

OPINION

Better report cards needed

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A problematic feature of school education in Australia is that there is a fair amount of choice available to parents, but there is very little information on which to base their choices. When it comes to choosing a school, parents have to rely on reputation and hear-say.

After a visit to Australia last year, American education expert Chester E. Finn Jr remarked that he was "jarred by how little information is available on school performance". He said that the level of secrecy seems "antediluvian and faintly undemocratic".

In a number of speeches and media statements over the past few months, Minister for Education Julia Gillard has taken up the cause of school performance reporting, arguing for a range of information about schools to be made public, including performance in national tests and contextual data, like the socioeconomic status of students.

Although some states, including Victoria, have been publishing school-level results for Year 12 students for a number of years, other states balk at providing such information. Given these differences, implementing national protocols on school performance reporting will be one of the first tests of the much-vaunted "modern federalism" promised by Labor.

The contentious part is whether parents and the wider community should be let in on what the data reveal.

One of the strongest reasons more information about schools should be made public is that it prevents underperforming schools from escaping public scrutiny. There are undoubtedly many schools both public and private which are not doing a good job for their students. Keeping this under wraps does nobody any good.

The public needs to know which schools need to improve so that pressure can be applied to the people responsible. There may be some stigmatisation of such schools in the short term, but experience shows that the end result is invariably positive.

Likewise, school performance reporting identifies successful schools so that their achievements can be celebrated and emulated. Many good schools, especially good public schools, are forced to hide their light under a bushel. These schools miss out on the accolades they deserve, and other schools miss out on the opportunity to learn from them.

The importance of this reform can not be underestimated. School performance reporting is the foundation for effective federalism in education.

In setting out its National Reform Agenda for school education, the Council of Australian Governments emphasises the advantages of federalism for school education, in particular: diversity of policy; the possibility for creativity and experimentation; and the positive effects of competition. Federalism also offers accountability and checks on government power.

Yet each of these benefits of federalism requires that people have information. The benefits of policy diversity are minimal if people do not know which policy is more effective. Creativity and experimentation are only the means to an end, so the end results must be made known. And how can states be competitive if they can't be compared?

It is not enough to publish state-level aggregate results, as occurs now. State-level results can conceal substantial variations in performance and significant inefficiencies. School-level results are necessary to determine how well governments and schools are delivering educational services.

The most commonly raised criticism of school performance reporting is that it will result in the creation of "league tables" of schools, ranking them from "best" to "worst" using raw test results. Such league tables are not especially helpful, but they are not synonymous with school performance reporting, and can be avoided. Parents are not interested in comparing the basic skills test and Year 12 results of every school in the state, they want to compare the schools in their area, using a rich array of information.

It must include academic performance, but also school, student and teacher characteristics. Value-added analysis, which shows the progress made over time, is a critical component of school performance reporting.

The Rudd Government has promised a balance of competitive and collaborative federalism with its state Labor mates, with more cooperation and no "blame-shifting". It sounds good, but judging by the response so far, school performance reporting may already be testing the friendship.

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