

NATIONAL TESTING AND LEAGUE TABLES

A league of their own making

Chris Bonnor

Despite all the denials and spin it was just a matter of time before national assessment test results appeared in the form of school league tables. Even the weak set of principles and protocols agreed by all governments didn't stop the recent publication of lists of schools, ranked by student achievement, in Tasmania and Queensland.

The newspapers which have created league tables out of these tests have also dished up generous serves of high-minded rhetoric about transparency, the right to know and school choice. While some cautions were issued along with the lists of schools there was nothing about the errors, false assumptions and borderline fraud inherent in publishing such information.

Their challenge was to come up with accompanying stories which could state something other than the bleeding obvious. The *Hobart Mercury* compared attendance rates and achievement levels, coming to the stunning conclusion that you have to attend school to get the results. Best and worst schools were highlighted but other differences between the schools and the communities were probably considered too complex for the Mercury's readers to digest.

The *Courier Mail* revealed that small regional state schools were the star performers. Hardly surprising: most are too far away from other schools to have their enrolment depleted by what we call competition. At the end of the day the bright little bunnies at Peek-A-Doo State School (yes, there is such a place) will still go to.... Peek-A-Doo State School.

The recent outbreak of school league tables represents a new low standard in misinformation about schools, but one which is aided and abetted by official encouragement and confusion. While the Rudd government previously declared that such tables "will not be a product of the new framework" the Deputy Prime-Minister only a few days ago welcomed "the cleansing sunshine of public scrutiny".

So what is wrong with throwing the spotlight on comparative school performance? Years ago I almost convinced a tabloid journalist to run a shock-horror story on the fact that 50% of school students were persistently below average. The penny eventually dropped.

Most league tables are just as useless. They overwhelmingly reflect the enrolment profile rather than the worth of schools and what they achieve for their kids. They essentially measure the prior learning, family culture, aspiration...and money of the kids who walk in through the school gates each day. The cleansing sunshine of league tables doesn't throw much light on all these other things.

The reality is that our schools have evolved into hierarchies which have more to do with sifting and sorting enrolments than much else. In NSW the HSC ladder is dominated by the (ever increasing) academically selective schools, both public and private, followed by high-fee private schools, then a mix of public schools in middle class areas and lower fee private schools and so on. In Victoria private schools dominate, together with public schools in Melbourne's east.

The mechanisms used to sort the student population are many and varied and include tests, interviews, previous school reports and of course, school fees. In Victoria there is even an academic hierarchy amongst the private schools which parallels the level of fees they charge.

Some schools are better than others, regardless of enrolment and resourcing issues – although the differences are surprisingly small. Simplistic tables don't tell us much. What they do is increase the flight from so-called low performing to high performing schools – in effect shifting enrolments (for those with choice) away from schools in low socio-economic areas. This has been going on for some time and may help explain Australia's worrying gap between high and low achievers, a gap which another bag of education policies is attempting to reduce.

So the issue boils down to the right to know versus the potential of misinformation to cement existing disadvantage for many kids, schools and communities. One solution, as Julia Gillard commonly suggests, is to compare the performance of schools with similar others in so-called like school groups. But schools are rarely alike and clumsy attempts to date have lumped very different schools together into too few categories, creating yet more potential hierarchies.

After years of league table disasters England has moved to comparing schools on the extent to which schools add value to student achievement. This can point to outstanding teaching in many schools at the bottom of other league tables. Like all test data, value-added information can help improve teaching and learning - but how far do schools, as distinct from family and others, add value to students when they see them for less than 20% of the time? We really need a complex range of measures, combined with the information and insights which parents can obtain by being closely associated with their schools.

It will be interesting to see what Julia Gillard does next. Three months ago all school sectors and interest groups sought an assurance from her that data collected from national testing would not be misused in this way. Their concerns were apparently ignored. These same stakeholders are now going to say much more than 'I told you so!' Get ready to see the "cleansing sunshine" replaced with lashings of thunder and lightning.

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