



FASTFACTS



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Publishing Provincial Standards Test Results Who Really Benefits?

A recent CBC story has again raised the issue of whether or not we should be releasing the results of provincial school standards tests. The CBC notes that some parents are requesting test results to help them to choose their children's schools.

Provincial Conservative leader Hugh McFadyen has called for reinstatement of the policy to publish provincial test results. Limited publishing of results occurred under the Filmon government in 1997 & 1998. The practice was abolished when the NDP took office in 1999.

But the debate around standards tests takes us down a road that has little to do with the quality of education. As with many public policy debates, there are myths that should be challenged when considering the value of publishing school standards test results.

The first myth is that teachers are against testing. This is not true. Teachers assess their students all the time. For teachers, testing is an important tool. But to be useful, test results must provide teachers with information that can help them shape both their classroom program and their response to individual student needs. The information provided by standards tests alone is too limited to be instructive.

A second myth is that publishing the results of standards tests leads to improvements in education. Some parents may feel there is benefit in knowing the test results of different schools. But these results, in isolation, don't really tell us anything useful.

Complex socio-economic factors contribute to test scores and therefore the results are not a reflection of how well teachers teach, how well students are performing, or how well a school is functioning.

Systemic improvements in education depend on the *quality* of assessments and the action that results from them.

The Political Agenda

A policy paper published by the Fraser Institute, *Can the Market Save Our Schools?* reveals that the real agenda behind publishing the results of standards tests, and using the results to rank schools as to their supposed success, is political. The Fraser Institute argues that the marketplace can do a better job of running our public schools. Their agenda is to discredit public schools and open them up to the marketplace. Ranking schools, they believe, will provide them with the ammunition they need to do that because it creates a system of 'winners and losers.' The 'losers' discredit the public school system, and that presents the marketplace as the only tool that can 'save our schools.'

In *Can the Market Save our Schools*, the Fraser Institute aims to demonstrate that ranking schools shows that market-based models are superior to public education. They provide glowing references to American private-school initiatives like charter schools and voucher schools. What they don't tell us is that these market-based schools lost steam after the largest U.S. government-commissioned study of student math



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scores in grades four and eight found that charter schools do no better than public schools, and private schools do worse.

What Ranking Schools Doesn't Tell Us

Aside from the ideological motivations behind publishing the results of standards tests, ranking schools on the basis of one province-wide test is meaningless. Many factors contribute to test results. The most important, as shown by decades of social science research, are the socio-economic conditions of neighborhoods and students, which is by far the most accurate predictor of how schools will perform. Also important are: the number of children with special needs; the number of students identified as 'at risk; class size; and the percentage of immigrant students for whom English is not the first language. These factors, much more than the quality of education being offered, will determine the results of a province-wide standards test.

Consider an example from British Columbia. Earlier this year, Roosevelt Park School in Prince Rupert had the distinction of being tied for last place out of 1006 elementary schools in B.C. The parents, teachers and students were 'losers' by the Fraser Institute rankings.

But 71 per cent of kids entering kindergarten there are "at-risk." Many students suffer from fetal alcohol syndrome. Some classes have up to eight or nine special needs children and 40 per cent of the 200 students at Roosevelt Park are in government care.

Roosevelt Park School is not the problem. Rather, it is dealing with the problems.

'Indicators of success' for Roosevelt Park School cannot be defined in the same way as for a school in an affluent community. In fact, Roosevelt Park is admired for programs that change students' lives—it has piloted everything from a suicide prevention program to an innovative literacy initiative to a program on basic parenting. Many people come to Roosevelt Park to observe the wonderful things that happen there day after day. With this knowledge, another picture emerges—that of a dedicated community and a group of educators who care enough to help students make the most of their natural abilities, despite challenges.

There are many other examples of schools that are performing extremely well in spite of similar challenges. Many inner city schools in Winnipeg are making positive strides in spite of the effects of poverty, inadequate

housing, and colonization that is the daily experience of many of their students.

These important successes are not likely to be reflected in standards assessments. Yet proponents like the Fraser Institute continue to defend the use of this method, and this method alone, to rank schools. They say that this will allow governments to determine which schools need help.

But the truth is, we don't need test results to tell us which schools need more help. We need only ask school trustees, superintendents, principals, teachers and parents. Identifying schools and needs is the easy part; getting the resources to do what is required is the hard part.

The objective of education policy should be to strive for excellence in our public education system for the benefit of all children, rich and poor. Publishing the results of standards tests and ranking schools accordingly, won't do this. If it did during the 1990's, when the Filmon Government published test results, we would have seen massive investments to 'underperforming' public schools, especially those in poor neighbourhoods. But we did not. The Filmon government increased funding to private schools, decreased public school funding and laid off teachers.

- Shauna MacKinnon

Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba. This piece first appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on Sunday September 24th, 2006

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