

# League Tables - In Favour *flawed but far better than none*

Carl O'Brien

Just over 20 years ago, The Irish Times published the first feeder school tables which provided a school-by-school list of progression rates to higher education. It upset the education establishment at the time, but it was a game-changer for parents. In the absence of any academic information on school performance, parents had to rely almost entirely on the local grapevine for information on one of the biggest decisions they are faced with: what second level school to send their child to.

Twenty years on, feeder school lists remain popular with parents, who are largely aware of the limitations of feeder school tables. The flaws are clear – and we acknowledged them in The Irish Times every year.

Critics, for example, say they are a crude indicator of what schools do. Teaching and learning, ethos and values, school size and gender mix, subject choice, access to sport and other extracurricular activities are just as important in the eyes of many parents and students.

They also do not take account of the socio-economic challenges faced by schools which have higher proportions of students from disadvantaged homes, migrant children or learners with additional needs. For some, simply finishing school is a far bigger achievement in relative terms than going to university.

And, in more recent years, there has been criticism that the data does not include information on school leavers' progression to further education or apprenticeships, reinforcing the notion that anything other than third level is "second best"

These are all convincing arguments. In fact, they are so valid that we acknowledge these limitations in our coverage of the feeder school lists each year. Why? We think it's important to be as informed as possible.

Many who oppose providing school exam data or other information on academic performance, it appears, do not.

In advocating that information be censored or kept under wraps, critics are, in effect, saying that they know the limitations of the data, but the public does not. In simple terms, parents and students are not bright enough to understand this and should be shielded from their own ignorance. It's a condescending argument, as Prof Kevin Denny of UCD has previously pointed out.

Making an informed decision is hugely important for parents – yet it is what much of the educational system seems intent on preventing.

Yes, there could be more sophisticated feeder school lists which take account of the "value added" impact which schools

have on their students. In fact, a team of academics at Maynooth University has produced such a measure. It could prove valuable if it was combined with students' exam results over time. However, the publication of league tables using Department of Education data remains illegal, a stance out of line with almost all other English-speaking countries.

We could also measure the proportion of students progressing to further education and apprenticeships, which have excellent outcomes for students. Again, much of the education establishment doesn't want to release this, either. We've tried to get this data, year after year, without success. The Department of Education's hostility to feeder school lists is understandable. Inequality in education is often hidden – but this is one of the rare moments where the scale of it is laid bare. The fact that getting to college in some parts of Dublin means crossing some of the deepest ravines of the social divide should sound alarm bell at the highest levels of government.

The publication of feeder schools has, in its own way, brought more transparency to education. Whole school evaluations and inspection reports weren't available to the public back in 2002, when The Irish Times first published the feeder school lists. The Department relented on releasing these reports, arguably because critics could not credibly denounce feeder school lists but reject demands for more general information on schools.

In Ireland, the conversation has changed. There's a grudging acceptance in most quarters that the data published now is here to stay, at least as long as the Government refuses to provide any other academic data on school performance.

Information is power. Those parents tied into professional networks likely have a good idea about where the schools that send most students to third level are. Others do not. All parents should have a chance to be as well-informed as possible to help make the right decision for their son or daughter, based on their needs.

That is why we publish feeder school lists. And it's why we believe this information – for all its flaws – is far better than none.

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# League Tables - Against *a bad idea whose time has gone*

Joe O'Hara

One of the more interesting aspects of writing about school league tables in Ireland is the manner in which we have managed to simultaneously take a strong, formal position that decries their use for sound educational and social reasons, while at the same time facilitating the production of annual sets of the self-same league tables that are avidly dissected across staffroom coffee tables, domestic breakfast tables and, yes, University lunch tables.

I have spent nearly 25 years working with colleagues in the Centre for Evaluation, Quality and Inspection at Dublin City University (EQI), thinking about, researching and writing about how we conceptualise and operationalise notions of quality in our education system. While responsibility for all that follows is my own, I would like to acknowledge the work of my EQI colleagues in helping to shape it.

I think that school league tables are a bad idea. I appreciate the arguments of proponents who suggest that they provide useful evidence for parents, provide rich data for policy makers and hold schools and teachers to account. However, I think that the evidence for many of these claims is flimsy, and more to the point, that the negative systemic impact of the use of league tables as demonstrated internationally far outweighs any claimed benefit. I suggest that league tables often oversimplify the complex landscape of educational outcomes, reducing the rich tapestry of student achievement and school effectiveness to a mere numerical ranking. This oversimplification neglects the multifaceted nature of education, undermining the very essence of a holistic learning experience.

In Ireland, the general issues surrounding the use of league tables are exacerbated by the proxy metric that we use for ranking schools – that of progression to Higher Education. By any standard, this is a limited metric and one with a whole range of inbuilt biases. Perhaps the most glaring of these is the disproportionate importance it gives to the socio-economic profile of the school. Simply put, and this is borne out year after year in the rankings published - schools from more affluent areas do better as they tend to see a higher proportion of their students progress to Higher Education. This doesn't surprise but it fatally undermines any claim that the league tables perform a function allied with transparency and accountability.

Simply put, if we skew the input in such a manner that further advantages those who are already privileged, we create an environment that undermines the work done across our education system to add value to our children's educational experiences and expectations.

This latter point is particularly important given the enormous importance that Irish schools place on their core values or ethos. Recent work conducted by EQI colleagues helping schools define and make informed, evidence based statements about their

ethos, a process also involving parents and students, gives voice and agency in a conversation that is often conducted about them rather than with them to the detriment of all (O'Brien 2022, Skerritt, 2023; Brown, 2021).

The danger with league tables is that they ignore this breadth and instead focus on a metric that fails to capture the diverse talents and skills that students develop throughout their educational journey.

These real world impacts on schooling can be seen in jurisdictions that formally include league tables in their quality infrastructure. Critics argue that league tables create a culture of "teaching to the test", where educators may feel pressured to prioritise exam preparation over fostering a deep understanding of the subject matter. This not only compromises the quality of education but sidelines the importance of fostering critical thinking and other non-cognitive skills essential for real-world success. Furthermore, the public release of league tables can contribute to a stigmatisation of underperforming schools, perpetuating a negative image that may hinder efforts for improvement.

In conclusion, I would argue that while school league tables may offer a seemingly straightforward means of comparing educational institutions, their inherent problems cannot be overlooked. From oversimplification and biased assessment criteria to the distortion of educational priorities, the limitations of these tables call for a re-evaluation of how we assess and communicate the success of schools.

Embracing a more nuanced and holistic approach to educational evaluation is crucial to fostering a comprehensive understanding of how schools work and what they do well, ultimately, improving the quality of education for all students.

Education is one of the great successes of the Irish State; we do it well and are lucky to have committed, engaged and well trained professionals working across the continuum. To endanger that in the name of dubious claims around objectivity, transparency and usefulness strikes me as being a major mistake and one we should continue to work against.

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