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A better way to assess and rank B.C. schools

Jerry Mussio, Special to Times Colonist

The latest Fraser Institute school rankings no doubt will be used by provincial education organizations to argue once again that the rankings are unfair and should be stopped.

After an unsuccessful attempt earlier this year to block the administration of the Foundation Skills Assessment in Grades 4 and 7, the B.C. Teachers' Federation has now asked the new minister of education to suspend the FSA and provincial examinations in Grades 10 to 12. These province-wide tests form the basis of the Fraser Institute rankings, so the proposed suspension would effectively kill the rankings.

It's becoming clear that the Fraser Institute rankings do not provide a fair comparison of schools.

But the solution isn't to stop testing students. The solution is to provide parents and the public with better information.

The annual Fraser Institute report cards provide a good summary of data for each school in the province. The problem arises when test data are combined to form a single index and all schools lumped together and ranked from top to bottom.

Predictably, the private school charging high fees and admitting only top students is ranked at the top and the public school taking all comers, including high numbers of children struggling with poverty and unstable families, is ranked at the bottom.

In other words, the Fraser Institute rewards schools who seek to admit only the best students and penalizes those who reach out to include those children who struggle to achieve success.

The recent B.C. Hospital Report Card, also published by the Fraser Institute, uses a different approach. Hospital rankings in B.C. are "risk adjusted" to account for differences in patient health status when they enter a hospital. This is done to ensure that a hospital's score reflects the performance grading that the hospital would have received if it had provided services to patients with an average mix of medical complications.

Put another way, the B.C. Health Report Card doesn't reward hospitals for turning away high-risk patients.

Responding to criticisms over school rankings in Quebec, the Montreal Economic Institute developed a new set of rankings. Their new rankings assess the school's impact on learning after a number of key variables are taken into account, including whether a school selects its incoming students.

Some B.C. educators are beginning to explore an even better approach. This involves tracking those students who, for example, are enrolled in Grade 4 and who go on to complete Grade 7 in the same school. FSA scores, and other data, are then used to estimate gains in learning for this cohort over the three-year period.

To encourage healthy competition and promote innovation in improving achievement, schools serving similar student populations could be ranked in relation to their learning gains. The Ministry of Education could easily produce this type of data for schools.

Measuring student progress with provincial standardized tests in reading, writing and mathematics is critical as these skills represent a core responsibility of the public school system. Continuing to offer provincial examinations in high schools also helps to assure parents, whether in Point Grey or in Port McNeill, that their local school meets high performance standards.

But measuring the effectiveness of a school involves more than tests in academic subjects. Schools also have a responsibility to work with families and the community to develop in students a sense of self worth and personal initiative and to prepare students for post-secondary education and the job market. The school accreditation system, first established in the 1930s, did a good job of examining school performance across these broader goals but was dropped in 2002, partly because of concerns that it had become too bureaucratic. This model deserves another look.

British Columbia students, as a group, tend to score high on international tests, but achievement levels and graduation rates appear to have flattened in recent years. Significantly, about 20 per cent of students do not meet literacy standards and the same percentage do not graduate from high school.

In today's world, education has become a major determinant of a nation's social and economic success, and the province's future will be determined, to a great extent, by our willingness to reach the 20 per cent of children who are not succeeding.

But by rewarding schools who admit only top students and ignore the rest, the Fraser Institute is pushing the province in the wrong direction.