

THE DAY AFTER ITS PUBLICATION A YOUNG mother I work with wanted to talk about the BC Elementary School Report Card. “What,” she asked, “am I supposed to make of a ranking of around 700 for our little school?” With one child enrolled and another a recent graduate, she believes she knows the school and teachers well and is quite pleased with the school’s role in her family and community. “Why do they use narrow and impersonal measures to make our school look bad and damage our teachers’ and parents’ morale?” If you have questions about a report card, I suggested, don’t merely sign and return it—come in for a conference. This is our conference.

In preparing for our meeting we note that the Report Card employs Ministry of Education data in a manner decried by officials there and by other informed educators and their organizations. Officials in government seem frustrated that their broadly based and multidimensional scheme for school accountability is less known than the predominantly single indicator, truncated version upon which the Report Card is based. While BC citizens could be taking pride in a comprehensive, responsive school accountability system, they are instead confronted with simplistic rankings and an abuse of scientific reporting methods. School performance is treated as if one were debating statistics on sports teams, casually creating winners and losers through statistical analysis that ignores complexity.

Staking all of a school or a student’s grade on a single indicator has been labeled the “Enronization” of education. Just as that bankrupt corporation focused exclusively on its stock price, so schools are directed to emphasize test scores. Such a narrow approach promotes performativity instead of performance—in plain language that means teaching to the test, scripting lessons along the lines of test items, eliminating time spent on non-testable aspects of the curriculum and focusing on test-taking skills in place of disciplinary knowledge or higher order thinking. At our conference we need to ask why the Report Card authors don’t look at our school in the comprehensive way the Ministry does, that is by weighing parent satisfaction, retention, the achievement of school-specific goals and other considered criteria. We need to ask if enriched curriculum in the arts, character education, service learning, and creativity should be sacrificed to focus on test scores as has widely happened in the USA.

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THE REPORT CARD CONFERENCE

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This narrow focus on standardized testing emerged in the southern United States, particularly Texas, where schools were among the worst in that nation and extreme measures were thought necessary to jump start reform. Emphasis on test scores also provided politicians with a means of grandstanding on education in part by oversimplifying its challenge. After more than a decade of wide implementation the results of test mania are not impressive. Houston, the leading example, has been caught in twin outcomes of fraud in reporting data and skyrocketing push-out rates for poorly performing minority students. The Houston Miracle has been revealed as a public relations fantasy. The floundering No Child Left Behind Act, based entirely on single indicator accountability, is a policy looking for an escape strategy and one which the other developed countries are conspicuously not copying.

At our little school that ranked around 700 there are kids with problems and without some of the support that they could use. In the community we understand the effect home life and economic well being have on school performance. Economists as well as teachers know that education can succeed only when the “deficiency needs” of students are taken care of. These include nutrition, security, and health care. Additionally, schools in the lowest socio-economic catchments see, on average, each student desk occupied by between two and three young people in the course of a school year. Mobility of this kind is beyond a school’s ability to affect but dramatically influences school achievement. The Report Card doesn’t weigh these sorts of data in labeling our school, although more sophisticated analyses do. In California, for example, schools are ranked not only against

all others, but also, in a separate listing, in comparison with other schools that share

their demographic characteristics. This way you can see how a low socio-economic district such as Oakland is doing compared to its peers, Compton and Fresno. On the other hand, affluent locales such as Beverly Hills, Marin, and LaJolla have to compete with one another.

Rather than signing and returning the Report Card, we want to talk back to the system and question the methods upon which our school has been graded. At a time when nearly every stakeholder group in education and ones from across the political spectrum are questioning the Report Card, we think it wise to get more information before we take its assertions to heart. We are in direct communication with our little school—we know the trustees, administrators, teachers, and staff there. We have seen the results of their good work in our own children. More broadly, British Columbia by many measures has one of the very best public school systems in the world. Our little school contributes its share to this success. Where is that shown on the Report Card?

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