



School League Tables are Inaccurate and Unjust

The ACT Government has adopted an unprincipled and biased consultation process in order to impose public comparisons of school literacy and numeracy assessments on government schools. It has reneged on previous public commitments not to publish comparisons of school test results. It is only consulting the public on the form of comparisons to be introduced, not whether they should be introduced.

All the options presented in its discussion paper involve public identification of school results. They will all lead to the publication of school league tables. There are no options for reporting school results which do not identify schools.

Parents of students in government schools, teachers, principals and school boards should reject school league tables as a major threat to the provision of quality schooling for all in ACT government schools.

Public comparison of school results does not deliver better information for parents or better public accountability to the taxpayer. It produces misleading and inaccurate information. It does not lead to better schools for all. It produces social segregation. It favours privilege and compounds the effects of disadvantage.

League tables of school literacy and numeracy outcomes give misleading and inaccurate information about the quality of education because they do not measure the 'value added' by the school. School test results are influenced by a variety of factors, not all of which are within the control of schools or teachers. League tables do not distinguish the school contribution to the test results from that of other factors such as family background and resources.

Socio-economic background is a major influence on education outcomes. High league table results may reflect more the privileged family background and resources of the community served by the school than the quality of teaching and the education program. As a result, league tables can camouflage underachievement among mediocre schools with favoured intakes. On the other hand, a school could perform badly in comparison with other schools despite high quality teaching and resources because it serves a less-privileged community.

Comparisons of school results also lead to inaccurate assessments of school quality because the tests are narrowly based. They do not assess the full range of schooling objectives. For example, they ignore the social and personal development dimensions of schooling which are just as important as the formal academic. Even in academic terms, the subject range and the year cohorts assessed is limited. In other words, league tables do not give a complete picture of the work of schools.

Consequently, comparisons of school literacy and numeracy assessment outcomes are misleading when interpreted as measures of school performance. They do not provide consistent and accurate guidance to parents or taxpayers about the quality of school programs. Indeed, so used, they are pernicious because they can damn a school in the eyes of parents and the public without good cause.

Successive UK Governments have conceded that school league tables can give a false impression of a school's performance. This is why they have been searching for a way of measuring 'value added' performance, although this approach too is proving to have serious limitations.

Comparisons of school results can further entrench inequities and social division in schooling. This has occurred in both the UK and New Zealand since the introduction of public league tables.

League tables have led to the introduction of selective entry into some government schools. As the higher performing schools become more popular they can adopt selective enrolment practices to further improve their performance.

The surest way for schools to improve their performance (besides outright cheating) is to change their

students - replacing those from low socio-economic groups with those from higher socio-economic groups. Replacing students is both easier and more certain of success on league tables than changing what teachers actually do. The Times Educational Supplement [24 November 1995] has reported that the top performing schools in the UK are choosing pupils with proven ability in selected areas. Schools are doing everything they can to recruit higher attaining students.

School league tables also cater for the well-off. Choice of school is exercised mainly by those with the resources to do so - this means the well-off. When parents are left with standardized scores as the only readily available indicator of school performance, they are led almost inevitably to the conclusion that the "best" schools are those that have the fewest low-income and minority students. Expanding parent choice in an environment of such one-dimensional information reinforces tendencies toward racial and economic separation.

League tables are also used as a job guide for teachers. Teachers applying for jobs in UK schools are using league tables to determine which are the best posts to apply for [Times Educational Supplement, 12 September 1997]. Schools with poorer results find it increasingly difficult to attract the staff they need to try and turn their results around.

As the more selective schools siphon off students, the better teachers and associated funding, the unpopular schools become the resting place for disadvantaged pupils and demoralised teachers. The result is a two-tier government school system - one group of schools for the well-off, the best informed and the best teachers and another for the least well-off, the less informed and the least qualified and experienced teachers. The problems for disadvantaged communities in gaining access to high quality resources and programs are further compounded by the publication of school league tables.

League tables also establish incentives for schools to ignore the low achieving students in their ranks. Research published last year by the Institute of Education at the University of London found that schools were increasingly rationing their resources and attention to concentrate on students who were on the border of accepted benchmarks rather than the lowest attainers [Times Educational Supplement, 26 November 1999]. Focusing resources in this way gave schools their best chance of improving their position in the league table.

In general, the research evidence from the UK experience with league tables indicates that they have led to little improvement in schools' performance and there is little sign that the worst-performing schools have closed the gap on the best since 1992 when league tables were introduced [Editorial, Times Educational Supplement, 21 November 1997].

There is no case for school league tables. The Government's biased discussion paper should be comprehensively rejected by all concerned for the future of the ACT Government school system.

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