



Report cards help both parents  
and educators

Peter Cowley

Each year, hundreds of thousands of parents and educators in B. C., Alberta, Ontario and Quebec turn to the Fraser Institute's school performance report cards.

Why? Because they provide accurate, objective, understandable information about the performance of individual schools that is not easily available anywhere else.

Parents use the report cards when they are choosing a school for their kids. Because they make comparisons easier, the report cards alert parents to those nearby schools that appear to have more effective programs.

They can also see at a glance which schools are improving over time. In addition, a few minutes study of a school's report card might suggest questions that parents should ask when they interview the principal and teachers at prospective schools.

After their kids have settled into a school, parents use the report card as an annual audit of how the school is doing. Informed parents are more likely to encourage the school's educators to focus on results and find ways to improve student learning.

Educators also use the report card in ways that will ultimately benefit the kids they teach. The report cards include a variety of indicators, each of which provides results for another aspect of school performance.

Teachers and school administrators who are dedicated to improvement study each indicator's historical values in search of ideas for improvement and feedback on the effectiveness of their improvement efforts.

For those educators who are uncertain that lasting improvement is possible, the report cards offer hope. Each one provides evidence about what can be accomplished. It demonstrates clearly that, even when we take into account factors such as the students' family characteristics' which some believe dictate the degree of students' success' some schools do better than others.

Indeed, the data consistently suggest that what goes on in schools makes a difference to student results and that some schools make more of a difference than others.

If more school performance data becomes available, the institute's report cards can be made even more valuable. To date, they have reported only on academics.

However, many parents would be interested to know how successful the schools are in encouraging students to participate in the fine arts and to adopt and maintain an active lifestyle.

Other parents might like to know whether the school's students are acquiring the communications, leadership, teamwork and citizenship skills that they will need to be successful in their future studies and careers.

Regrettably, indicators of school performance in these non- academic aspects of school performance cannot be added to the report cards due to a serious lack of data. I would encourage SFU's Dean Shaker to join with me in an effort to encourage education authorities across the province to begin the collection and distribution of a far richer set of school performance data.

Nevertheless, all of the institute's report cards provide parents and educators with an indepth look at how the schools are doing in academic studies' a core aspect of every school's program.

They are all based on large, multi- year sets of student results data. In B. C., for example, provincial testing conducted at Grades 4, 7, 10, and 12 provides a strong foundation for both the secondary and elementary report cards.

The result is a detailed annual report of the extent to which each school ensures that its students acquire the skills and knowledge that are embodied in the provincial curricula.

Unfortunately, the many benefits of publicly rating schools do not come without some cost. The adverse publicity surrounding an unfavourable result can bring pain to a school's community.

But when results are not good there is a clear imperative to overcome the emotion and explore all possible means by which poor results may be reversed.

In the words of a determined Alberta elementary principal, "Sure, it hurts to see your school rated at the bottom in the province; it knocks you down. It affects morale. You take it personally. But we decided that we had to find ways to change this school."

But each edition of a report card also contains a great deal of news worth cheering about. In the secondary schools' report card that was published in this newspaper on Saturday, 24 B. C. schools found evidence that their improvement programs had resulted in significant improvement in their overall rating over the past five years.

Getting the truth out into the open is always the first step in any effort to make things better.

By helping both parents and educators understand how individual schools are doing over time, the report cards contribute to everyone's goal of a better education for the province's children.

Peter Cowley is director of school performance studies at the Fraser Institute.



Looking past the hype of the quick  
and easy way

Paul Shaker

Parents sincerely wish to know whether their public school is worthy of their children.

Because of this natural feeling, when I object to school rankings I am often asked:  
"Then how can we know whether our school is of high quality?"

I answer as a parent who selected schools for my children too many times: Visit the school, talk to people you trust, including other parents, as well as the school's teachers and principal. Use your knowledge about your child and make an informed judgment.

For many, that's not the answer they want to hear.

There isn't a quick and easy, foolproof scheme that can replace this process. Let's put school choice in a larger context: I never found a single ranking or number that answered my questions about the physician or surgeon I should consult; or the place of worship best for me; or the counsellor I need.

These are highly personal choices that require my observation and discrimination. Of course, there were shortcuts out there -often in the form of advertising on TV, in print or on the Internet. I found, however, those voices typically had interests of their own that had more to do with their profits than they did with my family's welfare. And, of course, they didn't know our specific characteristics and values.

Whose job is it to protect the public from propaganda and junk science in education or these other fields? Who is to label infomercials as such and challenge the expertise and motives of self- appointed experts who seize the public forum? Who can stand up to powerful interests who spend millions to shape public opinion so that their own interests are served while the health, safety, and quality of life of the average person are sacrificed? My hope is that a central answer to these questions is the membership of our self- governing professions whether in medicine, education, law or other fields.

These specially identified groups of citizens are trained to have the expertise necessary to provide valid information. They also have an ethical obligation to uphold the public good even when doing so entails personal sacrifice.

Honouring the interest of the patient, student, or client is a foundation of professions. Closely associated with such professionals are the lay board members

and governmental officials who work in fiduciary association with them. They also are expected to maintain a higher ethical standard in their dealings with the public.

Year after year, as school rankings are published in British Columbia, we hear the near unanimous voices of education -and associated- professionals warning us that ranking schools according to standardized test scores is neither scientifically credible nor socially valuable. Ministry officials, superintendents, school trustees, principals and teachers, as well as the B. C. deans of education and our research professors, submit that such 'report cards' as publicized are invalid, unreliable, and socially damaging. See [www.educ.sfu.ca/school-ranking](http://www.educ.sfu.ca/school-ranking)

After you do the work of finding a good school remember, however, it is only one element in the education of your child. I suggest you view the school as a significant resource from which your child benefits while he or she also learns from the larger context of life in your home and community. As a parent you are well advised to thoughtfully enhance school experiences with your choice of activities, including sports, the arts, and advanced academics. As you talk with your children, help them make sense of their many experiences and account for their feelings. Identify the lessons that are appearing in their lives. Influence their reactions to events and reflect with them on the results of what they say and do.

As we create this curriculum for your child's whole education, let's start a list of what to avoid:

Schools that are dominated by poverty or wealth, for example, since they may infect their students with despair or entitlement, respectively.

Schools whose character is defined by excessive conformity or a lack of cultural diversity. Those aren't classrooms that prepare one for life in Canada today.

Schools that have a narrow curriculum, neglecting the imagination and the body in favor of an obsession with cognitive work alone. Let's avoid adults who are unkind to children. Bad media, too much media. Boredom. Inactivity.

I don't think you or I should pass the buck and make decisions for our children based on public relations literature or advertising. We need to understand why the range of informed professionals advises us against the report card rankings.

Until we study the issue independently, prudence says it's safer to set aside the infomercials and slogans and pick a school in the way you pick your physician, your accountant, your minister, or your counselor. Weigh the full evidence; visit with the parties involved, look for yourself, talk with your child, listen to your heart.

Paul Shaker is dean of education at Simon Fraser University.