

## Press Release

### School League Tables: Do they make the grade?

School League Tables have been a feature of the English education system since 1992. Whilst many bemoan their existence, the government has made it clear that they are here to stay, in England at least. Statistics on school performance can and should be used to inform school choice and improve accountability and school performance. But they need to be the right statistics presented in a useful, robust and informative way.

A series of papers, published today in a special issue of *Fiscal Studies* on measuring school effectiveness, highlight some of the key issues that policymakers must consider. The authors argue that the following are crucial components of any school accountability system:

1. Simple, understandable measures that assess what the school is doing rather than the social background of parents and/or prior ability of students;
2. Incentives for schools to add value to *all* of their students, regardless of background or prior ability;
3. Encourage schools to offer a curriculum and adopt practices which suit the needs of *all* its students and discourages gaming of the system;
4. Measures teacher effectiveness within schools as well as overall school effectiveness.

Coming up with measures that are transparent, understandable and actually measure what a school is doing is very difficult. But the government's acceptance of the conclusions of the recent Wolf Review of Vocational Education – urging greater transparency in the information provided on pupils' achievement in school and, in particular, more focus on how lower-achieving pupils perform in schools – suggest that such changes are at the top of the policy agenda. So the information provided to parents is going to change going forward.

#### The papers in the special edition argue:

- 1) School performance measures need to measure outcomes over which schools can reasonably have influence; that ensure schools add value to all pupils and not just marginal pupils; and that don't encourage gaming either via cheating or encouraging students to take certain courses which enhance league tables.
  - Ali Muriel and Jeff Smith argue strongly that school performance measures can play a positive role in improving the education system, but that other institutional changes are needed to get the best out of such measures. In their view, under the current

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systems in both England and the US, teachers and principals are too often held accountable for outcomes over which they have little control. The result, predictably, is the level of conflict, frustration and 'gaming' of the performance measures observed in both countries. They argue that giving educators greater flexibility in a number of areas – including the recruitment, retention and remuneration of teaching staff – would offer schools a powerful (and positive) channel through which to respond to performance measures.

- 2) Some measures of school performance such as Contextualised Value Added (CVA) – which attempts to take into account pupil characteristics that we might expect to affect educational attainment, such as whether they have special educational needs or are eligible for free school meals – suffer from a number of serious problems which makes using these measures problematic.
  - George Leckie and Harvey Goldstein outline a number of statistical problems with school league tables (particularly CVA measures) including lack of stability in the measures and absence of statistical significance of differences in observed measures of school effectiveness. These statistical difficulties make it hard for parents to choose schools sensibly on the basis of league table information. But they do not prevent policymakers from using these data to hold schools accountable for their past performance.
  - In a similar vein, Lorraine Dearden, Alfonso Miranda and Sophia Rabe-Hesketh examine whether there are systematic biases in contextualised value added measures because of missing information in school administrative data used to estimate the value added by schools. They find that by not taking into account crucial outside influences on a child's educational outcomes (in particular mother's education) there are significant systematic biases in school CVA measures for the vast majority of schools. Schools with children with a high proportion of well educated mothers get significantly inflated CVA scores and those for whom the opposite is true get unfairly penalised.
  - On the other hand, Rebecca Allen and Simon Burgess in their article focus on whether school league tables are fit for purpose: whether they do help parents find the school in which their child will do best academically. They show that basing decisions on school league tables is much better than an uninformed choice, despite the limitations with league tables. They also show that school league table information is most likely to be helpful where there are big differences in school performance amongst local schools.
- 3) Between 25% and 40% of schools are differentially effective across the prior ability distribution, that is are either good for students with

low ability but not high ability or vice versa. Having only a single measure of school performance is therefore often misleading.

- Dearden, Micklewright and Vignoles argue that parents and policymakers should use information on differential effectiveness within schools. Both they and Allen and Burgess propose ways of ensuring that this differential effectiveness in secondary schools is adequately recognised. These conclusions chime with those of the recent Wolf Review.
- 4) Focusing purely on school quality is only part of the story – there is increasing evidence that it is teacher quality rather than overall school quality that is the most important determinant of pupil academic achievement.
- Herb Marsh, Benjamin Nagengast, John Fletcher and Ioulia Televantou pursue this theme in their paper, suggesting that the proportion of the variation in pupil outcomes that can be explained by institutions, such as schools or universities, is not great and that more of the variation in outcomes is explained by differences across teachers within schools or universities.

The government has recently announced changes to School League Tables that take some of the findings from these papers forward, such as publishing school effectiveness by prior attainment (low, middle and high) and abandoning CVA measures. Lorraine Dearden, one of the guest editors of the special edition and author of two of the papers said: “This change in approach is to be commended as it involves reporting outcomes which everybody understands but also takes into account pre-existing differences between students. This is informative for parents and will help to better ensure schools have incentives to improve the academic outcomes of students right across the ability distribution.”

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Notes to Editors:

1. This special edition of the journal *Fiscal Studies* will be published by Wiley on Monday 15 August:  
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/%28ISSN%291475-5890/issues>

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2. All the papers contained in this special issue of *Fiscal Studies* were presented at a School Effectiveness conference which was held in conjunction with the ESRC Research Methods Festival held in Oxford in July 2010. Funding for the conference was provided by the ESRC's National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and the conference was organised by three ESRC funded centres: Cemmap (based at the IFS and UCL); the NCRM ADMIN Node (based at the Institute of Education) and the NCRM LEMMA Node (based at the University of Bristol).