



Conveniently misleading

Website comparing school report cards has its thumb on the scale

Thursday, October 23, 2014

The school-comparison website created by a statewide teachers union and a “nonpartisan” advocacy group run by Democrats would be a great public service — if it played it straight.

As it is, KnowYourCharter.com is a well-executed exercise in selective transparency. It shows users only what the creators want them to see, and makes it marvelously easy to get an incomplete picture.

The Ohio Education Association and Innovation Ohio purport to offer a comparison between charter schools and conventional district schools. The data are from the source: the Ohio Department of Education’s annual report cards for schools and districts.

The creators contend that the data prove that charter schools generally spend more per student and perform worse than traditional public schools. But charter-school groups make a valid complaint that the “comparison” isn’t apples to apples.

From a technical standpoint, the site couldn’t be much more user-friendly. Using a large searchbox, users enter the name of the charter school or district school. The website instantly produces a screen showing how the charter schools and the district measure up on five metrics.

But the information shown in the comparison is only a sampling of everything the state report cards measure, and charter-school supporters make the case that it’s unfair in several respects:

- Rather than comparing school to school, it compares single charter schools to entire school districts. This masks the poor performance of the lowest-ranking district schools by averaging their scores with those of their district’s highest-performing schools.

A more-meaningful comparison would be between individual schools.

- Many charter schools exclusively serve students at risk of dropping out or those who already have done so, but the top-level comparison page makes no note of that, even though these students can be the most difficult to educate. Users of the website have to click deeper into the site to find that information.

- The category “state funding per student” shows that charter schools tend to get more per pupil than district schools. But state aid, by design, is higher for students who are poor or have disabilities, and this can drive up charter-school amounts. And district schools get substantial funding — sometimes the majority — from local tax levies, which aren’t available to charter schools. The website user who isn’t aware of that would be misled.

- The site compares “performance index” — a composite of a school’s or district’s scores on standardized tests. Schools that have a high percentage of disadvantaged students may do poorly on performance index but earn high marks for “value added” — how much progress students make in a year. Some contend this is a more-valid measure of a school’s effectiveness, but again, users of the site will have to drill deeper into the site to find this measurement.

Much of the information anyone needs to make a thorough and valid comparison between schools is available at the Ohio Department of Education’s website, but doing so requires far more searching and clicking.

Until a truly disinterested party, rather than devoted charter-school opponents such as the OEA and Innovation Ohio, puts together a handy site, people who want a valid comparison will have to do the work themselves.

Original Article:

<http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/editorials/2014/10/23/conveniently-misleading.html>