

I was wrong on league tables for schools

Kevin Donnelly, January 15, 2010

Ranking schools using league tables will not help lift standards, as shown in the US and England.

In 2002 I wrote an opinion piece in *The Age* arguing that schools should be held more accountable by publicly releasing information about results, standards and teacher performance. Drawing on overseas practice in England and the US, I argued that school data be provided by postcode and, instead of league tables, that only schools with a similar socio-economic profile be compared.

Given that the federal Labor Government, and Julia Gillard as Minister for Education, have adopted what I suggested eight years ago, readers would be forgiven for thinking I feel vindicated and that I support the new accountability measure.

Such is not the case. Gillard's rationale behind making school results public, and allowing parents and others to compare schools, is to raise standards and to lift the performance of under-achieving schools.

The track record, in both the US (under the president Bush inspired No Child Left Behind legislation) and England (where school league tables are published on an annual basis) is poor when it comes to new accountability measures raising standards.

In New York, for example, under the stewardship of Joel Klein (an education bureaucrat much admired by Gillard and often cited as somebody to copy) academic results, as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests, have flat-lined.

Such are the concerns in the US about the adverse impact of the types of accountability measures being introduced in Australia that the prestigious Board of Testing and Assessment wrote an open letter to the US Education Secretary (October, 2009) detailing the flaws inherent in testing and using results to evaluate school and teacher performance.

Far from being objective and reliable, the US experts argue that "a test score is an estimate rather than an exact measure of what a person knows and can do". Tests, especially standardised, multiple choice tests, narrow the curriculum, only measure a limited range of knowledge and skills, and take valuable time from what teachers most enjoy – teaching.

The US experts are especially critical of using a "value-add" approach to evaluate school and teacher performance. Value-add is a model that attempts to measure how successful schools are in improving student performance otherwise than what might be expected and it is being promoted by the ALP Government-sponsored Grattan Institute.

In relation to value-add, the US experts state, ". . . a great deal is unknown about the potential and the limitations of alternative statistical models for evaluating teachers' value-added contributions to student learning. BOTA agrees with other experts who have urged the need for caution and for further research prior to any large-scale, high-stakes reliance on these approaches."

In relation to tests lacking validity and reliability, it is important to note that an Australian measurement expert, Dr Wu from the University of Melbourne, late last year expressed misgivings about Australia's National Assessment Program literacy and numeracy tests. NAPLAN measures literacy and numeracy across all Australian schools at years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

Dr Wu's research concludes that the results of the 2009 NAPLAN tests are open to doubt. She states, "with seven out of the 20 subject areas showing aberrant results, it is difficult to have confidence in the overall NAPLAN 2009 results". In relation to increasing testing across Australian schools, Dr Wu argues: "However, valid and reliable assessments are not easily developed. The validity and reliability of a large-scale assessment is under threat from multiple sources including measurement error, sampling error, measurement disturbances and administrative challenges."

The English record in testing and accountability is also open to doubt. Last year's national testing results in England failed to reflect any significant improvement in standards and the consensus is that the Blair education initiatives (such as league tables, naming and shaming schools and regular inspection) have failed to strengthen schools and improve performance.

Last year's inquiry into the primary school curriculum (the Rose report), argues that the emphasis on standardised, external testing be reduced and more attention be given to teachers undertaking more flexible and sensitive ongoing assessment in the classroom.

Some years ago, when former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher suggested that England have a national curriculum, she intended that it to be concise, brief and easy to implement. Once the education bureaucrats and teacher academics became involved it grew into a convoluted and impossible to manage curriculum that overwhelmed and frustrated teachers.

The same can be said with the testing and accountability regime being imposed by Gillard. While schools and teachers need to be accountable and parents have the right to be informed, what is being imposed on Australian classrooms is intrusive, overly bureaucratic and counter-productive.

Government schools, unlike Catholic and independent schools, will be hardest hit as they lack the autonomy and flexibility to recruit and reward staff and to manage their own affairs to best reflect the needs and aspirations of their local communities.

Not only will schools suffer as a result of compliance costs and the adverse impact of testing on the curriculum (where subjects like music, art and physical education will be further devalued), but also the information parents receive will be of limited value.

As teachers and parents well understand, what should be most valued in education is impossible to quantify by using standardised, short answer tests like Australia's NAPLAN.

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