

Improvement of school league tables

Research summary

Information on school performance is so important it can change the decisions and outcomes of families, particularly those on low incomes. But how useful are school performance tables to parents as predictors of their own child's likely exam performance? More specifically, how functional, relevant and comprehensible are they? Researchers from Bristol University's Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) evaluated school performance tables against these specific criteria. Results show that the different items of performance information in England were not as useful as they could be. Their proposed alternative approach, offering improvements in functionality, while still being simple to understand, was adopted by the Department for Education and implemented for the first time in the school league tables published early in 2012. This has potentially far-reaching long-term implications for parental choice and school behaviour.

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Key findings

- The standard league tables were useful for parents to identify the school in which their own child would do best in future exams. But they simply reflected the ability of the intake into schools, and not the effectiveness of the school.
- A 'school choice' rule based on the proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, correctly identified a school where the child would outperform almost twice as frequently as it identified a school where the child performed worse.
- This rule was shown to be extremely stable over time, and have considerably better predictive power than a rule utilising the contextual value added (CVA) score for a school. But it had low relevance as it was not a broad indicator of overall pupil performance.
- The CVA rule, delivered good choices only 1.33 times more frequently than bad choices. It was not functional and not comprehensible, but it was more relevant.
- The researchers' alternative proposal offered a way of representing school attainment information that was more functional and comprehensible, as well as more relevant than the GCSE grade data.
- Their measure used a straightforward approach to give parents the expected GCSE performance for a child of similar ability to theirs for all schools in their local choice set.



Impact

For more than two decades, English school admissions have allowed parents to express preferences for schools. These, along with school oversubscription criteria, have been used to allocate pupils to schools. Central to the parental choice process is the publication each year of school performance tables, which were compiled using data based on the proportion of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades A* to C, as well as the contextual value added (CVA) score for a school.

An alternative approach, proposed by Professor Simon Burgess at Bristol University and Dr Rebecca Allen of the Institute of Education, has had a direct impact on publication of the new school performance tables in England by the Department of Education. In fact, results of the research have changed the form and content of the school performance 'league tables' that have formed the backbone of school accountability for more than 20 years.

On the recommendation of the research, the tables now include a new performance measure which will show the GCSE performance of students with differing levels of initial ability (defined by their Keystage 2 scores), thus capturing some aspects of the progress students make in different schools. Specifically, for each school the tables now report the percentage of pupils attaining at least five A* to C grades (including English and maths) separately for low-attaining pupils, high attaining pupils and a middle group.

But why is this a change for the better? Because, the new tables are more functional, comprehensible and relevant. "The new group-specific component which we proposed is comprehensible and is more relevant than the previously-used simple school average measure. In our analysis of functionality, we show that it is as good as the standard measure, and much better than the contextual value added score for a school, which was introduced from 2006," says Rebecca Allen.

It also addresses in a straightforward way the critique of the standard league tables that they simply reflect the ability of the intake into schools, and not a school's effectiveness. "By reporting the attainment of specific groups of students of given ability, this measure automatically corrects for prior attainment, and in a very transparent way. This is therefore much more informative to parents about the likely outcome for their own children than a simple average. This of course is what value-added measures are meant to do, but they have never really become popular, and they tend not to be very functional," adds Simon Burgess.

The new measures hold out the promise of improvements in two areas: first in choices by parents and second in behaviour by schools. Parents will have better information on the likely academic attainment of their child in a range of schools. They will also be able to see more directly whether school choice actually matters a great deal for them: whether there are worthwhile differences in attainment within the ability group of their child.

As far as school behaviour is concerned, the new measure should give schools more of an incentive to focus across the ability distribution. "It is still the percentage of students achieving five A* to C grades that is the focus of attention for each group, but now schools will have to pay attention to improving this metric for high and low ability groups as well as simply the marginal children with the highest chance of getting that crucial fifth C grade," states Simon Burgess. "The new performance measures drew widespread media and public attention to the performance of these low and high ability children in every school in England."

Pathways to Impact

- Discussions took place in early 2010 at the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) about their proposals on reforming school league tables and a particular focus on School Report Cards.
- Initial ideas were presented, on other ways of reforming, in February 2010. These discussions were attended by DCSF policymakers and analysts.
- A blog was published about league table reform, and the technical paper was presented at the Royal Economic Society conference, on 19 April 2011.
- A technical paper on the best content for performance tables. was produced and submitted to the Economics of Education Review in July 2011.
- A more accessible version appeared in the special issue of Fiscal Studies associated with the Oxford conference and was first published online in August 2011.
- This built on the technical analysis and expanded on the broader criteria for judging the best performance tables. A specific proposal for the reform of league tables was made here.
- The researchers met with Graham Stuart MP, Chair of the House of Commons Education Select Committee, in November 2011 at his request.
- In November 2011, new league tables were released that adopted the key component of the proposal.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Evaluating the Provision of School Performance Information for School Choice

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Working paper on Evaluating the Provision of School Performance Information for School Choice
www.bristol.ac.uk/cmpo/publications/papers/2010/wp241.pdf

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