

# The case against league tables

**Glenn Rowley** explains why nationally comparable data about school performances should be reported to the public, but should not be used to create league tables.



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ACER was recently asked to provide advice to the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) on national schools data collection and reporting for school evaluation, accountability and resource allocation.

The resulting paper, *Reporting and Comparing School Performances*, written by Geoff Masters, John Ainley, Siek Toon Khoo and I advised that comparable data should be collected about schools' student backgrounds, student outcomes, numbers and qualifications of teachers, sources of funding and amounts of fees paid by parents.

We recommended that education authorities and governments use this data to monitor school performances and to identify schools that are performing unusually well or unusually poorly given their circumstances.

We also advised that this data should be reported publicly, so that parents and the public can make informed judgements about, and meaningful comparisons of, schools.

Parents need a wide range of detailed information about schools' outcomes so they can choose the right school for their children, and educators need information about outcomes for effective school management – but schools work to promote many different kinds of outcomes for their students.

Simple comparisons of schools, such as league tables, ignore this broader context by restricting the range of information that can be provided. League tables also encourage 'rank order' interpretations that have been damaging to schools and students in the past, and focus attention on some aspects of schooling at the expense of other outcomes that are as important but not as easily measurable.

The tabular format requires that exactly the same measures be provided for every school, even though the schools may perform very different roles.

Reporting is not simply a matter of gathering the maximum possible information and putting it into the public domain. We must consider who will use and benefit from information

about schools, and the best ways to measure and deliver that information.

League tables are not the best way to measure and deliver that information. It is popular in some parts of the world to adjust data to fit 'measures' of school performance and to report these measures publicly in league tables – but there are very sound technical and educational reasons why school measures of this kind should not be used for public reporting and school comparisons.

Simple comparisons of student outcomes can be made between any schools, or between individual schools and state or national averages. Comparisons of this kind, however, take no account of the different circumstances and challenges faced by different schools. In consultations with teachers and administrators from primary and secondary schools in Victoria, conducted as part of the 2007 development of the Victorian Department's Blueprint, researchers David Downes and Oanh Vindurampulle reported a widely-held view among school staff that it is inappropriate to make simple comparisons of outcomes for schools in very different circumstances.

Based on our advice, MCEETYA has stated that while it aims to develop a school transparency agenda, 'Ministers agreed that these reforms were not about simplistic league tables which rank schools according to raw test scores.'

Instead, following our advice, MCEETYA will facilitate comparisons of 'like' schools to allow parents, the public and education systems to compare outcomes for schools in similar circumstances.

Because the circumstances under which schools work vary so widely across Australia, a challenge under any approach to reporting school performance is to ensure that outcomes in a school are compared with outcomes in schools in similar circumstances. For example, remote Indigenous schools with high

proportions of students who do not speak English as their first language perhaps should be compared only with similarly remote schools working in similar circumstances. The number of such schools may be relatively small.

Characteristics that have been shown to be correlated with student outcomes include students' socioeconomic background, and parents' occupation and level of education; the geographic location of the school; and the percentage of students within the school from Indigenous backgrounds, from non-English speaking backgrounds, and with special education needs.

If schools are to be compared, and particularly if they are to be compared publicly, then it is important that the different circumstances and the different challenges they face are taken into consideration. A 'like-schools' methodology is the best way to do this, and we prefer an approach that is not based entirely on predefined categories of schools but that compares each school with the schools most similar to it.

Comparing only like schools would also allow measures of school performance to be reported without adjustment. We believe that data reported publicly should be factual data about a school, and not the results of secondary analyses and interpretations that are open to debate.

Announcing a new framework for publication of comparable information about school performance based on our advice, a recent MCEETYA communiqué stated that:

*From 2009 the new Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) will be responsible for publishing relevant, nationally comparable information on all schools. This will include publication of the 2008 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data and associated contextual information.*

*The information available will enable comparison of each school with other schools serving similar student populations around the nation and with the best-performing school in each cohort of 'like schools'.*

*It will also support accountability, school evaluation, collaborative policy development and resource allocation. These same transparency and accountability requirements will apply to both government and non-government schools.*

Through better monitoring of performance at the student, school and system level, educational outcomes can be lifted across all schools.

These reforms to the reporting of school performance are important because they recognise that changes over time in the outcomes being achieved by a school do not necessarily reflect changes in the school's performance; they may simply reflect changes in the student population. And there is some evidence that changes in the student population can be a direct consequence of publishing school outcome data, as more affluent parents withdraw their children from schools with poorer outcomes.

Vigilance is required to ensure that the public reporting of data does not have negative and unintended consequences for schools, such as from the reporting of the socio-economic backgrounds of students in a school, or of the financial circumstances of struggling, small schools.

Overall, however, if information is presented in a way that does not encourage ranking, almost all data could be reported publicly.

The full report, *Reporting and Comparing School Performances*, by ACER researchers Geoff Masters, Glenn Rowley, John Ainley and Siek Toon Khoo, is available for download from <[http://research.acer.edu.au/ar\\_misc/8/](http://research.acer.edu.au/ar_misc/8/)> ■