

School Grades: Identifying British Columbia's Best Schools (2008)

For the *Commentary* by David Johnson, http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/commentary_258.pdf

The David Johnson/C.D. Howe Institute British Columbia School Grades Database (2008):

For the 2008 school performance indicators, [click here](#)

For the 2008 grade 4 community profiles, [click here](#)

For the 2008 grade 7 community profiles, [click here](#)

Note: These tables were updated in September 2008 to account for an error caused by the creation of duplicate observations.

Project Summary and Methodology

Standardized testing is a controversial subject, particularly in British Columbia. British Columbia students write the Foundation Skills Assessment (FSA) in Grade 4 and Grade 7. This is a standardized exam that is comparable between years and tests students on numeracy, reading, and writing. What is the best way to make use of this data to determine which schools do the best job of educating students?

Standardized test results can be a valuable resource as long as they are placed into the proper context. It is no surprise that students who have parents with more education or speak English as a first language do far better on standardized tests than otherwise disadvantaged students. This *Commentary* compares outcomes in British Columbia schools where students come from similar backgrounds.

Professor David Johnson's methodology, based on his ground-breaking study of Ontario schools, identifies which schools are doing better or worse than expected given the socioeconomic characteristics of their students. By linking student postal codes to census data on education, income, employment, housing status and other variables, this study has constructed profiles of the British Columbia communities from which elementary school students are drawn.

In British Columbia slightly over half of the variation in tests scores is associated with variation in student backgrounds. The other half of the variation is associated with school-specific characteristics. This half of the variation allows a fair comparison of schools because the ratings in this study are constructed by comparing schools with a similar mix of students. This *Commentary* also finds strong evidence that there are schools where educators or parents appear to have influenced the composition of students actually writing the assessments and thus raised their school's rank in previous rankings of school quality.

Parents and educators alike should welcome a fair comparison of schools, rather than a ranking. When exceptionally strong schools are identified, then other schools can try to understand and emulate what exceptional schools are doing. The associated tables of school test scores, student socioeconomic characteristics at schools and, most importantly, the percentile ratings of schools allow a comparison of how schools actually do on the Foundation Skills Assessments compared to the scores predicted by the socioeconomic characteristics of their students. A high percentile school is an exceptionally strong school that has outperformed other similar schools. A low percentile school is a school with weak

FSA results relative to other similar schools. Schools at both extremes of the percentile distribution should be further investigated.

While the critics of the Foundation Skills Assessment are right in saying that socioeconomic characteristics are a major driver of test scores, this *Commentary* provides a measure of the variation in test scores across schools with the same socioeconomic characteristics. This allows a fair comparison of schools. Standardized tests in British Columbia are a useful exercise for school comparisons as long as the data are used in an appropriate manner.

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