

Abolishing school league tables in Wales: the impact on pupil performance

The latest international comparisons of educational attainment do not look good for Wales. Research by *Simon Burgess* and colleagues indicates that part of the explanation lies in a decision ten years ago to remove a key mechanism for public scrutiny of how well Welsh schools are educating their pupils.

The release of the latest round of international comparative education results produced some fascinating results. Not least of these was the outcome for Wales, characterised by Leighton Andrews, the Welsh education minister, as alarming and unacceptable.

The PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results derive from a standardised international assessment of 15 year olds, run by the OECD. As Figure 1 shows, Wales has fallen further behind since the last tests in 2006, and scored worse than before in each of reading, maths and science. Scores in Wales have fallen relative to England and are now ‘cast adrift from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland’. Leighton Andrews described the results as reflecting ‘systemic failure’.

What might that systemic failure be? One leading candidate is highlighted in research we have been doing on accountability mechanisms for state schools. We argue that the decision in 2001 by the Welsh Assembly Government to stop the publication of school performance data or ‘league tables’ has resulted in a significant deterioration in GCSE performance in Wales.

The effect is sizeable and statistically significant. It amounts to around two GCSE

grades per pupil per year – that is, achieving a grade D rather than a B in one subject. This is a substantial effect, equivalent to the impact of raising class size from 30 to 38 pupils.

The PISA results have prompted a thorough rethink of education policy in Wales, set out in a major speech in Cardiff by Leighton Andrews in February 2011. One of the central components of the new policy will focus directly on school accountability, he said: ‘We will introduce a national system for the grading of schools which will be operated by all local authorities/consortia. ... All schools

The abolition of league tables in Wales has reduced average GCSE performance and raised educational inequality

will produce an annual public profile containing performance information to a common format’.

Our study is part of a small but growing body of research trying to estimate the effect of school accountability mechanisms. The aim is to estimate a causal effect – the direct impact of introducing (or removing) an accountability system on pupil outcomes.

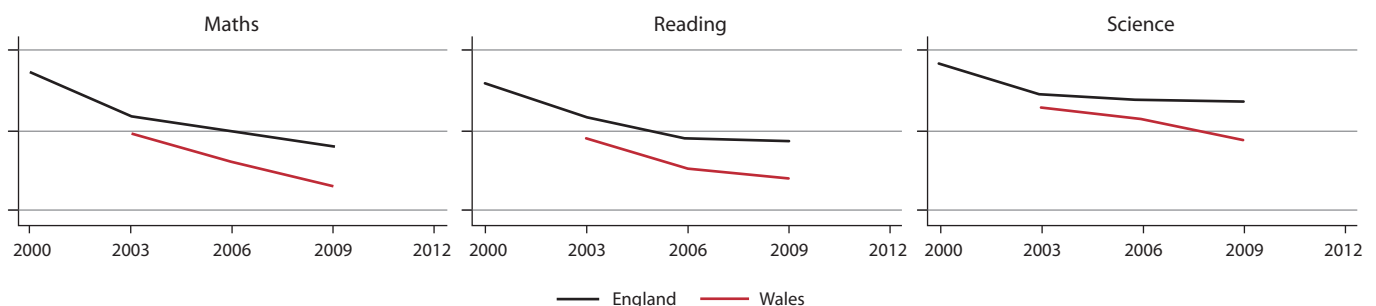
There are two reasons why this is difficult. First, such reform is typically introduced for

an entire country at once. This makes it hard to find an adequate control group to quantify the counterfactual or what would have happened if the reform had not been made.

Second, an accountability system is often put in place as part of a package of measures – new curriculum, new testing procedures, new incentive structures for schools – all alongside the public reporting of performance. This simultaneous introduction of a set of innovations means it is almost impossible to single out the effect of one component.

We exploit an event that gets round these problems. Following a referendum in 1999, power over education policy was devolved to the newly created Welsh Assembly Government. Given a greater belief in ‘producer’ solutions and a distrust of the ‘consumerist’ approach to public services in England, the Welsh government wanted to reduce the role of market-like features in education. In July 2001, it was announced that school league tables would not be published that November, and they have not been published since.

Figure 1: PISA scores in reading, maths and science



Because school performance data have continued to be published in England, we can exploit this policy change to estimate the effect of publicly available league tables. In other respects the education systems continued to be very similar so we use pupils in England as the control group for pupils in Wales. The fact that most of the other system components continued means that we can isolate the role of the league tables.

We take each secondary school in Wales, and 'match' it up to a very similar school in England. The matching is based on pupils' prior attainment, neighbourhood poverty and school funding among other factors. We then track the progress ('value added') that pupils make in these schools before and after the league tables reform, comparing each Welsh school with its English match. Our analysis explicitly takes account of the differential funding of schools in England and Wales, and the greater poverty rates in neighbourhoods in Wales.

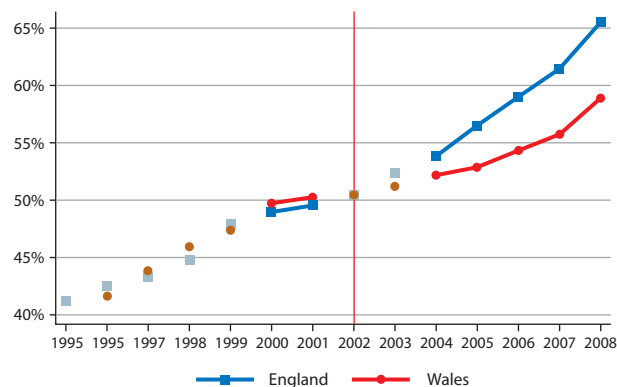
Although our results are based on a study of the GCSE scores school-by-school, Figure 2 gives a very stark impression of the overall effect. Pupils in England and Wales were performing very similarly up to 2001, but thereafter the fraction gaining five good GCSE passes has strongly diverged. We find that the abolition of league tables reduced school performance in Wales by two GCSE grades per pupil per year on average.

'Naming and shaming' puts poorly performing schools in England under pressure to improve; that pressure is absent in Wales

But this effect is not evenly distributed across all schools. The top 25% of Welsh schools, as measured by highest prior attainment or lowest poverty rate, appear unaffected by the reform. It is the lower 75% of schools that are affected negatively, with the poorest and lowest prior attainment schools falling behind the most. Our research shows that the policy reform in Wales reduced average GCSE performance and raised educational inequality.

Why should the removal of league tables lead to a fall in school performance? Standard economic analysis suggests that the public scrutiny of schools' results through performance tables would discourage teachers and schools from 'coasting' and not focusing strongly on attainment. The counter

Figure 2: Proportion of pupils with at least five good GCSE passes



argument is that teachers are professionals, do not need such oversight and that a narrow focus on performance tables reduces their effectiveness.

Part of the effect is through the removal of performance information to support parental choice of school. The league tables allow parents to identify and then apply to the higher scoring schools, and to identify and perhaps avoid the low scoring schools. A lack of applications puts pressure on the low scoring schools to improve.

But this is not the whole story. Perhaps as important is the simple public scrutiny of performance, and in particular the public identification of the low scoring schools. This 'naming and shaming' means that low scoring schools in England are under great

pressure to improve, whereas similar schools in Wales are able to hide and to 'coast'.

that the lower GCSE results simply reflect a focus on broader aspects of education. Another broader question is the potential impact on wellbeing. It may be that lower stress from a reduced emphasis on exam performance raises teachers' wellbeing. It may be that it raises pupil wellbeing too. We do not know if this is true but if so, then there is a trade-off to consider: higher teacher wellbeing against higher pupil attainment.

Responding to our research, the Welsh Assembly Government said 'wait for the PISA results'. These results are now in and do not make happy reading. No doubt there are many factors underlying the relative performance of Wales and England, but the diminution of public accountability for schools in Wales is surely one of them.

pressure to improve, whereas similar schools in Wales are able to hide and to 'coast'.

This research answers an important but very specific question: what is the impact on GCSE performance of a significant change in school accountability? It needs to be remembered that GCSEs are very important, the gateway to jobs and higher education. But there are broader questions to consider.

It is alleged that GCSEs are a narrow measure of educational attainment, and that the removal of league tables would allow space for a broader plan of learning. But this is precisely what the PISA figures measure – these tests cannot be prepared for and do not reflect cramming or teaching to the test. So the PISA results do not support the idea

This article summarises 'A Natural Experiment in School Accountability: The Impact of School Performance Information on Pupil Progress and Sorting' by Simon Burgess, Deborah Wilson and Jack Worth, CMPO Working Paper No. 10/246

For the full paper, see:
<http://www.bris.ac.uk/cmipo/publications/papers/2010/wp246.pdf>

Simon Burgess is CMPO's director and a professor of economics at the University of Bristol

The research on the abolition of school league tables in Wales is discussed in a video on CMPO's YouTube channel:
<http://www.youtube.com/user/CMPOBristol#u/4/q9pj374JGMs>