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The upside of testing topic

A visiting US professor thinks standardised testing in schools will help to determine what educational approaches work best, writes BENJAMIN LONG.

The real benefit of the **Australian government's** controversial MySchool website will not be for parents wanting to compare their children's **school** with others, but for academic researchers, argues a leading United States economist, Professor Joshua Angrist.

Prof Angrist of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is regarded as one of the world's leading economists and has a longstanding interest in public policy, particularly in regard to education issues.

He was in Wollongong last week as a guest of the University of Wollongong's School of Economics and delivered a public lecture on the topic "Does greater independence for publicly funded schools improve student test scores?"

Prof Angrist's research interests include the effects of school inputs and school organisation on student achievement, and the impact of education and social programs on the labour market.

"I'm a labour economist and so that includes education, or more broadly what we call human capital, because schooling is closely related to earnings," Prof Angrist said.

"We spend a lot of time in my field studying the determinants of earnings, and the most important systematic factor determining whether somebody has, say, a middle class or better standard of living is how much schooling they get.

"So there is a strong academic and public policy interest in school quality issues. There is a whole group of people like me who come from an economic background but who study education."

With education policy a hot topic in Australia at the moment Prof Angrist timed his visit well, although he admitted to being surprised at just how much attention he has received.

"These are academic studies, I didn't anticipate so much general public interest," he said.

"I gave a lecture at ANU last week and there was a large crowd and a lot of discussion, and I gave the lecture here in Wollongong and we had a lot of discussion afterwards, too.

"I also gave a lecture to the (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet) staff and had lunch with them and they asked me lots of questions."

Prof Angrist says everybody he has spoken to in this country has been keen to hear his views on MySchool.

While Prof Angrist was quick to point out that his understanding of the Australian education system was limited, he did have some interesting things to say about MySchool.

"I know you're having a big national debate about standardised testing and that most of that debate has focused on this idea of the MySchool website and of league tables," he said.

"Generally, I'm a big fan of standardised testing, but not for that reason. I think the reason we need tests is so that we can do research where we evaluate alternative approaches to education and try to figure out what works and to know what works we need measurable outcomes.

"The secondary role of testing is so that parents can compare schools and stuff like that. We have that, too, in America. I think ultimately that will prove to be less important, even though it gets a lot more media attention.

"The value of testing is just like we want to see who gets better when they go to hospital, so we can compare treatments and therapies. We need to measure things to be able to do that. It is exactly the same in education - we need to measure how well we are doing so that we can learn to do it better.

"Most parents in the United States, and I imagine it is going to be similar in Australia, are going to be pretty happy with the schools their kids go to and there are going to be other reasons like convenience and so on why they send their kids to the neighbourhood school.

"My prediction is that ultimately the MySchool table won't have a dramatic effect (on where parents send their children), but it may have a dramatic impact on education policy by promoting a lot of good research.

"Good data is a prerequisite for useful research."

Prof Angrist's research on US "charter schools" should also be of interest to Australian education policymakers.

His lecture at UOW was about research he has done into charter schools in the US. Charter schools are publicly funded but operate with almost as much autonomy as private schools, both in terms of curriculum and staffing.

"Much of the charter movement is about school reform for low income, poor non-whites in American inner cities where achievement levels are persistently below that of the surrounding white community, and there is a long history of failed attempts to close that gap," he said.

Angrist's studies focused on one charter school in the Boston area that is part of "Knowledge is Power Program", the nation's largest charter management organisation.

"The charter schools in our study conform to a model that some people call the 'No Excuses' model, which is the idea that you should not make the excuse that the kids have a weak

family background for why they are doing so poorly, that you should do whatever it takes to close the gap.

"In practise these schools offer a very intense school experience with a long day, a long year, and lots of discipline and structure, and a particular kind of highly structured teaching style."

The school day goes from 7.30am to 5pm, there is an emphasis on basic reading and maths skills, and students are expected to adhere to a strict behavioural code.

Angrist found that the school had "very impressive achievement gains in math and reading".

"I was surprised by the actual size of the benefit," he said.

"The benefits of this school model are as large or larger than anything I have ever seen in education research, and I think the results are quite convincing.

"The population that these schools are serving is notoriously underachieving and it has been very difficult to come up with interventions that produce large gains for this type of student.

"So the size of the effects and the fact that they are helping such a type of weak student, that's very impressive and it is something that ought to get noticed.

"I'm not saying that it ought to become the basis for our whole educational system; I think it ought to be thought of as a targeted intervention for a particular situation."

The next task, says Angrist, is to do more research on exactly why this school model has proved so effective for this population.

"We don't really know for sure (why this school has been successful), we hope to flesh that out and get more data and do a wider study of more schools.

"I think it has something to do with the amount of schooling - the length of the day - but we know it's not just that because other research on lengthening the day in the existing public system has not been that encouraging.

"I think there has been an approach to teaching here that has been quite effective for these low achievement kids, for struggling kids.

"It is very, very structured. It's more teacher-centred than child-centred. There's a social component to it. There's high expectations and extremely efficient use of classroom time as well."

While hesitant to suggest that what worked well in a particular situation with a particular social group in the US could transfer automatically to an Australian setting, Prof Angrist thought there were elements of the approach that also might work in some Australian cases.

"The talk I gave was about one school and it is very easy to talk about that one school and what it is all about. But there is evidence from other similar schools of substantial gains and achievement for minority kids from the inner city.

"However, it's not clear that all charter schools are this good, in fact most are probably not this good - I'm looking at a particular model that is probably among the most successful if not the most successful approaches to education that are being experimented with now.

"That could translate somewhat to Australia, although that is a little stretched. I know there is a lot of concern here with indigenous people and various poor outcomes among that population. I have also heard of concerns about immigrant group that are doing better or worse."

Caption :Photo: United States economist Professor Joshua Angrist says ranking schools provides a wealth of information for researchers and academics. Picture: KIRK GILMOUR

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