



LIES, DAMNED LIES AND LEAGUE TABLES

‘Despite warning the public that there are many other factors involved in answering the question, “Is this school right for my child?” the (Western Australian) Curriculum Council finds that there is still considerable interest in these statistical tables.’ That’s the disclaimer preceding the WA Curriculum Council’s ‘league table,’ published in January, of the ‘first 50 schools’ in WA ranked on the percentage of full-time students who studied four or more Tertiary Entrance Exam subjects for the Western Australian Certificate of Education scored a scaled mark of more than 75 per cent in at least one of these subjects. As Bethany Hyatt reported in the *West Australian*, Rossmoyne Senior High was the only state school in the ‘top 10,’ while six state schools made the ‘top 20.’ These league tables have a way of obscuring the fact that ‘there are many other factors involved in answering the question, “Is this school right for my child?”’ beneath the simple idea of ‘the top schools.’ That led Christ Church Grammar School principal Garth Wynne to describe the tables as ‘shallow and unhelpful’ in a letter to the *West Australian*. ‘The measures used fail to take into account the particular circumstances of individual schools and their communities and are completely unrepresentative of much of what is truly important in education,’ Wynne wrote. For what it’s worth, Christ Church Grammar School was in the first 10 of the WA Curriculum Council’s ‘first 50 schools.’

WIN-WIN

Until December, Melbourne’s St Michael’s Grammar School in St Kilda, with 1,200 students, had no onsite venue for concerts, speech nights or major productions, and had to hire external venues instead, so when the Astor Cinema, a mere block down Chapel Street, came on the market the school bought

it – for \$3.8 million. With 1,100 seats, ‘The Astor has the potential to house an exciting mix of educational and entertainment options close to our main campus,’ says St Michael’s head Simon Gipson. Students will use the cinema by day, while the Astor will continue its screenings of independent films at night. ‘Our purchase provides us with a wonderful opportunity to responsibly protect an important part of St Kilda’s heritage by restoring key elements of the Astor to their former glory,’ Gipson says.

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According the 2008 Quality Counts report on education in the United States produced by *Education Week* with support from the Pew Centre on the States, ‘Teaching matters more to student learning than any other school-related factor.’ Called *Tapping into Teaching* and curiously subtitled *Unlocking the key to student success* – unlocking the key? – the report has found that most US states have tightened up teacher registration, requiring prospective teachers to have a major in the subjects they to teach, and to pass basic-skills and subject-matter tests. The weak spot, according to the report, is in ‘quality control’ over teacher-preparation programs. Most states merely use state licensing exam results as a proxy to rate teacher-preparation programs while a minority actually hold teacher-preparation programs accountable for the performance of their graduates in the classroom. Rigorous evaluation of teachers’ on-the-job performance is a second weak spot. ‘While 43 states require all teachers to be formally evaluated, only 26 require formal training for those who do the evaluations, only 12 require that those evaluations occur at least annually, and 12 base teachers’ evaluations at least partly on the achievement of their students.’ The report ranks states on a range of measures besides teacher quality, incentives and capacity building, including stu-

dent achievement; standards, assessment and accountability; and transitions between and alignment with other education providers before Kindergarten and after Year 12. New York topped the 2008 league table with a B rating and score of 84.9 per cent. Near neighbour Washington DC came in last with a D+ rating and score of 68.1 per cent.

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As Grapevine reported in December, New York’s Khalil Gibran International Academy removed its founding principal, Debbie Almontaser, after she failed to condemn students wearing T-shirts with the slogan ‘Intifada NYC’ – ‘intifada’ being the Arabic term for the Palestinian uprising against Israel. Almontaser was replaced by Holly Anne Reichert in January. At a news conference to announce her appointment, Reichert declined to comment on the events surrounding the removal of Almontaser, but in a telephone interview later with the *New York Times*’s Elissa Gootman, she did comment on the word ‘intifada.’ ‘It’s a word that connotes tremendous violent conflict, and I don’t think it should be used casually, as on a T-shirt,’ she said. Khalil Gibran International Academy began life in controversy even before it opened in September, with critics saying a ‘madrassa’ did not belong in a public school system. The *New York Post*’s Yoav Gonen stepped up the controversy in August in an article headlined ‘“Intifada” principal.’ The *New York Post* followed that up with an Editorial – headlined ‘What’s Arabic for “Shut it down”?’ – that described Almontaser as an ‘intifada-apologist principal,’ and suggested the NYC Education Department ‘would do well to deep-six the school’ – as in bury it six feet under.

This month’s Grapevine is by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher.