

See-through “transparency”

Educators are deeply concerned about the federal government’s plan to rank and resource schools according to achievement data. **Carolyn Rance** reports.

➔ Briefly

- The Rudd government’s plans for greater school “transparency” are flawed.
- Plans to have league table-style ranking of schools stem from an approach to education that wrongly implies falling standards.
- These moves to make teachers more accountable can be interpreted as an attack on the education unions.

Public schools are providing the community with more information about their offerings and achievements than ever before. They are using a plethora of communication methods including school websites, newsletters, annual reports, parent-teacher meetings, and information sessions for prospective students and their families.

It’s hardly surprising that the Prime Minister’s call for schools to do more to “demonstrate the outcomes they achieve with the resources they receive” is causing concern among educators.

“Kevin Rudd’s ‘education

revolution’ seems to be about picking a fight with education unions,” says AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos.

He fears the government’s demand for a “higher level of transparency” again raises the spectre of data being reduced to simplistic and potentially misleading rankings that could lead to educationally counterproductive league tables, and says rich and robust information on schools is already available to parents.

In August, Rudd said the government would be making agreement on individual school performance reporting a condition of the new national education agreement to come into effect at the beginning of next year. “Within a year, we want to see increased information available to Australian parents,” he said. “And within three years, a report that shows not just how their child is doing, but how their child’s school is performing compared to similar schools.”

Beyond data

The relationship schools have with parents is dynamic, organic and goes far beyond just publishing a set of data, says Maurie Mulheron, principal of Keira High School in Wollongong, NSW. “It goes all the way from formal relationships with groups such as parents and citizens

associations through to information evenings on subject selection. At Keira, we hold information meetings for prospective parents in March and November of the year their child is in grade six and we have interpreters at information meetings for families from non-English speaking backgrounds. Schools do more to involve parents than they have ever done.”

Like many schools across Australia, Keira High has a comprehensive website providing details of curriculum offerings, key personnel, enrolment, news and events. Annual reports contain information on external examination results and the whole range of programs designed to foster students’ academic, social, sporting and artistic skills.

“Schools know that just publishing data on test results doesn’t help parents measure happiness, safety, student engagement and involvement in music, sport, public speaking and other activities,” says Mulheron. “It doesn’t tell people anything about the thousands of things schools do every week to assist children mature into engaged, happy young adults.

“Publishing rankings sets up expectations that parents have to make a choice about the school their child attends. They don’t have to make a choice. They just ▶

► need to enrol their child at their local government school where they will receive an excellent, world-class education.”

Gavrielatos says teachers at government schools have no problem with accountability. “Of course parents, students and the public have a right to know that teachers are competent and professional, and that schools are offering high-quality and effective programs. But this should be communicated in reports from schools to parents. The notion that somehow the social and human dynamics of education can be reduced to a single figure or rank is drawn from flawed policies in the likes of the United States and United Kingdom—two places where the education systems are consistently outperformed by other developed countries.”

Rankings are a political construct

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that don’t provide meaningful information and serve no educational value, says Gavrielatos. “In the US and UK, so-called league tables have been counterproductive, lowering teacher morale, proving destructive to students and school communities and contributing to inequity in education.”

Mulheron says data provided without context is of little use to parents or the broader public. A set of data doesn’t mean much without someone to explain it. “It is one of the reasons teachers try to involve parents in the life of schools—so they can be sure

people understand what things mean. Teachers gather data on their students on a daily basis and this provides information that is far richer than just one set of test scores. Test results removed from this context of overall assessment are often unreliable.”

Diagnosing problems

National testing data should be used to allow teachers and parents to diagnose learning problems and put programs in place to remedy them, says Jenny Branch, president of the Australian Council of State School Organisations.

She is wary of Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Julia Gillard’s enthusiasm for New York’s methodology of grouping schools and comparing their student performance. “I’d be very hesitant about importing any model from overseas. We

have to work on what is meaningful for us.”

Branch says parents generally appear satisfied with the reporting they receive from schools, and governments should use collected data to address identified deficits rather than construct rankings that could unfairly damage a school’s reputation or morale.

Queensland Teachers Union president Steve Ryan says government demands for teachers to be more accountable are diverting public attention from education funding deficiencies. “State school teachers and principals hoped that a Labor

government would deliver on its pre-election promises that schools would receive the support they deserve after a decade of neglect by the previous Howard government. [Now] it seems Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard are prepared to blame teachers for the dire straits many government schools find themselves in.”

Ryan says that without a truly national curriculum, even nationwide tests of literacy and numeracy lack credibility. “In Queensland, for example, we have a different early-years approach to schools than in Victoria. It means you are not comparing apples with apples.”

The same point was made when Victorian Education Minister Bronwyn Pike described the results of this year’s National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing as “a glowing report card” for her state. Education academics were quick to note that Victoria had a comparatively larger middle-class population, with fewer Indigenous and remote students than Queensland and the Northern Territory where more students failed to meet national minimum standards.

Comparisons and political point scoring such as this make teachers fear the worst when politicians proclaim the need for national rankings.

Scrutiny at all levels

Gillard has been at pains to emphasise that the federal government wants to make only like-for-like comparisons between groups of schools with similar student populations. AEU ACT branch secretary Penny Gilmour

doubts this is feasible and says claims of a lack of accurate and comprehensive information about students and schools are nonsense.

“Teachers have never been subjected to more scrutiny at all levels,” says Gilmour. “They take their responsibility for quality teaching and student outcomes very seriously. Teachers are accountable every day for the progress of their students and the public school system is publicly accountable. In the ACT, the CEO of the Department of Education and Training fronts the assembly estimates committee every year to be grilled over costs, benefits, issues and outcomes.”

Information is readily available to parents too, she says. “ACT schools have comprehensive reporting systems to assist parents understand how their child is developing. Not just crude measures of test scores, but descriptive reports based on teachers’ professional judgment and data gained through assessment.”

Comparisons of school performance are notoriously difficult because no two schools have an identical student cohort or set of aspirations, community circumstances or resource needs, she says. “One of the challenges and rewards of teaching is to make the learning of every child rich, diverse and engaging so that all students move forward, regardless of their starting point.”

Ryan says national tests don’t take issues such as decentralisation into account, or the fact that schools are staffed according to the number of kids and not their needs. “Comparisons can be demoralising for teachers, students

and parents. A lot depends on the spin placed on the outcomes.”

Ryan supports the Queensland approach to student assessment. Professionals from the public and private sectors work together in regional groupings to discuss the standard of work achieved, and

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the process is moderated by the Queensland Studies Authority. A number of American states have shown interest in the process.

“It’s unfortunate that the government has chosen to criticise teacher unions publicly,” says Ryan. “They have high rates of membership—ours is 96 per cent—and this reflects the collegiality and strong concerns teachers have about professional issues as well as industrial matters. Teachers want to work collaboratively with governments for the betterment of schools and students. Parents know that teachers want to do the best they can for kids, and governments should also start from that approach.”

False sense of crisis

AEU federal research officer Peter Job worries that the current public and political debate about school standards could generate a false sense of crisis. In a paper prepared this year, National Testing, League Tables and School Performance Accountability, he notes that the latest Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) data suggests that Australia performs well in literacy and numeracy.

Calls for rankings of schools stem from a back-to-basics philosophy which wrongly implies that modern teaching methods have led to a decline in literacy and numeracy, says Job. “It is not supported by evidence. The Longitudinal Surveys of Australian

Youth from 1975-1998 show levels have generally remained constant, and improved for some groups, despite the challenges of changing demographics.”

The PISA data indicates that Australia rates poorly for equity, with a larger gap than the OECD average between the highest and lowest-ranked schools. Job says this clearly shows that the most pressing educational issues in Australia lie not with literacy or numeracy levels, teaching quality or methodology, but with matters of educational equity.

Proper resourcing of public education must be at the heart of efforts to narrow the gap between rich and poor, private and public schools, he says. “Schools which cater to large numbers of students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds should not be stigmatised as ‘failing’ on the basis of simplistic performance criteria. They should be provided with additional resources to improve educational outcomes and address the needs of their students.” ●

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