

Marketing or Scholarship

Brian Norris, a popular marketing guru, defines his craft as “the ongoing process of moving people closer to making a decision to purchase, use, follow” The Fraser Institute, on its web site, credits itself with having moved people to a “recognition of the importance of market competition.” Though Michael Walker, one of the Institute’s founders, would like us to view the *Report Card on British Columbia’s Elementary Schools* as a scholarly analysis, it could be seen as a marketing initiative that ranges from the creation of a need to a description of the means to satisfy it.

The need for change in education has been a cherished theme of the Fraser Institute for years, oblivious to the reality that our students regularly rank among the highest on international tests like the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Although the authors of the *Report Card*, Peter Cowley and Dr. Stephen Easton, do not refer to or dispute the PISA results, they contend that their study identifies schools that are alarmingly inefficient, that the most effective schools are independent schools, and that when parents exercise choice, competitive market forces will result in improvement.

Can schools be improved? Yes. Do some schools attain higher academic results than others? Yes. Are the assumptions of Cowley and Easton well founded and is their methodology sound? No.

It is a fundamental assumption of the authors of the *Report Card* that the differences between the schools is solely attributable to deficiencies in teaching practices and administrative leadership. They compare the effectiveness of schools without the slightest accounting for differences such as class composition or the existing abilities of students. Independent schools, which are permitted to be selective in their enrolment, become the benchmarks for the measurement of public schools that are mandated to accept any applicant, regardless of intellectual, emotional or social difficulties. Though Cowley and Easton insist that “successful educators overcome any such impediments”, Michael Rutter, the very authority they call upon to buttress that conviction, is more realistic. He found that “a child’s examination success was strongly linked with his own ability level as measured prior to secondary school transfer, and to the academic balance of the secondary school he attended”.

In the last paragraph on the last page of their 125 page *Report Card*, parents are made aware that “the *Overall rating out of 10*, based as it is on standardized scores, is a relative rating.” It can only be hoped that they read this page of the *Report Card* as closely as the earlier pages. An East Vancouver school in which more than 30% of the students require special assistance to cope with a range of physical, intellectual and emotional difficulties and more than 50% require ESL instruction received a 4.3/10 rating, and a ranking of 865 out of 1013 schools - a seemingly disastrous level of achievement. However, a closer reading shows that though this rating appears abysmal, 80% of the students of that school actually met or exceeded FSA expectations. Cowley and Easton use academic achievement, the number of students meeting expectations, and the gender difference in achievement to rate the effectiveness of schools. The use of only these three factors and

the weighting that is assigned, results in ratings that exaggerate and inflate differences. It is not surprising that at the top of the thousand elementaries are single gender independent schools that select their students based on admission tests.

For years, the Fraser Institute has promoted an expansion of school choice. The Institute may be independent and not beholden to anyone, but judging by the names with which they seek to establish their credibility - from Milton Friedman, Bill Harris and Preston Manning to Margaret Thatcher - its views are not non-partisan. Though the endless tables and rows of numbers lend it an air of scholarship, the contention that competition will result in higher academic achievement is not proven. A recent study of several hundred thousand American students by Christopher and Sarah Lubienski found that when “the fact that private schools serve more advantaged populations [is accounted for], public schools perform remarkably well, often outscoring private and charter schools.”

Brian Norris sees marketing capable not only “of moving people closer to making a decision to purchase” but also capable “of moving people closer to making a decision to ...become complacent to another person’s, society’s or organization’s value.” Schools can be improved and many schools need help, but the *Report Card* does little to assist in this endeavour. It undermines confidence in the public school system, renders suspect the achievement of independent schools, and diverts attention from the real challenges of helping all students to become fulfilled individuals, productive members of the community, and informed and actively participating members of a democratic society, regardless of ability, language, race or religion.

Note: a more extensive examination of the *Report Card* by Dietmar Waber has been accepted for publication in the July issue of *Education Canada*, the journal of the Canadian Education Association.