

# Rankings as a Catalyst Improving Student Performance

JOHN CYR AND DIANE FYFE

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On a recent trip to the United Kingdom to visit Diane's brother, the topic of conversation over Sunday family dinner was the choice of high school for our niece's eldest child, the first grandchild. After much "research", a decision had finally been made. We were told it was a "good school": "it has high academic standing and was ranked amongst the top three in the county," announced the mother; "so-and-so's three children went there and they are all at university," reported the grandmother; "too bad it's not an all-girls' school," interjected the grandfather, "they are really good schools; nothing to distract the learning." We turned to the up-to-now silent twelve year old, the object of this discussion, and asked her what she thought of her new school. "Oh! I don't really mind which school I go to, I just want to go to the same school as my best friend Jenny."

We smiled; it would seem that parents, grandparents and teenagers embarking on the choice of high school on both sides of the Atlantic have much the same requirements of a "good school". However, from our experience, educators and families often have differing perspectives on what constitutes a "good school".

More and more often, school "rankings" come into this discussion. In this article, we will consider both sides of the rankings debate, followed by our experiences with two

schools that used ranking as a motivator to initiate school improvement.

The definition of "ranking", according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "To arrange in lines or in regular formation; to determine the relative position of; rate; to take precedence of." The definition commonly used in education is the second one; it is all about "positioning" based on some performance data. The indicators used for the elementary and high school "positioning" or "ranking" tend to be based on academic achievement. For many provinces, the Fraser Institute produces annual ranking information on schools. In Québec, *L'Actualité* annually publishes "The Report Card on Québec Secondary Schools"; in the 2003 edition, it used the following indicators: average on uniform examination marks (based on five June 2002 provincial examination results); percentage of uniform examinations failed; promotion rate; grade inflation (difference between the school mark and the examination mark); and differences in academic achievement between the genders.<sup>1</sup>

Why has ranking become so popular? Increased calls for public accountability have put ministries of education, school boards/districts, and schools under pressure to account for the use of public funds. Parents, more involved in schools than they have ever been through the establishment of Parent Councils, are better informed. At the same time, pressure to improve standards through the promotion of scientific, objective data has led to a search for the proper tools to measure the effectiveness of schools and school boards.

Many see rankings as a way to identify a "good school." School trustees, the educational partners, and the community at large (taxpayers) want to see evidence that their schools and their students are improving academically. Parents want to see their children attain a "good educa-



tion” – to be academically successful, socially well-rounded, and life-long learners. Students, themselves, are not usually focused on the long view; they want to “get through” and move on to the next stage of life. But do rankings help meet these various objectives?

Those who promote ranking believe that it provides information to help parents and students choose a “good school”; that it puts pressure on the underperforming school to improve; and that it provides an opportunity for a school to be scrutinized through a transparent process. Furthermore, they think that because ranking is based on scientific, objective and measurable indicators, it maintains the integrity of the highly respected traditional report card. By providing this baseline data, the proponents will tell you, ranking produces clear articulated goals and improved schools.

Those opposed to ranking, on the other hand, believe that it demoralizes those schools that have a predominantly underprivileged student population; that it does not measure objectively the effectiveness of teaching and learning; that it inhibits creativity because teachers are under pressure to teach to the test. They will tell you that the indicators are too limited in scope; they will question the validity of the assessment tool and criticize the testing environment. They are worried about the perverse effects of high stakes testing that pits student against student and promotes rote-learning rather than deep understanding. Ranking, they will tell you, is competitive not collaborative, promotes segregation, and is biased especially against native students and some ethnic minorities.

It is a hot topic, indeed! A simple Internet search on the Fraser Institute produced 67 pages of sites dealing with issues surrounding just this one ranking model! Jane Gaskell and Donna Vogel of British Columbia write: “The FI (Fraser Institute) wants to turn the debate about quality into one about test scores. Their simplistic ranking system tells us who takes the most Grade 12 exams and how well they do. But these results are not indicators of the quality of our schools unless they are part of a much bigger picture.”<sup>2</sup>

John Barlow, from Alberta, reports “the Fraser Institute report card...is often criticized for unfairly ranking schools, but for some schools to see an improved ranking is gratifying”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the raging debate, most provincial governments

**EN BREF** Le classement des écoles est une question controversée qui n’est pas près de disparaître. Les modèles actuels de classement des écoles sont habituellement injustes, car ils ne tiennent pas compte des composantes à valeur ajoutée de l’école. Deux écoles au Québec ont utilisé les résultats des classements provinciaux comme catalyseur pour susciter l’adoption d’un concept de performance à valeur ajoutée fondée sur une comparaison entre le potentiel établi de l’élève et son rendement. Non seulement ces deux écoles ont-elles connu une augmentation substantielle du rendement de leurs élèves, mais leur philosophie centrale est maintenant différente. Ce sont désormais des établissements plus focalisés, où il y a un niveau accru d’énergie et de dialogue.

across Canada are instituting some form of “School Accountability Plan”, ensuring that school communities are provided with feedback on their schools’ performance. This often takes the form of a ranking structure. It appears that this practice will continue, despite the arguments of ardent and garrulous opponents. Some schools, appreciating that ranking is here to stay, have tried to use the published information to motivate whole communities to become involved with their local school. They seek to turn the Ministry of Education imposed accountability plans towards locally controlled school improvement projects. St. Patrick’s High school in Quebec City and Pontiac High School in Shawville, Quebec are two such schools with quite different stories.

In 2001 the Ministère de L’Éducation du Québec (MEQ) produced its ranking of schools and school boards. St. Patrick’s High School (SPHS) in Quebec City (Central Quebec School Board) had done well in the rankings and was motivated to ensure continual improvement; Pontiac High School (PHS) in Shawville (Western Quebec School Board) ranked among the worst in the province; they wanted to find the reasons behind this situation and to improve it. (It should be noted that SPHS is located in an urban affluent area, whereas PHS is in a depressed rural area.) Motivated by their provincial rankings, and with input and endorsement from each school community, the schools embarked on a process of accountability by producing a plan for school success, keeping in mind the belief that school improvement occurs “one student at a time”.

The authors, who were then Directors General of the two school boards involved, were intrigued by the methods of Dr. George Berwick, principal of Ravens Wood School in Bromley, UK.<sup>iv</sup> Using the concept of value-added performance, based on comparing individual student-established-potential with achievement, Berwick improved the academ-

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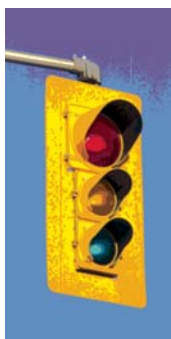
**Figure 1** Pontiac High School report card, based on the traffic light model.

Western Quebec School Board  
Pontiac High School  
Group:  
H.R. Teacher:

Date: April 2003  
Term: 3

Name	Eng. Mark	Eng. Target	Fr. Mark	Fr. Target	Math Mark	Math Target	Geo. Mark	Geo. Target	Eco. Mark	Eco. Target
	47	62	57	60	40	60	40	60	62	61
	83	83	90	85	96	86	90	89	94	93
	81	83	84	85	91	70	90	90	91	90
	85	83	74	85	92	75	90	90	90	90
	80	78	94	75	88	75	86	89	88	89
	72	70	59	70	40	65	52	60	49	65
	60	72	71	85	84	75	82	80	67	80

In these two schools, the ranking became a catalyst... it is no longer a question of measuring student achievement; it is a question of measuring value-added student performance, which in turn provides feedback and an accountability tool for the whole community.



ic performance (and therefore the OFSTED ranking) of his high school. In his school, students and teachers meet together regularly to set “targets” based on the student’s potential. Student achievement is highlighted through a reporting mechanism known as “traffic lights”: students and their teachers discuss their progress and identify a target mark for each term based on an agreed “potential”. If they reach their target it would be identified as green; if close, amber and if not reached, red. (An example, developed as a report card by Pontiac High, is shown in Fig.1 on page 35).<sup>5</sup>

After communicating with Dr. Berwick and Ravens Wood School to verify the transferability of this model to the Quebec schools, we shared these findings with the principals of PHS and SPHS. They consulted with their staffs and governing boards before deciding to embark on a school improvement pilot project with RWS: “The Triple Alliance”. Both the MEQ and the school boards supported this initiative.

This “Triple Alliance” model focused on student performance information as the underpinning that supports student learning and allows learning and support programs to be analyzed. The two Quebec schools, with mentoring from RWS, developed a model that allowed performance information to be integrated into student learning programs. In both schools, the model included *Performance Indicators* – based on both in-school assessments and standardized test results – and a system of *Delivery and Organization*, which supported the use of performance information to set individual student targets, learning partnerships, and modified administrative structures to facilitate dissemination of student performance information. Ravens Wood School staff provided mentoring throughout and became “critical friends” through reciprocal visits among the three schools.

The two determining elements in this process were the individual meetings between staff and students to set targets, which had a significant impact on student motivation and morale, and the use of data in these discussions and in further dialogue and communications with parents and amongst staff members.

After the first two years, both schools improved significantly in their academic performance. But the staff, students, and parents will tell you that much more has happened; the whole ethos of their schools has changed. There is a new level of dialogue, energy and focus. Although the ranking was the motivator for this reflection on academic performance, it was the leadership of the principals and staff that has brought about the focus on performance through using achievement data. The Triple Alliance project was well received in both schools by students, staff and parents because it stressed the need to build upon the excellent practice already taking place in each school, not on improving the ranking. As Rick DuFour states “It is only when students feel connected with their teachers, when they believe that they are recognized, respected and valued, that teachers are able to make a difference in students’ lives”<sup>6</sup>

As the Triple Alliance project underscores, deciding how to use rankings must be the first priority. The current models of ranking schools are usually unfair. They look at raw scores of achievement and academic performance but rarely look at the potential for improvement of the student

scores being measured; they do not take into account the value-added component of the school. In these two schools, the ranking became a catalyst for the ensuing dialogue that focused on school improvement – on realizing the value-added potential. In the Triple Alliance, the schools developed with their own communities their own indicators of success. On the academic side, it is no longer a question of measuring student achievement; it is a question of measuring value-added student performance, which in turn provides feedback and an accountability tool for the whole community. These schools are now being held accountable for the value-added component of their students’ potential for success.

It would appear that ranking is here to stay. However, for a ranking system to be valid and respected, the scope and number of indicators must be extensive. For example, Leithwood, Aitken and Jantzi acknowledge that “[t]he negative consequences of increased accountability demands are ameliorated by information about a broader set of the organization’s well-being than is typical of existing indicator systems or the student achievement data collected by many schools and districts”<sup>7</sup> The outcomes in education are not solely academic, so if we are going to continue ranking schools, this must be respected. We know from the Conference Board of Canada employability skills survey (2000) that employers want to hire people who not only have good academic standing but also have personal management skills and are team players.<sup>8</sup>

We must listen to these voices; the traditional ranking system should not be used in isolation. We appreciate the need for tools that provide transparency and accountability, but ranking on academic performance should not be the only indicator of a “good school”. On the other hand, as we have shown, careful use of rankings with clear objectives in mind can contribute to the ongoing dialogue on good teaching and learning. ★

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#### Notes

- 1 Fraser Institute, *The Report Card on Quebec Secondary Schools*, 2003 (Vancouver, 2003).
- 2 J. Gaskell and D. Vogel. “Fraser Institute Ranking Fails as a Measure of School Quality” in *Opinion Pieces* (Vancouver: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2001), 29.
- 3 J. Barlow, “Fraser Institute Report Card – Turner Valley School Enjoys Renaissance” *Western Wheel News* 29, no. 3 (2004).
- 4 G.T. Berwick, *Building Success: A School’s Journey Of Improvement*. (Bromley: Ravens Wood School Press, 2001).
- 5 G.T. Berwick, G.T. with J. Cyr and D. Fyfe, “The Alliance of Learning Schools” unpublished report on The Triple Alliance (Aylmer, Quebec, November 2002).
- 6 R. DuFour, “Closing the Gap,” KSDC/KSDE (Annual Spring Conference, Wichita, Kansas, April 30, 2003).
- 7 K. Leithwood, R. Aitken and D. Jantzi, *Making Schools Smarter: A System for Monitoring School and District Progress*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press, 2001), 3.
- 8 Conference Board of Canada, *Employability Skills 2000+* (Ottawa, 2000).