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OPINION PIECE

The True Purpose of School Rankings

By Dr. Charles Bingham, Simon Fraser University

Spring has come, and the Fraser Institute has completed its annual ranking of public and private schools in BC. As might be expected, private schools get higher marks, by and large, than public schools on this 'report card.' Who wouldn't expect this? It should not surprise us when private schools teach more effectively than public schools.

And it surprises no one who reads the Straight that the Fraser Institute, the body doing the ranking, is a right-wing think tank. To be specific, the Fraser Institute's grand mission is to prove that free-market competition is always more beneficial than government stewardship.

But back to the rankings: And if I am a parent, I fall into one of two categories. Either I send my child to a public school, or I don't. In either case, the Fraser Institute has got rankings for me. If I send my child to a public school in my neighborhood, then I will find out how 'my' school fares in comparison to other public schools in Vancouver and around the province. Indeed, I may not like what I read. I may find that other schools outperform mine. I may take my child out of a public school and put him or her into a private one. If I have the money. If I already send my child to a private school, I will probably be happy that 'my' school out-ranks so many others.

On the surface, then, it seems like these school rankings have something for everyone. Well they don't. While the Fraser Institute claims that it publishes the rankings of public schools so that parents can make an informed decision about where they send their children to school, these rankings are instead intended to create dissatisfaction with public schools. They are aimed to show that private schools consistently rank towards the top of the ten point scale, and that public schools rank from the top all the way to the bottom. The ultimate aim of the Fraser Institute's school rankings is not to encourage choice among public schools, but to establish dissatisfaction with public schools in general.

Here's the news about the Fraser Institute's mandate for education. You can verify this news on your own by going to the www.fraserinstitute.ca/. The mission of the Fraser Institute "is to measure, study, and communicate the impact of competitive markets and government intervention on the welfare of individuals." More precisely, its mission is to prove that government sponsored endeavors such as public schooling should be abandoned. The Institute even has its own definition of 'educational freedom.' You have achieved 'educational freedom' as soon you have taken your child out of the public school system. Once again, look at the website.

In the press we see school rankings, and we hear that that they are 'controversial.' For example, the Dean of Simon Fraser's Faculty of Education has criticized the rankings because they are too simplistic. But these arguments for and against rankings have not been based on a thorough scrutiny of the Fraser Institute's agenda where public education and privatization are concerned. We have not seen the logic behind these rankings.

We have not seen the lesson plans that the Fraser Institute offers teachers, free of charge of course. The aim of one such lesson is to teach students "the tragedy of the commons," that is, the tragedy publicly owned land. We have not read the award-winning, thousand-dollar words in a student essay contest staged by the Fraser Institute: "If the developed world is truly committed to poverty alleviation, it must forsake aid and adopt trade."



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So let's say I am a parent, and I believe in the public school system. Maybe I also believe in the preservation of public lands. Maybe I believe in aid as well as trade. Are the Fraser Institute school rankings for me, for my own edification? Well, that's what I'm told.

I might believe the 'edification' story if the rankings were done by a group that believes in public schooling. The Fraser Institute's school rankings are meant to create a horse-race type of situation, a situation that will put the good old steed, the public school—your neighborhood school—out to pasture.