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SCHOOL LEAGUE TABLES

A short guide for head teachers and governors

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INTRODUCTION

Education is swimming in data, and trying to make sense of these data can be a difficult task. League tables have been popular with governments, the media and the public because they seem to be an easy way of showing which schools are working well, compared to others. But something suitable for Premiership football is not necessarily fit for judging complicated organisations such as schools.

I've been studying league tables and the numbers behind them since they were introduced in England 20 years ago. Unfortunately it's not that straightforward to get at the true underlying relationship between the quality of what schools provide and the results of tests and examinations.

League tables look useful as they seem to help identify schools that may be poorly performing. Shame at coming low down in the pecking order is seen as a way of giving schools an incentive to 'pull their socks up'. They also appear to provide parents with useful information to assist them in choosing a school to send their children to. But they are often crude one-dimensional summaries and can have perverse side-effects that cause more harm than good. We need to take a lot of care, both in compiling and in interpreting league tables: otherwise parents can be left with a misleading impression, and teachers can become dismayed at seeing their efforts misunderstood and downgraded.

This guide, based on a report I produced for the British Academy with Beth Foley last year (*Measuring Success: League tables in the public sector*), summarises what the existing evidence tells us about some of the problems associated with their use so far as schools are concerned.

6 IMPORTANT POINTS TO CONSIDER

1

We don't have a great deal of evidence of how they are used or their effects on schools over the longer term. If schools and governors focus on the one aspect of schools that gets them ahead in the tables, then performance on those tables may well improve. But is this to the neglect of other qualities – exam results to the neglect of good teaching, the happiness and welfare of pupils or a school's place in the community – or heads only putting certain pupils in for certain exams, to maximise chances of success or taking low achievers out of test results altogether?

2

We have to beware missing critical factors, the biggest of which is the background children bring to any particular school with them, negative and positive. Tables apparently showing a school high up the charts may just tell us a school takes in well-motivated and able pupils. Even the 'value-added' tables that are now produced which do take into account some of the pupils' backgrounds may not give us a reliable picture of school life, because they average over all pupils and may hide some pupils consistently doing well, others doing worse.

3

Someone must always come in the relegation zone, even if their standards have been rising and they may be doing a decent job.

4

Often tables are based on results of a small group of pupils. The average primary school year group in the UK is just 40, which in itself makes the findings unreliable.

5

Secondary school league tables are always out of date, which limits the extent to which they can be used as a guide to future performance – the key issue for parents. For secondary schools, results refer to the performance of students who began secondary schooling several years earlier and are based on pupils' work over the several years they have been at the school, during which it may have changed a lot: heads and teachers may have come and gone, the area may have changed, pupils may have attended different schools and so on. This limits the extent to which current school performance can be used as a guide to future performance. Recent research we have carried out in Bristol shows that such changes over time are so large that future predictions become very uncertain and practically useless for school choice. Tables at best tell us something about how a school has been faring. But, as they say in the advertisements for bonds and investments, past performance does not guarantee future results. Parents can't rely on them as an indicator for what will happen with their own child.

6

There is evidence that schools engage in 'gaming' to improve their ranking. Pressure on teachers to meet performance targets and maximise league table rankings can lead to 'gaming' to improve their position, sometimes at the expense of particular kinds of pupils. For example, schools only putting certain pupils in for certain exams, to maximise chances of success or taking low achievers out of test results altogether.

CONCLUSIONS

League tables certainly affect behaviour. In some cases this may be for the good, but not universally. There are grounds for worrying that a concentration on league tables may be harmful and distort what heads, teachers and governors are doing, let alone pupils.

Different parts of the UK have taken varying approaches to league tables for their schools. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have taken the decision not to publish school performance indicators because of some of the drawbacks outlined above. It's unlikely, however, that in England the government is going to stop using them.

In *'Measuring Success'*, we conclude that league tables should always come with a large 'health warning'. Publishing league tables can be harmful if not published with caveats and qualifications (although those will often get ignored).

THE ROLE OF HEAD TEACHERS AND GOVERNORS

The use of league tables poses a challenge to head teachers and governors, to push back against simplistic and mistaken interpretations of data and league table position. People don't always treat statistics with care, and school heads and governors may be thrust into the front line of explaining just how far they can be trusted. Sometimes heads and governors may need to say out loud: these tables are wrong. The data behind them is too imprecise, the uncertainty too large and the potential for bias too great.

This does not mean that we shouldn't try to measure school performance or stop debate about a school and how it might be improved. In seeking to assess school performance, parents and other stakeholders can be drawn into a more subtle and better-informed conversation about what improvement amounts to, and how it can be secured.



Further information on the issues outlined above is included in the report, *'Measuring Success: League tables in the public sector'*, which is available to download from www.britac.ac.uk/policy/Measuring-success.cfm

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