

Testing, testing ...

By Tony Pearson

‘Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted, counts.’ – Albert Einstein

Recently, a right-wing organization in Vancouver once again had the gall to ‘rank’ Ontario schools accordingly to a heavily-biased system designed to back their anti-public school agenda.

There's a limit on the amount of words I can write in an editorial. But I could fill the entire paper with the destructive impact of (a) the Fraser Institute; (b) the dangers of ranking schools, especially on the basis of elitist standards.

As for the Fraser Institute which gave the corrosive grade to our local students, let me simply point out a few facts:

1. It is funded by conservative and right-wing ideologies in both Canada and the United States. Prominent among their donors are the American Koch brothers, oil billionaires who fund much of the extreme right wing of the Republican Party. It is also heavily funded by tobacco companies.
2. Not surprisingly, it takes right wing positions on most public issues. For example, mirroring the views of its oil baron patrons, it denies climate change, and supports oil sands development.
3. On education, it is a big fan of private schools. On its website, it carries an article moaning and wailing about the fact that about 95 per cent of Ontario students attend publicly funded schools.

Moreover, the Institute's school rankings are based on preciously little information. They look at Grade 9 test scores, the Grade 10 literacy test – and that's about it. Oh, they also look at the number of special needs students at a school. Apparently to the Fraser Institute, these are second-class people who drag down a school's standing. High rankings are given to schools that few or no students in college or work force courses; only university academic courses meet the Institute's definition of a good school.

But the issue isn't just the right-wing Fraser Institute. It's the whole issue of making value judgments about what's important in education. It's about the stupidity of ranking schools by test scores. As one wit pointed out, ‘Believing we can improve schooling with more tests is like believing you can make yourself grow taller by measuring your height.’

Cathy Portt, superintendent of education for the Hastings-Prince Edward school board, put it well when she stated: ‘At our board, our consistent focus is on supporting the achievement and well-being of each student we serve. School and board staff use a variety of data to assist in school improvement planning, including student work samples, classroom assessments, and individual student achievement reports.’

‘The Fraser Institute Report provides an incomplete picture of school effectiveness. There is no evidence to show that ranking schools improves student learning. The bigger picture is that schools are dynamic, engaging learning communities where all students have numerous opportunities to be engaged in learning, physical activity and social interactions. Tests are indicators of where students need extra help. Tests are only useful if they are used to improve student learning.’

Some years ago, it dawned on educators that there wasn't one measure of so-called intelligence, but many. There's math and language capability, of course, but there's also artistic, athletic and social skills, and they should count as well.

There's team building and problem solving, vital to success in the labour force. There's also common sense, as displayed in making moral decisions, for example. But if standard tests become the be-all and end-all of student assessment, then schools will devote themselves simply to ‘teaching test-taking,’ and important fields of life-important skills will be neglected.

In the end, surely what matters is how schools prepare students for success in life – in the work force, at home, and in the community. What is more worth knowing – calculus, or the ability to read a blueprint or a spreadsheet? Is it more important to know grammar rules, or to be able to make a convincing presentation of an idea? What counts depends on your goals and your situation.

At our high school, important, life-relevant learning is taking place. Just look at the innovative Northern Outdoor and Environmental programs (NOS and NERDS), designed to equip students with skills relevant to businesses in our area.

The Fraser Institute would wipe out such programs as ‘insufficiently academic,’ just as they would ignore any students with special learning needs.

That's not just bad educational practice, that's detrimental to student development. Our high school, its teachers, staff, and students deserve more respect.

So the next time you hear anything about school ‘rankings,’ ignore it for the BS it truly is.

Using one instrument to deal with the complexity of learning reminds me of the old saying: ‘If the only tool you use is a hammer, then you're going to handle every situation like it's a nail.’