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STREET ADDRESS

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
8888 UNIVERSITY DRIVE
BURNABY, BRITISH COLUMBIA,
CANADA
V5A 1S6

www.educ.sfu.ca

OPINION PIECE

A 1% Solution to Enhancing Education

By Philip H. Winne

Last Friday, the Fraser Institute released the Report Card on Secondary Schools In British Columbia and Yukon. Almost everyone in the education sector knows about this report. So do many parents.

Using basic statistical methods, the Report Card scores schools on a 10-point scale. The authors say, "... it makes comparisons easy, [it] alerts parents to those nearby schools that appear to have more effective academic programs."

All research, including the Report Card, has limitations. For instance, the Report Card is silent about the accuracy of scores it publishes.

For a parent who can choose schools, it's important to know each school's score describes an average student. Only about one percent of students are exactly average.

For a particular child, it's statistically hazardous to treat scores reported to one decimal place as being that precise. A common scientific guideline allows 5% error. Thus, each school's score ranges at least plus one point and minus one point from the reported value. The more a school's score differs from the middle of the pack, the wider this range becomes. This muddles comparing schools.

There are other debates about how the Fraser Institute scores schools. Some might have a right side; some won't.

How can we change debates about education so they work for children and society? It won't be by just using better methods for evaluating education, though that would help significantly. Merely reporting more clearly could enhance everyone's decision making about education, but it's not enough. Inviting comparisons among schools won't do it – everyone does this already.

The Fraser Institute's scores for schools are based 80% on standardized tests. Test data are important and the Ministry's tests are well designed. But test data are not enough. It's like judging an entire round of golf just by the approach shot on the 18th hole. What influences scores students get on tests? We don't have enough data to know. What uses are test scores? No one has data to answer this. What should we change if scores are low? We lack data to help us answer.

How can we better deal with these and many, many other critical questions about education? I suggest this: Gather more data. We need data about resources available to education and effects they have on learning. We need more data about instruction students experience, what they learn in each class, homework and motivation and all the other important factors in education.

How much data can we afford? I suggest something manageable. Dedicate just one percent more of each school year to do research on education. How much is one percent? It's about 4 minutes a day. Twenty minutes a week. Twelve hours over whole a school year. Our children can pay for this investment and they need it.

Some will say, "The last thing we want is more testing and researchers interfering in schools. No way." In reply, consider this. When you bought your \$2000 plasma TV, did you walk into



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the store and pick randomly? Or, did you look at several brands? Compare features? Investigate payment plans at different stores? Ask your kids to check out the latest blogs on the internet? Buy Consumer Reports? We must do no less when we research how education can better prepare children for their futures.

Choosing schools and changing education based on ample and valid data isn't an option. It's essential. So, how might my suggestion work? Everyone needs to be involved.

First, people would have to agree we can afford to invest one percent more of everyone's time in school to research how education works. It's debatable, I agree.

Second, students, parents, teachers and school administrators should collaborate with people who do educational research for a living. We need diverse views to describe the spectrum of education.

Third, educational researchers should embrace the idea that other educational researchers are just one consumer of their work. We should examine data and publish findings for students, parents, teachers and decision makers. We must work harder to make data accurate and clearly understood. We should hear critics and improve our science to become better at contributing to education's goals.

Fourth, everyone needs to accept that improvements will take time. It took years for seat belts to be researched and made standard in our cars. Bill Reid didn't chisel his stunning sculptures in a week.

Just one percent seems a smart way to invest in everyone's future. It's a small step that can yield big returns. Let's take it.

Philip H. Winne is Professor of Education and Canada Research Chair in Self-Regulated Learning and Learning Technologies at Simon Fraser University.