



## AEU Parliamentary Brief

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Issue Number 13: August 2007

### School League Tables

Recent comments by Stephen Smith regarding the desirability of publishing school literacy and numeracy test scores are of concern to educators everywhere. The AEU rejects the “public policy” rationale put forward by Smith and asserts that the real public policy questions should focus on whether publication of literacy and numeracy results does actually improve student outcomes in literacy and numeracy, and, more specifically, whether it closes the achievement gap for lower socio-economic, NESB and Indigenous students.

In the USA, where similar programmes have been introduced, the research evidence shows that there are no consistent effects as a result of high stakes testing. In comparing states with high stakes testing to those without, there are no statistically significant gains in Year 4 reading, or Year 8 reading or Mathematics. [Amrein & Berliner (2002)]. In addition, it is also the case that some results have been inflated as a result of excluding lower achieving students from taking the tests [Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner (2003)]. In fact, it is precisely those groups of students that this strategy is supposed to help who become further disadvantaged. Research by Heubert & Hauser (1999) found that high stakes testing programmes actually increased the dropout rate of students from minority and ‘at risk’ groups.

Further, the publication of information such as this does not provide any meaningful information about school or teacher quality and will inevitably lead to the development of school league tables.

There are a number of problems with school league tables. They

- exacerbate the problems of simplistic judgements being made on the basis of misleading and incomplete information about school performance;
- lead to a public debasement of schools and to public labeling of their students and families as ‘failures’; and
- lead to greater education inequities and social segregation of schools as perceived “high ranking” schools select their students and, ultimately, their teaching staff.

In the USA, the introduction of the Bush “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation in 2001 linked the federal funding of schools to requirements to meet test score targets. States were required to

- meet 100% proficiency levels within 15 years;
- meet state academic standards in core subjects;

- publish reports of achievement disaggregated by ethnicity and sub-groups.
- publish school league tables;
- provide rewards and sanctions for annual accountability.

Rewards included financial rewards and bonuses for staff, districts and schools, as well as external scholarships, while sanctions included salary reductions, termination of principals' employment public labeling of teachers, loss of employment and grade retention of students.

Jennings (2007) has found that the promised federal funding was subjected to frozen and declining grants in 2005-06 and that, by 2007 80% of districts were locally absorbing the costs, as the punitive aspects of the legislation remain while the financial benefits have disappeared.

League tables also undermine school improvement efforts by redirecting teacher focus to ensuring that students pass tests rather than being concerned with the development of deeper understandings and an appreciation of what is being learnt. This changed focus has resulted in a number of unintended consequences in both the US and England. Nichols & Berliner (2006) identify the following effects

- a narrowing of the curriculum to concentrate on what is tested;
- teaching to the test;
- problems with teacher retention and recruitment;
- “unprofessional treatment” of teachers through the increased use of direct instruction methods;
- local and state level corruption and misrepresentation of data;
- no sustainable achievement gains for the most ‘at risk’ students;
- increased dropout rates of students in years 11/12;
- corporate/publisher/consultant profiteering – “billions of dollars” to insider programmes.

It should be noted that the highest achieving countries within the OECD, in terms of both excellence and equity, have systems which are not characterised by this form of public “accountability”.

Further, there is a high correlation between those countries which have adopted a marketisation approach to education and those countries which are failing to achieve equitable outcomes for their students. There is no doubt that league tables lead to a furthering of this approach.

Suggestions that league tables would provide necessary information for parents to exercise “choice” about schools are based on the false premise that parents will be choosing schools. In an era of league tables it will be a case of schools choosing their students rather than parents exercising “choice”.

There are alternatives to publishing literacy and numeracy test scores to ensure genuine public accountability. These involve reporting aggregated school data in a way which does not identify individual schools but still allows systems to assess the extent of improvement from year to year. Sample testing programmes are also able to provide system accountability. It is also possible to report the proportions of students, including those from “at risk” groups, achieving particular results, thereby enabling systems to monitor progress in improving equity outcomes (This can be – and is - done currently by departments of education, though the information is not made available to the general public.). This would achieve the “public policy” goals quoted by Stephen Smith as a rationale for league tables, but without the collateral damage to schools, teachers and students.



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