

Administrative and Assessment Data For What?

A Response to the Paper

**Do Education Systems Count?
The Role of Administrative and Assessment Data
by
Victor B. Glickman**

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(The views expressed in this response belong to the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Canadian Education Association)

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to the paper *Do Education Systems Count? The Role of Administrative and Assessment Data* by Victor Glickman. The central argument of his paper is that in order to improve student outcomes we need analyses of empirical data that provide trends in student outcomes at the level of the school and district and further, that effective use of such data requires the cultivation of a culture of performance management. Glickman emphasizes both the need for such data and the need for an enlarged capacity for analysis. His reference to ‘empirical story-telling’ is an important reminder that however good the data are, they remain essentially worthless unless their story has meaning for those that ought to act on it.

Glickman notes that in some provinces there is still no means of linking data to students. I recall from my time as a school trustee that it was in the early 1980's that the Toronto Board of Education in Ontario began asserting the need in Ontario for a means of tracking student progress through the school system. But only recently is this becoming a possibility. CEA is a Canada-wide organization called upon by all sorts of people to answer what appear to be such simple questions such as what is the drop-out rate in Canada. My answer takes a full paragraph – it depends on the definition; it depends on how it is measured; and our best estimates at the national level come from surveys.

I understand that BC has all kinds of potentially useful data and I applaud the work of Edudata Canada in making it useful to school districts. Glickman provides evidence of the government's commitment to the use of data in school improvement and the Deputy Minister's stated intention of meeting with the Superintendents to discuss the performance of school districts and plans for improvement is a fine example of the

leadership we will need if we are to become really serious about improving educational outcomes in a significant way.

I titled my response *Administrative and Assessment Data for What?* because I am not yet persuaded that the question has been satisfactorily answered or if it has, that the answer has been widely understood. Obviously we want, indeed need improvement in school outcomes, and yes, the best advice is that it comes from whole school improvement efforts. But what will we judge to be improvement? When I think about the matter of more research as a prerequisite for real improvement, I am reminded of words written in 1979 by Ron Edmonds, a pioneer in school based, "We can, whenever, and wherever we choose, successfully educate all children whose is of interest to us. We already know more than we need in order to do this. Whether we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't done it so far."¹ We now have 20 more years of research yet the benefits of large scale reform continue to elude us.

My specific interests in assessment data lie within a framework of education as social policy - that is policy concerned mainly with achieving particular outcomes for society as a whole, and especially for vulnerable groups.² In these terms education should benefit the poor proportionately more than it does the rich. At the moment it does the opposite. This is largely accounted for by the fact that those from lower

¹ Edmonds, Ronald. *Effective Schools for the Urban Poor*. Educational Leadership Association for the Supervision and Development of Curriculum. Alexandria, VA. 1979 (October) 37 (1)

² Willms, Douglas. Presentation to CEA Annual general Meeting. September 2001. Toronto

socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to go on to post-secondary education.

Formal education is the single most significant public investment in social and economic development. As Glickman reminds us, we spend about \$40 billion dollars a year. I assume that we don't intend that the outcomes will be more or less distributed within the population as they might have been without such investment. Schools are supposed to positively affect current and future outcomes for society as well as individual.

I appreciate very much, Glickman's reference to "empirical story telling". Stories are a special and sometimes under-acknowledged way in which human beings make to make sense of things. Turning research findings into compelling stories is an essential ingredient in the research, policy and practice mix. As Ben Levin's paper points out, this is especially important for influencing public and political opinion. It is true also of professional opinion. Large numbers of school administrators and teachers maintain professional stances towards what they do that run counter to what we would expect based on research. A good example can be found in school vision statements (or government policies) that purport some variant of the notion of "success for all" but the organization and practices of the school that flow from this vision, take little account of what we know about how we might achieve success for all students.

I suggest we are mainly not clear about what we expect students to achieve and especially not clear about whether educational or curricular outcomes are for all children or only some. I think we need a new plot for the story of school improvement. Doug Willms of the Centre for Research in Social Policy at the University of New

Brunswick, in accepting the CEA Award for Education Research told what for many in the audience was a compelling new story.³ He called it the story of converging gradients; that is that youth from homes of well educated parents do almost equally well in literacy scores in all countries but those in Canadian homes of low parental education attainment do worse in Canada than they do in a number of other countries. It is the slope of the gradient that we need to change. (Note: Willms analysis comes from the International Literacy Survey for the cohort 15-25 years. The recently released PISA, OECD assessments of 15 year olds indicate that Canada is doing better in this regard.) We need to change the outcomes for the large percentage of young people that do not go to post-secondary education because they are not qualified to do so.

I agree wholeheartedly with the paper's focus on data within a performance management framework. Performance management is an organizational issue, whether at the school or school district level. Simply put, performance management includes activities to ensure that goals are consistently being met in an effective and efficient manner. I am attracted to the current British notions of performance management in schools for reasons that I will come to later.

“Performance management means shared commitment to high performance. It helps focus attention on more effective teaching and monitoring to raise the quality of teaching and to benefit pupils, teachers and the school. It means providing appropriate and effective personal training and development to ensure job satisfaction, a high level of expertise and progression of staff in their chosen profession. We want to improve performance by developing the effectiveness of teachers, both as individuals and as teams. The evidence is that standards rise when schools and

³ Willms, J. Douglas, Sloat, Elizabeth A. Literacy for Life. Centre for Research in Social Policy. Policy Brief #4. 1998. At <http://www.unb.ca/crisp/pbrief4.PDF>

individual teachers are clear about what they expect pupils to achieve. That is why performance management is important".⁴
(Emphasis added)

The reason that I believe that that we need to pay attention to what the UK is doing, is because it is changing the slope of the gradient between the performance of lower income students as compared to those from higher income families, in statistically valid ways.⁵ Michael Barber a key architect of the UK reform approach, says we need a new conception of public education. Ronald Manzer, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, agrees. Manzer organizes the history of school systems in Canada into clear public education ideologies.⁶ While we may not fully subscribe to his analysis, I think it is useful to consider the transition from the prevailing conception of education in the late sixties to 80's to where we are now. Manzer describes our recent past as representing an ethical liberal tradition that sees the ultimate purpose of education as individual development. What goes with that view is the progression of human development (social, physical, emotional, intellectual) that can vary greatly among individual learners. While I too believe in the uniqueness of individuals, the limitation of this view, is that in locating patterns of behaviour within the individual, the school is not held responsible for individual outcomes. Differential rates or levels of achievement are explained by contextual features or individual characteristics of students and not by what happens in schools. I have argued in many places that the poor children are more likely to depend on school for their success but middle class kids may do well in spite of it. There is evidence to show that the gap between the development of kids from low SES as compared to high gets larger as they progress through school.⁷

If we are really determined to change the pattern of student achievement across the country, and I think we are, then we need to sort

⁴ Department for Education and Skills. UK. Teaching Reforms. 2001. At http://www.dfes.gov.uk/teachingreforms/rewards/perfmanage/schools/model_policy.shtml

⁵ Barber, Michael. Address to OECD Meeting. Schools for Tomorrow. Rotterdam. 2000

⁶ Manzer, Ronald. Public Schools and Political Ideas: Canadian Educational Policy in Historical Perspective. University of Toronto Press. 1994 (263-274)

⁷ Moss (Milton), Penny and Rutledge, Donald. Issues in Education in Children, Families and Public Policy in the 1990's. Ed. Barnhorst, D and Johnston, L. Thompson Educational Publishing 1991. (136-140)

out a way of assisting the profession to make the transition to a new understanding of the purpose of public education. Good data and compelling analyses make an essential contribution. But real change requires teachers and administrators to examine their beliefs and practices about teaching and learning in light of new knowledge about learning drawn from neuroscience, cognitive science and cognitive psychology. Bryan Kolb points out "the period of the brain's special sensitivity to experience roughly coincides with the entire period of public school attendance. Our challenge as educators is to take advantage of this neural plasticity to stimulate optimal brain development for adulthood".⁸

Good data for performance management needs to be available to schools and school districts within a framework that supports time for teachers to learn and reflect on their own learning and its relationship to their practice in facilitating the learning of young people.

⁸ Kolb, Bryan. Experience and the Developing Brain. Education Canada. Vol 39, No.4. 2000. Canadian Education Association. (26)