

Arguments against League Tables – November 2017

Intellectual curiosity, creativity and higher level thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation and synthesis are recognized as key to good learner outcomes in terms of further and higher education and future employment opportunities. In the IOM, the Essentials for Learning Curriculum Statement frames the processes that support the development of these highly valued learner skills. Under the Programme For Government 2016-2021, one of the strategic objectives is an 'inclusive and caring society.'

DESC is concerned that, particularly in such a small community, the sharing of school performance data with little reference to other, more complex measures of school success, such as those mentioned above, could result in 'league tables' of schools. In other jurisdictions the use of such league tables to highlight performance against a limited range of criteria, has led to an increase in pupil selection and ultimately has disadvantaged the most vulnerable in society.

IOM schools are quality assured against a range of criteria, including various measures of pupil performance. To select narrow metrics and rank schools against it can be misleading, particularly to parents, and offer a very distorted picture of quality. Schools vary considerably in size, for example, meaning that the performance of a small number of pupils can have a disproportionate impact on the apparent success or otherwise of a school.

In prioritising limited measures of performance there is a danger of creating an environment in which schools 'game' statistics just to appear near the top of the 'league table'. This can have significant adverse effects on the breadth of the curriculum, resulting (as it has in other jurisdictions) in a reduction (or even removal) of the time allocation for other subjects and activities – something that we have managed to avoid on the Isle of Man.

There is evidence that the use of measures such as the EBacc performance measure in schools in England* has led to a narrowing of the curriculum and the 'squeezing out' of subjects such as Design & Technology, Art, Music and Drama all of which are significant in employment opportunities and the community on the Isle of Man. There would be a risk to vocational courses which are predicated on clear links to future work based learning as well as learning in educational settings.

It is also not uncommon to hear reports that schools in other jurisdictions are making places much more inaccessible for vulnerable or low-attaining students, such that they don't depress their league table positions.

Concern has been raised across the world about the pressures placed on schools, and thus on students by the focus on too narrow a judgement of schools' performance that league tables can create. A recent report by the National Children's Bureau found that, "In recent years, children and teachers have been sent a strong message that the main purpose of school is to gain qualifications and pass exams. Education policy, particularly under the Coalition Government (2010-15), increased pressure on academic outcomes, with more value given to league tables, and a greater focus on exams over coursework. Evidence also shows that that across the UK, mental health issues in children are increasing. "

In Singapore the increasing rates of suicide and emotional damage to children is well documented both in primary and secondary schools. Students experience high stress levels from primary school, as a result of competitive pressure from schools and parents. More worryingly one report states, "In 2015, there were a reported 27 suicides among 10- to 19-year-olds in Singapore, double that of the previous year. In May 2016, an 11-year-old boy jumped to his death from the 17th floor of a flat block, fearful of sharing his exam results with his parents. It was the first time the child had failed a subject."

The emphasis placed on all aspects of pupils' development on the Isle of Man enables pupils to have a range of appropriate skills that will help them achieve in the workplace and in wider adult life. The recently published Programme for Government requires schools to equip pupils with the Island's skills requirements now and in the future. The Department's recently revised framework for school evaluation includes 37 statements against which a school must evaluate itself and makes reference to the broad and balanced curriculum and experiences that we would encourage schools to offer pupils.

Jan Gimbert and Caroline Savin
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Sources and Further reading:

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Harvey Goldstein, University of Bristol 3rd October 2016

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