[PISA Thailand Regional Breakdown Shows Inequalities between Bangkok and Upper North with the Rest of Thailand](#)

GUEST CONTRIBUTION by John Draper

As reported previously in [*The Isaan Record*](#), there are clear inequalities in Thai students' academic achievement, and these are easily seen in official Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET) Results by province. These results have been seen to broadly follow ethnolinguistic and class groupings, with Bangkok, home to wealthier ethnic Central Thais, noticeably outperforming other areas and ethnicities. This was visible in the fact that 15-16-year old Central Bangkok students achieved a mean score of 50.6/100% in the Thai language in 2010, compared to a mean of 39.0/100% for the median northeastern province, Mahasarakham — a difference of nearly 12%.

In an [article](#) in *The Nation* on December 5th, 2013, it was revealed that Thai students' results in the Organization for Economically Developed Countries' Programme for International Student Tests (PISA) had improved from 2009-2012. This test also looks at the achievement of Thai 15 year olds, with Thailand being one of [65 countries and economies](#) involved.

The 2009 results were 421 in reading, 425 in science, and 419 in mathematics. The recently released 2012 results were 441 in reading, 444 in science, and 427 in mathematics. However, Dr. Sunee Klainin, the manager of the PISA Thailand Project, attributed the higher scores to the performance of demonstration schools and the Princess Chulabhorn's College

schools. She also pointed out that half of Thai students tested did not achieve a Band 3 or higher in mathematics, while around a third did not achieve a Band 3 in science or reading.

What do these scores mean? The definitions of the PISA levels for reading and mathematics are available [here](). There are six bands for mathematics. Students testing in Band 3 or lower — half of Thai students aged 15 — means they have little problem-solving ability in mathematics.

Likewise, in reading, a third of Thai students aged 15 are not able to relate a text to everyday knowledge and find and link multiple parts of a text.

What about the regional breakdown for Thailand? To date, this has not been included in the PISA 2012 regional data sheet (available [here]()), which lists regional breakdowns for 14 of the PISA countries and economies. In fact, the regional breakdown for Thailand has never been publicly reported in the media. However, a regional breakdown was reported in a technical document published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the ASEAN Secretariat in late 2013.[i] (Also available from a web link on the OECD Centre for Development website, [here]()).

Figure: PISA scores in Thailand, by subject and region

	Math	Level	Math/BKK	Science	Science/BKK
Bangkok	450	2	—	455	—
Central	400	1	-50	416	-39
Upper North	445	2	-5	449	-6
Lower North	412	1	-38	415	-40
Upper Northeast	420	1or2	-30	422	-33
Lower Northeast	412	1	-38	410	-45

South	397	1	-53	409	-46
National Average	**419**			**425**	

Source: The Institute for the Promotion of Teaching Science and Technology (IPST).

Note: PISA scale was set such that approximately two-thirds of students across OECD countries score between 400 and 600 points. Gaps of 72, 62 and 75 points in reading, mathematics, and science scores, respectively, are equivalent to one proficiency level.

In math, the average Bangkok student scores half a PISA level higher than almost every other regionally-based student except in the Upper North, where Chiang Mai has been an academic powerhouse for some time. The Upper Northeast fares slightly better than the Lower Northeast likely because it includes the major urban centers of Khon Kaen and Udon Thani. Interestingly, the average Central region student also scores very low compared to the average Bangkok student, and this may be because of differences in the quality of the schools. One possible explanation for the much lower average score for a student in the South is because it includes the war-torn provinces of Yala, Narathiwat, and Pattani.

In science, there is a similar pattern. The average Bangkok student scores half a PISA level higher than almost every other regionally-based student except in the Upper North and the Upper Northeast, with the Upper Northeast still well behind Bangkok.

Can we correlate the statistics with ethnic identity? It certainly looks like the scores of the Northeast Thailand students can be correlated with the Thai Lao ethnolinguistic identity. In the Lower Northeast, where there are a million ethnic Khmers, the scores are lower, but without a detailed understanding of which provinces are included, it is difficult

to say. What is interesting is that the average student from the Central Thai ethnolinguistic identity also scores low outside Bangkok.

One of the standard explanations for these differing scores is poverty. Poverty is certainly a factor in tertiary enrollment in Thailand.[ii] While poverty is also a factor in PISA achievement, the 2012 PISA figures note that the socio-economic background (class) of Thai students has an impact on both performance and the performance gap that is actually better than the OECD averages. Another issue then may be the inequality of access to resources, especially in more rural areas populated by ethnic minorities.

In response to the poor Thai PISA 2012 results, Professor Gerald Fry made five recommendations in an article in *The Nation* of December 23, 2013. He suggests additional factors in the low scores may be a lack of equity in resource allocation, an emphasis on quantity (buildings and personnel) rather than the quality of people, the lack of a strong reading culture, and a lack of expenditure on Research and Development. He also notes there is the possibility that students may be scoring low because their first language is not Thai. In other words, they may simply not understand the written instructions or how to write the short analyses in Thai required by the PISA tests.

Overall, the Thailand regional breakdown and the country PISA scores make for tragic results. Thailand is a whole PISA level behind the OECD averages of 494 for mathematics, 496 for reading and 501 for science. As also pointed out by Professor Fry in his article, it is also behind Vietnam, a newcomer to the PISA tests and a developing country compared to Thailand's status as a newly industrialized country.

The gap in PISA levels is the difference between 15-year-old Thai children being able to solve problems or not. And, for the first time we can see from the PISA statistics themselves

where those differences are geographically. They are the same kind of differences that can be seen in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Survey results from 2011 for Thai Primary 4 and Thai Secondary 2 students' scores, as reported in *The Nation* on December 12, 2012.

There is an urgent need for a public discussion of these regional figures and what they mean for the future of the Thai education system. This public discussion should be constant and sustained until the scores of the children of the Northeast – and those of the other regions stricken by poor results – can equal the scores of the children of Bangkok.

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[i] OECD. (2013). *Southeast Asian Economic Outlook 2013: With Perspectives on China and India*. Available at http://books.google.co.th/books?id=c8vri8vPvmIC&pg=.

[ii] Ibid., p. 207.