

School rankings flawed but useful by **GARY MASON**

VANCOUVER -- The recent release of the Fraser Institute's annual rankings of B.C. elementary schools once again prompted the now predictable bleatings of moral indignation from the province's teachers union. This time, however, the rankings have touched off a debate in the halls of academia as well.

Each year, the institute ranks schools according to results from the government-sanctioned Foundation Skills Assessment exam. It tests students in Grades 4 and 7 across the province each May in reading, writing and arithmetic. The institute also provides a similar ranking report for high schools.

Ever since the institute began publishing its rankings nine years ago, there has been a growing unease among teachers who feel the results don't account for the socioeconomic factors that contribute to test scores.

In other words, schools in rich neighbourhoods with a preponderance of households with highly educated parents inevitably do better than schools in poorer areas where, say, English as a second language is more common in the household.

This rankles Paul Shaker, dean of the faculty of education at Simon Fraser University, who has launched an intense attack on the rankings. Some of Mr. Shaker's colleagues recently produced a paper taking issue with the institute's methodology, opining that when you factor in the margin of error associated with this kind of skills-testing, it could affect a school's ranking by several places in either direction.

What bothers Mr. Shaker even more is the way in which the rankings cast certain students and schools as losers. And how the rankings, in his view, perpetuate and reinforce ethnic, racial and class stereotypes.

At the University of Victoria, meantime, Ian Cameron, an education professor and expert on student testing, says the FSA is a straightforward exam that almost every student in the province should

pass. He says the FSA offers a useful province-wide picture of the state of education and allows schools to see how their students' level of learning compares with others in their area and elsewhere in the province.

The B.C. Teachers' Federation has launched a campaign against the institute's report cards, saying they are based on one narrow set of tests and do not take into account other areas of a school's performance. The federation successfully persuaded many parents to have their children boycott the testing, which has greatly influenced participation rates around the province and, some would argue, destroyed the legitimacy of the rankings.

So what should we make of it all?

Well, first, I think we need to recognize that the union's opposition is prompted by a couple of things. Teachers resent what the rankings imply, particularly if they work at a school that has done poorly. A lousy ranking, they argue, suggests the teachers at the school must be lousy too. That's unfair, they say.

Second, teachers and education academics don't like it when outsiders (see Fraser Institute) stick their nose into matters they feel is their exclusive intellectual domain. What does the institute, after all, know about education?

Finally, there is politics. Over the years, the teachers union has been represented by those holding moderate to extreme left-wing views. The Fraser Institute, meantime, is perpetually characterized as a right-wing think tank, which, in this case, sets up a noisy ideological clash.

All that aside, the question remains: Do the rankings serve any useful purpose? I believe they do, at least potentially.

Forget for a moment the fairness of ranking a private school on the west side of Vancouver with a public school in northeastern B.C. -- no one honestly compares the two, anyway. I think there is some value in ranking schools in a defined area, with a similar socioeconomic backdrop. Why?

Because it provides parents who might be shopping for a school in that area with some useful consumer information.

With one important caveat. Even the Fraser Institute admits the rankings should be just one tool that a parent uses to make that decision. The wise one will also visit prospective schools and talk to teachers and other parents.

I would agree that a better measure of a school is how its students have progressed from the start to the end of the year. How much did their skill set advance during that period? That would be a more accurate indicator of a school's success.

Could a test be devised that could get at that? I think it probably could. And I think people like Mr. Shaker and Mr. Cameron, as well as representatives from the Fraser Institute, the teachers federation and bureaucrats from the Ministry of Education should get together and discuss how that might be achieved.

It's easy to sit back and criticize the rankings. It's a heck of a lot harder to try to do something to improve them. But that's what should be done.

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