

Filtering white noise out of the education debate:

UK evidence suggests curriculum suffers when teachers are driven by league tables.

John Kaye MP, Jul 15, 2009

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July 14 marked both Bastille Day and day 20 of league table-gate. The longevity of the controversy surrounding the Greens amendment to the NSW Education Act that bans the publication in this state of simplistic comparisons of schools is remarkable by normal media standards. It is particularly extraordinary for a debate where almost everyone claims to agree on the primary premise that league tables are misleading and damaging.

The saga began in late June when the Rees Government was pushing legislation through the NSW Parliament to allow school testing results to be handed over to federal Education Minister Julia Gillard to put on her all-schools website. NSW Minister Verity Firth enthusiastically parroted her federal colleague's enthusiasm for publishing the outcomes, including year three, five, seven and nine literacy and numeracy diagnostic results, known as NAPLAN, and the HSC and school certificate results.

In NSW alone, publication of most school results had been banned after one newspaper in early 1997 savagely defamed an entire class based on its HSC scores. That media outlet subsequently apologised to the students, parents and friends for "all the hurt, harm and suffering it has caused them".

Legislative changes to the ban were consequently required to allow the results to go live on Ms Gillard's website.

The Greens in the NSW Parliament were deeply concerned that once the results for all schools were available in one location it would be a simple matter for any media outlet to harvest the numbers and create simplistic league tables, ranking schools from 'best' to 'worst'.

Good schools serving disadvantaged communities would be unjustly stigmatised. The evidence from the UK was that as teachers were forced to focus on boosting test results for fear of their school slipping down the league table, other curriculum areas would suffer. Dr Ken Boston, formerly director-general of Education in NSW and later the officer in charge of gathering and reporting equivalent schools data in Britain, ascribed the decline in employability skills amongst school leavers in that country to the high stakes placed on the basic skills test.

Further, NAPLAN is a diagnostic tool which was not designed to rank students, let alone schools. Any attempt to compare schools by their basic skills results would be akin to judging GPs by the cholesterol level of their patients.

Our concerns were shared by education experts and students, parents, teachers and principals in both public and private education. The unions representing teachers in each sector were uniquely united in their concern for what this would do for schools, students, communities and education.

The Greens successfully persuaded the Coalition and the other cross-bench members of the Upper House to support our amendment to ban the publication of comparisons of schools based on test results. It passed into law, effectively perpetuating the protection for schools that had operated in this state since 1997.

Nothing in the Greens amendment interferes with the flow of information to Julia Gillard's website. Nothing stops the continued publication of annual reports on each school's website, or even newspapers discussing individual schools based on their results.

In fact, the amendment was initially criticised as being ineffective, given that constitutional limitations stopped the NSW Parliament regulating the internet or inter-state media outlets.

The heat and duration of the subsequent debate seems to challenge the original criticism.

A number of newspaper commentators were incensed at the restriction imposed on their right to report. Indeed, freedom of the press is precious and must be safeguarded but it is not unqualified.

Society imposes a number of restrictions on the media, including prohibitions on naming of minors involved in criminal justice matters, the publication of false and misleading information, defamation and materials that would harm national security. It has long been accepted that the principle of protecting the public good and the interests of the innocent outweighs a libertarian licence to publish all and any information, regardless of the harm it might do.

That principle certainly applies to simplistic school league tables. Julia Gillard and Verity Firth both warn against the damage done by crude comparisons, as does the 'Principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia', agreed to by the federal and all state and territory education ministers in June of this year.

The debate is now being sustained by a vigorous bout of cheap political point-scoring for which NSW is so justly infamous. Without regard to the impact it is having on the debate, Premier Nathan Rees and his Education Minister Verity Firth continue to imply that the Greens amendment interferes with transparency. By muddying the waters, the NSW Government is trying to wedge the Opposition.

The Rees Government also regularly trots out the guidelines, saying there is nothing to fear. They omit to mention that the guidelines bind governments, not the media who are free to use the data as they see fit, except, of course, in NSW.

To keep the story running, Mr Rees promised to introduce legislation to overturn the Greens amendment in September when parliament next sits in September. With words like giving the Opposition "a second chance to fully back the NSW Government's transparency agenda" Verity Firth is deliberately creating confusion.

She is also putting the reputations of excellent schools and the quality of schooling on the line in order to win a few points.

The next 10 weeks will be critical in the debate over the future of school information. State and federal governments are pushing into dangerous territory, already disastrously explored in the UK.

It is time for Australia to strike out in a new direction.

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