



School performance tables can provide useful information for parents choosing a school, but data is not conclusive

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Informing the market for schools

Should performance tables be central to school choice?

GIVEN THE COALITION government's emphasis on a decentralised market for schools, it is more important than ever to evaluate the main channel through which information about schools is presented to parents – school performance tables. Information on a school's performance is central to the school choice process in England and the content and format of these tables is currently the subject of much debate. From this year, the content will change quite significantly, following the government's response to the Wolf Review. A new differential average points score will be published for each school, which provides information on how well the school does for students at the lower and upper ends of the ability distribution, as well as at the average.

Researchers Dr Rebecca Allen of the Institute of Education, University of London, and Professor Simon Burgess from the ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation, University of Bristol, have argued for such a move. The previous government had considered New York-style School Report Cards; think tanks are proposing to offer a

wealth of information through web-based delivery; the current government has set out its intentions for future tables, and there is likely to be further change.

The researchers address a central question: are school performance tables in general any use to parents? Are they fit for the purpose of informing parents' choice of a school for their child? The performance tables are widely reported and easy to get hold of, but their value is controversial. There are three main counter-arguments to their continued use. First, it is argued that differences in raw exam performance largely reflect differences in school composition; they do not reflect teaching quality and so are

not informative about how one particular child might do at a school. Second, schools might be differentially effective so that even measures of average teaching quality or test score gains may be misleading for students at either end of the ability distribution. Third, the scores reported in performance tables are so variable over time that they cannot be reliably used to predict a student's future performance.

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After all, today's league tables reflect last year's students' exams, but a parent wants to know how his/her child will do in five years' time.

It is an empirical question how quantitatively important these points are. To answer this, the research uses the long run of pupil data now available to researchers. It follows each student through secondary school to see how he/she fares in the GCSEs. And also uses statistical procedures to estimate the counter-factuals of how that student would have done at a different local school.

If families had picked schools according to the league table information available at the time, would that have turned out to have been a good choice in terms of subsequent exam performance for that specific child? Focusing on the simplest measure of the school's percentage 5A*-C score, the results show that while it certainly does not produce a good choice for everyone, it produces a good choice for twice as many students than it produces a poor choice for. So, on average, a family using the schools' percentage 5A*-C scores from the league tables to help identify a school that would be good academically for their child will do much better than the same family ignoring the league table information.

What is the best performance information? No measure can be perfect because there are important trade-offs between the relevance, functionality and comprehensibility of performance information. But this research shows that school performance tables are useful to many parents, and help make the schools market more efficient. ■

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