

LEAGUE TABLES: DO THEY HAVE *ANY* BENEFITS?

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In February each year, a function is held at Government House in Adelaide to recognise those students who have gained merits in their SACE (South Australian Certificate of Education) examinations at the end of Year 12. The Governor presents certificates to students who have gained merits (or maximum possible scores) in three or more subjects, and other dignitaries present certificates to students who have gained one or two merits. During the same week, a function is held at Adelaide Town Hall to present certificates to students who have gained merits and distinctions in the IB (International Baccalaureate) Diploma. Similar functions are held in most states of Australia, and these are great occasions to recognise the outstanding achievements of young men and women at the conclusion of their secondary schooling.

Given this wonderful atmosphere of celebration and recognition, it was disappointing this year that Adelaide's largest selling daily newspaper, *The Advertiser*, marked the occasion with a feature article headed 'Parents in the Dark', calling for the publication of annual 'league tables' to rank the performance not of students, but of the schools they attended.

The bold introduction to the article stated: "Want to know how good your child's school is? It's a secret. The information is denied to parents by secretive government authorities". The article commented that among Australian states only South Australia and Queensland do not publish the names of schools of high performing students. The article suggested that parents are entitled to this information, but it is denied to them because SSABSA, the authority that processes the results, is exempt from the Freedom of Information Act. The article also noted that the paper had contacted many schools but had been unable to find any support for publishing league tables.

Why?

I attempted to answer that question in a letter to the editor that was published by *The Advertiser* as the day's 'boxed letter' the following day:

League tables for SA schools? We can see the newspaper headlines now: "Does your school pass or fail?". This is not fantasy. In New Zealand, where league tables were introduced a few years ago, that is precisely the headline that was used.

The opposition of schools to league tables has nothing to do with embarrassment or trying to be secretive with parents. Most schools publicise their performance quite openly to their own school community.

League tables are an issue of student welfare and of what is important in education.

League tables encourage the erroneous idea that the quality of education can be measured simply by examination results. The huge range of achievements, attitudes and values that schools strive to form in young lives cannot be reduced to a simple set of figures to two decimal places.

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By all means congratulate those students at the top of the list. They were the best on the day and they worked hard under the guidance of fine teachers to get there. Don't label them the best, though, because that's not true.

There are many other talented and hard-working students who made great efforts, often under challenging circumstances, who are owed as much recognition.

I would hate to see our young people's idealism and zest for life diverted so that they become a spiritless, destructively competitive group of adults. That is the danger of league tables.

Education is not a competition. It is a process of enlightenment.

What is the future of our society, and what are the implications for young people, if a media-driven mindset reduces the measure of thirteen years of education down to a single list of numbers? With all the progress that has been made in adolescent psychology over recent decades, the annual focus on examination results seems somewhat archaic. Not only is the system of determining the results misunderstood by most of the population, it seems to serve only those few students who receive the coveted top results. It does very little to take into account individual talents, efforts, circumstances or 'personal best' achievements. It sets one student against another in a sometimes desperate bid to compete for high stakes, and there are many casualties.

Many schools which are opposed to the publication of league tables could certainly gain some excellent publicity for their consistently excellent examination results if schools' names were published in the newspapers. However, they choose not to do so, because to do would not be in the best interests of their students. League tables should not be used as a tool for marketing – they are an over-simplistic and seductive device to divert our attention away from what is truly important in education.

Of course Year 12 examination results are very important. But they are important within the context of a young person's *total formation*. Good schools are involved with much more than narrow academic schooling – they are also concerned to provide the best possible opportunities in sport, music, the arts, the development of thinking skills, the formation of spiritual awareness, and meeting each student's individual needs.

League tables may boost the circulation of newspapers, but this should never be done at the expense of placing even more pressure on students to perform, and confusing achievement for effort. Before the media begins to label schools as 'failures', perhaps it should look more reflectively at its own responsibilities towards the community it claims to be serving.