



LEAGUE TABLES

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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What are League Tables?

League tables are commonly created using student results in standardised tests. Schools are ranked according to their students' results with the highest scoring at the top and the lowest scoring at the bottom. An alternate way is to list all schools test results in alphabetical order and then to create mini tables featuring the "top schools" and the "bottom schools".

Why Do Parents, Teachers and Principals Oppose League Tables?

There are many reasons why parents and educators strongly oppose league tables. Firstly it is a crude and invalid measure of a school's performance to publicly rank it according to the results of a limited number of students in a limited number of subjects when there are such a vast number of factors that affect educational outcomes. Not only is it an invalid use of test data but the effect of being lowly ranked in a league table can be devastating for students, teachers and local communities.

Naming and shaming schools in league tables makes it harder for schools in disadvantaged areas to improve and it makes it harder to recruit and retain teachers and students. Research shows that league tables create greater inequality and increase segregation as a result of shifts in enrolment patterns.

There is no evidence that the introduction of league tables has improved educational outcomes anywhere in the world. To the contrary all the evidence shows it has a detrimental effect on schooling. The damage to curriculum provision, students and entire school communities caused by league tables is well-documented in international research.

Teachers are placed under more pressure to teach to the test, the curriculum focus narrows and students receive a less well-rounded education. Untested subjects such as science, history, social studies, languages, arts and music, physical education and health receive much less time.

Why is There Concern Now About League Tables in Australia?

The introduction of national testing in Australia last year has seen for the first time the collection of student results in standardised national tests undertaken by years 3, 5, 7 and 9 students in literacy and numeracy. Already this data has been released by the QLD and Tasmanian governments in a way that has allowed newspapers to create league tables.

The Education Minister Julia Gillard has instructed the newly established Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to create a national website which will feature the national literacy and numeracy results along with Year 12 results of every school in the country. There will also be data on enrolments, teacher qualifications and attendance and school funding. The website will also allow visitors to compare individual schools with other "like schools" and other schools in a local area. (What a like school is and what a local area is are not yet clear).

If the data that is made available on the Federal Government's website is not protected it can be harvested by organizations looking to profit from league tables and reproduced in a crude form with schools ranked according to their test results.

What Does Julia Gillard Say About League Tables?

Julia Gillard has said repeatedly she opposes simplistic league tables:

“I understand some of your concerns about the misuse of school performance data. I understand that league tables based on raw test scores can create a misleading picture and make the jobs of principals and teachers that much harder. We are working with State and Territory Education Ministers to ensure that the side effects of a new transparency framework are not negative ones.” (Speech to Public Education Forum March 27, 2009)

“I want to emphasise that these will not lead to the creation of dumb league tables that tell us little but to smart reports that show us how well each school is meeting agreed standards compared to schools with similar enrolments and challenges.” (ISCA Parliamentary Forum, 1 September 2008)

But so far she has failed to take any steps to protect the data that will be housed on her new national website so that league tables will not be created.

In fact she has criticized new laws in NSW which would prevent the publication in newspapers of league tables. (Daily Telegraph 8/9/09)

What the Experts Say

“We could do grave harm to our education profession. Who wants to work in schools where there is an oppressive regime of invalid public reporting of school performance and where curriculum priorities are distorted with excessive amounts of time spent on practising for tests?”
Professor Brian Caldwell, Former Dean of Education at the University of Melbourne

“Trying to even up the life chances for the disadvantaged is the greatest challenge for education systems. The available evidence, however, does not support the view that it can be met through the transparency of report cards or league tables or through unfettered choice. These tools simply help the advantaged to make even more strategic choices.” **Peter Mortimore, Former director of the Institute of Education, University of London**

“In the absence of contextual information the league table becomes a proxy for all other information, which is inferred. This school has good results: it must be well-led, the teachers must be great, it must be well-funded, discipline must be good, the pupils will be the sort of kids I’d like my child to have as friends. But this other school has bad results; its leadership and teachers must be poor; it is obviously run-down; my child would not be happy there.” **Dr Ken Boston, Former NSW Director General of Education and former CEO of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in Britain.**

“It is not the tests themselves so much as the high stakes attached to them, the archaic methods of delivery and marking and the multitude of invalid uses to which the results are put. In all but those [British] schools principled enough to resist the pressure on them, the primary school curriculum has become a dry husk. The teaching program focuses on what is to be tested and on practising for the tests, because the future of the school (not that of your son or daughter) is dependent upon the result.” **Ken Boston again.**

“It can be damaging if people make unfair comparisons (between schools).” **Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority chair Barry McGaw.**

“In many cases, people assume very small differences between schools are significant and they're not -- there's a danger of over-relying on one type of data rather than a complete profile. Schools have different strengths and do different things for students, and this should come through.” **Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority chief executive Peter Hill.**

“Being listed like that really destroys the confidence of the kids, the teachers and the parents. We had to go to a great deal of trouble to explain we were being judged simply on one measure, and it wasn't a true measure of the quality of the education we were providing. I think we had a slight decrease in enrolments, but because we worked very hard to counteract the information, it wasn't as bad as it could have been. But the community was devastated.” **Former Principal of Melton High in Victoria Peter Hendrickson on his school being publicly ranked as one of the worst in the state.**

A 2008 OECD report on school reporting found that “the consequences for the individual school are often negative”, “the construction of league tables favours schools that are already advantaged” and “most head teachers disapproved of the great competitive pressure open enrolment and league tables had produced, and considered the strong market orientation as educational misconceived, even harmful”. The paper also describes the vicious cycle forced on schools serving disadvantaged communities of “...bad reputation, worsening school atmosphere, decreasing identification of the pupils with their school, decreasing number of pupils, reduction of resources, decreasing job satisfaction and motivation among staff, lack of applications of well-qualified teachers for this school, worse quality of lessons, decreasing pupil achievement, worse results in the league tables.” (**Improving School Leadership, OECD, August 2008**)

“Nevertheless an inevitable result of comparisons among schools, whether by publication of crude league tables or more sophisticated ‘value added’ ones as in Tennessee is that there will always be winners and losers. Once the losers are deemed to be ‘failing’ it is difficult to find ways to help them when the prevailing atmosphere is one of recrimination, and retribution.” (**Kate Myers and Harvey Goldstein, Failing Schools in a Failing System**)