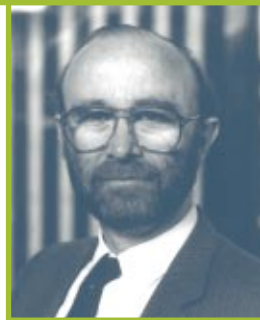


## How good are our schools?

Michael Irwin

**Choosing a school is one of the most important things parents can do for their children. Yet what Australian academic Ken Gannicott recently said of Australians is true also for us: “parents have more information and more rights when they buy a packet of soap than when they choose a school for their child” (*Policy*, Spring 1998).**



**W**e have consumer protection laws, and consumer organisations provide information and comparative data on all sorts of goods and services from cars to computers and from shares to sewing machines. But, although there is widespread agreement that parents need more school information, suggestions that there should be regular comparative data on pupil achievement are regularly met with howls of outrage.

In its Green Paper on assessment, the government clearly seeks to avoid any such reaction. Its principal proposal is that primary children should be assessed in several aspects of English and maths, but the procedures proposed seem designed to make comparisons of schools very difficult. Test items are to be culturally appropriate, which would exclude comparisons across cultures. Data would be provided in various ranges; there would be no readily interpretable scores for literacy and numeracy. The Paper specifically excludes the publication of ‘league tables’ ranking schools in terms of pupil performance. Moreover, it is not clear how this testing and the other proposals would raise pupil performance.

In spite of its cautious, obfuscating approach, the reaction to the Green Paper was mostly negative. I have seen only two media items, one by a former teacher and one by a parent, which supported national assessment. However several education academics, teacher union spokespeople and various school principals have opposed it. Nothing surprising here: parents’ interests and perspectives are different from those of education providers and regulators.

I agree with some of the criticism, especially that the benefits of the government’s proposals are unlikely to exceed the costs. In making the system complex the government both raises the compliance and data collection costs and reduces the benefits because the information obtained is less useful. The government says that it has shifted its focus of attention from inputs to outcomes, yet it refuses to contemplate the measurement of outcomes except in a complex, convoluted way. This inconsistency and lack of resolve are likely to lead to a costly non-event in terms of useful information and to further erosion of valuable teaching time.

But one particular criticism of national assessment and inter-school comparisons is, in my view, misdirected. It is that, since children’s performance is strongly influenced by home background, it is unfair on schools to compare their results: Auckland Grammar is always going to do better than Struggletown College simply because of their very different pupil intakes. This leads to the proposal that what we should be concerned about is the ‘value added’ by schools (i.e. pupils’ educational gains) and not their raw test scores (i.e. the scores unadjusted by differences in pupil characteristics). Employing the value-added approach, Struggletown College may be found

to be doing just as well as, perhaps better than, Auckland Grammar.

The basic response to 'value-added' is that parents want to know the actual levels attained by their children; they will not be much comforted by an assurance that a school is achieving high value-added if its pupils remain illiterate and innumerate.

Similarly policy-makers should be concerned that all children achieve at least adequate standards irrespective of background and starting point. A value-added approach would neither answer the policy question, "Are all children performing to a satisfactory level?", nor the concerned parent's question, "Is my child achieving at the expected level for her age?"

Value-added could be useful as a research tool, for example in identifying the factors which lead some schools to be more effective than others after allowing for different pupil characteristics. But as a policy instrument it may, as Gannicott notes, simply reinforce low expectations of schools in poorer areas. In fact it could increase educational disadvantage by providing excuses for pupils and schools not to try as hard as they could.

The government's recently announced intention to make sure all children can read, write and do maths by the age of 9 is, in principle, excellent. But it needs to be supported by a process that accurately measures whether children achieve the required levels. In its submission on the Green Paper, the Education Forum has advanced a simpler and more coherent strategy and one that meets this particular requirement.

The focus of the Forum's submission is on enabling all children to meet a high threshold of literacy and numeracy by age 10 irrespective of their starting points. The present vague maths and English curricula would be rewritten to establish clearly the content and expected levels of achievement. All 10-year-olds would take externally set and marked tests under standardised conditions based on the rewritten maths

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and English curricula. The results would be published and indicate the percentage of children nationally and by school achieving the required levels. Tests at other ages could be set but would be voluntary. Schools in difficulty could be considered for additional assistance.

I support these proposals. The focus is not on comparing schools but on improving students' learning by providing a clear incentive to bring all children at least up to a threshold level in the two essential 'languages' of English and maths and on assisting schools facing problems. External setting and marking of tests and standardised conditions would provide clear information and limit potential for cheating and loss of teaching time. Other proposals in the Green Paper would then fall into place: exemplar material would help to clarify the required levels, and the existing national monitoring project could be redesigned to track the effects of the drive for literacy and numeracy.

I hope the government grasps the nettle. Too many children are slipping between the cracks and missing out on education and life chances. Parents, teachers and children deserve better than the culturally appropriate tests and obscure range statements presently proposed.

**At the time of writing, Michael Irwin was a policy analyst for the New Zealand Business Roundtable specialising in education issues.**

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