

The transparency myth

RICHARD TEESE

January 27, 2010

Poor parents know their children are failing, rich parents have the facts.

For more than 30 years Australian governments of different persuasions have sought to measure how well our schools work.

However, publishing results at a school level has been resisted as narrow, insensitive, and statistically dubious.

The tabloid press and shock jocks have feasted on the scandal of struggling schools. Despite statistical controls in how data are now presented, the launch tomorrow of the My School website has created fears that this will continue.

There is a lack of clarity about how published data are to be used in a constructive way. Equally there is a risk that not measuring and publishing - at least at a summary level - will leave serious issues of equity and quality unaddressed. When there is no information, there is no pressure to improve.

The Rudd Government has made testing and publishing a major tool of educational policy. Transparency is viewed as a form of political leverage and a source of behavioural change in parents and schools. Test scores are used to pressure the states and territories to improve student outcomes. Equally schools will be exposed to judgment by parents. They can take their custom elsewhere.

This second aspect has been emphasised by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. But stressing that parents want detailed information on schools is also admitting that something is wrong - there has been a failure by government to ensure consistently high standards across all schools. Now parents are being asked to repair this by becoming informed consumers.

But which parents? Since underperformance is highly concentrated in disadvantaged communities, parents with the fewest economic and cultural resources are being called on to do a lot. This begins, not with an informed reading of web-based statistics, but with a view about themselves as active and capable agents who are respected and can change things, including how they raise their own children and their involvement in their school.

It may be paternalistic to question whether the parents who most need support to engage their children in schoolwork can also lead the charge against mediocre standards. Is it really the socially most vulnerable parents for whom school does not work well, who will take their schools in hand, once poor outcomes have become painfully conspicuous on a website? This is the challenge that publishing test scores sets. Or is there some other way in which government sees the tables working?

If it is not the poor, maybe it is parents who are determined to get quality. Aspirational parents can readily access performance data, even if deciphering it will be more difficult. Their relationship to government schools has already been scarred by attacks from on high (John Howard) and weakened by generous subsidies promoting the use of non-government schools.

The signals that this group has so far received have led to a narrowing of the cultural mix in local schools and a concentration of "cultural capital" and funds in fee-paying or selective schools. This has lowered the performance platform of government schools in poor and not-so-poor areas and increased the insecurity of parents who haven't moved. Will the new transparency arrest this?

The risk with the Government's information strategy thus appears two-edged. Schools that most need active parents may lose them - as parents will move school rather than try to improve a school - while the parents who most need to become involved will remain disconnected and passive consumers of the local product, and contribute little. Transparency, in short, may only serve to divide parents and split both cultural and professional resources across schools. Is this a solution to the problem of underachievement? Governments cannot transfer the task of raising achievement to parents by creating quasi-markets of informed choice where educational and social failure are endemic.

Neither transparency nor choice strikes at the roots of failure in our schools. Both have aggravated the problem. Transparency has been used to injure the schools of the poor, and choice to strengthen the schools of the rich.

Moreover, the transparency that the Federal Government has so far offered exposes the failings of poor schools, while concealing the financial advantages of rich schools. Judy Crowe of Melbourne Girls' College (*The Age*, 8/1) reports that a rich private school spends some \$20,000 more per student or three times the level of funding in a government school, before taking into account substantial state and federal grants.

This over-funding drains resources from schools serving poor communities, leads to creaming and poaching of pupils and staff, fortifies an academic curriculum focused on selection, and undermines the equity targets set by the Rudd Government itself for higher education.

Is it surprising that teacher unions and parents' organisations have reacted so strongly? It is not transparency that is needed, but justice in how different communities are treated. Poor parents already know their children are failing, while rich parents have all the information and all the security they need in a simple price signal: fees underwritten by government subsidy.

But just as transparency of outcomes will not solve the problem of failure in our schools, nor will banning league tables or the tests that reveal the depth of achievement differences.

The Rudd Government rightly sees that it must invest heavily in the schools that serve our poorest communities and it must therefore measure the impact its budgets make. But it will make no impact at all if it fails to end the gross inequalities in funding that underpin educational failure and that transparency of outcomes conceals rather than reveals.

Richard Teese is Professor and Director of the Centre for Post-Compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning in the University of Melbourne.