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Karsten, S.; Visscher, A.J.

DOI

[10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01807.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01807.x)

Publication date

2010

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Public Administration

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Karsten, S., & Visscher, A. J. (2010). The standards challenge: a reply to Helen M. Gunter. *Public Administration*, 80(1), 118-119. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2010.01807.x>

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THE STANDARDS CHALLENGE: A REPLY TO HELEN M. GUNTER

SJOERD KARSTEN AND ADRIE J. VISSCHER

Helen Gunter's criticism on our proposal for developing standards for the publication of school performance indicators is that we don't fully realize that public school indicators are part of a neo-liberal policy agenda. She believes this agenda causes much harm in education. Because of this, our attempt to critically appraise and, where applicable improve, current systems of public accountability, should be rejected.

Here, in our opinion, she is fundamentally wrong. First, it is incorrect to assume that we are insufficiently critical of the neo-liberal agenda. We are aware of its dangers. In fact, one of us critically analysed the neo-liberal agenda (Karsten 1999). However, we think that leaving the development and use of performance indicators completely to policy-makers, is dangerous. In fact, doing so would lead to much damage: inadequate indicators (such as not using value added) and raising false hopes in parents (something that the experiences in England show – Karsten *et al.* 2001). This is exactly why we developed 'standards' or criteria in order to test and improve the currently employed indicators. Thus, what we are doing is very different from what Gunter suggests when she speaks of 'standards'. What Gunter is referring to are specific learning standards or performance outcomes that schools need to fulfil.

Secondly, the assumption that public performance indicators should only be understood within a neo-liberal context is, from both a comparative and historical perspective, untrue. Two of us showed in an earlier study that in France and The Netherlands, the public performance indicators were introduced from a completely different policy context (Karsten *et al.* 2001). In France there is formally no or only restricted parental choice and the introduction of free-market thinking is largely opposed. However, publicly available performance indicators were introduced in the early 1990s as an instrument of the state to be used for informing citizens of its own functioning. The Netherlands has allowed free school choice for more than 100 years because of religious and cultural reasons. In 1997, one national newspaper went to court to demand that the information collected by the school inspectors on the quality of secondary schools should be made public. The newspaper was granted the right to go ahead and published a sort of league table of all secondary schools. The Dutch government reacted reluctantly by making the publication of these inspectorates' reviews part of its policy. These two cases show that Gunter's criticism is grounded in a limited 'Anglo-Saxon' view of public accountability. If Gunter looked at how performance indicators are made available to the public in other countries, then she would know that the negative effects she refers to are not manifesting everywhere. The Netherlands is an example of this. Performance indicators can be made public in different ways. Some ways are better than others. One cannot disregard public performance indicators completely on the basis of the English experience.

The belief that publicly available school performance indicators are part of a sort of neo-liberal conspiracy shows that Gunter misunderstands history. In both Europe and

Sjoerd Karsten is in the Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Amsterdam. Adrie J. Visscher is in the Department of Educational Organization and Management, University of Twente.

the United States there were innumerable initiatives for the development of performance indicators – and this long before neo-liberalism had developed (Bouckaert 1995). But it was not just right-wing (and later New Left) policy-makers who were considering these ideas. After the Second World War, the Old Left was also promoting public and objective tests of pupils' achievements. An important function of these tests was to convince working class parents, counter to all prejudices, of the capacities of their children. These tests could also be used by teachers as a comparative norm for assessing their own performance as well as validating the advice they gave to students and their parents.

The need for more open and class-independent performance tests came under criticism at the end of the 1960s by the libertarian ideology of self-development. These tests were seen as damaging to the personality of young children. However, Dutch research on the use of these objective tests at the end of primary schools showed that where these tests were not used, pupils from lower social classes were put at a disadvantage (Luyten and Bosker 2004).

Gunter claims that in the UK nearly four million children live in poverty. It is generally known that these children have a greater chance of going to a poorly functioning school than children from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Gunter suggests citizens living in a democracy should not have the right to know which schools are functioning poorly and criticize the inequality in performances. Even worse, parents of children attending a poorly functioning school are to be kept ignorant of that fact. If we understand Gunter's line of thought correctly, these parents are even not allowed to make well-informed choices. That is only the privilege of the better-off. We think this is an irresponsible position to take. Therefore, we strive for school performances to be openly and honestly compared.

One last point: how does Gunter think the quality of school education can be protected and improved? In her concern to rebuke us as pawns in the neo-liberal game, she offers no way forward. For all her political critique, we are confident that measuring standards will be part of any school regime because, as we have shown, standards are not just neo-liberal tools.

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