It's a poor sport that turns education into a football league table

The growing practice of ranking schools according to their HSC marks is inherently unfair, writes William McKeith.

The British Sunday Times calls them league tables. And they were published recently in sell-out editions of a mid-November issue. No, not rugby league tables, not football tables of any kind. These are schools league tables.

"How to choose the best education for your children", and "Britain's Best Schools", were the appealing headlines in The Sunday Times, which ranked schools in league tables based only on examination results.

Schools in NSW are preparing for the same unwanted attention in our media outlets. Almost without exception, educators across the world dislike this type of ranking of schools.

Despite this, in the quest for accountability measures at the school and system level, schools in NSW will soon appear in this newspaper and others, ranked according to students' achievements in the Higher School Certificate.

The "top" schools or the "best" schools title will be the reward for the schools with highest performers. Political correctness and the fear of litigation will dissuade publishers from identifying those schools with the lowest achievers.

Given the significant proportion of public and private expenditure, as well as the substantial number of teachers and administrators in paid employment in education, it seems appropriate that school effectiveness and school improvement indicators occupy, with persistent regularity, the political and media stage.

But how useful, really, are these league tables of high performers generated by the results in the HSC? Do they tell us anything useful about the quality of education offered by a school and how successful or otherwise a school is in meeting its or the system's goals? Kenneth J. Rowe, of the Centre for Applied Educational Research at the University of Melbourne, published a landmark paper in 1999 on league tables.

He stressed the fallibility of all rankings of schools. He quoted studies that showed that there are serious and inherent limitations to the usefulness of indicators such as examination results for providing reliable judgements about educational institutions.

Educators have consistently posed the question: how do we fairly assess a "top" school when we fail to give any consideration to contextual and input factors - to socio-economic conditions of parents, to the degree of academic selectivity of the intake, to the freedom of the school to select its teachers, to the resources available to the staff, and so on.

Some schools emphasise sports, others drama and dance. Others have programs for children who suffer some particular forms of disadvantage.
The State Government has promoted these school-based specialisations within the
government school sector. And the Government has created a two-tiered system of
academically selective and comprehensive schools that further separates the division
between the government, Catholic and independent school sectors. All of these very
different schools are thrown together in the schools' leagues tables.

It is hardly revealing that schools that accept into year 7 only from the highest 1 per cent
of academic performers should end up on top of the league table six years later.

Or that private schools which have high fees, with their considerable socio-economic
advantage, form a disproportionate number of the top 50 per cent of high performing
schools.

Surely, it would be revealing if it were otherwise. Rowe finds that even when suitable
adjustments for students' intake characteristics and prior achievements have been taken
into account, the resulting estimates of value added by the school have too much
uncertainty attached to them to provide reliable rankings.

There is a lot more to a good school than how its students perform in a particular set of
examination papers. It was possibly for this reason that section 18A of the Education Act
1990 and regulation 5(5) of the 2001 regulations governing publication of School
Certificate and Higher School Certificate results and assessments were drafted thus:
"Results to which this clause applies must not be publicly revealed in a way that ranks or
otherwise compares the results of particular schools."

I gather the public interest argument overrides the significance of the act.
If we are to continue with some form of published performance information about
schools, two principles should be applied.

The first is the principle of unwarranted harm, and the second is the right to information.
Published information about schools should seek to avoid rankings, and should clearly
demonstrate the complexity of the process with information about context, statistical
uncertainty and multiple indicators of success.

If schools' rankings are a non-negotiable matter, then possibly a well-resourced ratings
agency for schools should be established, something similar to Standard and Poor's which
operates in the commercial world.

A similar approach has been applied to universities for many years.
To publicly rank schools' quality and to apply misleading terms such as "best" or "top",
on the basis of a particular year group's performance in an examination, is irresponsible,
unfair and potentially very damaging.

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