

Social, economic factors guide latest school rankings

By Tamara Gignac, Calgary Herald August 22, 2013

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The C.D. Howe Institute has released its annual ranking of Alberta schools. It compares student outcomes by examining social and economic factors.

Photograph by: Keith Morison , Calgary Herald

A new report card on the performance of Alberta's elementary schools compares student outcomes by examining social and economic factors.

The C.D. Howe Institute used provincial achievement test results from grade 3, 6 and 9 students with similar backgrounds in an effort to identify the province's best and worst-performing schools.

Previous ratings — such as those from the Fraser Institute — have pitted schools from disadvantaged communities directly against those in affluent areas.

But the C.D. Howe study argues it offers a fair and direct comparison by screening out barriers such as poverty, language and culture to show where teachers and support staff are making a difference.

“If you look at just raw test results, a large proportion is driven by the socio-economic background of the students,” said Benjamin Dachis, senior policy analyst with the non-profit think-tank.

“We want to isolate the school based on the quality of its teachers, administrators and principals, not things like the degree of education the parents have or whether they are recent immigrants.”

[Click here to see how your school did in the rankings](#)

David Johnson, a Wilfrid Laurier University economics professor and fellow-in-residence at the C.D. Howe Institute, is the report's author.

He created a profile of more than 800 Alberta schools using information from the 2006 Census. The information provided him with a statistical snapshot of family income, the percentage of single parents, the number of recent immigrants and other details.

Johnson then predicted a standard of excellence rate for each school and compared it to actual provincial achievement test results.

Some of the results mirror the Fraser Institute's annual report, with Calgary private schools Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School and Webber Academy scoring exceptionally well.

But charter schools — although small in number — seem to score much better when compared to schools where students come from similar social and economic backgrounds.

A good example is Almadina Language Charter Academy. Many students are newcomers to Canada but scored remarkably based on C.D. Howe's methodology.

A school with a score in the 50th percentile — such as St. Aquinas School — is considered average, or performing as expected. But parents with children at a school with a low percentile should expect better, according to Dachis.

A handful of separate and public schools in Calgary rank among the top performing in the province.

Students at St. Philip — a fine arts school in Parkland — scored in the 98th and 99th percentile respectively for Grade 3 and Grade 6 test scores.

Within the Calgary Board of Education, laudable schools include Alex Ferguson, Nellie McClung and Sunalta School.

The report, released Wednesday, suggests a whopping 40 per cent of the variation in schools' standardized test scores is explained by differences in socio-economic environments. Dachis hopes parents will use the report to hold educators accountable.

“It is reasonable to infer that much of the remaining variation reflects the effect of factors specific to a school, such as the principal, the teachers and the other staff.”

Officials from both Calgary's public and separate school boards declined to comment on the C.D. Howe report.

The Alberta Teachers' Association also did not respond to an interview request. But spokesman Frank Bruseker previously told the Herald that the methodology used in third-party school rankings is typically flawed due to the use of standardized test scores.

“It ranks the entire provincial system based on three days of information, when there is 600 days of instruction. It ignores the total work the teacher does in the classroom,” he said.

The complete report can be found at www.cdhowe.org/albertas-best-schools-2013/22531.

Smaller schools with fewer than 45 students participating in language tests over three years are excluded from the study.

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- See more at:

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