

Are school league tables any good?

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Choosing a child's school based on league tables is inadvisable because the tables ignore the uncertainty that arises from predicting a school's future performance based on its past performance, according to new research from Dr George Leckie and Professor Harvey Goldstein of the University of Bristol Centre for Multilevel Modelling (UK).

The findings, which are published in the current issue of *Research in Public Policy* and the *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, show that it is only possible to separate statistically a handful of schools' performance from the average school or other schools. Furthermore, parents selecting a school now are basing their choice on the latest league tables, when they should be basing their decision on future performance.

For example, consider parents who selected a school for their child in 2008. The child will enter school in autumn 2009 and will take their GCSE exams in 2014. Thus, the information the parents need to make their decision is how the school is predicted to perform in 2014 but the latest available league tables are from 2007, effectively seven years out of date.

The government introduced school league tables in the early 1990s. The tables ranked schools based on an average of the percentage of pupils achieving five or more GCSEs at grades between A* and C (5+A*-C). This model was criticised because the schools that scored well in the league tables tended to be those that recruited the highest-achieving students.

In 2002 a 'value-added' system was introduced that allowed schools to be compared in terms of the extent to which they improved pupils' performance, rather than just on their final performance. In 2006, the value-added system was modified further to produce the current 'contextual value-added' system (CVA), which takes into account factors such as gender and eligibility for free meals, which have been shown to affect pupils' performance.

The CVA system allows for more meaningful comparisons between schools but, because the CVA figures are published alongside the original (5+A*-C) figures, it is the latter, simpler - but more misleading - measure that tends to be used in the media and subsequently by parents.

Speaking about the findings, Dr Leckie said:

'Parents need to be aware that the tables contain less information than official sources imply and that this necessitates a lower weight being placed on them as compared with other sources of information available to parents. It is also worth noting that Scotland, Wales and Northern

Ireland have either never had or have abandoned publishing school league tables. Now seems a good time for England to follow suit.'

More information:

- The paper, *The Limitations of Using School League Tables to Inform School Choice* by Dr George Leckie and Professor Harvey Goldstein, is available to download from the [Centre for Market and Public Organisation website](#).
- School league tables can be downloaded from the [Department for Children, Schools and Families website](#).

Provided by University of Bristol ([news](#) : [web](#))

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