Does Transparency Lead to Better Education? The Effects in the Netherlands of Publishing School Performance Indicators on the Internet

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Abstract. Publishing information about school performance on the Internet is currently a 'hype' around the world. Many countries publish this information because they believe that this will benefit schools and parents. The assumption is that parents will use this information to assess the performance of schools and consequently choose a school on the basis of this information. Changes in school choice would then form a strong signal to schools to improve performance, with the net result being a better school system. This expectation, however, does not hold true in reality; the information is not used much by parents and, hence, their behavior does not send a strong signal to schools. This does not mean that the publication of school performance data on the Internet has no effect. School administrators do frequently refer to the information in order to know what is happening at other schools. They interpret and analyze this information in the context of competition with other schools, benchmarking themselves and learning from others. Schools do change their behavior in response to the influences of the information being public, albeit not in a deterministic and predictable manner.

Key words. Performance indicators, transparency, education

1. The Hype: Publications on the Internet Enhance School Quality

'Show me, don't tell me!' The belief that parents have the right to know how their children's schools are performing has become widespread. If the performance record of a school is not being published, so it is argued, the school probably has something to hide. Publishing the information is intended to be a strong incentive for schools to keep up their quality, resulting in better education for all students. Publishing performance indicators is a 'hype'.

How can we understand this hype? Broad societal trends in the Netherlands and in many other countries have weakened the link between parents and schools. Traditionally, school choice was based on location and religion: children attended the school nearest to home or the school that fit their parents' religion. However, increased mobility and secularization have weakened or even eliminated this natural tie between

parents and schools. This tie once formed the basis for communal steering, and in its absence new forms of steering are now required. Marketization of the public sector is propagated as one such new form of steering [1]. This and other new sorts of public influence fall under the label of 'New Public Management', which emphasizes that governments should facilitate markets and refrain from direct steering [2].

In the application of New Public Management (NPM) to education, three broad trends stand out. The first trend is autonomization: within NPM, allowing more autonomy is regarded as a way to enhance the performance of public service providers, e.g. [3]. The second trend is accountability: public service providers must account for their use of this enhanced autonomy and also demonstrate their performance [4]. The third trend is marketization governments all around the world are introducing market mechanisms in public sectors in order to enhance quality, efficiency and effectiveness.

Neoclassical micro-economics and market theory present two arguments for school choice [5]: a supply side and a demand side argument. The supply side argument runs as follows: introducing competition in education will force providers to increase quality, meet specific consumer demands, and/or generally decrease cost in a bid to gain or maintain market share. The demand side argument focuses on the parents of students: competition increases the incentives for parents to obtain information about these services, since they will be required to choose one. The result will be that they will assess schools more critically. Put in Hirschman's terms [6]: parents can exert choice by choosing a school or withdrawing their child from a school and voice by complaining about school quality.

A fundamental problem in the 'education market' is the lack of information about the performance of schools, and therefore many argue that the transparency of school systems needs to be improved [7, 8]. Worldwide, information about school perform-ance is being published on the Internet in an effort to solve this problem. The basic argument is that this information can be used by parents in choosing the best school for their children and that these choices will send the signal to schools that they need to perform well or risk losing their students. Schools will then supposedly make an effort to improve their performance and, consequently, the overall performance of schools will improve and parents will receive a better education for their children. Therefore, the publication of school performance on the Internet has become a 'hype'.

Proponents of this form of transparency such as Brin [9] argue that the publication of performances will indeed have these intended effects, but opponents such as Power [10] stress that it will lead to all kinds of perverse effects (see [11, 12] for a discussion of intended and perverse effects). The best known of these perverse effects is 'goal displacement': schools will try to improve their scores as measured by the School Inspection Service, but the overall quality may actually diminish. Another effect is referred to as 'meritocracy', which means that the information strengthens the relative position of higher-educated parents at the expense of those with less education. These effects will be discussed in this chapter.

The Dutch government is one of the governments that publish information about school performance on the Internet. The results of school inspections are released so that parents can obtain adequate information about schools. Parents can use this information to choose a school, which could eventually lead to improvements in the quality of Dutch education by activating the environment in which schools function and enabling parents to discuss quality with school management.

In discussing the effects of these publications I will first approach the question of whether parents actually use this information for choosing a school. My research has

led me to the conclusion that parents hardly use this information at all and that other sources of information, such as contact with other parents and visits to the school, are much more important. The expectations do not prove true. Radical improvements in school performance do not occur as an effect of shifting patterns of school choice based on neutral information. I will then show that this does not mean that the publication of information about school performance has no effect at all. Aside from the hype, the information is in fact used by school administrators in different ways. This has non-deterministic and unpredictable effects on schools.

2. Information about School Performance

In the Netherlands school choice is not restricted by school districts as it is in the USA or by catchment areas as in the UK; people are free to choose the school they think is best for their children. During the first half of the 20th century the Netherlands had a pillarized system that included Catholic, Protestant and public schools, and most people chose schools according to these denominations. Nowadays there are still Catholic, Protestant and public schools, but because of the secularized character of the Dutch society, these denominations are not as important in school choice as they used to be. All schools are funded with public money, and the quality of education is inspected by the national School Inspection Service (Onderwijsinspectie). Inspectors from the School Inspection Service visit schools regularly and report on the results of these inspections to the schools and to the Minister of Education. Until 1997 these results were not made public and were not accessible to citizens.

In 1997 a Dutch journalist from the newspaper Trouw requested access to databases that contained summaries of these inspection reports [14]. The Minister of Education denied this access, but a judge ruled that the minister did not present sufficient arguments to support his case. The minister was ordered to grant access to the results of school inspections, and the journalist used these results to compare the quality of schools and compare schools in different respects. From then on Trouw has published articles on the quality of schools every year and has opened a website so that citizens can view this information year-round (www.trouw.nl).

The increased transparency led to drastic changes in the School Inspection Service, and the agency decided that it would publish the results of school inspections itself. The School Inspection Service even redefined its mission and stated that one of its tasks was to provide citizens with independent and reliable information about the quality of schools. The School Inspection opened a website itself and began publishing quantitative information concerning the quality of schools – the so-called Quality Cards – in 1998 (www.kwaliteitskaart.nl). This website, which presents information about school performance, has become fairly popular in comparison to other government websites in the Netherlands. The School Inspection Service indicated that they received approximately 800 individual visitors daily in July, August and September 2004 and about 200 questions a month through the info-mail facility on their website.

In 2004 the School Inspection Service asked the visitors to its website to complete a short questionnaire. Their answers provided insight into who the visitors to the website are (Table 1).

Table 1: Results of questionnaire regarding the School Inspection Service

	Number of respondents	**Percentage**
Parents	860	40.5%
Students	189	8.9%
Teachers	311	14.6%
School management	286	13.5%
Others in education-related jobs (e.g. local government officials)	291	13.7%
Other	186	8.8%
Total	2123	100%

This table shows that parents are the largest group of visitors but that they still form only a minority of the total. Together with students they form a group of nearly 50%; the other 50% consists of people who work in the education field as teachers, school administrators or in other positions. These results show that the website is not only used by parents but also by a large group of professionals. When looking at the gender of the respondents, 70% of the parents were women. A majority of the teachers were also women (55%), but most respondents from school management were men (70%).

Despite the popularity of this website, the percentage of parents who visit it is still small. A rough estimate would be that, within a period of three months, the maximum number of parents who visit the website is just over 7%. This seems to give some ground to the idea that the 'hype' might not be very far off the mark. If this 7% of parents actually uses the information in choosing a school, this could give a strong signal to schools to improve their performance. But does that really happen? To answer this question, we need to go beyond simple numbers and obtain an understanding of the actual use of the information on the website by parents.

3. Use of the Performance Information by Parents

The web enquiry was used to gather information about the use of the information about school performance by parents. It measured why parents visit the website. The main reasons given are presented in Table 2. (Note: the percentages add up to more than 100% because respondents could mention more than one reason.)

Table 2: Reasons parents mention for visiting the School Inspection Service website

Reason	**Percentage**
I want to find a school for my child.	41.3%
I want to know what the School Inspection Service thinks of my child's school.	46.4%

| I want to compare schools. | 31.9% |
| I worry about the quality of my child's school or have complaints about the school. | 12.2% |

This table shows that parents use the website when trying to find a school for their children. Parents also refer to the information simply to know how the school of their child is doing. Some parents have a look at the website when they are concerned about school quality. Both groups, parents who want to choose a school and parents who want to assess the quality of their child's school, compare their own child's school with other schools. In another question parents were asked to indicate how important the website is as a source of information about school quality. Seventy-two percent of the parents indicated that it is very important and 27% indicated that it is important. These numbers seem to indicate that the website is indeed used for choice and voice.

The respondents to the enquiry were also asked to state their level of education. Of all respondents, 68.7 % had a college or university degree. The education level of parents was specifically analyzed. In this group the level of education was also high: 58.8 % of the parents had a college or university degree. This shows that the website visitors are not a cross-section of Dutch parents. Highly-educated parents are much more likely to use the website that less-educated parents. This finding seems to confirm the idea of a meritocracy: better-educated people can strengthen their relative positions.

These numbers seem to indicate that the expectation behind the hype is indeed being fulfilled, but that it takes place specifically among highly-educated parents. To truly understand the effects of the publication of school performance information, we also need to know whether parents actually use the information for school choice and voice. Do schools notice that patterns in school choice are being influenced by the publication of information? Do parents refer to the website when discussing school quality with school management?

The results of the qualitative research are mixed and seem to contradict the quantitative findings. Most school managers and professionals indicate that, as far as they have noticed, none of the parents use the website to assess the quality of the schools (although some respondents think this may happen more in the future). Many respondents highlight the fact that options for school choice, especially when it comes to primary education, are limited: "The school is in a small village and one can choose between a Protestant school and a public school. If you go to church on Sundays, you send your kids to the Protestant school, if not, you send them to the public school." Another respondent emphasized that parents only want to know whether the school offers sufficient quality: "The effect of an average score on school choice is negligible. Only very low scores influence school choice." Some managers emphasized that they regret the fact that the information is little used because it would give their school a chance to improve its public profile.

A minority of the respondents indicated that they do use the information when preparing for school choice. They do not use the information directly, but mainly to prepare for informative meetings with school management. One school manager: "I think that a small percentage of the parents, around 20%, use the website to prepare for an informative meeting with the school management. (…) They pose specific questions that are based on the information on the website." Another manager confirmed this

perception: "Parents who are looking for a school know the information on the Internet, but it does not determine their choice."

The qualitative research indicates that teachers and school management are rarely confronted with parents that refer to the school website when discussing school quality. A school manager: "I recently experienced that parents noticed that we had a bad score for the topic 'communication with parents'. They came to me and said: 'That confirms our idea that the communication between school and parents requires improvements." Other managers mentioned similar instances. They all emphasized, however, that these are very rare instances. Most parents base their assessment of the school quality on their own experiences and not on a website. A school manager: "It has never happened to me that a parent said that he had seen on the Internet that our school did not fulfill the required number of class hours."

How can we understand the discrepancy between the quantitative research that seems to indicate that a substantial group of parents does use the information for choice and voice and the qualitative research which indicates that many schools hardly notice any influence? One explanation could be that the information is only used by parents of certain schools. Another explanation could be that parents look at the information but use it as just one source among many. This would explain both why many parents look at the information and at the same time this goes unnoticed by schools. One manager indicates: "I am never confronted with it, but I would be amazed if parents did not look at the information on the Internet." That explanation is confirmed by other research [15] which indicates that other sources such as a visit to the school, contacts with other parents and articles in newspapers are much more important. Parents with a child already in school look at the information out of curiosity but base their judgment on their own experiences with the school.

The above discussion of the use of information about school performance on the Internet by parents shows that the 'hype' is not justified, since use of information is limited and does not send a strong signal to schools to improve performance. Does that mean that publication has no effect at all? That conclusion would be too quick, since one could also argue that although the information is not used by parents, it is used by other stakeholders such as the media, prospective teachers, youth care, etc. If stakeholders use the information to assess school quality, this would still send a strong signal to schools.

4. Use of the Performance Information by Other Stakeholders

The School Inspection Service did not mention stakeholders such as journalists, neighbors, church groups, etc. as visitors to the website (see Table 1), which seems to indicate that stakeholders do not make much use of the website. This quantitative finding was confirmed in the qualitative interviews. Interviews with respondents at schools indicated that the information about school performance is hardly used by stakeholders. There are some exceptions. One school manager indicated that local government officials compare the school with other schools and discuss the results of this analysis with school management. Another respondent said that sometimes potential new colleagues study school performance information when applying for a job. Every now and then a student has a look at the website but, as far the respondents know, these are rare occasions. The dominant opinion is briefly summarized in the following remark of one of the school managers: "I never get a question or hear a

remark about the information about our school that appears on the website of the School Inspection Service."

More surprisingly, the media rarely pays attention to school performance. School performance was only an issue when this information had just gone public. One respondent said that the local newspaper published a list of underperforming schools in 2002. This article triggered many reactions, but since then the newspaper has not written about school performance anymore. It is not considered something 'new' that warrants attention by the media. The media is now interested in other things such as radical opinions among immigrant students. One school manager said that the only reason why a journalist would look at the information about his school is to know how many immigrant students there were in the hope to find a juicy story about radicalization.

The lack of media attention in this country for school performance is an interesting difference between the Netherlands and the USA. American newspapers frequently write about school performance and present elaborate analyses when the new numbers about school performance are released [13]. The crucial difference here seems to be the nature of education in society. In the Netherlands, schooling is considered to be an issue between schools and parents and not something that is of interest to society at large. Americans consider public schools to be an issue that is relevant to the local community, and school boards are elected by all citizens. This cultural and institutional difference seems to be at the heart of the difference in the level of attention given to school performance by local media.

This empirical assessment of the use of school performance information by stakeholders does not provide any confirmation of the idea that stakeholders would send a strong signal to schools to improve performance. No evidence is found for this alternative 'hype' effect discussed in the introduction. Does this mean that the publication of school performance information on the Internet has no effect? That conclusion, too, would be too quick, since publication could also have a direct effect on schools if the publication itself forms an incentive for school management and professionals to improve performance.

5. Use of the Performance Information by Schools

The quantitative research showed that the website is used extensively by professionals working in education. Fifty percent of the visitors to the website are people that work in education as teachers, school management or in other jobs (see Table 1). The respondents were asked why they visited the website. The main reasons are presented in Table 3. (Note: the percentages add up to more than 100% because respondents could mention more than one reason.)

Table 3 shows that the three reasons for the visits − knowing, comparing and improving − are almost equally important. Knowing is more important to teachers, comparing and improving are more important to school management. The third of these reasons is especially interesting, since it shows that the information is not only used for competing with other schools but also for learning from others' experiences.

Table 3: Reasons school professionals mention for visiting the School Inspection Service website

Reason	Percentage teachers	Percentage school management
I want to know how the School Inspection Service evaluates my school.	53.0%	40.8%
I want to compare schools.	35.0%	40.2%
I am looking for information to improve the quality of my school.	26.0%	37.4%

The explorative research showed that the extent to which the performance information on the website of the School Inspection Service is used varies enormously. Some respondents actively use the website to collect information about other schools, whereas other respondents indicated that they never look at the website. The extent of use is related to the position of the respondents: teachers hardly use the information whereas, on average, managers make much more use of the information (although there are great differences between managers). This shows that the information about school performance is considered to be relevant management information.

How do managers use this information? They use the information to prepare themselves for a visit of the School Inspection Service by reading other recent reports to know which aspects are currently important to inspectors. They also use the information to prepare for external communication about school performance. Managers want to know how other, competing schools are doing so as to be prepared for questions by parents or to be able to sketch the unique selling points of their schools. However, the use of the information is not only related to competition; managers are also interested in learning from other schools. Some respondents highlighted that they read the reports of other schools to learn from best practices. One manager indicated that he recently approached the manager of another school. "I had seen that their school had a good score for their quality system. I asked him how we could improve our system."

Benchmarking is a general form of information use that is important to many school managers. Several reasons for benchmarking were mentioned:

- Emotional reasons for benchmarking. Managers indicated that benchmarking can make them feel better about their own performance.
- Strengthening the external focus. Comparing school performance with other schools strengthens the outward focus of schools.
- Evaluating the quality of performance. Comparison is needed in order to know how to value one's own performance.
- Accountability. One school was held accountable by local government and had to present its own performance in relation to those of other schools.

These results show that public information is important to the majority of managers. The overall effect is that managers focus less exclusively on their own schools; they study other schools to know who they are competing with, to learn from them and to be

able to value their own performance relative to other schools. These findings indicate that an understanding of the effects of the publication of school results on the Internet should not primarily focus on the behavior of parents (and other stakeholders) but rather should look at the meanings that school managers attach to this information. These meanings form the basis for the changes in the behavior of school managers. This raises the following question: What meanings do school managers attach to public performance information on the Internet?

6. Effects of Publication on Schools

Various respondents admitted that they are 'not amused' when bad performance data of their schools are publicized on the website of the School Inspection Service. They feel that the reputation of their schools may be in jeopardy and that this needs to be avoided. The main effect of the publication of school inspection results is that it forms an incentive to improve performance. One manager: "It stimulates us to pay more attention to school quality." Another respondent: "It focuses our attention on school quality. We are held accountable and therefore need to work more on school quality." A minority of the respondents highlighted that the publication of school performance has no effect at all. One respondent: "The school inspection report has an effect. It leads to actions to improve the quality of our school. The fact that this report is publicized on a website has no effect. (…) We steer on the content of our program and publication does not put pressure on us."

The respondents who indicated that the publication of school performance information forms an incentive to improve performance stressed that the publication of school performance does not have a direct impact on decisions. The effect is mediated by their own interpretations and analyses of the information. One respondent: "Our own arguments and analysis are more important." Bad results do not directly lead to efforts to improve the score. School management may analyze the score and conclude that the bad results are only a temporary drop or that the results are not so bad in view of the context and student population of the school. The incentive can certainly not be equated with a deterministic striving towards higher scores.

Many respondents emphasized that the publication of school results is just one of the factors that influences decision-making and is certainly not considered the most important one. One could describe the publication of performance information as a 'weak signal' that schools need to focus on certain aspects of their performance. Strong signals, such as a decline in test results or a drop in student admissions, directly focus the attention of school management and lead to decisions aimed at improving results and attracting more students. The publication of school performance may, however, lead to attention for new issues. The respondents find the publication of school performance indicators important in view of the long-term support of parents, students and stakeholders for the school.

Other respondents indicated that other signals, such as the opinions of parents, may conflict with the signal sent out by the publication of school performance data. In one school the first-year student population is mixed, in the sense that students at different levels are all in the same classroom (which is quite unusual in the Netherlands, where students are usually separated according to ability). The school's performance could possibly be improved by separating the classes according to the abilities of the students, but parents prefer the mixed system. In this case, the opinion of parents is considered

by the school to be more important than improving performance to gain a higher public ranking, and thus the mixed system is retained.

Two respondents highlighted that non-traditional schools such as Montessori schools or Jenaplan schools have difficulties with the publication of school performance data. They have a different concept of 'school quality' and therefore may not attain the required level of quality as measured by the School Inspection Service. Some of these schools have brought about changes in their programs in order to fulfill the standards of the School Inspection Service. They were pushed into changing their programs by the fact that the media ranked them as underperforming schools on the basis of the data that had been released by the School Inspection Service.

These results show that most schools do care about the publication of school performance data, but this publication has a limited and mediated effect on their behavior. No evidence was found of strong and immediate improvements, nor did the publication lead to perverse effects such as 'goal displacement'. Decisions are not based directly on the data but only on an analysis and interpretation of the data. Publication of school performance data is a signal, but it is relatively weak compared with strong signals such as a drop of students and poor test results. This weak signal does have an impact on schools, but the impact is always mediated by other factors such as the context of the school, the organizational culture, the type of education, other issues facing the school at that moment, etc. Understanding the impact of publication requires a better understanding of how the weak signal of publication is interpreted in various contexts.

7. After the Hype: No Direct Effects but Perceptual Changes

Did the hype come through? Has publication of school performance indicators had strong beneficial effects on schools and parents? This explorative research shows that the enhanced transparency of the school system has not had a radical influence on the sector. Citizens – the well-educated ones – visit the website, but use the information to a limited extent in choosing schools or complaining about school quality. Publication of the results has had little influence on the contacts between citizens and schools. Citizens rarely base their school choice on this information, and thus poor performance as measured by the School Inspections Service does not result in the loss of students. Nor does the information form the starting point for a discussion between parents and school management about school performance. Other stakeholders (local governments, potential staff and media) may look at the information, but it does not affect their behavior, either. There is, for instance, little media attention for the performance of schools.

This research seems to debunk policy expectations of improved performance through pressure by parents enabled by public information. Does the explorative research show that the transparency has no effect at all? The answer to that question is negative. The release of the website of the School Inspection Service has triggered a number of changes in schools. First, school managers knows that their performances can be scrutinized by outsiders. "It is written on the wall", as one respondent put it. 'Public eyes' [12] can see what schools are doing, and although schools do not get signals from parents or other stakeholders, these public eyes still form an incentive to improve their performance. Second, various schools use the website to learn from the experiences of other schools. A school with a high-quality system may be approached

in order to be learned from. Third, school administrations use the information to benchmark their own schools against others. Sometimes they focus on their placement in relation to other local schools, but often school managements prefer to compare themselves with a school that is further away but more similar in student population and curriculum.

The fact that publication of school performance data has few direct effects provides no support for the arguments of opponents of transparency. None of the schools showed signs of goal displacement, risk-adverse behavior, creaming, selecting or other perverse effects. The effect of transparency just does not seem to be strong enough to trigger such effects which do often take place when performance indicators are directly coupled to financial rewards. The publication of school performance data in the Netherlands is not coupled to such schemes, and school managers thus have ample room to react in their own manner. Their reactions sometimes focus on improving performance, but they do not do this through perverse ways.

The overall effect of the transparency is an enhanced focus on external developments. School management used to have a more inward focus. Developments and trends were discussed within the schools, and other experiences and achievements played a less important role. This external focus changes the behavior of schools, albeit not in a deterministic and predictable manner. The value that schools attach to the publication of performance indicators depends on, among other factors, context of the school, the organizational culture, the type of education and other issues facing the school at that moment. The changes should be conceptualized as a process of social construction. The school environment is not a given but rather something that is constructed through interactions and dialogues [16]. This chapter has provided an idea as to how managers construct their environment under the changing conditions of transparency.

The external focus, which is the overall effect, seems to be something that can be valued positively since schools can now more quickly adapt to new circumstances and trends. One can, however, also criticize the external focus, since it could lead to less diversity in schools. The uniform system of measuring performance that is used by the School Inspection Service may stimulate more uniformity in schools. Some even fear a McDonaldization of the Dutch School system [17].

The publication of school performance data on a website does not drastically change school behavior, but it does change the decision-making agenda of schools. They discuss various issues that are triggered by the website. Most importantly, they increasingly discuss school quality in the terms defined by the School Inspection Service. Changes in perceptions are a more subtle effect than changes in behavior, but these changes should not be neglected. Postman [18] shows how new technologies allow us to look at reality in a different manner. The website of the School Inspection Service is an example of a new technology that does not quickly change schools' behavior but instead slowly changes schools' perceptions of their environment and school quality.

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