

# EMPOWERING PARENTS AND IMPROVING ACCOUNTABILITY A FRESH LOOK

**James Croft** is the Director of the Centre for Market Reform of Education and looks at parental involvement in school choice and how league tables can be improved

Over the past 25 years a series of reforms have been designed to increase the responsiveness of schools to parents and the broader public. It is generally accepted that when a service is accountable to its users it becomes both more responsive and outcomes improve. So do the facts support the accepted wisdom?

In truth, the answer isn't entirely clear. The English education system has become dominated by exam results. Attainment may seem a logical starting point but the pressure on examinations and exam results has created perverse outcomes: gaming, narrowing of the curriculum, concentration of effort on students at the C/D grade boundary, arguably at the expense of both the brightest and weakest students. Focus on exam results has also clouded thoughtful policy development as successive Secretaries of State tinker with the exam system. Successive governments have made concerted effort to make pupil performance and contextual data more widely available but little has been done to help consumers understand this information. Accordingly, studies show the measures

utilised to date have had only limited impact on parental engagement and choices.

Why is this important? Because parents are particularly susceptible to poor decision making. Parent surveys consistently show that while education quality is clearly paramount in their minds when choosing a school, general peer quality (which research suggests is a poor predictor of outcomes) often becomes the most important indicator.

If we want the system to be one of virtuous self-improvement it needs to be attuned to parents and they need to have a reasonable understanding of what constitutes a good school. What does a good high quality education look like?

This is thorny stuff because of the complexities involved. Parents who do exercise choice within the current system generally look for schools whose pupils do well in the league tables, and which are situated in affluent catchments. On its own, without socio-economic profiling of some sort, such information is, at best, a very poor proxy for assessing the contribution of teaching. This is especially the case if the rigour of many of the subjects/qualifications is in question as it has been in recent years.

To date the government's reforms in this area offer some encouragement. These provide some indication

of teaching capability by re-focusing attention on more challenging subjects. This has been intended to shift the focus from doing lots of exams to doing well in exams.

But much more could be done. The present government has gone further than any of its predecessors in releasing over 400 aggregate datasets into the public domain. The not for profit Open Public Services Network (OPSN) was recently established with a view to 'improving the quality of the relationship between

people and their services' and their first project in education focused on improving information provision. By meshing data from a number of sources they were able to present, with the help of an online tool developed by The Guardian newspaper, a much clearer picture of the progress an individual school is making over time, and of its performance relative to the expected rate of improvement.

Encouraged by this and other initiatives to show what can be done, the DfE are now looking at

opening access to the National Pupil Database, a highly detailed, ten-year longitudinal educational dataset covering pupil performance and socio-economic characteristics, school demographics, and a number of other characteristics that have bearing on education outcomes.

Wider release of this and other data to qualified organisations for analysis could yield valuable insights into pupil and school performance and the relative impacts of different factors influencing educational outcomes. Let us hope that the government matches in funding the political capital it now has invested in the 'open government' agenda. The Open Public Services Network has shown the way, the government must now put careful consideration into the design of a proper market in information supply. There are important socio-economic spill-over effects associated with getting this right, and negative consequences will surely follow if we don't do the job properly. ■

► **James Croft is Director of The Centre for Market Reform of Education (CMRE). Information asymmetries in education markets and how information provision and accountability might be improved are treated extensively in research**

