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PRESS CUTTINGS

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Why we agree to differ over data

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Over the past few weeks we have been engaged in both a public and private debate that has highlighted and clarified a number of disagreements between us over the interpretation of educational research data, the kinds of information about school performance that should be published and about the nature and value of long-term targets. This debate has been highlighted by *The TES* and has raised some basic issues about the relationship between research and policy and has helped both of us to understand better the nature of that relationship.

Given that education is now at the centre of political debate, it is inevitable that a dispute among colleagues at the same institute will create excitement among journalists. As far as the Institute of Education is concerned, such a debate can only be healthy, and for the public at large we believe that the exposure of genuine disagreements can help to clarify issues. Both of us have, from time to time, had a high profile in the media. In this case the situation is further complicated because one of us has played an active part in the politics of education in the run-up to a general election, and, in doing so, has been associated with a number of ideas that are highly controversial in both academic and professional circles and certainly cannot be seen as the views of the Institute.

In spite of our differences, we would not wish our argument to hide the fact that there are many areas of agreement between us. For example, we both strongly believe in academic freedom and in the value of high-quality independent research, as well as in the need to find ways of improving the quality of education.

On the specific issues which drew us into argument, there are important areas of agreement, too. We both believe that it is necessary to raise standards of literacy and, indeed, other aspects of learning such as numeracy. We also consider that to do this it is essential to involve teachers by supporting their professionalism and by making available to them excellent programmes for professional development and the necessary resources.

Although we differ on the validity of any league tables and their effects on schools, we both consider that the national primary school league tables are deeply flawed and misleading, and should not have been published. If there are to be future published league tables, for schools or for local education authorities, we consider that the Government has a duty also to publish prominently a health warning pointing to all the limitations inherent in these kinds of comparisons.

We believe strongly that value-added analysis of performance, within a context of school effectiveness research, is a vital tool in understanding the performance of schools and the education service generally. Such research has helped us to understand how schools in general can affect the progress of their pupils, given the pupils' initial achievements and their social and other characteristics. With such knowledge schools are in a better position to plan their futures and, in conjunction with local and central authorities, to set realistic targets for improvement.

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parring partners: Michael Barber (left) and Harvey Goldstein