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Beyond Rankings to Educational Productivity
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This week, *U.S. News & World Report* issued its annual "Best High Schools Report." As with most "rankings," it received extensive media attention and provides bragging rights for those fortunate enough to be included. But there's a problem: school rankings grab our attention, but also can distract us from the bigger issue: are they really predictive of student success?

The report uses an identification process to determine which schools serve all of their students well and then assesses whether those schools produce college-ready students. On the face of it, this seems fine. Creating benchmarks, using a variety of performance indicators and measuring academic outcomes all help to build a picture of how a school is delivering on its responsibility to prepare students for success in college and beyond.

That's all good, but it's not enough, because the rankings themselves are not "actionable." The test scores and rankings are simply proxy measures for what is happening academically at the school at that point in time. There is nothing a school or school system can specifically do to improve outcomes for students based upon this list. With the data available today we can begin to re-define success in terms of improved productivity leading to improved outcomes and their related cost.

To determine what's working and why, we must start at the end and work backwards along the educational pipeline. The end is what matters most: Do students have the skills necessary to land living- wage jobs, and are they actually landing these jobs? Do students have a career ladder available to them to continue their climb toward security and prosperity?

A wealth of information is available that allows us to determine the important momentum points along that educational pipeline – and then be able to apply them in the classroom. By linking data systems together it is now possible to see which schools and teachers are "getting it right." What works in Peoria can inform teachers in Pomona. Through these data, we have concrete answers to such questions as: Among those students landing good jobs, did they go to college? For how long? What courses did they take? Did they get a degree? A certificate? Did they finish high school? What were their grades? What were their test scores? Did they go to kindergarten, preschool? What are the details? What mattered most? What did it cost?

With these types of productivity metrics we can determine the meaning and impact of standardized test scores, class size, teacher qualifications, teacher preparation, and determine what matters more and what matters less. With this information we can quickly improve the likelihood of better outcomes for students by learning from those

schools and school systems that are achieving higher levels of educational productivity, and create and share productive cycles of improvement.

To determine what is really happening we must recast the metrics toward achievement of educational outcomes. It's a productivity exercise. And educational productivity and economic productivity are tightly linked.

For parents trying to select a new school for their children, performance data are critical to their evaluation. For a school to be recognized for high performance is good for morale, for recruiting and for continued improvement and inclusion in the rankings. However, school rankings can be like shiny objects. They grab our attention for the moment, but distract us from the bigger issue: are they really predictive of student success?

James S. Lanich is president of Educational Results Partnership, a business-led nonprofit organization that maintains the largest database on student achievement in the country.