SOME TIME AFTER LAST YEAR’S RELEASE OF THE FRASER INSTITUTE’S REPORT Card on Elementary Schools in British Columbia, a remark on CBC caused me momentarily to lose my grip on my coffee cup. I thought I had heard a guest declare that the Institute was non-partisan! I had always considered the Fraser Institute’s lean to the right self-evident. Is it unreasonable to conclude that an organization may be as single-minded in its views as its guests and resident scholars? The pages of its web site are studded with names of fervent conservatives from Mike Harris, Preston Manning and Milton Friedman to Margaret Thatcher. But it was not the opinion of the radio guest that jolted me from my morning reverie; it was the unquestioning acceptance by the show’s host. And because the CBC stalwart – an employee of our national purveyor of sweet reasonableness – did not challenge the remark, I found myself succumbing to that quintessential Canadian malady, self-doubt. Possibly the Institute is truly an unjustly maligned bastion of nonpartisan reflection and research!

A closer look at the Report Card on British Columbia’s Elementary Schools, a Fraser Institute initiated and funded study, may establish whether its conclusions are shaped objectively by facts and figures alone, or whether ideology may influence the undertaking.

STATED AND UNSTATED OBJECTIVES OF THE REPORT CARD
Peter Cowley and Dr. Stephen Easton, the authors of the Report Card, obtain the data for their study primarily from the British Columbia Ministry of Education’s Foundation Skills Assessment Report (FSA). It is likely that the Ministry agrees with the stated objective of the Institute’s document: “to collect a variety of relevant, objective indicators of school performance into one easily accessible public document so that anyone can analyze and compare the performance of individual schools.”1 For Cowley and Easton, however, that is only one goal. They call for a response to the deficiencies they detect in a multitude of schools, implying that these deficiencies are readily remedied by changes in school governance. A limitation of choice allows inefficient practices to flourish and provides no incentive for improvement, hence an expansion of school choice is the solution – so reason the educational free-marketeers.

And while Cowley and Easton do not explicitly promote any particular configuration, they do not need to; of the 20 top ranked academic schools in their report, more than three quarters are private. Not surprisingly, the number of parents reconsidering the wisdom of automatically choosing the neighbourhood public school increases with each new Report Card.

But is the confidence of these parents well founded? Are the ratings and rankings of the Report Card accurate and reliable? Does it direct the attention of parents and educators to the most significant sources of differences in academic achievement? Does their methodology account for significant differences in student characteristics and does it measure only the school-related factors that influence achievement? Does it clearly demonstrate that significant differences in school achievement can be overcome by changes in educational practices alone? Does it provide evidence that school choice will improve the academic performance of schools or better meet the needs and rights of all children?

THE INDICATORS
To calculate the overall ratings for their Report Card, Cowley and Easton employ a formula that quantifies nine indicators: reading, writing and numeracy levels for both Grade 4 and Grade 7 students, gender differences in reading and numeracy in Grade 7, and the percentage of students not

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meeting expectations.

Though the authors assure us that the Report Card "collects a variety of relevant, objective indicators", the rating of a school is really based on the core 3-R's: three indicators, not nine. Granted, reading, writing and numeracy are crucially important enabling skills, but other abilities are arguably equally fundamental. For example, they ignore listening, observing, reflecting, verbal and non-verbal expression. Neither do they assess the effectiveness of prospective schools in fostering community service, participation, leadership, celebration of cultural differences, fair play, respect for all, willingness and ability to learn from others and an understanding for the less advantaged. Their claim that "the Report Card provides a detailed picture of each school" is overstated; the picture is sketchy.

If schools vary in their ability to meet academic requirements, we may assume that they also vary in nurturing behavioral, attitudinal and social growth. A claim that Cowley and Easton have no obligation to measure these skills because the Ministry did not do so can be countered with the reminder that the FSA was designed to evaluate achievement in the 3-Rs only. Since the Report Card aspires to aid parents in choosing a school, it seems reasonable to expect it to address the wider range of necessary skills. Though Cowley and Easton urge parents to visit prospective schools and question their educators, a detailed and objective evaluation might be more helpful.

To calculate the overall rating out of 10, Cowley and Easton do not use the FSA data directly; rather they weight the indicators. The average FSA score for each of the reading, writing and numeracy tests for each of the two grades is allotted a possible 8.3% for a total of 50% of the overall rating. The absence of a gender difference in Grade 7 numeracy and reading results is rewarded with 10% each and, depending on the "percentage functioning below expectations", a certain amount is deducted from the remaining 30%. Grandview Elementary, a school that earned a ranking of 865 out of a total of 1013 elementary schools, illustrates the impact of this weighting scheme. Its overall rating was calculated to be 4.3 out of 10. Cowley and Easton explain their formula but not the rationale that results in a rating of 4.3 for a school in which 80% of the tests that were written meet or exceed expectations.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE REPORT CARD ON BRITISH COLUMBIA’S ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS MAY ESTABLISH WHETHER ITS CONCLUSIONS ARE SHAPED OBJECTIVELY BY FACTS AND FIGURES ALONE, OR WHETHER IDEOLOGY MAY INFLUENCE THE UNDERTAKING.

In addition, Cowley and Easton offer no reasons for selecting 20% as the appropriate award for Grade 7 gender equality in numeracy and reading while allotting only 16.6% for those two tests themselves. When barely a dozen of Vancouver’s 100 schools display a consistency in gender equality on FSA tests over the last five years, the benefit of using this indicator and this degree of weighting may fairly be questioned. Nevertheless, some schools benefit consistently from this formula. To compensate for the absence of a gender gap value in independent schools that are not co-ed, Cowley and Easton make adjustments. In these schools, academics account for 62.4% instead of 50%, and meeting expectations is valued at 37.5% instead of 30%.
given for almost automatically awarding 20% to schools that cannot be affected by the vagaries of the gender variable.

Automatic? Though the authors do not indicate how many of the successful applicants to the top ranking single gender private schools test “below expectations”, we can hazard a rough estimate. Of the over 250 FSA tests written in 2003/2004 by the Grade 4 and 7 students at one of these schools, York House, only a single test fell “below expectations”.8

The Report Card would be strengthened were the use and weighting of the gender difference indicator revisited and were the authors to pursue intake measurement with the same enthusiasm as they do outcome achievement.

FACTORS AND INFLUENCES
The Report Card lists a number of factors that may affect learning and may therefore be useful in assessing schools. But we must question the relevance of some and the omission of others since they relate to the issue of impartiality.

First, the location of the school is meant to assist parents in comparing the results of “schools with similar school and student characteristics”. Then why are all schools from Fort St. James to Point Grey ranked in a single list at the end of the Report Card? A list that clustered schools by similar demographic characteristics rather than geography would be more valid.

Second, the independent/public designation seems intended to direct attention to a correlation between school governance and performance. Though Cowley’s and Easton’s rankings suggest a causal relationship, the link is unproven until a multiplicity of other factors is considered.

Third, the Report Card notes the number of students in Grade 4. These values are of little significance on their own but should serve as a reminder that small classes can easily skew results – a point that the authors ignore. Parents are probably less interested in total grade enrolment than in the size of classes and whether they are multi-level; values for neither are given.

Also noticeable by its absence is a cost analysis for different schools. The correlation between the highest academic ranking (awarded to a few independent schools) and a per-pupil expenditure (twice that of public schools) is striking. Nevertheless, a few public schools place only fractionally lower. Since efficiency is a concern of Cowley and Easton, the decision to highlight only the academic performance of the elite independent schools and not the associated costs is surprising. They thereby miss the opportunity to evaluate the impact on academic achievement of educational opportunities made available by differences in funding.

A similar error of omission relates to inclusion. The Report Card reports the percentage of students who require ESL instruction and special needs assistance for public schools only (where such instruction is required by the School Act.) Though Cowley elsewhere admits that independent schools can be more selective with regard to whom they accept and “include”,9 the Report Card does not list values for ESL and special needs enrolment for those schools, although those figures are available from the FSA. By using “n/a” in place of the actual number – which is often zero – Cowley and Easton obscure demographic differences and make comparisons more difficult.

Most educators are convinced that the community benefits of inclusion outweigh the increase in instructional complexity. They are, however, equally convinced that when inclusion is not sufficiently supported, it negatively affects overall instruction and academic achievement. Whatever the level of support and instruction, inclusion has direct consequences on school-wide measures of academic performance. The scores of ESL students with limited English skills, as well as of those students who require curricular and instructional adaptations, are included in the calculation of the school’s FSA score. Unless student composition is similar, comparisons cannot be relied upon to gauge the relative expertise of educators or the effectiveness of schools.

The tables in the Report Card also list the average number of years of education of the parent with the most education. A 1994 meta-analysis of studies about factors that help students learn found the “curriculum of the home” – including talking about various subjects, encouraging read-
ing and discussing what is read, monitoring TV and peer activities and showing interest in school activities – near the top. However, parental education was not even mentioned. The authors of *Measuring up: Canadian Results in the OECD PISA Study*, do note a correlation between parental education and student achievement, but only for certain professions. And what is the impact on academic achievement when parents send their children to tutors and private learning centers? To what extent do cultural, economic or geographic factors affect performance? Cowley and Easton do not begin to examine these factors, and yet, without data on the degree and nature of parental involvement and its correlation to academic performance, assessment of school effectiveness cannot be accurate.

**EDUCATORS: THE ONLY INFLUENCE?**
No one disputes the statement by Cowley and Easton “that what goes on in the schools makes a difference to academic results and that some schools make more of a difference than others.” But at times their assessment of the capacity of educators to influence academic achievement is unrealistic: “Effective schools produce good results, regardless of the family backgrounds of their students.”

Possibly they feel that their reference to the classic 1979 study by Michael Rutter, *Fifteen Thousand Hours*, supports such a statement. Though Rutter found that the effectiveness of schools can differ even when student demographics are similar, his conclusions are far more measured: “The results [from 15,000 hours of observation] carry the strong implication that schools can do much to foster good behaviour and attainment, and that, even in a disadvantaged area, schools can be a force for the good.”

Cowley’s and Easton’s excessive expectations of educators are encountered more than once: “Undoubtedly some personal and family characteristics, left unmitigated, can have a deleterious effect on a student’s academic development. However, the *Report Card* provides evidence that successful teachers overcome any such impediments.” Rutter not only emphatically cautions us from ascribing so much influence to schools, he adds, “we agree with Bernstein (1970) that education cannot compensate for the inequities of society” – an observation Cowley and Easton chose to overlook. To arrive at his conclusions, Rutter accounted for all conceivable student, family and community variables so that school factors which influenced achievement and behaviour could be isolated and assessed; he most certainly did not find that the achievement of schools with twice the funding and disproportionately high numbers of academically able students from advantaged families and neighbourhoods can be used as benchmarks to measure the effectiveness of schools that include a substantial number of students who are academically less able, and who come from families and neighbourhoods that are less advantaged. The implied overlap of methodology and data between the *Report Card* and Rutter’s work is difficult to detect. The claim by Cowley and Easton that their study confirms Rutter’s findings, is only possible if the earlier study is read selectively.

**RATING THE EXAMINERS**
The focus of the *Report Card* is exceedingly narrow. To identify schools that effectively meet the expectations of the larger community, parents should have access not only to their academic results but also to objective information regarding their success in nurturing non-academic, behavioral, attitudinal and social skills. But even the formula that Cowley and Easton use to calculate academic ratings is questionable. Their weighting of the scores for reading, writing, numeracy, gender differences and meeting expectations exaggerates the differences between schools and school systems.

The shortcomings of the *Report Card* are glaring. It glosses over, or fails to consider, some of the influences that others have found responsible for large differences in academic achievement. Until its authors take into account the numbers of students who require ESL and special needs instruction in each school, the effect of selective admission, the vagaries of the gender gap and the differences in per-pupil cost, a ranking that includes both public and independent schools lacks validity. Research that Christopher and Sarah Lubinski have been conducting for years has lately aroused intense interest in academic and education communities. Most recently they analyzed the achieve-

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being 80% bias-free misrepresents the extent to which ideology appears to have influenced the findings. Perhaps we should accept, when measuring intricate and complex human relationships, that numbers — while appearing to be objective — can just as easily mislead as inform. Perhaps it is sufficient to simply observe that evidence of relentless and unflinching impartiality is not apparent either in the nature of the shortcomings identified in this examination or in the consistency with which some independent schools appear to benefit from them.

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Elementary students, their parents, their educators, their communities and the province are not well served by the Report Card. It presents, arguably, an incomplete, superficial and misleading picture of the state of schools in just one of Canada’s many provinces for which the Fraser Institute issues Report Cards. It accomplishes little and unjustifiably alarms all parties. Cowley and Easton do deserve credit for drawing attention to the possibility, desirability and, in some cases, the need to improve the education of our students. The contention, however, that their ratings and rankings identify schools whose practices, if emulated, will lead to superior academic results is based on the assumption that the differences indicated by the FSA results are chiefly attributable to educators and school procedures. This assumption is supported by neither the argument nor the evidence presented by the Report Card. Though studies, like those of the Lubienskis, convincingly challenge the belief that market forces are best suited to improve schools, Cowley and Easton choose not to respond to findings contrary to their views.

Before endorsing the forms of school choice championed explicitly by Hepburn and the Fraser Institute, and indirectly by the authors of the Report Card, parents and the community should weigh the possible consequences of turning away from our public school system without unambiguous proof of its weakness or the superiority of an alternative. School reform, Levin asserts, should only be considered when compelling evidence is offered that addresses “all four criteria of freedom of choice, efficiency, equity and social cohesion ...”21 The Report Card begins to concern itself with only two; our present balance of public and private schools addresses all four. The results on international tests by our students, our province’s economic and cultural diversity, as well as our readiness to embrace a wide diversity of opinion and belief, is due in no small measure to the current arrangement of schools and to the contributions of those working within both systems. Educators from both — not just one — deserve recognition and praise. To opt for an expansion of school choice without reliable information and a thorough public debate, and to abandon neighbourhood schools rather than overcome whatever difficulties may be encountered, threatens the ready access of every student, regardless of ability, race, religion or parental income, to rich learning experiences.

Notes

2 Ibid., 3.
3 Ibid., 124.
4 Ibid., 52.
6 Cowley and Easton, 52.
7 Ibid., 124.
9 P. Cowley, Technical Faults in BC’s School Funding (Fraser Forum, May 2001). http://oldfraser.lexi.net/publications/forum/2001/05/section_05.htm
12 Cowley and Easton, 3.
13 Ibid., 9.
15 Cowley and Easton, 9.
16 Ibid., 18.
19 Ibid.

DIETMAR WABER has taught art and photography in Richmond for decades and occasionally forsakes the resonant ambiguities of the image for the directness of the written word.