

Institutes at odds over methodology: C.D. Howe says Fraser disregarded socioeconomic factors
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A new study comparing school performance in Ottawa and across Ontario has triggered a fight between two major Canadian think-tanks.

School ratings released yesterday by the C.D. Howe Institute directly challenge the recently released Fraser Institute rankings of Ontario schools.

"If you're going to do statistical analysis on important policy issues, you've got to do it right," said David Johnson, the Wilfrid Laurier University economics professor who created the new rankings for C.D. Howe.

The study ranked 3,300 publicly funded elementary schools in Ontario from best to worst.

"Unlike other measures of school performance," the institute said, in a thinly veiled reference to the Fraser numbers, "the ground-breaking study adjusts for the socioeconomic environment of the school, such as whether the students are drawn from better-educated, better-off families, or the reverse."

Mr. Johnson pointed to the fact that he used three years of data to compile his ratings, as opposed to the single year used by the Fraser Institute.

The Fraser Institute looked at the results of Grade 3 and Grade 6 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) tests in Ontario schools, and ranked schools on a scale from one to 10 based on test performance. The system has been criticized for overlooking factors that can affect student success, such as parental education and household income. Schools with students who come from more affluent backgrounds tend to rank more highly than schools in low-income neighbourhoods, or schools that have transient student populations. "If you have a high socioeconomic ranking, you're very likely to have a high Fraser score," said Mr. Johnson.

The C.D. Howe Institute claims its ratings are free of that socioeconomic bias, and Mr. Johnson said he believes that they provide parents with far more useful information about a school's performance.

"What I have done is separated out, in a statistically useful way, the pass-rates associated with socioeconomic indicators." He said that up to 40 per cent of the variation on the test scores can be attributed directly to socioeconomic characteristics.

But Peter Cowley, director of school performance studies at the Fraser Institute, is not impressed with the C.D. Howe argument. He acknowledged that socioeconomic factors account for some variation in test scores, but he said the percentiles reported by C.D. Howe are not as accurate as the Fraser rankings.

"Sure, you can find schools that do much better than would be predicted, or do better relative to all other schools, but what our report card does is say, 'Given the curriculum that we want these kids to learn, this is how they perform.'" Mr. Cowley suggested that the C.D. Howe ratings could be used as an excuse for poor performance.

"He's just dead wrong," said Mr. Johnson. "You can stick your head in the sand and say socioeconomic factors shouldn't matter, but they matter. They matter 40 per cent. But you can't use that as an excuse for the other 60 per cent of the differences in scores. So, if anything, (the Howe) rating method actually reduces the possibility of using socioeconomic factors as an excuse for lower test scores."

Mr. Johnson is careful to point out that when looking at the extreme top or bottom of the ratings in either system, there won't be much difference, for mathematical reasons. His method, he said, works best for the "average" school.

He also cautions parents against thinking that his system is an absolute ranking system. "There is no difference, really, between a school in the 94th and the 90th percentile," he said. "But if you have one in the 80th percentile, and one in the 20th percentile, you'd want to know what's going on there. Why are they so different?"

IMAGES



Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen

Meghan Burns, 7, of Woodroffe Elementary School reads her 'My Fairy Tale' to pupils in her Grade 2 class. Woodroffe was ranked as one of the top schools in a report by the C.D. Institute. C.D. Howe says that, unlike an earlier report by the Fraser Institute, it took into account 'sociological' factors, such as family income and education in its rankings.



Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen
Grade 6 pupils take the EQAQ math and reading tests at an Ottawa school in 2004. Many school administrators are reluctant to discuss school rating systems.

Using several schools in the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board as an example, Mr. Johnson illustrated how his analysis can dramatically change the perception of the school's performance.

Dunlop Public School ranked 7.6 out of 10 on the Fraser Institute's scale, but in the C.D. Howe ratings it comes out in the 96th percentile on Grade 3 testing and in the 86th percentile on Grade 6 testing. (This means that given the EQAO scores Dunlop could be expected to produce based on the socioeconomic factors influencing its pupils, it is performing better than 96 per cent of all other schools in Ontario on Grade 3 testing, and better than 86 per cent of Ontario schools on Grade 6 testing.)

"It is very likely that interesting things are going on in that school," Mr. Johnson said.

Elmdale Public School scored close to Dunlop on the Fraser Institute's report card, with a 7.4 ranking, but when socioeconomic factors are taken into account, Elmdale ends up in the 19th and 20th percentiles in Grade 3 and Grade 6 testing, respectively. That means, according to Mr. Johnson, that the school is not performing as well as would be expected.

The C.D. Howe numbers illustrate that some schools show gaps between grades that the Fraser numbers did not show. Parkwood Hills Public came out in the 10th percentile in Grade 3 testing, but in the 85th percentile in Grade 6 testing. The Fraser Institute gave it an overall ranking of 7.7.

In the Ottawa-Carleton Catholic District School Board, St. Marguerite d'Youville had the highest combined score for both grades, scoring in the 80th percentile in Grade 3 testing and the 68th in Grade 6 testing. It received a Fraser Institute ranking of 7.4.

School administrators are reluctant to discuss school rating systems; one principal discounted them entirely. "I don't even look at them, to be honest," she said. The principals, including some from schools in the higher percentiles of the Howe report, argue that schools are about far more than test-based performance; they cite parental involvement and support, among other things, as key factors in pupil success.

Some education experts say they are wary of any results that rank or rate schools based solely on EQAO test scores. "You can't quantify learning quite as easily as these institutes would have us believe," said Paul Shaker, dean of education at Simon Fraser University. Mr. Shaker challenges the use of a single indicator, such as EQAO test scores, to rank schools, claiming that such measures clearly favour a certain kind of cultural background and parental education level.

He said the C.D. Howe Institute's school percentile ratings give parents more useful information than the Fraser Institute rankings, but he remains skeptical of any rating method.

"Rankings are demoralizing," he said. "There is heroic work going on in some of the so-called 'worst' schools."

Mr. Shaker advises parents to consider factors other than rankings or ratings based on test scores when choosing a school for their children. He said listing schools according to test scores could lead to decreased educational opportunities for pupils in schools with lower scores, as has happened in the U.S., where funding has been attached to better performance on tests.

"I'm trying to inform public opinion in Canada so that Canada doesn't go down the path the U.S. has gone down. I can't see how the implication of (this kind of) work isn't to bring that kind of model to Canada," Mr. Shaker said.

He said that Wales has recently abolished standardized testing for pupils up to the age of 14, and points to Manitoba, where a much broader set of criteria are used to determine which schools are doing well.

Download the Reports

To get downloadable .pdf reports that show how the C.D. Howe Institute ranks Eastern Ontario schools based on standardized Grades 3 and 6 tests and taking into account socio-economic influences, go to Editor's Picks at ottawacitizen.com. You'll also find links there to the earlier Fraser Institute reports, also in downloadable .pdf format.

A Sample of Individual School Results Using Two Different Methods

School - School Board - Fraser Institute Ranking (out of 10) - Percentile Using C.D. Howe Method Grade 3 Grade 6

Devonshire Community Public - Ottawa-Carleton Public - 9.7 - 99th - 96th

Woodroffe Elementary - Ottawa-Carleton Public - 8.9 - 97th - 99th

First Avenue Public - Ottawa-Carleton Public - 9.2 - 76th - 77th

St. Marguerite d'Youville - Ottawa-Carleton Catholic - 7.4 - 80th - 68th

Our Lady of Fatima - Renfrew County Catholic - 6.1 - 98th - 98th

Saint-Jean Baptiste - District catholique de l'Est ontarien - 10 - 62nd - 95th

Lamoureux - District catholique de Centre Est de l'Ontario - 9.1 - 89th - 69th

Marie-Tanguay - District catholique de l'Est ontarien - 7.3 - 97th - 92nd

Immaculate Conception - Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario - 4.1 - 78th - 98th

Illustration:

- Colour Photo: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen / Meghan Burns, 7, of Woodroffe Elementary School reads her 'My Fairy Tale' to pupils in her Grade 2 class. Woodroffe was ranked as one the top schools in a report by the C.D. Institute. C.D. Howe says that, unlike an earlier report by the Fraser Institute, it took into account 'sociological' factors, such as family income and education in its rankings.
- Photo: Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen / Grade 6 pupils take the EQAQ math and reading tests at an Ottawa school in 2004. Many school administrators are reluctant to discuss school rating systems.

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Note: Schoolyard Scuffle: Think-Tanks at Odds Over Ratings. Ran with fact boxes "Download the Reports" and "A Sample of Individual School Results Using Two Different Methods", which have been appended to the story.

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