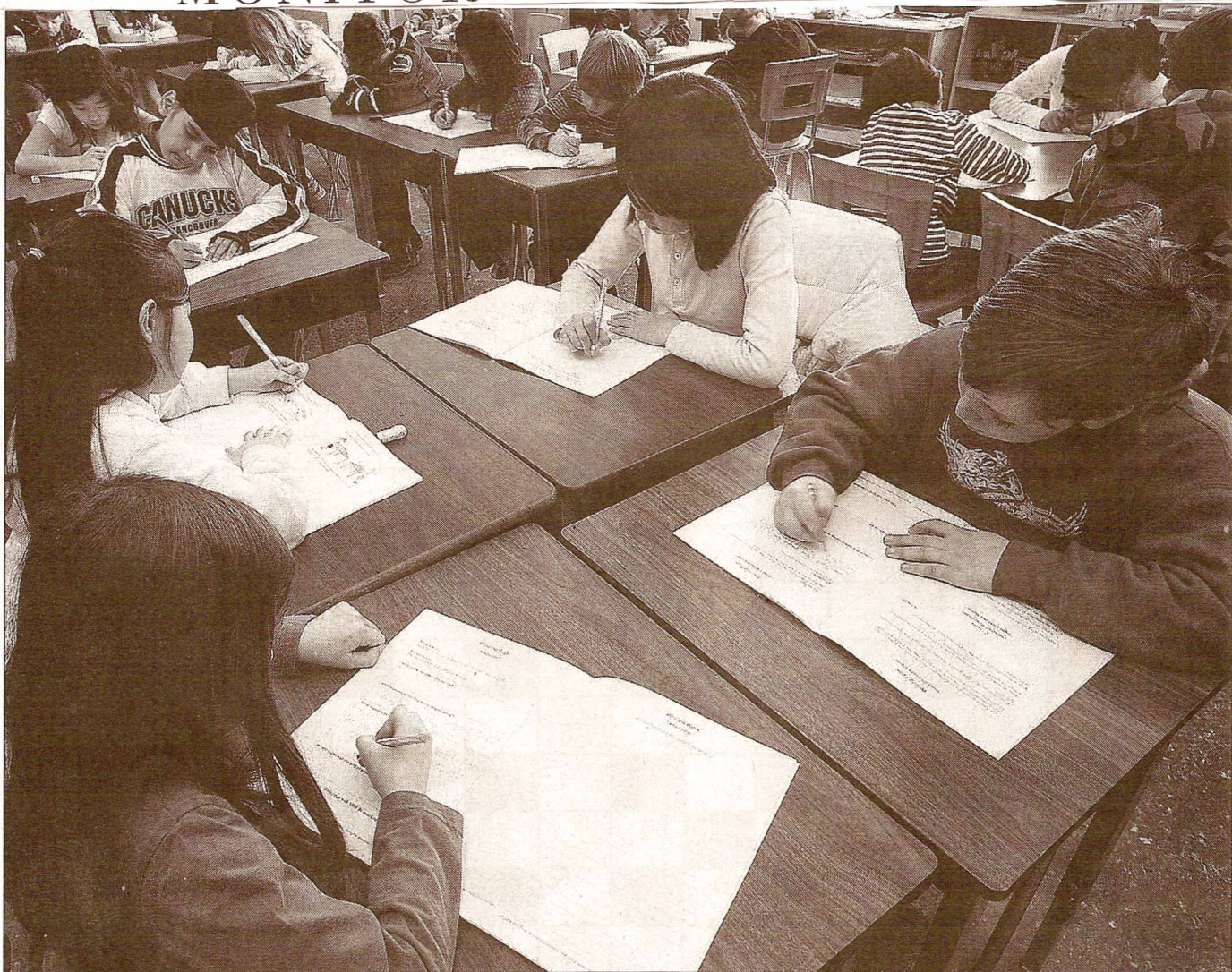




CANWEST NEWS SERVICE ARCHIVES

The Maclean's magazine university rankings use more sound methodology than does the Fraser Institute.

The case against the Fraser Institute's school rankings

Parents should ignore flawed report and contact the Ministry of Education

Last week, the Fraser Institute released its controversial annual report card on B.C. schools, using data drawn from the province-wide Foundation Skills Assessment tests.

Some critics object to the report card because of its FSA component. However, in this article, University of Victoria professor Helen Raptis demonstrates other flaws in methodology that make the report card less balanced than it purports to be.

In past years, the Times Colonist has published the report card. The newspaper is not doing so this year.

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Highlights from the Report Card on British Columbia's Elementary Schools

- Among the 57 countries and 10 Canadian provinces that participated in the 2006 PISA international testing, BC ranked 4th in overall science results; 6th in reading; and 13th in mathematics.
- The five-year-average rating (out of 10) in this Report Card was 8.3 for independent schools and 6.0 for public schools. Over the past five years, 26 independent schools and 5 public schools enjoyed five-year-average ratings of 9.0 or higher.
- Of the 876 schools in this Report Card, 51 public and 7 independent schools enjoyed statistically significant improvement over the past five years. During the same period, 73 public and 3 independent schools showed statistically significant decline.
- Among schools with average parental income in the bottom quarter, 37 public and 23 independent schools enjoyed average five-year ratings of 8.0 or above average.

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British Columbia

Every year, students in B.C. write government-administered examinations: the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) in grades 4 and 7, and provincial exams in grades 10 to 12.

Like small-scale (classroom-based) assessment, such large-scale provincial tests are critical instruments in an educator's toolbox. Indeed, evidence indicates that effective schools use multiple sources of data — including standardized tests — to strategize and improve their effectiveness.

Soon after B.C.'s government tests are marked, though, the Fraser Institute publishes its school rankings and low-achieving — usually low socio-economic status (SES) — schools pay a heavy price when parents of high-scoring students move them to higher ranking schools.

The Fraser Institute would argue that parents are simply exercising their democratic right to free choice. I agree. But shouldn't parental choice be informed by valid information?

I believe the Fraser Institute's overly simplistic school rankings are not valid sources for parental decision-making because of the flawed methods used to derive them. Here's what parents need to know about the rankings.

First, the limited newspaper coverage that the rankings receive leaves many parents with the mistaken impression that the rankings are based entirely on test scores. They are not. The FSAs make up only 45 per cent of an elementary school's overall rank, provincial exams a mere 25 per cent. A school's rank score is in fact a composite of tests and other indicators.

What is most worrying is that several of the indicators discriminate against low-SES students. To illustrate: One of the indicators wrapped into a school's overall rank is "the percentage of the tests that could have been written

by students who were absent, exempted from writing the test or, for any other reason, did not provide a meaningful response to the test" (Fraser Institute, Report Card on B.C.'s Elementary Schools, 2009).

Absenteeism is known to be higher in low-SES schools because of various factors, such as poverty. The use of this indicator artificially deflates the rankings of low-SES schools. A more accurate portrayal of a school's academic achievement can be found in actual test scores.

There are several other ways that the rankings unnecessarily depress low-SES schools' academic achievement. For instance, part of a school's overall rank is assigned by calculating "the percentage of ... tests written by the school's students that were judged to reflect performance below expectations" (Ibid., page 6).

This indicator penalizes low-performing schools by essentially accounting for their low test scores twice. Equally problematic is that an overall rank is partly based on the difference between male and female students' test scores in reading and numeracy for Grade 7 and for English and math at the secondary level.

For reasons that researchers still do not fully understand, the impact of gender on student achievement is more pronounced among low-SES than high-SES populations. By including the gender gap in its measure of a school's overall rank, the Fraser Institute again artificially depresses the standing of low-SES schools while bolstering the rank of (often high SES) single-gender independent schools where the gender indicator cannot be applied.

Another way that the rankings handicap low-SES schools is by including a score for graduation rates and delayed advancement rates which tend to be worse among low-SES students. The research literature is also solid in its findings that students' decisions to drop

out are not solely based on their school experiences. There is usually a triggering event — often in the home environment — that prompts students to move their studies to the bottom of their priority list.

Implying that graduation and advancement are purely within the control of a school is erroneous and discriminatory to low-SES schools.

In another example of unorthodox data analysis, the Fraser Institute combines the FSA scores of Grade 7 students from various middle schools into the ranks of the students' former elementary schools in situations where such elementary schools only go up to Grade 5.

Although the test scores collected from one school should not be attributed to the academic achievement for another, the authors of the rankings erroneously "believe it is reasonable to make this attribution" (p. 5). Parents need to know that the ranking of an elementary school composed of kindergarten to Grade 5 actually includes the test scores for Grade 7 FSAs written by students who left the elementary school almost two years earlier.

Let's see how some of the many indicators that go into a composite ranking can distort schools' "true" test scores.

On last year's rankings, Torquay Elementary tied with several other schools at 131st place provincially. But according to the Ministry of Education website, the percentages of Torquay's Grade 4s meeting or exceeding expectations on the FSAs were 97 per cent (reading); 85 per cent (writing); and 87 per cent (numeracy).

These figures are significantly better than those of Pacific Christian School at 82 per cent (reading); 69 per cent (writing); and 76 per cent (numeracy). Yet Pacific Christian ranked 108th.

This example illustrates that the Fraser Institute's rankings do not accurately reflect a school's academic achievement as measured by

government-administered FSAs.

There is nothing inherently wrong with ranking organizations. Methodologically solid rankings are important sources of information to help people make decisions.

Take, for instance, the rankings of *Fortune 500* companies or the *Maclean's* university rankings. Unlike the Fraser Institute's simplistic ratings, methodologically sound rankings compare similar entities — apples with apples.

For example, the *Maclean's* rankings only compare the University of Victoria to other mid-sized "comprehensive" universities with similar programs. Notably, UVic is in a different category from large, research-intensive universities with medical schools, such as the University of British Columbia or McGill.

Furthermore, the *Maclean's* rankings judge universities on components over which the institution has control: Class size; student-faculty ratio; percentage of the budget allocated to student services; etc. Not only does the Fraser Institute erroneously compare different types of schools to each other (small one-room rural versus large urban), they mistakenly judge them by factors that are not entirely within their control.

These are but some of the reasons why I believe the Fraser Institute rankings are flawed. Parents seeking information about school effectiveness would be better off bypassing the rankings and getting their information from schools themselves. Anyone interested in the outcomes of government-administered tests should consult the Ministry of Education achievement reports available at <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting>.

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