

League Tables Increase Social Segregation and Inequity

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Australia's school system has a high degree of social segregation between schools and large inequities in outcomes between students from rich and poor families. These will probably increase following the agreement of Australian Governments, led by the Rudd Government, to introduce national reporting of individual school results.

Under the agreement, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) will publish nationally comparable information on each school's results, teaching staff, financial resources and enrolment profile. It will probably include average test scores in literacy and numeracy, the proportion of students achieving national benchmarks, gains between year levels, retention rates and attainment to Year 12. The information will be used to compare schools with similar student profiles (like-schools) across Australia and schools within regions.

League tables are inevitable

In effect, governments have agreed to league tables of school performance even though the Prime Minister and Minister Gillard have previously dismissed them as "simplistic", "silly" and "dumb". ACARA will publish data that can be used by the media to construct league tables. This is clear from the wording of the new Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians which states that "governments **will not themselves** devise simplistic league tables or rankings". It will be left to others to do so.

This is what happens in England. The UK Government publishes tables of school results in alphabetical order in each region and the media turns them into league tables ranked by performance level (see *The Times* http://www.timesonline.co.uk/parentpower/league_tables.php).

This decision completes the Howard Government's program to develop a national market in school education. Reporting school results and extensive government funding of private schools make choice and competition the fundamental organising features of the Australian school system. The Rudd Government has achieved what David Kemp could only aspire to; Labor's supposed revolution in education is one conceived by Kemp.

Misplaced faith in competition

The Government claims that reporting of school results will promote competition between schools to improve student achievement. Adopting Kemp's metaphor, the Prime Minister says it is designed to encourage parents to 'vote with their feet' so that schools will be more responsive to parents. Julia Gillard says that it will motivate schools to do better.

Their faith in education markets is misplaced. The research evidence that reporting school results and promoting competition between schools increases student achievement is not compelling.

The major studies of so-called 'high-stakes accountability' for school results show no significant gains in student achievement or reduced achievement gaps. For example, a review of research studies published in the *Handbook of Research on Education Finance and Policy* [2008] found small or non-existent gains in reading achievement and slightly larger gains in mathematics. Another recent review by Jaekyung Lee at the State University of New York found that the effects on reading and mathematics achievement

ranged from modestly negative to modestly positive with a small overall average positive effect.

These results may over-estimate the benefits because many studies show that schools respond to test-based accountability by manipulating their results in various ways. They may remove low-achieving students from tests by placing them in special education streams, suspend or encourage them to be absent on test days and retain them in grades not tested. The incidence of teachers helping students during tests or changing answers has been shown to increase following the introduction of reporting school results.

The New York City school reporting system, so admired by Julia Gillard, has encouraged schools to use special dispensations for students during tests to improve their results. Last year's revelations about excessive use of dispensations for the HSC exam by some NSW elite private schools to boost their results is a harbinger of what can be expected here.

A second stream of studies analyse the impact of greater choice and competition between schools on student achievement. The best studies compare the outcomes of students who enter admission lotteries for oversubscribed schools. Recent studies of such schools in Chicago and North Carolina found no impact on average reading and mathematics scores for students winning the lottery.

An extensive review of research studies published last year by the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago concluded that students who exercise choice do not experience achievement gains and that school choice does not induce public schools to improve their performance. Recent research on the impact of greater choice and competition between primary schools in England published by the London School of Economics also shows no effect on the performance of schools or students.

Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago and the co-author of *Freakonomics*, Steven Levitt, says of school choice that "the theory sounds great, but evidence confirming it has been hard to find". The London School of Economics study concluded that "choice and competition does not seem to be generally effective in raising standards".

Competition increases social segregation and inequity

On the other hand, there is extensive evidence that increasing choice and competition between schools tends to increase social segregation between schools which exacerbates achievement gaps between rich and poor students and between black and white students.

A range of studies show that socio-economic and/or racial segregation in schools has increased in Chile, Denmark, England, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the United States over the last decade or so and that choice and competition in schooling has contributed to this. For example, research from the University of Bristol and the Institute of Education at the University of London on English secondary schools has found that social segregation between schools by income and ethnicity is higher where there is greater choice of schools.

Studies published by the US National Bureau of Economic Research found that public school choice tends to increase education stratification rather than a competitive tide that lifts all boats. A review of research studies on US charter schools in the *Handbook of Research on Education Finance and Policy* shows that school choice and competition lead to greater racial segregation between schools.

Many international studies show that social segregation between schools has a "double jeopardy" effect on students from low socio-economic status (SES) and minority families. Their achievement is generally low because of their home circumstances, but when they are also segregated into predominantly low SES or minority schools they fare even worse.

Like-school comparisons are misleading

Julia Gillard argues that like-school comparisons will show which schools are making a difference and help identify good practice. However, 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 and Indian descent which are obscured by current classifications according to language background.

Where like-schools are grouped by 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. Thus, some schools with a high proportion of low SES families may be incorrectly classified to high SES school groups.

There is an alternative

Gillard also justifies reporting school results on the grounds that parents have a right to the information and that it is needed to inform governments on how to better target funding. However, there is no absolute right for information as is recognised for some court hearings, national security issues and Cabinet meeting minutes. Access must be decided on whether the public benefits exceed the public harm. The research evidence shows no significant gains and well-documented negative impacts from reporting school results.

It is nonsense that reporting school results is needed to better allocate resources. Governments already have this information, yet they have long failed to fund schools according to learning need. Reporting school results allows governments and bureaucracy to abrogate their responsibilities by blaming schools and teachers. It is governments who should be held accountable, and for this reporting individual school results is not necessary.

Governments should be held accountable by reporting the number of schools in each state/territory whose average results fall within different score ranges so that the extent of improvement from year to year can be assessed. It should be supplemented by

reporting student performance across regions, as in a recent NSW Auditor-General's report, and by SES and ethnic background to monitor progress in reducing achievement gaps. This should be the focus of future reporting on schools.

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