

[Ontario's Best Public Schools: An Update to *Signposts of Success* \(2005\)](#)

For the ebrief by David Johnson, [click here](#).

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The David Johnson/C.D. Howe Institute Ontario School Performance database (2007):

For the 2007 school performance rankings, [click here](#).

For the 2007 school community profiles, [click here](#).

For *Signposts of Success: Interpreting Ontario's Elementary School Test Scores* (2005), Policy Study 40, [click here](#).

Project Summary and Methodology

There are about 4000 publicly funded elementary schools in Ontario. Can we determine which do the best job of educating students? Yes – but not through the measurement methods that have been prevalent until recently.

Each spring, for the past eight years, Ontario students in Grades 3 and 6 write assessments administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). If a student scores at a Level 3 or Level 4 in these assessments, that student's performance is classified as successful. The percentage of students that achieve a Level 3 or Level 4 in each grade at a given school is published annually. And it is on that basis that schools have generally been evaluated.

In reality, however, a school cannot be considered a success just because a high percentage of students are successful; nor can schools be meaningfully ranked on this basis. Under such a system, the schools that draw students from neighbourhoods with the highest incomes and best educated parents will likely have the highest success rates – since these factors have been shown to correlate strongly with student performance. As a result, some commentators argue that the publication of school rankings can tell us little about any given school, its educators, or its pedagogical methods.

But not all variation in school results can be traced to variation in the social and economic characteristics of the communities where they are located. By linking student postal codes to census data on education, income, employment, housing status and other variables, I have constructed profiles of the Ontario communities from which elementary school students are drawn. I found that only 40 to 50 percent of the variation in school success rates – depending on whether testing results from Grade 3 or 6 are examined – can be ascribed to socio-economic characteristics.

By focusing on the statistical variation that remains after the influence of socio-economic variables has been accounted for, I have been able to create meaningful performance indicators for 3326 elementary schools in Ontario. Only schools where we have results from three assessments in a grade from 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06 are evaluated because only in this case are there sufficient data to actually compare schools fairly.

Schools included in the ranking are assigned a percentile measure in Grade 3, Grade 6 or both. The number 90, for instance, indicates that a school's results for that grade are better than the results at 90 percent of schools with similar socio-economic profiles. This comparison is fair to teachers and principals because it is performed after separating out the effects of the student pool at the school. A parent with children at a low percentile school could and should expect better results. School administrators should be very interested in what is happening at a school with either a very low or a very high percentile score.

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