

School Rankings Don't Provide Full Picture

by Dr. James Christopher

The Canadian Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) has long been a proponent of supporting parents in their selection of schools for their children. The association recognizes that such decisions can be agonizing and time consuming, but quite necessary as the education of our children is so important. CAIS recognizes that parents often base decisions on a ranking system that has been artificially designed, more often than not excluding vital information regarding each school. Such a design creates a disparity and can lead to decisions based on statistics which are often misleading due to their inconclusive nature. The following article was written by the President of CAIS, Dr. James Christopher, in response to such rankings.

Everyone loves a simple answer. At our office, each year we receive hundreds of telephone calls, e-mails, and visits from parents asking one question: "What is the best school for my child?" They usually don't want the real answer, "it depends", they want a short list, a "top ten" to save them the time and trouble of really researching their choices. And why not?

We live in an era of rankings. Universities, books, restaurants, motion pictures, NCAA basketball teams, draft choices, cars, places to live, tax rates, the list goes on... if something demands that we make a choice, you can be almost certain that someone else has ranked it for us.

So, if we depend upon rankings to determine what movie to go to or what book to read, why should our choice of schools be any different? Why shouldn't we take one of the most important decisions that we make in our lives and look for an easy shortcut to make up our minds?

The fact is, that school rankings usually give us little more than a shopping list of locations where the nature of the student population, and the organization of the programme, offer the best statistical chance of success. Does that indicate a "good" school? Sometimes it does, but the opposite result definitely doesn't indicate a "bad" one!

How does a school get a high ranking? In Canada, usually the statistics cited are student results on high stakes testing. As school leaders in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec have long experienced, simplistic school rankings based solely on narrowly defined student achievement data can often do more harm than good.

The Fraser Institute issues a regional "Report Card" on independent and public schools each year. Their rankings are based on publicly available information with regard to standardized test results, graduation rates, and dropout statistics. Using this framework, they attempt to hold schools "accountable" for their results and to rank the most successful.

Needless to say, such an approach is fraught with difficulties. The attempt a few years ago to apply the model to Ontario schools is an excellent example of this. Ontario has no formal standardized examinations. Schools were held accountable for their performance using incomplete and often inaccurate data, the researchers passed judgment on schools that they had never seen, students whom they had never talked to, and teachers whom they had never witnessed in action.

In the process, considerable damage was done to the reputation of many fine schools, and the self-esteem of the thousands of students who attend them. MacLachlin College in Oakville challenged the Fraser Institute's findings. Using an independent outside research firm, they asked for an analysis of the actual student data that formed the basis of their "Report Card" ranking.

The result was a "score" that was double that inaccurately reported by the Fraser Institute, and a ranking that was hundreds of places higher on the list. Faced with a lawsuit alleging that the inaccuracy of the rankings had damaged both the reputation and the financial viability of the school, the ranking agency made a very public retraction and apology. They no longer attempt to rank Ontario schools.

Such actions underscore the weakness of an arbitrary statistical snapshot. But the real issue goes even deeper. By looking for a common denominator for comparison, organizations such as the Fraser Institute devalue the one thing that characterizes the best schools in Canada, namely their ability and dedication to providing the most appropriate educational experience for the students in their care.

There are many excellent schools on the list. Parents, students, teachers, administrators and Boards can rightly be proud of the wonderful programmes and supportive learning environments being provided in those buildings. Unfortunately, the ranking system does not actually give you that information, or tell you where those excellent schools are!

What do school rankings show? They claim to show schools that educate students effectively, and, in many cases they do. However, in many other cases this form of accountability merely showed evidence of a careful and rigorous admissions policy by an individual school.

Admit only the best and the brightest and even average schools will often produce outstanding results. In all cases these types of rankings are simply a record of academic credits earned, per student, on an incredibly uneven playing field. What do such ranking systems miss? They miss the broad range of extra-curricular and cocurricular experiences being offered to students. They miss the opportunities for leadership, for team building, for mentoring, and for collegial and cooperative learning which characterize so many of our schools. They miss the innovative and leading edge integration of technology into the curriculum. They miss the broad range of non-Ministry courses being provided for students such as Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programmes. They miss the provision of preparation for post-secondary education. In short, they missed the "value added" component that marks the distinct nature of independent education across Canada.