

Government use of school league tables completely unjustified

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Parents and teachers should not rely on school league tables to judge how good, or bad, a school is, according to research published today.

Since the early 1990s school league tables have been published in the UK, leading parents to start searching for the ‘best’ school for their child. Whilst no longer published in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, their use has continued in England.

The first league tables used raw data from exam results and they have now graduated to a ranking system using ‘contextual value-added points’ which take into account factors such as prior achievements of pupils, lack of spoken English at home and even eligibility for free school meals.

Statisticians from the University of Bristol looked at the GCSE scores of secondary schools in England, and compared the ‘value added’ scores with simple GCSE averages and show that these can differ substantially.

Professor Harvey Goldstein, lead author of the study, from the Centre for Multilevel Modelling at the University of Bristol said, “By publishing both sets of data, schools can pick and choose which version they use and parents need to be aware of what they are looking at.”

The key finding of their research, however, is that when it comes to choosing a school, what matters is the future performance when those about to start secondary school will take their GCSE exams – some 6

years later. When these ‘predictions’ are taken into account it turns out that less than 5% of schools could be significantly separated from the average or from each other.

“The general use of league tables, whether for schools, police forces or hospitals, rests on shaky scientific foundations and the current evidence suggests that they cannot safely be used for the purposes put forward by the government in terms of institutional choice or accountability,” added Goldstein. “From the results of our study it is clear that the government should take note of the evidence and cease the production and present use of school league tables.”

Source: Wiley

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