

Banding: Does it constrict Welsh schools?

The biggest issue facing Welsh education at the moment is perceived underperformance of Welsh schools. There has been a Press campaign based on GCSE results and the PISA survey in 2010.¹ These measures are not as hard and fast as some people make out.²³ Nevertheless, there is certainly a high level of deprivation and consequently a real underperformance in Welsh schools. The education minister, Leighton Andrews, has responded to Press pressure with a list of 20 points to raise achievement, followed by later thoughts on skills development. Many of his 20 points are unexceptional. Some are valuable, such as increased emphasis on teacher training. Some should be happening already, such as governors' evaluating school performance.

The most controversial is Banding, an effort to sum up the performance of a school in a single number, from 1 (the best) to 5 (the worst). These numbers have been released for all 121 secondary schools in Wales. The minister describes them as solely for the purpose of directing support to schools that need it. Unfortunately there is no money available for this. Predictably, the local Press has treated them as new league tables. Pressure from teaching unions has led to postponement of the extension of the system to primary schools until the data is more robust. But the publication of the secondary school figures has already caused loss in morale and real misery for some schools. The data in no way reflect the judgement of schools by teachers, governors, parents and Estyn⁴. Locally, for example, a school, described by HMI in 2011 as 'good' has appeared in band 5, the lowest.

The way that the numbers are arrived at is deeply flawed. The Welsh government has chosen 11 categories of performance and divided each into quartiles. The school then gets a score of 1 if it is in the top 25%, down to 4 if it is in the bottom 25%. This is problematic since it is not clear that schools in different quartiles are statistically different from one another.⁵ The 11 categories include attainment, attainment related to FSM,⁶ progress over 3 years⁷, value added based on prior expectation⁸ and absence rate and its progress.⁹ The values are then all added up and, more or less arbitrarily, divided into the 5 groups.¹⁰

SEA Cymru debated these issues and reached the conclusion that challenge and support are indispensable, but that the current banding system is deeply flawed and unfair to schools. It would be better to publish the 11 categories separately so that schools and parents could see clearly where they needed to improve.

In addition, we would hope to see human judgement exercised, as is possible for headteachers, governors, local authorities and consortia¹¹ and Estyn. We hope also to see the latest comparison of the amount spent per pupil in Wales compared to England.¹²

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¹ PISA stands for Programme for International Student Assessment. It involves 400,000 students in more than 30 countries, taking place every 3 years under the auspices of the OECD.

² The GCSE results in Wales have improved but not as fast as in England. This may have something to do with Ofsted, as English headteachers have adopted various coping strategies, such as GNVQs which are allegedly worth 4 GCSE A*-Cs.

³ The PISA samples have not been representative enough to allow valid comparison between Wales and England. The differences are in raw scores only.

⁴ Estyn, Welsh for 'to stretch', are the Welsh HMI, who, unlike Ofsted, are broadly welcome in schools.

⁵ Ranked data of this sort are known as ordinal data. Top rank is clearly better than 2nd, but it is not clear how much better, nor whether it is the same as the difference between 20th and 21st or 50th and 51st. Thus the numbers are non quantitative and should not be added together.

⁶ Free School Meal data is grouped into quite wide bands. One school jumped dramatically in a previous league table by persuading just 6 parents to apply for free meals, thus putting the school into a higher FSM category.

⁷ Clearly advantageous to the school that started low, with great scope for improvement.

⁸ Clearly advantageous to the school whose feeder had low expectations.

⁹ Clearly disadvantageous to schools with traveller children, looked after children, ethnic minority children or just sick children.

¹⁰ The best score is 11 (which means 11 top quarter scores). The worst is 44 (which means 11 bottom quarter scores). Most schools are in the middle and so it is impossible for parents to assess what they are good at.

¹¹ Consortia are the latest attempt to compensate for the small size of Local Authorities in Wales by 'encouraging' them to work together in groups.

¹² Latest figures available show that the gap has increased from 2% in 1999-2000 (£58) to 10.8% in 2009-2010 (£604). There is a disagreement between the Welsh Government and the DfE as to whether this figure is available to the public.