the High and Advanced Benchmarks, the variation in percentages increased. Notably, statistically significantly fewer pupils from schools where 26 to 50% of pupils had English as their native language reached either the High or Advanced Benchmarks, compared to all other categories.

Figure 5.2: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the proportion of pupils in schools with English as their native language (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.2.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

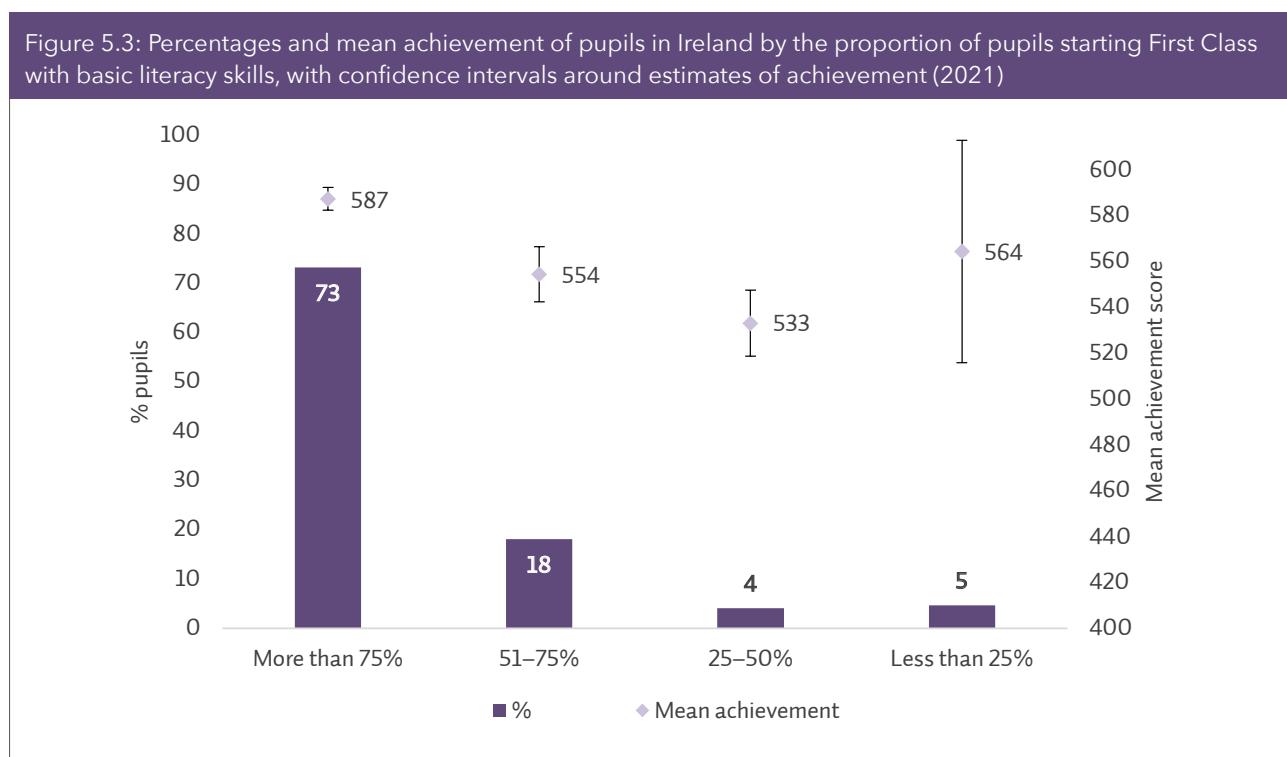
As this question was included in both PIRLS 2011 and 2016, comparisons can be made with the 2021 data. There was a small and not statistically significant decrease in the proportion of pupils attending schools with *more than 90%* speaking English as their native language in 2021 (58%) and 2016 (57%) compared to 2011 (64%). Mean differences between pupils attending schools where *more than 90%* of pupils spoke English as their native language and other categories changed across cycles; however, no clear patterns were observed (see Appendix Table A5.3).

Pupils' literacy readiness

School principals were asked to estimate the proportion of pupils in their school having basic literacy skills (e.g., write the alphabet, write sentences, etc.) at the beginning of First Class. The options provided for 2021 were *more than 75%*, *51-75%*, *25-50%*, or *less than 25%*.

Figure 5.3 shows the overall proportions of pupils within schools in Ireland that had basic literacy skills, according to school principals, along with the reading achievement scores for each of the categories. The majority of pupils (73%) attended a school where *more than 75%* of pupils had basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class. A smaller proportion of pupils (18%) attended a school where *51-75%* of pupils had basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class, while 9% attended a school where *less than 50%* of pupils had basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class. Overall, reading achievement was highest for pupils whose school had a greater proportion of pupils who had basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class (*more than 75%*) (587). However, attending a school with a lower proportion of pupils with basic literacy skills was not necessarily associated with lower reading achievement, as pupils who attended schools where *less than 25%* of pupils had basic literacy skills had a higher score (564) than pupils who attended schools where *25-50%* (533) or *51-75%* (554) of pupils had basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class. It should be noted, though, that these differences were not statistically

significant, and the large error margins for the achievement of the former group (*less than 25%*) should be taken into account in interpreting these data.

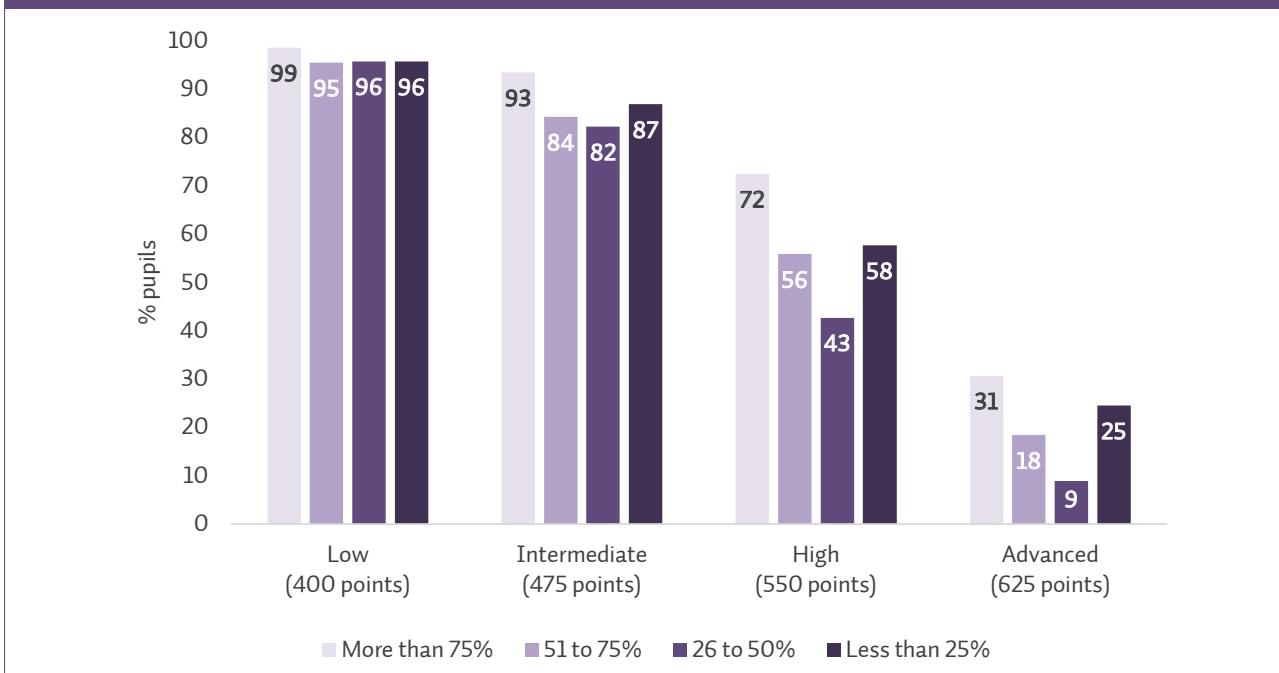


Source: Appendix Table A5.4.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by the proportion of pupils with basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class, as reported by school principals, is shown in Figure 5.4. The majority of pupils from each category achieved the Low Benchmark, while, at the Intermediate Benchmark, there was some variation across categories, with the highest percentages of pupils reaching this benchmark being from schools where either *more than 75%* or *less than 25%* of pupils had basic literacy skills, a pattern also noted at the High and Advanced Benchmarks.

Figure 5.4: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the proportion of pupils starting First Class with basic literacy skills (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.5.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

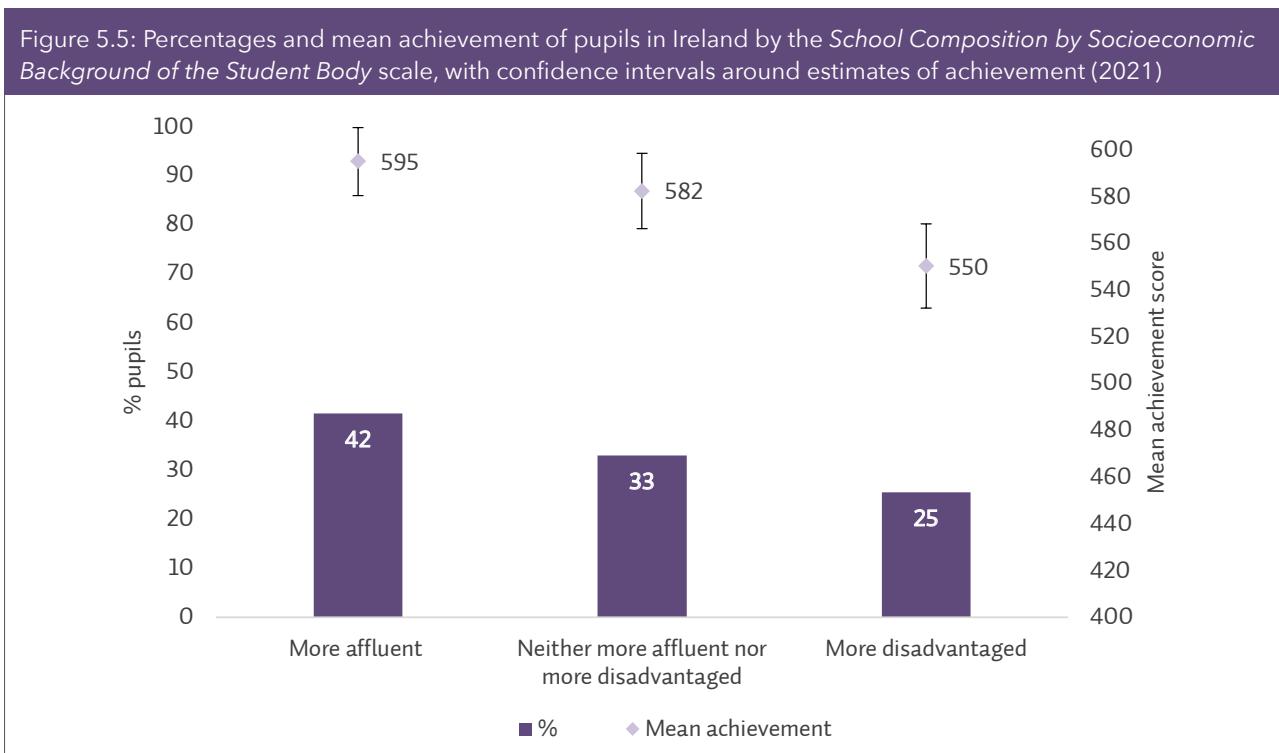
School socioeconomic composition

School principals were asked to estimate the socioeconomic composition of their school by estimating the percentages of pupils attending the school who came from economically affluent and economically disadvantaged homes. These reports were combined to characterise schools as *more affluent*, *neither affluent nor more disadvantaged*, or *more disadvantaged*.²⁹

Figure 5.5 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the *PIRLS School Composition by Socioeconomic Background of the Student Body* scale in Ireland in 2021. Approximately four out of 10 pupils (42%) attended schools with relatively *more affluent* pupils, while 25% of pupils attended schools with relatively *more disadvantaged* pupils. A third of pupils (33%) attended schools classified as *neither more affluent nor more disadvantaged* with regards to pupils' socioeconomic backgrounds. Pupils in the *more affluent* schools achieved a mean PIRLS score of 595 points, which was statistically significantly higher than those of their peers who attended *neither more affluent nor more disadvantaged* schools (582) or *more disadvantaged* schools (550).

²⁹ Schools were categorised as *more affluent* when more than 25% of pupils in the school came from economically affluent homes and no more than 25% of pupils came from economically disadvantaged homes. Schools where 25% of pupils came from disadvantaged homes and no more than 25% came from affluent homes were categorised as *more disadvantaged*. All other response combinations were classified as *neither more affluent nor more disadvantaged* (Mullis et al., 2023).

Figure 5.5: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *School Composition by Socioeconomic Background of the Student Body* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)

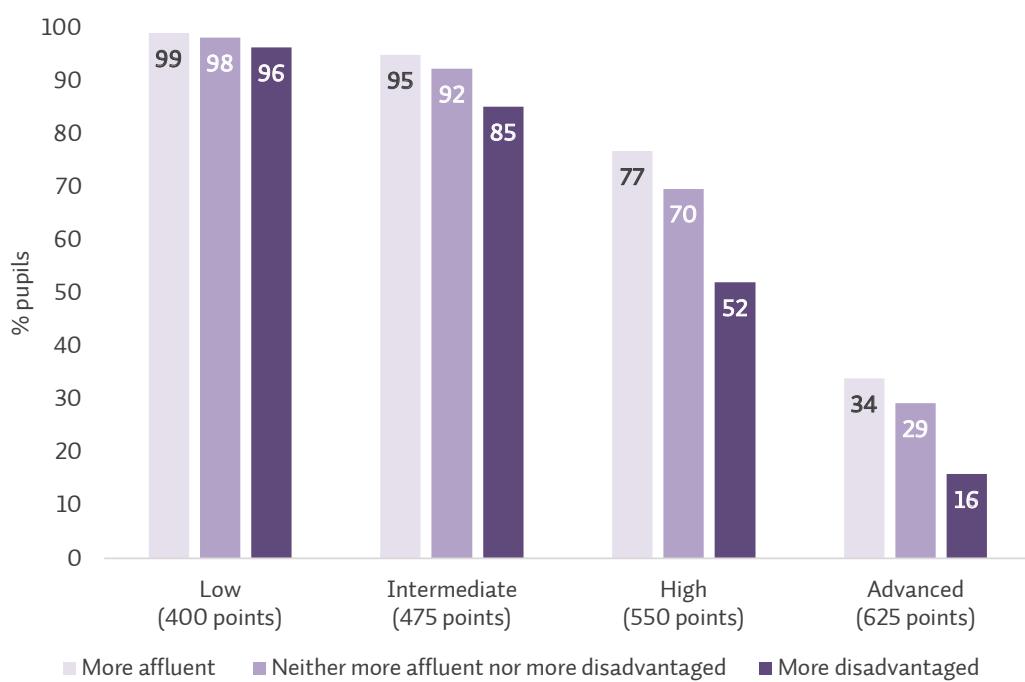


Source: Appendix Table A5.6.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by each category of the PIRLS *School Composition by Socioeconomic Background of the Student Body* scale in 2021 are shown in Figure 5.6. Percentage differences between pupils in *more affluent* schools and those in *more disadvantaged* schools were statistically significant across all benchmarks, with the widest difference being at the High Benchmark. While 95% of pupils who attended *more affluent* schools reached the Intermediate Benchmark, compared to 85% of pupils who attended *more disadvantaged* schools, forming a difference of 10 percentage points, the equivalent differences at the High and Advanced Benchmark were 25 and 18 percentage points, respectively (77% vs 52% and 34% vs 16%).

Figure 5.6: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *School Composition by Socioeconomic Background of the Student Body* scale (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.7.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

The *School Composition by Socioeconomic Background of the Student Body* scale was also included in PIRLS 2016; therefore, comparisons can be made with the 2021 data. The mean difference between pupils who attended *more affluent* schools and pupils who attended *more disadvantaged* schools seemed to, although remaining statistically significant, slightly decrease between 2016 (48-point difference) and 2021 (45-point difference). The mean difference between pupils who attended *more affluent* schools and those who attended schools that were *neither more affluent nor more disadvantaged* was also statistically significant; however, it increased slightly between 2016 (11-point difference) and 2021 (13-point difference) (see Appendix Table A5.6).

School-level resources

School library

Table 5.2 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils who attended schools that had a library and those who attended schools that did not have a library based on school principals' reports.³⁰

In Ireland, over half of pupils (54%) attended a school that had a school library. Among those pupils attending schools which had a school library, 41% were reported to have access to more than 2,000 print books with different titles, while the majority of pupils (86%) were reported to be able to borrow both print and digital materials from their library to take home with them. Reading achievement for pupils who attended a school that did not have a school library (582) was higher, though not statistically significantly, than that of those who attended a school that did have a school library (573), while pupils who had more print books with different titles

30 Information about the existence of a library/reading corner in pupils' classrooms, based on teachers' reports, can be found in Chapter 4.

available to them (*more than 2,000 books*) achieved a higher mean score (579) than those who had fewer (*2,000 books or fewer*) (568); though, again, this difference was not statistically significant. Pupils who were able to take home print or digital materials from the school library achieved a slightly, though not statistically significantly, higher reading achievement score (573) than those who were not able to take such materials home (567).

Table 5.2: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland, by school library resources (2021)

Does your school have a school library?	%	Mean
Yes	54	573
No	46	582
Approximately how many books (print) with different titles does your school library have (exclude magazines and periodicals)?	%	Mean
2,000 books or fewer	59	568
More than 2,000 books	41	579
Can pupils borrow print or digital materials from the library to take home?	%	Mean
Yes	86	573
No	14	567

Source: Appendix Table A5.8.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

The percentages of pupils who had a library in their school varied across PIRLS cycles. Slightly fewer pupils had a library in their school in 2011 (52%), while more pupils had a school library in 2016 (64%) in comparison to 2021. Similarly to 2021, pupils in previous cycles who did not have a school library tended to achieve slightly higher reading achievement scores (554 in 2011; 569 in 2016) than those who did have a school library (549 in 2011; 566 in 2016), though, within each cycle, this difference was not statistically significant.

Of those pupils reported to have a school library, there was a larger proportion reported to have more books available in 2016 compared to 2021, with 48% and 41% of pupils having a school library with more than 2,000 books in 2016 and 2021, respectively.³¹ The percentage of pupils who were able to take library materials home from school also decreased, with 94% being able to take print books home in 2016 and 86% being able to take print or digital materials home in 2021. However, these declines in 2021 should be interpreted considering schools' policies to contain the spread of COVID-19, which may have included temporary restrictions on borrowing materials to take home (see Appendix Table A5.8).

Digital learning resources

Table 5.3 shows the overall proportions of pupils within schools in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021 by pupils' access to digital learning resources (e.g., e-books, videos) in the school. Four out of five pupils in Ireland (79%) attended a school where there were digital learning resources available to them. Although this proportion was similar to that of the PIRLS average (80%), Ireland was found to have the lowest proportion of pupils attending schools in which digital learning resources were available across the reference countries. With regards to overall reading achievement, pupils in Ireland who did not have access to digital learning resources at school achieved a higher (though, not statistically significantly) mean score (580) than pupils who attended schools where such resources were

³¹ This question was not administered in 2011, therefore there are no data available for comparison.

available (576), with this pattern also being noted for a few of the reference countries (England, New Zealand). Similarly to Ireland, mean differences between the two groups of pupils were not statistically significant within each of the reference countries.

Table 5.3: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by availability of digital learning resources in schools (2021)

	Overall mean	Yes		No	
		%	Mean	%	Mean
Start G5	Ireland	577	79	576	21
	Northern Ireland	566	87	567	13
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	93	557	7
	<i>Lithuania</i>	552	91	550	9
End G4	Australia \bowtie	540	94	541	6
	England \bowtie	558	82	558	18
	Hong Kong SAR	573	99	573	1
	Poland	549	85	550	15
	<i>Finland</i>	549	90	550	10
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	94	520	6
	<i>Singapore</i>	587	93	587	7
	PIRLS	503	80	505	20

Source: Appendix Table A5.9.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

\bowtie Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

\sim Mean achievement is not reported due to insufficient data.

The availability of digital learning resources within schools in Ireland can be examined from a trend perspective as school principals were also asked about it in 2016. However, it must be noted that, in 2016, school principals were asked to report on access to *digital books*, while in 2021 they were asked to report on access to *digital learning resources* (which included e-books). There was a statistically significant increase in the percentage of pupils attending a school where digital learning resources were available between the two PIRLS cycles, from 19% in 2016 to 79% in 2021. In both cycles, pupils who had access to such resources tended to achieve slightly lower scores in reading (561 in 2016; 576 in 2021) than those who did not have access to them (568 in 2016; 580 in 2021); however, both in 2016 and 2021, mean differences were not statistically significant (see Appendix Table A5.10).

School climate, discipline, and safety

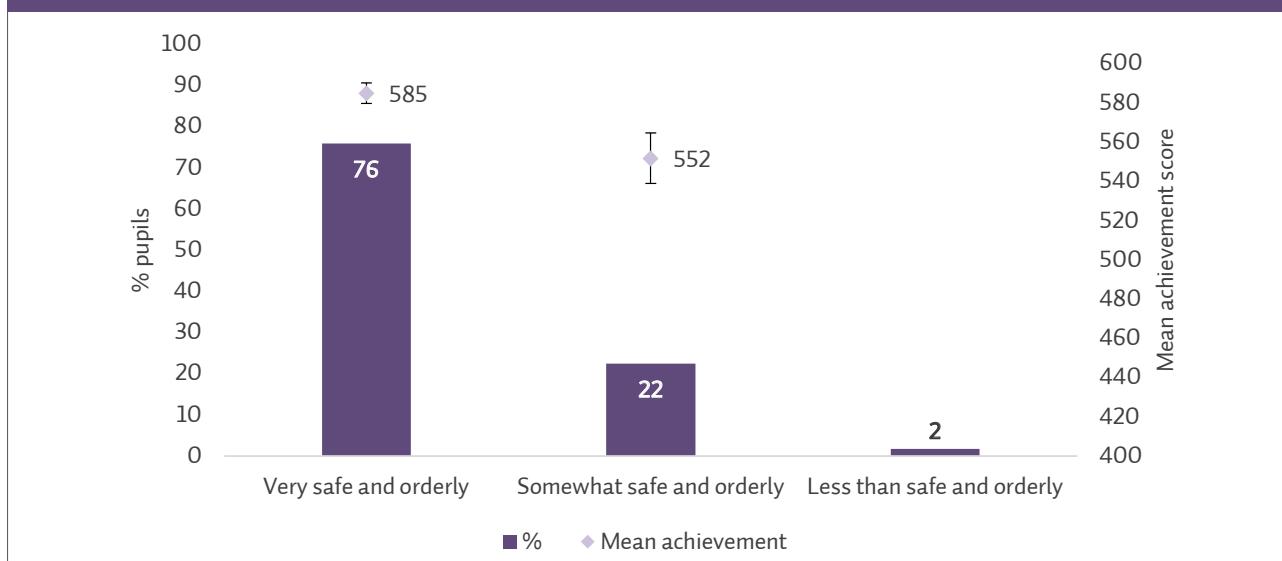
Safe and orderly school

Teachers' level of agreement with nine statements were used to create the PIRLS *Safe and Orderly School* scale. The statements were: *This school is located in a safe neighbourhood; I feel safe at this school; This school's security policies and practices are sufficient; The pupils behave in an orderly manner; The pupils are respectful of the teachers; The pupils respect school property; This school has clear rules about pupil conduct; This school's rules are enforced in a fair and consistent manner; The pupils are respectful of each other*. Based on the responses, pupils were categorised as attending schools judged by their teachers to be *very safe and orderly, somewhat*

safe and orderly, or less than safe and orderly.³²

Figure 5.7 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Safe and Orderly School* scale in Ireland in 2021. Approximately three-quarters of pupils (76%) attended a school judged by their teachers as being *very safe and orderly*, 22% attended schools that were judged to be *somewhat safe and orderly*, and only 2% of pupils attended schools judged to be *less than safe and orderly*. Pupils who attended a school categorised as *very safe and orderly* achieved a mean PIRLS score of 585 points, which was statistically significantly higher than that of their peers who attended a school judged by their teachers as *somewhat safe and orderly* (552). Due to the small number of pupils and resulting error margins, the estimate of mean achievement for pupils in the *less than safe and orderly* category is not reported as no clear conclusions can be drawn about their relative performance.

Figure 5.7: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *Safe and Orderly School* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)

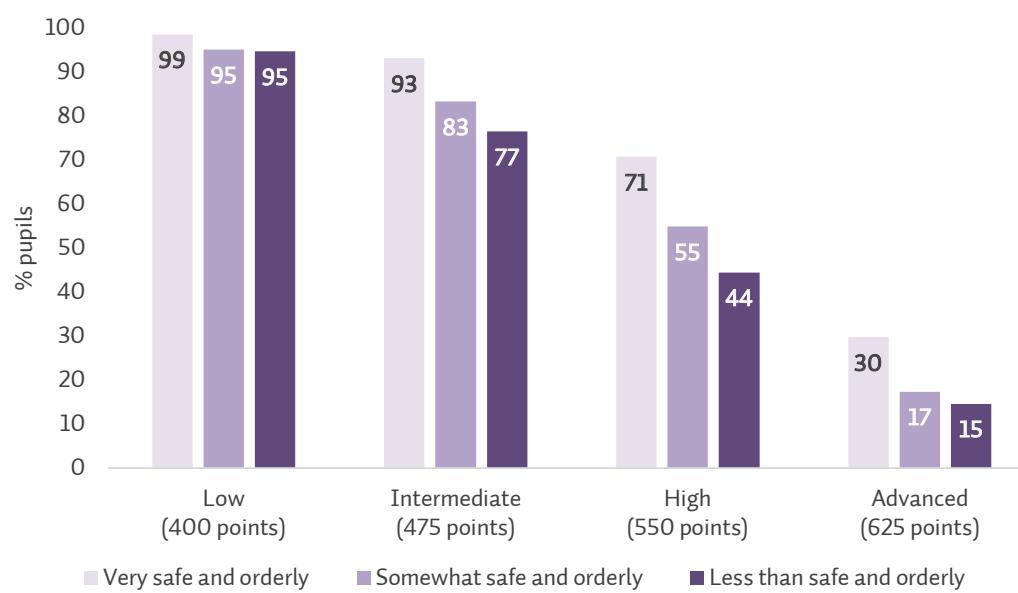


Source: Appendix Table A5.11.

Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. Mean achievement is not reported for the *less than safe and orderly* category due to insufficient data.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Safe and Orderly School* scale in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks are shown in Figure 5.8. Percentages for the *less than safe and orderly* category should be interpreted with caution as this category is represented by only 2% of the sample. Percentage differences between the *very safe and orderly* and *somewhat safe and orderly* categories were statistically significant across all benchmarks, with the former tending to have an advantage compared to the latter, as percentage differences ranged from four to 16 percentage points. This difference was widest at the High Benchmark, where 71% of pupils who attended a school judged to be *very safe and orderly* reached this benchmark, in comparison to 55% of pupils who attended a school judged as *somewhat safe and orderly*. Statistically significantly more pupils who attended schools judged as *very safe and orderly* reached the Advanced Benchmark (30%) in comparison to pupils who attended a school deemed *somewhat safe and orderly* (17%).

³² International comparisons for teacher questionnaire data are not available due to differences in the questionnaire administration. In Ireland, and a few other countries, the teacher questionnaire was administered to fifth grade (equivalent to Fifth Class in Ireland) rather than fourth grade (equivalent to Fourth Class in Ireland) teachers, precluding direct comparisons.

Figure 5.8: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *Safe and Orderly School* scale (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.12.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

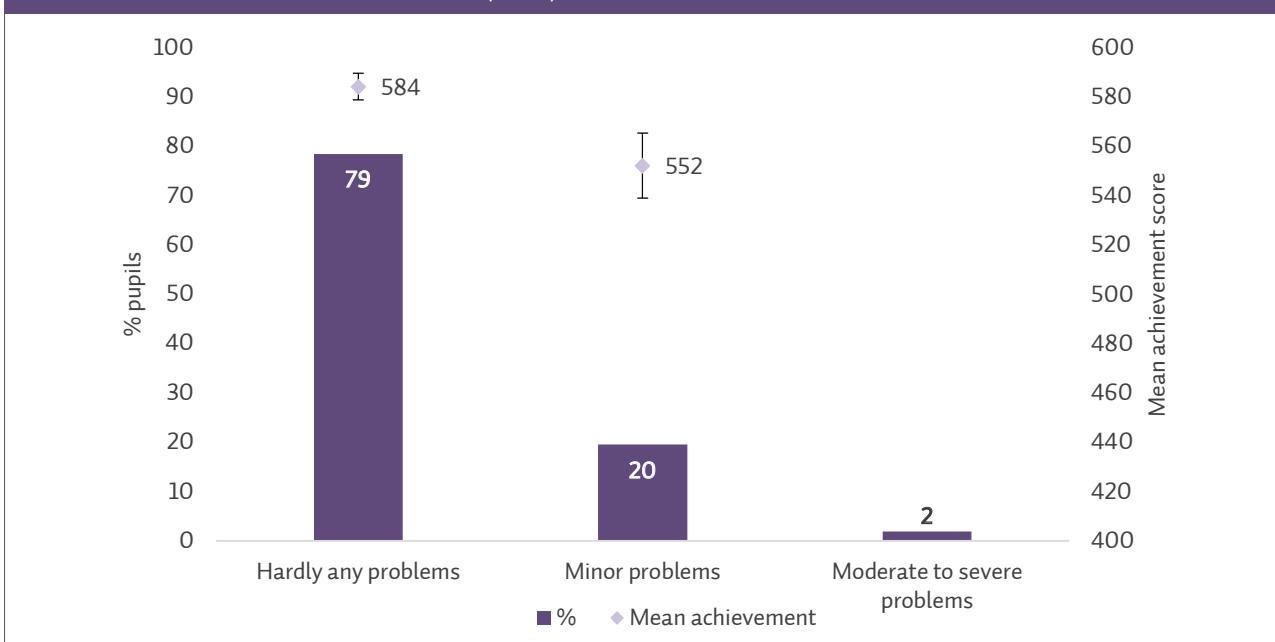
Both PIRLS 2011 and 2016 included a *Safe and Orderly School* scale; however, the component questions used to create the scale were different for each cycle.³³ This means that comparisons between cycles for this scale should be made with caution, and are only possible between certain component questions used across cycles (additional information about the scale components across cycles can be found in Appendix Table A5.13).

School discipline

School principals were asked to report the extent to which 10 discipline-related behaviours among pupils were a problem in their school. These 10 behaviours were: *Arriving late at school*; *Absenteeism* (i.e., *unjustified absences*); *Classroom disturbance*; *Cheating*; *Profanity*; *Vandalism*; *Theft*; *Intimidation or verbal abuse among pupils* (including *texting*, *emailing*, etc.); *Physical fights among pupils*; *Intimidation or verbal abuse of teacher or staff* (including *texting*, *emailing*, etc.). Their responses were used to create the PIRLS *School Discipline* scale, on the basis of which pupils were described as attending schools with *hardly any problems*, *minor problems*, or *moderate to severe problems*.

Figure 5.9 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *School Discipline* scale in Ireland in 2021. In Ireland, 79% of pupils attended a school with *hardly any problems*, while 20% attended schools with *minor problems*. Less than 2% of pupils in Ireland attended a school with *moderate to severe problems*. Pupils who attended a school with *hardly any problems* achieved a mean PIRLS score of 584 points, which was statistically significantly higher than that of their peers who attended a school with *minor problems* (552). Due to the small number of pupils and resulting error margins, the estimate of mean achievement for pupils in the *moderate to severe problems* category is not reported as no clear conclusions can be drawn about their relative performance.

³³ In 2011, the scale consisted of five questions, in 2016 this rose to eight questions, while the scale in 2021 was created based on nine questions.

Figure 5.9: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *School Discipline* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.14.

Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. Mean achievement is not reported for the *moderate to severe problems* category due to insufficient data.

Table 5.4 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *School Discipline* scale in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021. The pattern noted for Ireland was evident across all reference countries, with mean differences between pupils who attended schools that had *hardly any problems* and those who attended schools with *minor problems* ranging from three points in Lithuania to 37 in New Zealand. However, for some of the countries (e.g., Croatia, Poland, Singapore), this difference was not statistically significant.

Table 5.4: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by the *School Discipline* scale (2021)

	Overall mean	Hardly any problems		Minor problems		Moderate to severe problems	
		%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Start G5	Ireland	577	79	584	20	552	2 ~
	Northern Ireland	566	84	571	15	540	1 ~
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	77	559	20	554	3 521
	Lithuania	552	75	550	24	547	1 ~
End G4	Australia ✎	540	69	548	29	525	2 ~
	England ✎	558	76	564	22	542	2 ~
	Hong Kong SAR	573	93	574	7	550	0 n/a
	Poland	549	61	551	37	546	2 ~
	<i>Finland</i>	549	68	554	30	541	2 ~
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	54	540	40	503	6 470
	Singapore	587	81	589	19	580	0 ~

Source: Appendix Table A5.14.

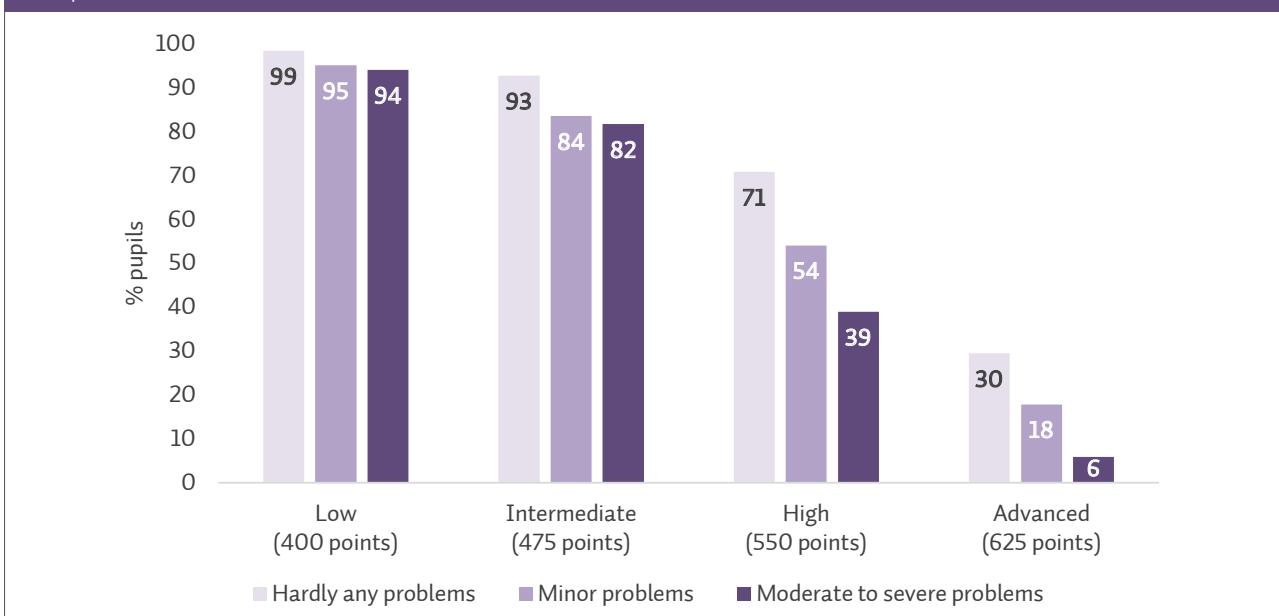
Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. PIRLS averages are not provided as several participating countries had no data on one or more of the categories of this variable, meaning that different numbers of countries would be included across the different categories.

Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

✎ Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

~ Mean achievement is not reported due to insufficient data.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks within each of the categories of the PIRLS *School Discipline* scale are shown in Figure 5.10. Percentages for the *moderate to severe problems* category should be interpreted with caution as this category is represented by only 2% of the sample. Percentage differences between pupils attending schools with *hardly any problems* and schools with *minor problems* or *moderate to severe problems* were statistically significant across all benchmarks. These differences were at their widest for each category at the High Benchmark, where 71% of pupils who attended a school where there were *hardly any problems* reached this benchmark, in comparison to 54% of pupils from schools with *minor problems*, and 39% of pupils from schools with *moderate to severe problems*. At the Advanced Benchmark, statistically significantly more pupils who attended a school that had *hardly any problems* reached this benchmark (30%) in comparison to pupils who attended a school with *minor problems* (18%) or *moderate to severe problems* (6%).

Figure 5.10: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *School Discipline* scale (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.15.

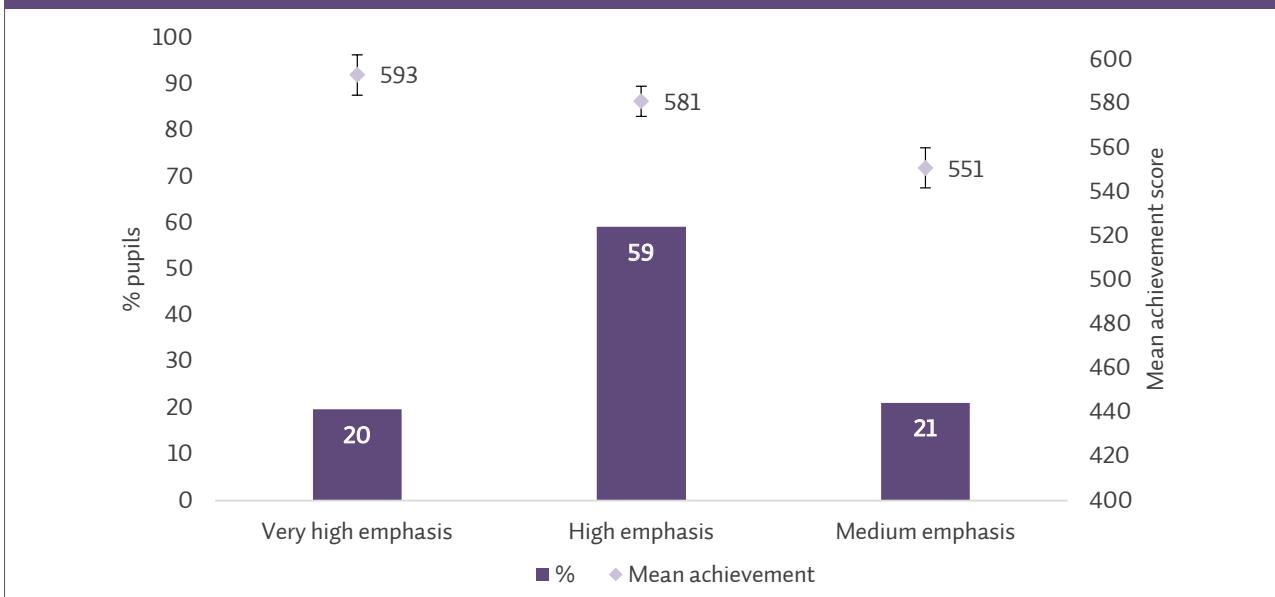
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

As this scale was included in both PIRLS 2011 and 2016, comparisons across cycles are possible. The percentages of pupils attending schools with *hardly any problems* remained stable from 2011 to 2016 (83%, respectively) and slightly dropped in 2021 (79%). Mean score differences between pupils at schools with *hardly any problems* and those at schools with *minor problems* were statistically significant across all three PIRLS cycles, favouring the former group of pupils (see Appendix Table A5.16).

School emphasis on academic success

School principals were asked to report the extent of their schools' expectations for academic achievement across 12 aspects. These 12 aspects were: *Teachers' understanding of the school's curriculum goals*; *Teachers' degree of success in implementing the school's curriculum*; *Teachers' expectations for pupil achievement*; *Teachers' ability to inspire pupils*; *Collaboration between school leadership and teachers to plan instruction*; *Parental involvement in school activities*; *Parental commitment to ensure that pupils are ready to learn*; *Parental expectations for pupil achievement*; *Parental support for pupil achievement*; *Pupils' desire to do well in school*; *Pupils' ability to reach school's academic goals*; *Pupils' respect for classmates who excel academically*. Their responses were used to create the PIRLS *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale, on the basis of which pupils were described as attending schools with *very high emphasis*, *high emphasis*, or *medium emphasis* on academic success.

Figure 5.11 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale in Ireland in 2021. A fifth of pupils attended a school with *very high emphasis* on academic success, while 59% attended schools with *high emphasis* on academic success. Approximately a fifth (21%) of pupils in Ireland attended a school with a *medium emphasis* on academic success. Pupils who attended schools with a *very high emphasis* on academic success achieved a mean PIRLS score of 593 points; although this was higher than the mean scores of pupils in the *high emphasis* (581) and *medium emphasis* (551) categories, it was only statistically significantly different from the mean score of the latter group.

Figure 5.11: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.17.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Table 5.5 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021. Ireland had the highest proportion of pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* on academic success (20%) across the reference countries. With regards to mean achievement, the pattern observed in Ireland was also evident in most of the reference countries, with score differences between pupils whose school had a *very high emphasis* and those whose school had a *medium emphasis* ranging from seven points in Croatia to 73 in New Zealand.

Table 5.5: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by the *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale (2021)

	Overall mean	Very high emphasis		High emphasis		Medium emphasis		
		%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	
Start G5	Ireland	577	20	593	59	581	21	551
	Northern Ireland	566	16	585	70	568	14	538
	Croatia	557	5	560	73	558	22	553
	Lithuania	552	9	555	77	550	13	536
End G4	Australia ✎	540	13	566	58	545	29	520
	England ✎	558	12	580	61	563	26	539
	Hong Kong SAR	573	5	582	53	578	42	565
	Poland	549	9	558	56	553	35	540
	Finland	549	7	569	70	552	23	536
	New Zealand	521	18	562	55	523	26	489
	Singapore	587	11	615	73	589	16	559
	PIRLS	503	10	524	58	509	32	486

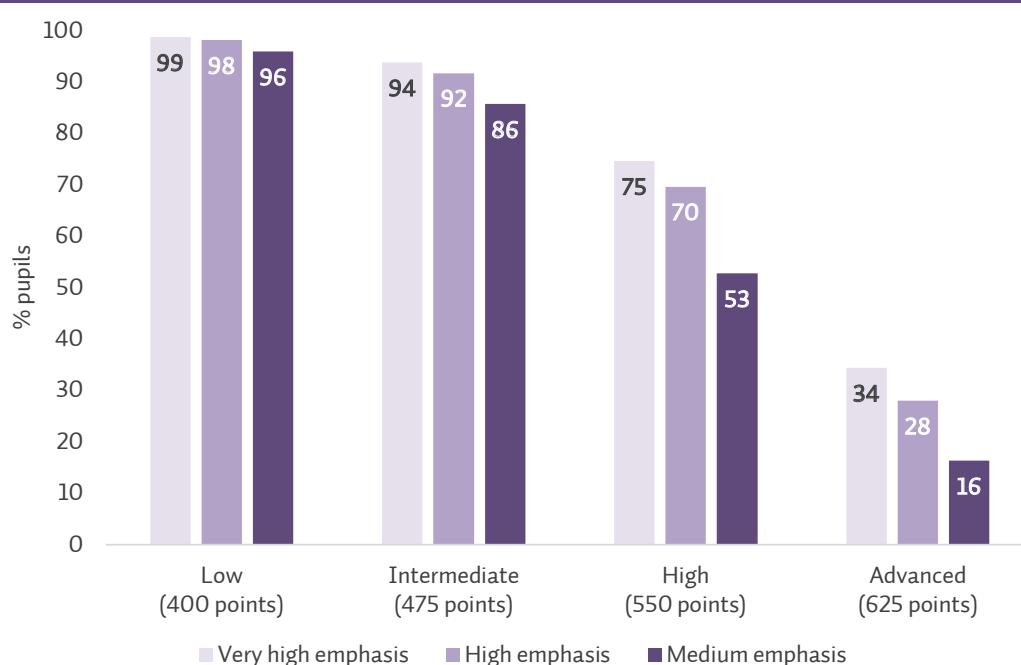
Source: Appendix Table A5.17.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

✎ Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks within each of the categories of the PIRLS *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale are shown in Figure 5.12. Percentage differences between pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* on academic success and pupils in schools with a *high emphasis* widened with every subsequent benchmark, with the largest difference (six percentage points) being noted at the Advanced Benchmark. However, none of these differences were statistically significant. The percentage differences between pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* on academic success and those in schools with a *medium emphasis* were statistically significant across all benchmarks except for the Low Benchmark, with the widest difference (22 percentage points) being noted at the High Benchmark. At the Advanced Benchmark, over twice as many pupils from schools with a *very high emphasis* reached this benchmark (34%), in comparison to pupils from schools with a *medium emphasis* on academic success (16%).

Figure 5.12: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.18.

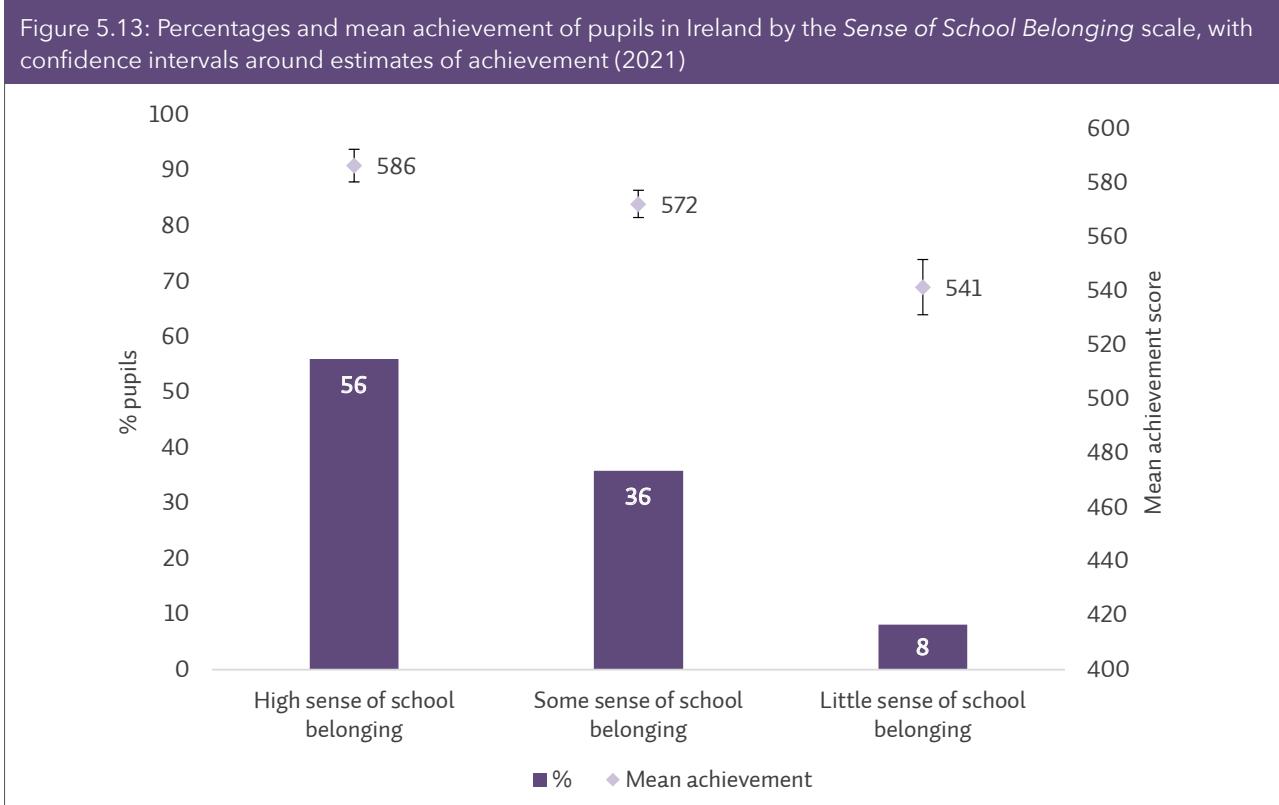
Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Both PIRLS 2011 and 2016 included a *School Emphasis on Academic Success* scale; however, the 2011 scale was slightly different to the corresponding 2016 and 2021 scales.³⁴ This means that comparisons are only possible between the 2016 and 2021 data (additional information about the scale components across cycles can be found in Appendix Table A5.20). Notably, the percentages of pupils reported to be in schools with a *medium emphasis* on academic success increased between 2016 (12%) and 2021 (21%), while mean differences between pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* and pupils in schools with a *medium emphasis* seemed to decrease between 2016 (53-point difference) and 2021 (42-point difference) (see Appendix Table A5.19).

Pupil sense of school belonging

The extent of pupil's sense of school belonging was captured through five items in the pupil questionnaire: *I like being in school; I feel safe when I am at school; I feel like I belong at this school; Teachers at my school are fair to me; I am proud to go to this school*. Pupils were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the five statements and their responses were used to create the PIRLS *Sense of School Belonging* scale, on the basis of which, pupils were grouped into three categories: *high sense of school belonging*, *some sense of school belonging*, and *little sense of school belonging*.

Figure 5.13 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Sense of School Belonging* scale in Ireland in 2021. More than half of pupils in Ireland (56%) reported having a *high sense of school belonging*, with a further 36% reporting that they had *some sense of school belonging*, and only 8% reporting having *little sense of school belonging*. Pupils with *high sense of school belonging* achieved a mean PIRLS score of 586 points, which was statistically significantly higher than those of their peers with *some* (572) or *little sense of school belonging* (541).

Figure 5.13: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *Sense of School Belonging* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.21.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Table 5.6 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Sense of School Belonging* scale in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021. The pattern observed in Ireland was also evident internationally, with mean score differences between pupils with a *high sense of school belonging* and those with *little sense of school belonging* ranging from five points in Poland to 53 in Northern Ireland. Ireland's mean difference (45 points) was larger in magnitude compared to the corresponding differences in most of the reference countries.

Table 5.6: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by the *Sense of School Belonging* scale (2021)

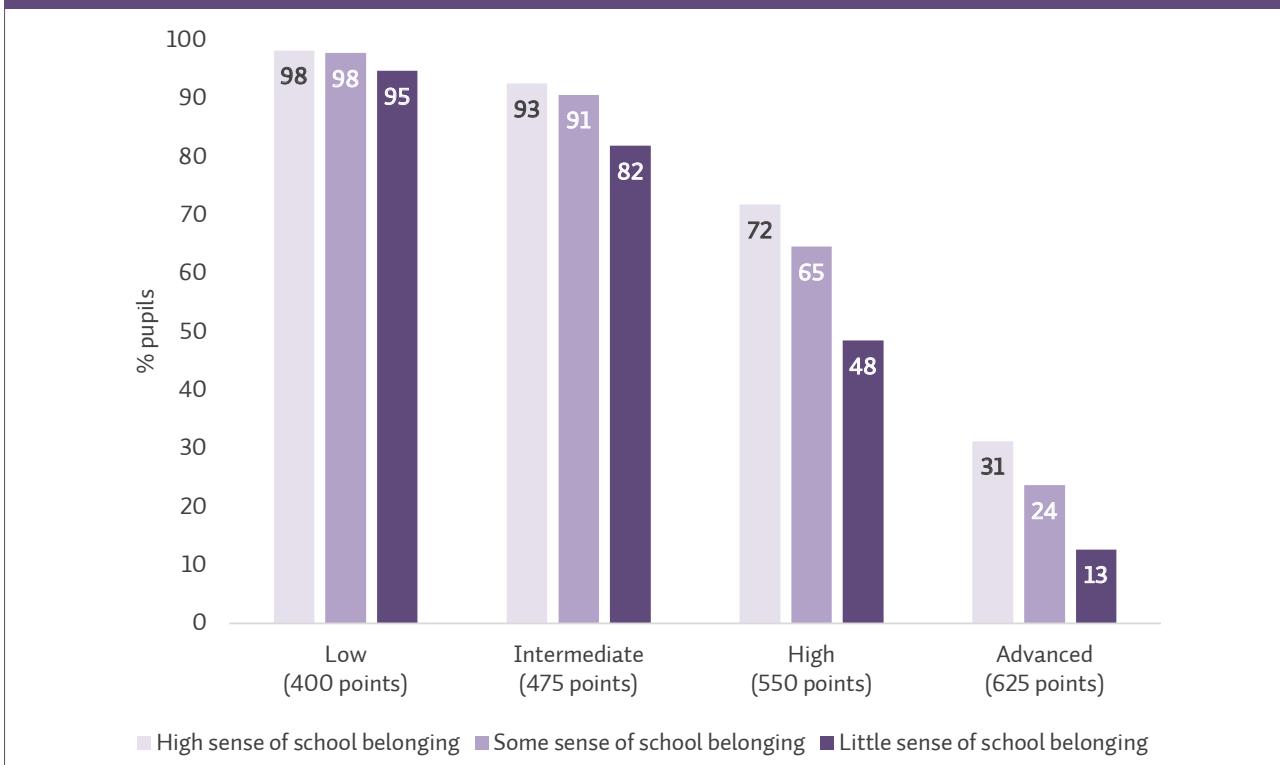
	Overall mean	High sense of school belonging		Some sense of school belonging		Little sense of school belonging	
		%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Start G5	Ireland	577	56	586	36	572	8
	Northern Ireland	566	61	578	33	553	6
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	38	563	51	558	11
End G4	<i>Lithuania</i>	552	47	558	44	552	10
	Australia \bowtie	540	54	549	37	537	8
	England \bowtie	558	56	566	35	554	8
	Hong Kong SAR	573	43	584	44	569	13
	Poland	549	43	546	47	556	10
	<i>Finland</i>	549	66	556	29	543	5
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	58	535	33	518	9
	<i>Singapore</i>	587	52	597	37	584	11
	PIRLS	503	63	512	30	495	7

Source: Appendix Table A5.21.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper. \bowtie Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by the PIRLS *Sense of School Belonging* scale are shown in Figure 5.14. Percentage differences between pupils with a *high sense of school belonging* and *some sense of school belonging* ranged between zero and eight percentage points but were only statistically significant at the High and Advanced Benchmarks. Percentage differences between pupils with a *high sense of school belonging* and those with *little sense of school belonging* ranged between three and 23 percentage points and were statistically significant across all benchmarks except for the Low Benchmark. In fact, more than twice as many pupils who reported having a *high sense of school belonging* reached the Advanced Benchmark (31%), in comparison to pupils who reported having *little sense of school belonging* (13%).

Figure 5.14: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *Sense of School Belonging* scale (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.22.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Both PIRLS 2011 and 2016 included a *Sense of School Belonging* scale; however, the 2011 scale was slightly different to the corresponding 2016 and 2021 scales.³⁵ This means that comparisons are only possible between the 2016 and 2021 data (additional information about the scale components across cycles can be found in Appendix Table A5.24). The percentage of pupils reporting a *high sense of school belonging* decreased slightly, yet statistically significantly, across cycles (61% in 2016 and 56% in 2021), while the percentage of pupils reporting having *some sense of school belonging* increased slightly, but statistically significantly, between 2016 and 2021 (31% in 2016 and 36% in 2021). Mean differences between pupils with a *high sense of school belonging* and pupils with *little sense of school belonging* seemed to remain stable, with mean differences of 44 and 45 points being statistically significant in both 2016 and 2021, respectively (see Appendix Table A5.23).

Pupil bullying

Pupils were asked to report how often they experienced bullying in school. Pupils were asked how frequently they experienced 10 bullying behaviours: *Made fun of me or called me names; Left me out of their games or activities; Spread lies about me; Stole something from me; Damaged something of mine on purpose; Hit or hurt me (e.g., shoving, hitting, kicking); Made me do things I didn't want to do; Sent me nasty or hurtful messages online; Shared nasty or hurtful information about me online; Threatened me*. Pupil responses were used to create the PIRLS *Student Bullying* scale, on the basis of which, pupils were grouped into three categories: *never or almost never, about monthly, or about weekly*.

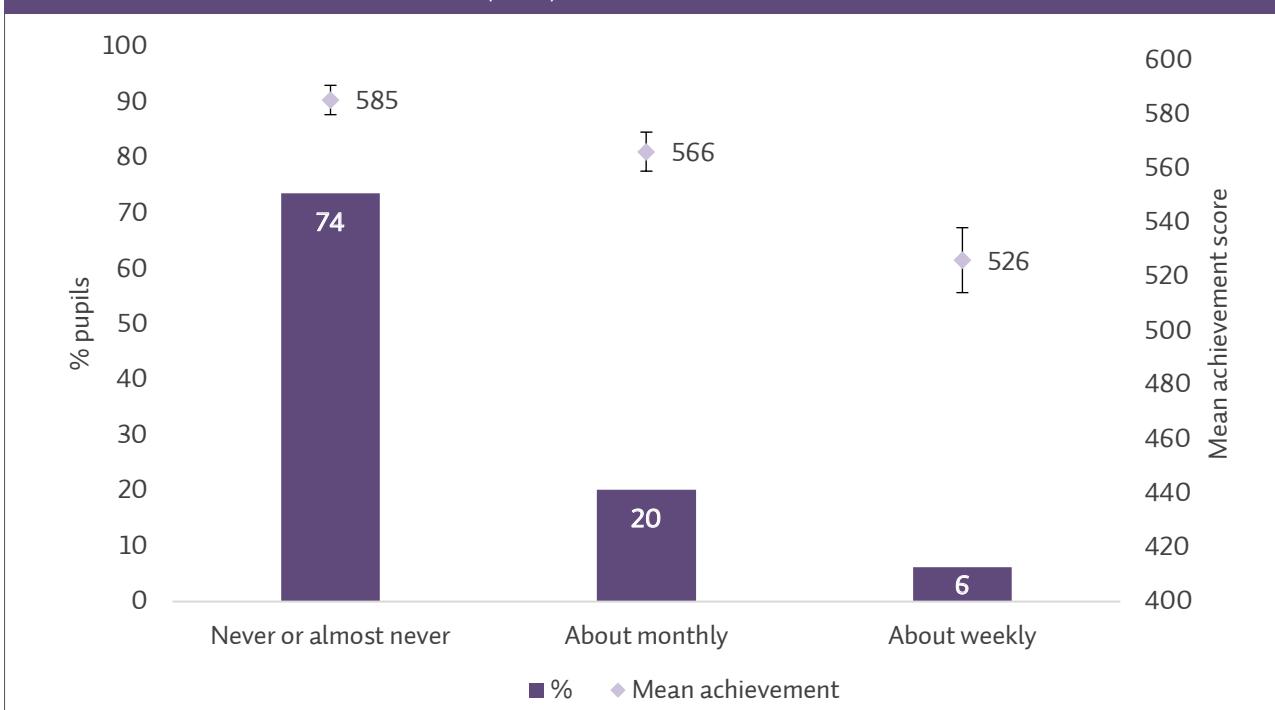
Figure 5.15 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the

35

In 2011, the scale included three questions. For 2016 and 2021, this rose to five questions.

PIRLS Student Bullying scale in Ireland in 2021. Three-quarters of pupils reported *never or almost never* being bullied, a fifth (20%) reported being bullied *about monthly*, and a relatively small percentage (6%) reported being bullied *about weekly*. Pupils who reported being bullied *never or almost never* achieved a mean PIRLS score of 585 points, which was statistically significantly higher than those of their peers who reported being bullied *about monthly* (566) or *about weekly* (526).

Figure 5.15: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *Student Bullying* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.25.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Table 5.7 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Student Bullying* scale in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021. Ireland was similar to many reference countries, whereby over half of pupils reported being bullied *never or almost never*. The pattern observed for mean achievement in Ireland was also evident internationally, with mean differences between pupils who reported being bullied *never or almost never* and those who were bullied *about weekly* ranging from 45 points in Australia to 74 in New Zealand.

Table 5.7: Percentages and mean achievement in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by the *Student Bullying* scale (2021)

	Overall mean	Never or almost never		About monthly		About weekly	
		%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Start G5	Ireland	577	74	585	20	566	6
	Northern Ireland	566	66	578	27	552	7
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	69	566	21	548	9
End G4	Lithuania	552	59	568	28	544	13
	Australia \bowtie	540	52	553	35	537	13
	England \bowtie	558	54	568	35	555	11
	Hong Kong SAR	573	81	579	16	557	3
	Poland	549	74	559	20	534	6
	<i>Finland</i>	549	75	557	20	539	5
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	46	542	35	530	19
	Singapore	587	59	602	29	579	12
							537

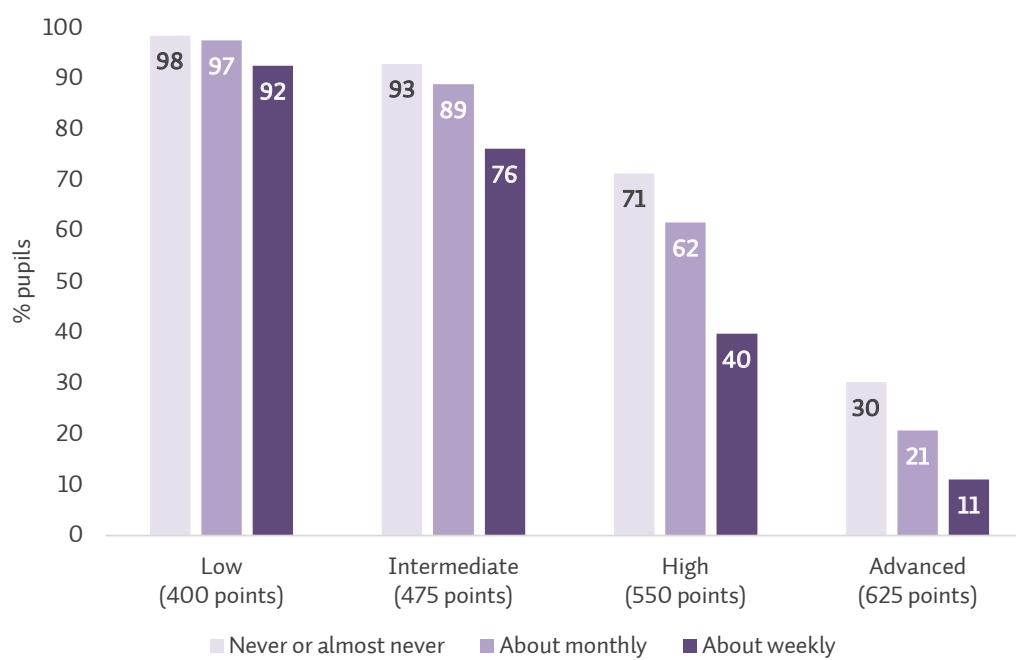
Source: Appendix Table A5.25.

Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. PIRLS averages are not provided as several participating countries had no data on one or more of the categories of this variable, meaning that different numbers of countries would be included across the different categories.

Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

\bowtie Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by the PIRLS *Student Bullying* scale are shown in Figure 5.16. Percentage differences between pupils who experienced bullying *never or almost never* and pupils who experienced bullying *about monthly* were statistically significant across all benchmarks except for the Low Benchmark. This difference was at its widest at both the High and Advanced Benchmarks, with 71% and 30% of pupils who reported being bullied *never or almost never* reaching each of these benchmarks compared to 62% and 21% of pupils who reported being bullied *about monthly*, forming a difference of nine percentage points in both cases. Percentage differences between pupils who experienced bullying *never or almost never* and pupils who experienced bullying *about weekly* were statistically significant across all benchmarks. These percentage differences were at their widest for at the High Benchmark, where 40% of pupils who reported being bullied *about weekly* reached this benchmark in comparison to 71% of pupils who reported being bullied *never or almost never*.

Figure 5.16: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *Student Bullying* scale (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.26.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

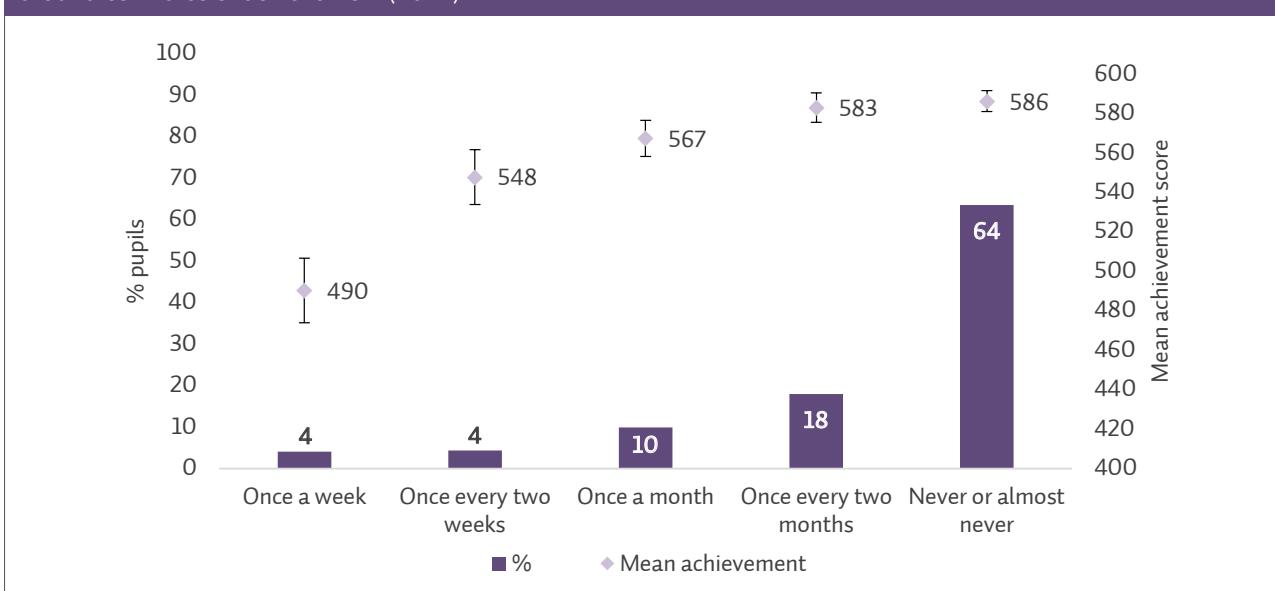
Both PIRLS 2011 and 2016 included a *Student Bullying* scale; however, the 2011 and 2016 scales were different to the corresponding 2021 scale.³⁶ This means that comparisons across the 2011, 2016, and 2021 scale data are not possible. However, comparisons of percentages across common scale components between 2016 and 2021 indicated a general pattern of slightly increased frequency in several bullying behaviours (additional information about the scale components across cycles can be found in Appendix Table A5.27).

Pupil absence

Pupils were asked about the frequency with which they were absent from school, with response options ranging from *once a week* to *never or almost never*. Figure 5.17 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils who are absent from school *once a week*, *once every two weeks*, *once a month*, *once every two months*, and *never or almost never* in Ireland in 2021. Approximately two-thirds of pupils reported that they were *never or almost never* absent from school, 28% reported they were absent from school *once a month* or *every two months*, while 8% were absent from school either *once every two weeks* or *weekly*. Overall, more frequent absence was associated with lower reading achievement. Pupils who reported being absent from school *once a week* achieved the lowest mean PIRLS score (490), which was statistically significantly lower than the score of their peers who were *never or almost never* absent from school (586), but also the scores of the rest of their peers in the other categories.

³⁶ In 2011, the scale included six questions, in 2016, this rose to eight questions, and the 2021 scale included 10 questions; however, there was variation in the questions across cycles.

Figure 5.17: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by pupil absence, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.28.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Table 5.8 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils by the frequency with which they are absent from school in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021. The frequency with which pupils were absent from school varied to some extent across the countries as did the magnitude of mean differences between the *once a week* and *never or almost never* categories. The highest percentage of pupils being absent *once a week* was noted in New Zealand (13%), and the lowest was noted in Hong Kong (2%). Accordingly, Hong Kong had the highest percentage of pupils at the *never or almost never* category (89%), a percentage that was 25 percentage points higher than the corresponding percentage in Ireland. Mean differences across all countries were statistically significant and in favour of the *never or almost never* category.

Table 5.8: Percentages and mean reading achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by pupil absence (2021)

		Overall mean	Once a week		Once every two weeks		Once a month		Once every two months		Never or almost never	
			%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
	Ireland	577	4	490	4	548	10	567	18	583	64	586
Start G5	Northern Ireland	566	4	485	3	535	6	546	13	571	74	574
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	6	500	3	536	10	556	13	561	67	563
	<i>Lithuania</i>	552	7	508	3	530	7	554	8	564	75	557
End G4	Australia ✕	540	7	473	5	515	12	542	17	548	60	549
	England ✕	558	5	488	4	532	8	553	18	565	65	564
	Hong Kong SAR	573	2	~	1	~	1	~	7	561	89	578
	Poland	549	9	488	4	527	7	551	11	551	70	559
	<i>Finland</i>	549	5	490	5	525	14	553	28	556	47	554
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	13	446	7	504	10	542	15	543	55	535
	<i>Singapore</i>	587	5	481	2	~	4	554	8	575	81	599
	PIRLS	503	11	448	4	468	7	491	11	507	67	515

Source: Appendix Table A5.28.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

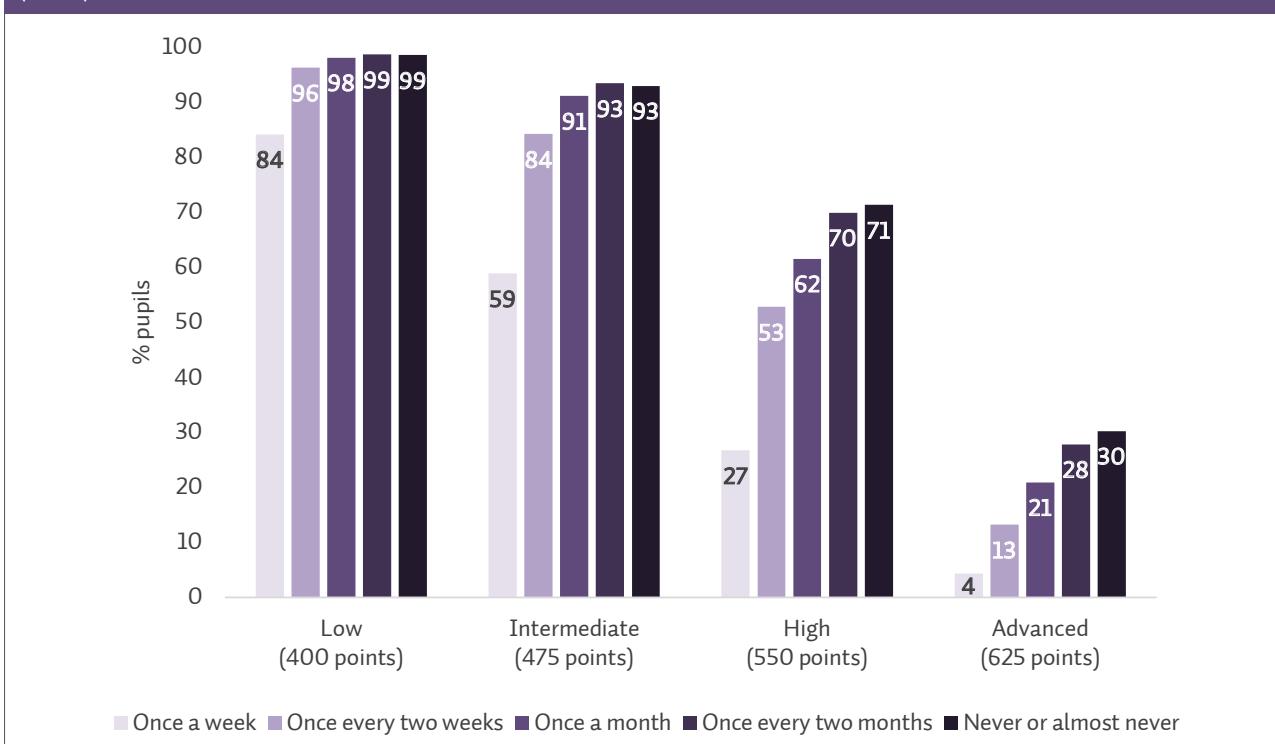
Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

✖ Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

~ Mean achievement is not reported due to insufficient data.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by the frequency with which they were absent from school are shown in Figure 5.18. Very substantial differences were noted between the *once a week* category and the rest of the categories, especially the *never or almost never* category. Pupils in the *once a week* category had a statistically significant disadvantage compared to the rest of their peers across all four benchmarks, with this disadvantage ranging between 12 and 15 percentage points at the Low Benchmark to between nine and 26 percentage points at the Advanced Benchmark.

Figure 5.18: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by pupil absence (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.29.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

The question related to pupil absence was included in the 2016 but not in the 2011 pupil questionnaire. While the percentage of pupils being *never or almost never* absent seems to have decreased between 2016 (71%) and 2021 (64%), this may be linked with the fact that the *once every two months* response was not available in 2016 as opposed to 2021, and so pupils who would be in the *never or almost never* category in 2016, were in the *once every two months* category in 2021. With this caveat in mind, the mean differences between pupils who were absent from school *once a week* and those who were *never or almost never* absent seemed to widen between 2016 and 2021 (by eight score points) (see Appendix Table A5.30).

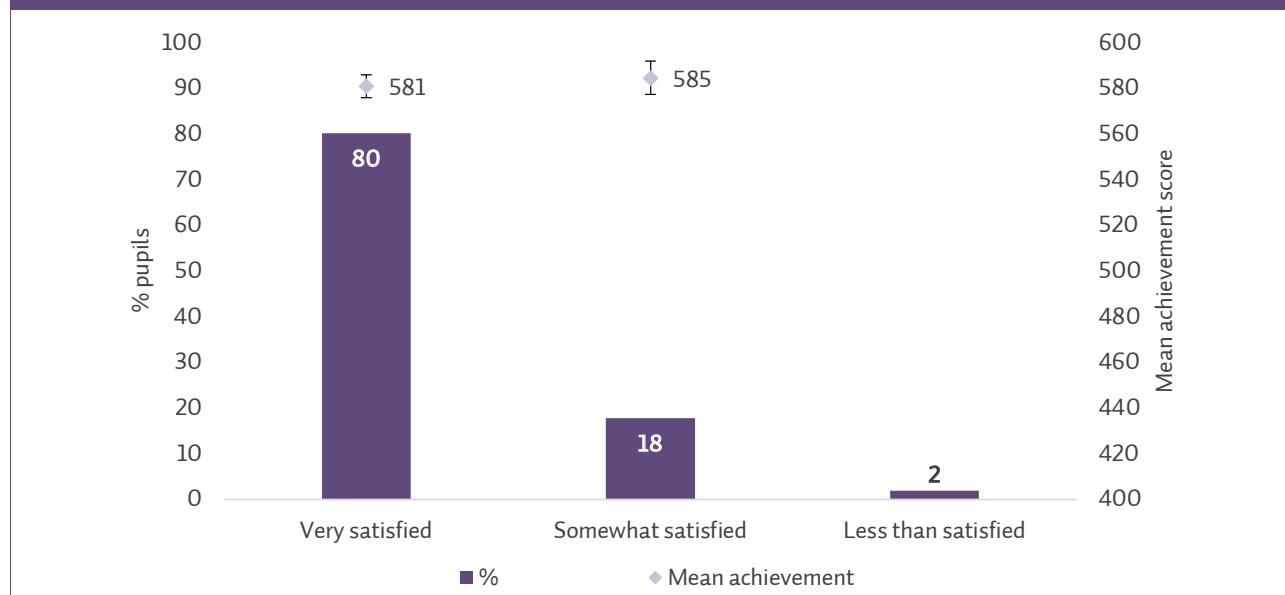
Parents' perceptions of their child's school

Parents of PIRLS pupils were asked to report their level of agreement with six statements related to their child's school: *My child's school does a good job including me in my child's education; My child's school provides a safe environment; My child's school cares about my child's progress in school; My child's school does a good job informing me of my child's progress; My child's school promotes high academic standards; My child's school does a good job of helping my child become better at reading.* Parents' responses were used to create the PIRLS *Parents' Perceptions of their Child's School* scale, on the basis of which, pupils were categorised as having parents who were *very satisfied*, *somewhat satisfied*, or *less than satisfied* with their school.

Figure 5.19 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Parents' Perceptions of their Child's School* scale in Ireland in 2021. Four-fifths of pupils had parents who were *very satisfied* with their school, while 18% had parents that were *somewhat satisfied*. Less than 2% of pupils in Ireland had parents who reported being *less than satisfied* with their child's school. Pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* with their school achieved a mean PIRLS score of 581 points, which was slightly, but not statistically significantly, lower than

that of their peers whose parents were *somewhat satisfied* (585). Due to the small number of pupils and resulting error margins, the estimate of mean achievement for pupils in the *less than satisfied* category is not reported as no clear conclusions can be drawn about their relative performance.

Figure 5.19: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland by the *Parents' Perceptions of Their Child's School* scale, with confidence intervals around estimates of achievement (2021)



Source: Appendix Table A5.31.

Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. Mean achievement is not reported for the *less than satisfied* category due to insufficient data.

Table 5.9 shows the percentages and mean achievement of pupils in each category of the PIRLS *Parents' Perceptions of their Child's School* scale in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries in 2021. Ireland (80%) and Northern Ireland (81%) had the highest proportions of pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* with their school across the countries. Among the reference countries, the mean differences between pupils whose parents reported being *very satisfied* and those whose parents were *less than satisfied* with their school ranged from five points in Croatia to 30 in Singapore.

Table 5.9: Percentages and mean achievement of pupils in Ireland, selected reference countries, and on average across all PIRLS countries, by the *Parents' Perceptions of Their Child's School* scale (2021)

	Overall mean	Very satisfied		Somewhat satisfied		Less than satisfied	
		%	Mean	%	Mean	%	Mean
Start G5	Ireland	577	80	581	18	585	2
	Northern Ireland	566	81	579	17	566	2
	<i>Croatia</i>	557	44	556	50	559	6
	<i>Lithuania</i>	552	54	576	38	561	8
End G4	Australia ✕	-	-	-	-	-	-
	England ✕	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Hong Kong SAR	573	67	578	30	569	3
	Poland	549	50	546	45	555	5
	<i>Finland</i>	549	62	557	35	546	3
	<i>New Zealand</i>	521	67	544	28	538	5
	<i>Singapore</i>	587	70	596	27	584	3
	PIRLS	503	70	506	26	502	4
Source: Appendix Table A5.31.							

Notes. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix. PIRLS average is based on 54 rather than 57 countries as data on parents' perceptions of their child's school were not available for Australia, England, and the United States.

Countries in *italics* took the test on computer, while those not in *italics* took it on paper.

✖ Country tested one year later than planned (autumn 2021 for southern hemisphere countries; spring 2022 for northern hemisphere countries).

~ Mean achievement is not reported due to insufficient data.

- Data are not available.

The cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each of the four International Benchmarks by the PIRLS *Parents' Perceptions of their Child's School* scale are shown in Figure 5.20. As mentioned above, provided that only 2% of pupils belonged to the *less than satisfied* category, comparisons of the cumulative percentages of pupils reaching each of the four International Benchmarks for this category should be avoided. Percentage differences between pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* with their school and pupils whose parents were *somewhat satisfied* with their school were not found to be statistically significantly different at any of the International Benchmarks.

Figure 5.20: Cumulative percentages of pupils in Ireland reaching each International Benchmark, by the *Parents' Perceptions of Their Child's School* scale (2021)

Source: Appendix Table A5.32.

Note. Due to rounding, some differences may appear inconsistent with those reported in text or the Appendix.

Both PIRLS 2011 and 2016 included a *Parents' Perceptions of their Child's School* scale; however, the 2011 scale was slightly different to the corresponding 2016 and 2021 scales.³⁷ This means that comparisons are only possible between the 2016 and 2021 data (additional information about the scale components across cycles can be found in Appendix Table A5.34). Mean differences between pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* with their school and pupils whose parents were *less than satisfied* with their school seemed to remain small and not statistically significant between 2016 and 2021, while percentages for each category were relatively stable across cycles (see Appendix Table A5.33).

Chapter summary

This chapter focused on the relationships of selected school characteristics with the reading achievement, overall and across the four PIRLS subscales, of pupils in Ireland. Ireland's data were compared to those of selected reference countries and the corresponding averages across all PIRLS countries and data from PIRLS 2011 and 2016 were also compared to those from 2021, where appropriate. As noted in Chapter 1, PIRLS 2021 data must be interpreted in the context of important caveats, which are particularly relevant for countries that tested at Start G5 (including Ireland).

Over half of pupils in Ireland attended schools where more than 90% of pupils spoke English (the language of the PIRLS assessment) as their native language, with a further third of pupils in schools where between 51-90% of pupils spoke English as their native language. Although there was some variation across categories, the highest achievement scores were noted for pupils attending schools where more than 90% of pupils spoke English as their native language. Overall, a similar pattern was found for some comparison countries such as Northern Ireland, Hong Kong, and Finland.

³⁷ In 2011, the scale included eight questions. For 2016 and 2021, this was reduced to six questions. However, for 2011, the questions were different to those in 2016 and 2021.

Regarding literacy readiness, the majority of pupils in Ireland attended a school where more than 75% of pupils had basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class. While reading achievement scores for pupils attending schools with greater proportions of pupils with basic literacy skills at the beginning of First Class generally tended to be higher, attending a school with a lower proportion of pupils with basic literacy skills was not necessarily associated with lower reading achievement, as pupils who attended schools where less than 25% of pupils had basic literacy skills at this point had a relatively high mean score that was not statistically significantly different from that of pupils attending schools where more than 75% of pupils had such skills.

Over two-fifths of pupils in Ireland attended schools with *more affluent* pupils, while a third of pupils attended schools classified as *neither more affluent nor more disadvantaged*. Pupils who attended schools with *more affluent* pupils achieved statistically significantly higher mean scores than those of the rest of their peers. The mean achievement differences between pupils from schools with *more affluent* pupils and *more disadvantaged* pupils slightly decreased between 2016 and 2021. Regarding the International Benchmarks, statistically significant differences were evident between pupils at schools with *more affluent* pupils and *more disadvantaged* pupils across all International Benchmarks, favouring the former group. Notably, over twice as many pupils attending a school with *more affluent* pupils reached the Advanced Benchmark in comparison to pupils who attended a school with *more disadvantaged* pupils.

In Ireland, over half of pupils attended a school that had a library; and of those pupils, two-fifths had *more than 2,000* print books with different titles available, with the majority of pupils being able to borrow both print and digital materials to take home with them. Compared to 2021, slightly fewer pupils had a library in 2011, while more pupils had a school library in 2016. The percentage of pupils who were able to take materials home from school decreased between 2016 and 2021, a finding that should be interpreted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions. Although not statistically significantly so, mean reading achievement was slightly higher for pupils who did not have a school library in their school. Among pupils who had a library, those who had *more than 2,000* printed books with different titles and could borrow books to take home tended to achieve higher scores than their peers; however, again none of these differences were statistically significant.

Four out of five pupils in Ireland attended a school where there were digital learning resources available to them. Although this proportion was similar to that of the PIRLS average, Ireland was found to have the lowest proportion of pupils attending schools in which digital learning resources were available across the reference countries. Pupils in Ireland who did not have access to digital learning resources at school achieved a slightly higher mean score than pupils who attended schools where such resources were available, with this pattern also being noted for a few of the reference countries.

Approximately three-quarters of pupils in Ireland attended a school judged by their teachers as being *very safe and orderly*, with another fifth attending a *somewhat safe and orderly* school. Only 2% of pupils were in schools judged to be *less than safe and orderly*. Pupils who attended schools categorised as *very safe and orderly* achieved higher mean PIRLS scores than those of their peers who attended *somewhat* or *less than safe and orderly* schools. Percentage differences between the *very safe and orderly* and *somewhat safe and orderly* categories were statistically significant across all International Benchmarks, with the former tending to have an advantage compared to the latter.

Most pupils in Ireland attended a school with *hardly any problems*, while one in five pupils were at schools with *minor problems*. Less than 2% of pupils in Ireland attended a school with *moderate to severe problems*. Pupils who attended a school with *hardly any problems* achieved statistically significantly higher mean scores than those of their peers. There were statistically significant percentage differences between pupils attending schools regarded as having *hardly any problems* and those with *minor problems* across all International Benchmarks, with statistically significantly higher proportions of pupils who attended schools that had *hardly any problems* reaching each of the benchmarks. Mean differences between pupils attending schools with *hardly any problems* and those with *minor problems* and *moderate to severe problems* were also statistically significant in previous PIRLS cycles.

In Ireland, a fifth of pupils attended a school with a *very high emphasis* on academic success, just under three-fifths were at schools with a *high emphasis*, and another fifth attended schools with a *medium emphasis* on academic success. Pupils at schools with a *very high emphasis* on academic success achieved a higher mean score compared to their peers, with only the latter difference being statistically significant. Mean differences between pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* and pupils in schools with a *medium emphasis* seemed to decrease between 2016 and 2021, while the percentages of pupils reported to be in schools with a *medium emphasis* on academic success increased statistically significantly from 2016 to 2021. Although percentage differences between pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* and a *high emphasis* on academic success widened with every International Benchmark, none of the differences were statistically significant. The percentage differences of pupils in schools with a *very high emphasis* on academic success and a *medium emphasis* were statistically significant across all benchmarks except for the Low Benchmark. Notably, at the Advanced Benchmark, over twice as many pupils from schools with a *very high emphasis* reached this benchmark, in comparison to pupils from schools with a *medium emphasis* on academic success.

More than half of pupils in Ireland reported having a *high sense of school belonging*, and just over a third reported having *some sense of school belonging*. Only 8% of pupils reported having *little sense of school belonging*. Pupils with a *high sense of school belonging* achieved a statistically significantly higher mean score than that of their peers with *little sense of school belonging*. This pattern was also evident internationally, though overall, the difference was larger in magnitude in Ireland compared to most of the reference countries, with Ireland having the second largest difference in achievement between these two categories. Percentage differences at the International Benchmarks between pupils with a *high* and *some sense of school belonging* categories were only statistically significant at the High and Advanced Benchmarks, while percentage differences between pupils with a *high* or *little sense of school belonging* were statistically significant across all benchmarks except for the Low Benchmark.

In Ireland, just under three-quarters of pupils reported *never* or *almost never* being bullied, a fifth reported being bullied *about monthly*, while a small percentage reported being bullied *about weekly*. Pupils who reported *never* or *almost never* being bullied achieved a statistically significantly higher mean PIRLS score than those of their peers. This pattern was evident in many reference countries. Percentage differences between pupils who *never* or *almost never* experienced bullying and those who experienced bullying *about monthly* were statistically significant across all benchmarks except for the Low Benchmark, while differences between pupils who *never* or *almost never* experienced bullying and those who experienced bullying *about weekly* were statistically significant across all benchmarks.

Approximately two-thirds of pupils in Ireland reported that they were *never or almost never* absent from school, over a quarter reported they were absent from school *once every month* or *every two months*, while a small percentage were absent from school at least once *every two weeks*. Overall, more frequent absence was associated with lower reading achievement, with pupils who reported being absent from school *once a week* achieving statistically significantly lower scores than their peers. The frequency with which pupils were absent from school varied across reference countries as did the magnitude of mean differences between the *once a week* and *never or almost never* categories. In 2021, the percentage of pupils *never or almost never* being absent seemed to decrease compared to 2016, while the mean achievement differences between pupils who were absent from school *once a week* and those who were *never or almost never* absent seemed to widen between the two cycles. However, this may have been due, at least in part, to changes in the categories of this question between the cycles. Considerable percentage differences were noted at the International Benchmarks between the *once a week* category and the rest of the categories.

Four out of five pupils in Ireland had parents who were *very satisfied* with their school, while just under a fifth had parents who were *somewhat satisfied*, and a very small percentage had parents who reported being *less than satisfied* with their child's school. Pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* with their school achieved a higher mean score, though not statistically significantly so, than their peers. Ireland had one of the highest proportions of pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* with their school when compared to the selected reference countries. Percentage differences at the International Benchmarks between pupils whose parents were *very satisfied* and pupils whose parents were *somewhat* or *less than satisfied* with their school were not found to be statistically significant at any benchmark.