HK pupils shine in international literacy study Gains attributed to changes following education reforms
Will Clem

Hong Kong 10-year-olds' outstanding performance in a major international literacy study is largely due to an increased emphasis on reading in schools following curriculum reform, the academic who administered the test locally said yesterday.

"Students have a lot more opportunities to improve their reading," said Tse Shek-kam, associate dean of education at the University of Hong Kong. "There has been an increase in the emphasis on reading skills in schools as a result of education reforms."

However, Professor Tse warned that the picture painted by the study was not entirely rosy, as Hong Kong families ranked near the bottom of the list in terms of parental attitudes to reading and pre-school reading activities.

The mean literacy score of local students came second in the 45 countries and regions taking part in the study, ranking behind Russia and ahead of Singapore. Each country or region looked at students in 150 randomly selected schools.

The second Progress in International Literacy Study was co-ordinated by the Lynch School of Education, Boston College, in the United States but conducted by academics in each of the 45 areas.

It tested 210,000 students, giving them a comparative literacy mark scaled around an international average of 500. Hong Kong students scored an average of 564 in the study, conducted between April and June last year, putting them just one mark behind Russian 10-year-olds.

However, local students topped the world in terms of higher-order literacy skills, which measured their ability to extract information from text, scoring 566 compared to Russian students' 562.

The results are a dramatic improvement on Hong Kong's score in the first round of the study, conducted in 2001. Local students then ranked 14th out of the 35 participants, tied with Singapore, Russia and Scotland at 528, far behind Sweden's top mark of 561.

Professor Tse attributed the improvements largely to changes in the curriculum and more emphasis on reading within the schools. Survey results showed teachers had increased the number of reading-related activities in class.

Elizabeth Loh Ka-yee, another researcher on the project, said students were spending more time reading for pleasure compared to five years ago, with 35 per cent saying they did so almost daily in the most recent study, up from 21 per cent in 2001.

Students who felt confident in their own reading ability had also jumped from 39 per cent to 48 per cent. "We see that when students have more confidence in their own reading abilities, then their literacy levels go up," Dr Loh said.

However, Professor Tse said it was important to note that 8 per cent of Hong Kong students scored less than 475 points, indicating they had a low level of literacy skills. The figures showed more needed to be done in the home. he said.
More than 15 per cent of parents surveyed spent less than one hour a week reading at home. Their children scored considerably lower than the 42 per cent whose parents read for five hours or more - 548 marks compared to 569.

Hong Kong also ranked third lowest in terms of the proportion of parents who placed a high value on reading and in the level of early childhood reading activities before starting school. "The reading environment in the home is a very important factor," he said, but added students should not be forced to do so against their will. "It is pointless getting angry with children, you need to encourage them," he said. "Give them time to read. If a child loves reading, especially before they are 10 years old, then they will be able to cope with any subject at school."

A spokesman for the Education Bureau said the study's findings were "a great encouragement to teachers, principals and other educational professionals". "There has been a significant increase in the percentage of schools which have informal initiatives to encourage students to read and which conduct formal instruction in reading," the spokesman said.