

School League Tables – Success or Disaster?

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1. The Government's Plans

The Federal Government is introducing three separate forms of school results to be published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) on a central website later this year.

First, individual school reports will be shown on separate web pages which will include national literacy and numeracy results and Year 12 results, together with a range of other information about each school.

Second, ACARA will publish comparisons of results of schools within yet to be defined local areas. It will also publish so-called like school comparisons which are intended to allow comparisons of schools in similar socio-economic circumstances around Australia.

In addition to these results, some state and territory governments may publish school results for their own jurisdiction on a centralized website. This is now done by the Queensland, Tasmanian and Western Australian Governments and others may follow.

2. Government Sophistry on League Tables

The Prime Minister, the Federal Minister for Education and State and Territory education ministers all claim that they are opposed to “simplistic” league tables. Yet, this is exactly what we are getting from them. Their claimed opposition to league tables is pure sophistry and semantics.

The recent publication of Queensland school results by the *Courier-Mail* is instructive.

These results were initially published by the Queensland Government in a table on the Queensland Studies Authority website. The *Courier-Mail* simply re-published them in a special lift-out with schools listed in alphabetical order. It also published a list of five primary and five high schools with the highest average results. The *Gold Coast Bulletin* published its own ranking of the top schools on the Gold Coast.

The Queensland Education Minister Geoff Wilson said the publication of school results reflected the Government's commitment to openness and transparency. Yet, his government claims that it is opposed to “simplistic” league tables.

A similar thing happened in Tasmania earlier this year. The Tasmanian Government published the results for individual schools on separate school websites. The Hobart *Mercury* then used the data to rank Tasmanian high schools from the highest to the lowest. Yet, the Tasmanian Premier and Minister for Education, David Bartlett, claimed that publishing the results was “not about ranking schools or creating league tables”.

Julia Gillard strongly backed the Queensland Government's action saying it was "time we stopped averting our eyes from poor performance" in the classroom. She also “applauded” the Tasmanian Government for its action, praising it as “brave”. The clear implication is that she supports publishing tables of school results despite claiming also to be opposed to “simplistic” and “dumb” league tables.

No government leader has condemned either the *Courier-Mail* or the *Mercury* for publishing tables of school results or for ranking schools on their average results. The Prime Minister

has not condemned them despite his claim of being opposed to “arbitrary” league tables, Julia Gillard has not condemned them; Anna Bligh has not condemned them; Geoff Wilson has not condemned them and David Bartlett has not condemned them. What hypocrites!

None of these leaders are prepared to ban the publication of league tables. The most any of them are prepared to go is David Bartlett who said that he will “encourage those in the media who have control of these things not to publish simplistic league tables”. He said he would say this to any journalist who wants to hear it and to any editor as well. The editor and journalists of the Mercury must still be quaking in their boots.

So this is where we are. Governments are to publish school results while washing their hands of all responsibility when the media publishes them and creates rankings of schools. Ministers’ claims of being opposed to league tables are disingenuous, hypocritical and self-serving. Their assurances are designed to deceive and to mislead.

The fact is that, by publishing school results, governments are inviting the media to rank schools. Indeed, governments are inviting anyone who looks at these results to rank schools. They serve no other purpose but to enable people to compare results and sort them into some kind of ordering or ranking. Governments want parents to compare school results as part of the process of choosing a school and to “drive school improvement” as Julia Gillard told the Brookings Institution in June.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of local area comparisons of school results. Paragraph 32 of the National Education Agreement signed by all Australian governments states:

The publication of this information [school results] will allow....comparison of a school with other schools in their local community.

The Federal Minister for Education has stated on several occasions that she wants parents to compare results for schools in their local area. So much, then, for opposing simplistic comparisons of schools.

Local area comparisons are in fact “mini-league tables”. While they may not formally rank schools, it will be a simple matter for anyone to cast their eyes down the table of results and compare and rank schools on their performance - this is their purpose. To deny that these comparisons are “simplistic” and “arbitrary” league tables is playing with semantics. In publishing these tables, the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have broken the assurances they have been giving the public about league tables for the past two years.

In some ways, this broken assurance is more calamitous than the ‘wink and nod’ they have given the media to publish full league tables. As the chief executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research, Geoff Masters, has said, it is comparisons of schools in the same geographical area that will be used most by parents. It is these local area school comparisons that will mainly drive any changes in the pattern of school choice arising from the introduction of reporting school results. Yet, as the Council itself stated in a recent report, these comparisons are often unfair and inappropriate.

3. What’s Wrong with Reporting School Results?

There are at least three major arguments against publishing school results:

- They are an unreliable indicator of the quality of school programs and teaching;
- They will harm education rather than improve it; and

- They lead to social segregation in schools.

Unreliable indicator of school quality

Gillard says that publishing school results is needed so the public knows which schools are under-performing. However, school results are not a reliable indicator of differences in school quality because:

- They do not take account of outside influences on student achievement;
- They are often subject to manipulation and sorting; and
- They generally do not take account of measurement error in test results.

School comparisons and league tables mislead about school quality because they reflect factors outside the control of schools and teachers. For example, school results are significantly determined by the socio-economic background of school communities. School results and league table rankings are often more a measure of the family background of a school's students than the quality of its teaching.

Many other factors outside the control of schools also influence a school's results. These include student absenteeism and mobility between schools, the extent of parent involvement in learning at home, and the extent to which students are engaged in private tutoring. For example, if a higher proportion of families engage private tutoring in any one year a school will receive a boost to its measured performance and league table ranking even though there was no change in teaching effectiveness during the year.

School results and league table rankings are also subject to manipulation. Overseas experience shows that many schools sort their results by poaching high achieving students from other schools, denying entry to, or expelling, low achieving students, suspending low achieving students on test days, increasing use of special dispensations for tests, encouraging students to take courses whose results are not used to compare schools and outright cheating.

Just this week, for example, a survey of public school teachers in Chicago by the *Chicago Sun-Times* and the teachers' union revealed that one-third of all teachers had been pressured in the last year by principals and boards to change student grades. Twenty per cent said that they had actually raised grades under this pressure.

Already, there are numerous examples of similar practices in Australia.

Last year, John Kaye and the *Sydney Morning Herald* exposed excessive use of dispensations for the HSC exam by some NSW elite private schools. These special dispensations include having extra time for tests and alternative forms of assessments.

Up to 30% of students at some private schools were given special provisions in the 2008 HSC, compared with an average 7% of government high school students. Masada College claimed special dispensations for 30% of its students and Scot's College claimed them for 25% of its students. These are amongst the wealthiest, highest socio-economic status schools in Australia.

The *Herald* also reported last year that a Sydney private school was forcing students to complete their HSC at TAFE if it appears they will not score high marks. Parents said their children had not been allowed to sit their exams at the school. The school has rapidly improved its ranking in the Herald's HSC results league table in recent years.

Last month, the *West Australian* reported that schools are pushing many Year 12 students to choose easier subjects so schools can lift their ranking on league tables. If struggling students are channelled into courses with no exams, their scores will not be counted in a school's overall tertiary entrance results which are used to measure school performance.

The absurd lengths to which school systems can go to fudge their results reached new heights in Texas recently. Last July, the Texas Education Authority introduced a new scheme for reporting school results which allows schools to report students as passing tests even when they fail. Schools will be able to do so if a complex formula predicts that students who fail in one year will pass in a future year. It will allow hundreds of schools to boost their performance.

League tables also mislead when measurement and sampling errors on school results are not reported. The margin of error can be exceptionally large in measuring improvement which means that the results of the large majority of schools are indistinguishable from each other. Technical studies of school results and school league tables in England and the United States have demonstrated that 50 – 80% of school results may be statistically indistinguishable. This means that it is chance differences which account for a significant proportion of the reported differences in school test scores. School rankings largely reflect chance differences rather than real differences.

It is instructive that neither the Queensland nor the Tasmanian Governments reported measurement errors when they published their school results. Yet, both governments have signed a national protocol to report statistical errors on school results. And, of course, the *Courier-Mail* and the *Mercury* made no mention of likely statistical error associated with the results.

School comparisons harm education

Gillard says that publication of school results is needed to improve performance and that parents and the public have a right to the information.

The right to information is an important principle in a democratic society because its benefits generally outweigh the harm. However, we recognise numerous instances where the release of information does greater harm than good, and publishing school results is one of these.

First, it narrows the curriculum and teaching with the result that students receive a less rounded education. Overseas evidence shows that schools direct more time into the tested subjects of literacy and maths while untested subjects such as science, history, social studies, languages, arts and music, physical education and health receive much less time. There is also less teaching of more complex thinking and writing skills. Even recess gets cut.

A major review of the English primary school curriculum published earlier this year by Cambridge University criticised the dominance of a rigid testing regime and its distorting effect on the curriculum. It said that children were receiving an education that was “fundamentally deficient”. It was neither broad nor balanced, and it valued memorization and recall over understanding and inquiry.

A study by the US Centre on Education Policy last year showed that since the No Child Left Behind Act was enacted in 2001 to require more testing and reporting for reading and maths,

average class time in US primary schools on reading increased by 47% and by 37% for maths. Time on social studies, science, art and music, gym and recess was cut by an average of 145 minutes a week. Recess time was cut by nearly 30%.

League tables turn classrooms into test preparation factories. Weeks and months are devoted to test preparation instead of deep learning. This is happening already in Australia.

Last April, the head of the Victorian Department of Education, Peter Dawkins, sent a memo to all principals suggesting more time be spent on preparing students for the national literacy and numeracy tests so as to improve Victoria's results.

The Age has reported that teachers are being pressured to put more time into test practice. The *Courier-Mail* in Brisbane reported in March that education officials were putting tremendous pressure on teachers to lift results by practising for tests. The *West Australian* reported last April that up to a quarter of school time was being spent on preparing for the tests.

What all this leads to, along with rorting of school results, is test score inflation. Scores go up an up. This week elementary and middle school grades in New York City were released. Many will know that the New York City model of school reporting introduced in 2007 is much admired by our Federal Education Minister. The new results show that 97% of schools received an A or B compared with 60% in 2007 and 84% got an A compared to 37% in 2007. All the schools that were failed last year, received an A or B this year.

School comparisons harm education in many other ways. Schools often devote more time to students who are on the cusp of proficiency benchmarks at the expense of low achieving students because this is the easiest way to improve a school's results. Competition for rankings discourages collaboration and co-operation between schools. Schools will be reluctant to share successful practices with other schools if it means those schools could leapfrog them in ranking. Also, low ranked schools find it more difficult to retain high quality teachers.

Increase social segregation

Reporting school results and publishing league tables tends to increase social segregation in schools. This is driven by both schools and parents.

Many schools actively choose their enrolments by "cream skimming" students most likely to achieve good results – these students are generally from white, well-off families. Selective and high demand government schools and private schools have control over their enrolments and this allows them greater opportunities to select higher achieving students – who, in general, tend to be from white, well-off families. There is abundant evidence from overseas of schools selecting their students to maintain or improve their league table position.

On the other hand, many parents see education as a "positional good" in that the value of education depends not on the learning acquired but on the relative status of the school attended. Publishing tables of school results aids this search for status and self-segregation.

There is extensive evidence of increasing social segregation between schools in England, which is attributable in part to greater competition between schools created by league tables. A new study of education markets in Detroit, New Orleans and Washington DC has found that competition between schools for enrolments tend to create hierarchies of schools in education markets serving families of different social backgrounds.

Increasing social segregation in schools is contrary to the whole rationale of public education. It undermines public education and it has serious implications for the future of our society.

4. Like School Comparisons are No Answer

So, for these reasons, league tables are not a success but a disaster.

Gillard thinks she has an argument to trump all this. She says that so-called like school comparisons will provide contextual information that obviates the harm of simplistic league tables.

However, like school comparisons are partial league tables and they incur the same problems as full league tables.

They narrow student learning in the same way. They provide the same incentives for schools to rig their results. The lowest ranked schools in each like school group will be pilloried and humiliated. They discourage collaboration and co-operation between schools.

Moreover, the existing models of like-school comparisons used in Australia fail to compare like with like and therefore do not accurately measure school 'value added'. Their problems are multiple.

They do not distinguish the ethnic profile of schools. Performance disparities between schools in one group may reflect differences in ethnic composition rather than differences in school practices. For example, there are large disparities in the average results of Lebanese and Pacific Islander students compared to those of Chinese descent which are obscured by current classifications.

Where like-schools are grouped by a SES index score ranges, as in NSW and WA, there may be larger differences in the SES profile of schools at the higher and lower boundaries of each group than between schools clustered either side of group boundaries. This would vitiate like-school comparisons.

There are flaws in the measures of SES used to determine like-school groups which may create misleading comparisons. For example, the area-based indexes of SES used in NSW and WA do not distinguish between households with and without children at school. Some schools may be classified in a low SES group because there is a large pensioner population in their area, even though families with school-age children may be well-off.

Using individual family data, as in Victoria, is just as problematic because around 40 per cent of families do not state their income or occupation on school enrolment forms. These families are largely concentrated in the lower SES categories. As a result, some schools with a high proportion of low SES families may be incorrectly classified to high SES school groups.

5. Where to Now?

High stakes are involved with the introduction of school performance comparisons and league tables in Australia. A critical blow is being struck against public education which must be resisted. Professor Brian Caldwell, not a noted radical, has urged "agitation on an epic scale" against league tables, calling on teachers and parents to boycott the national tests. It

may come to this. But, if it does, there needs to be a long preparation to make it successful and it cannot be left to teachers alone – parents and other groups need to participate.

Much needs to be done to increase parent and public awareness of the harm done by reporting school results through forums, workshops, leaflets, etc. Politicians need to be lobbied intensively. Alliances need to be developed between teachers, parents and other community organisations at the national, state/territory, regional and school levels to oppose publishing school comparisons.

This is the task at hand for all of us concerned about the future of public education in Australia.