

Talking tough on testing

Professor Peter Mortimore tells **Dan Murphy** how the English experience with league tables became a 'naming and shaming' distortion for schools.

Having served as a school teacher, inspector and administrator in England before entering academia, Professor Peter Mortimore has seen many education trends come and go. He recalls that English politicians began their obsession with collecting and comparing test data from schools in the 1980s, but says it really picked up pace after Tony Blair's election.

"School testing allows politicians to talk tough and look like they are doing something," says Mortimore, who is on a speaking tour in Australia, sponsored by a group of universities in conjunction with the AEU.

One of the first acts of the British Labour government was to publish a list of schools at the bottom of the league table, which was the first naming and shaming policy, he says.

"It is easy to argue that parents should be given full information, and that schools are public institutions supported by the public pocket so they should be accountable.

"As for the effect on outcomes, [the politicians'] argument is that if you put information in the public domain, a school that hasn't

done well will have to lift its game. In reality it doesn't quite work like that."

Schools within one system sit identical tests, but the situations facing their students can be worlds apart, he says. "There are schools that attract students from stable homes, who have been encouraged to read and learn by parents with educational experience and higher incomes. Then there are schools that teach disadvantaged children who do pretty badly on the standard tests."

The reality is that once information is released, what people do with it is beyond the government's control. Although the British government now uses school league tables for its own purposes, they were initially compiled by the

School testing allows politicians to talk tough...

media. Regardless of who does it, crude comparisons of this kind can have damaging effects.

"What happens when a school appears at the bottom of league tables is not that they pull up their socks and improve, but rather teachers become wary of working

there. Once the curse of failure has been put on a school, parents will try to transfer their children."

The English approach is referred to as 'high stakes testing', and for good reason. In June the education minister threatened 300 schools with closure if their scores didn't improve.

Pressure to perform

In his continuing research and regular column in *The Guardian* newspaper, Mortimore looks closely at issues arising from England's attachment to testing. One of these is the way pressure to perform distorts teaching and curriculum.

"People aren't fools," he says. "They don't want to close their schools or lose their jobs, and they will do whatever they can to improve their position.

"A journalist from *The Times* education supplement, Warwick Mansell, spent two years visiting schools, looking at how they prepare for tests. His book, *Education by Numbers*, shows people spending weeks rehearsing for tests. It also demonstrates how in a high stakes regime, people will massage results and in some cases cheat."

This phenomenon of 'teaching to the test' is one reason many educationalists approach national exam results with caution. In England's case, such scepticism seems healthy, considering the disparity between improved national test results and those from the OECD Program of International Assessment survey, which have been going down for literacy and maths. PISA results for students in the United States are particularly poor.

Despite his misgivings over England's approach, Mortimore is not against external assessment. He has just completed a post as international professor of education at the University of Southern Denmark and advised the country to introduce standardised tests. "The tests they are creating in Denmark are diagnostic and the information will be made available to administrators, teachers and parents to be used as part of the learning process. I'm very much in favour of that, but not using the same sensitive data for crude league tables."



Professor Peter Mortimore

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Finland, unarguably the world leader in student learning outcomes, also employs sampled testing for diagnostic purposes.

In England and the US, reporting requirements have gone hand in hand with more school competition and choice. But Mortimore warns of potential negative consequences. "You have these results being published and greater choice in schools. But rather than evening

things out, they are reinforcing hierarchy. At the very top are the most prestigious schools, then religious schools, then some of the new academies the government is creating and giving advantages to. And right down the end are what [Blair adviser] Alistair Campbell famously called 'the bog standard comprehensive' schools."

Mortimore, 66, is a former pro vice-chancellor of the University of London, a former director of the London-based Institute of Education and an independent educational

consultant. He is the author of several books and numerous articles on educational matters and has taken part in international research projects for the OECD. ●

Dan Murphy is a freelance journalist and was previously communications coordinator for the AEU's South Australian Branch. He is studying in the masters program in education and globalisation at the University of Oulu, Finland.



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