Each year since 1994, the French Ministry of Education has provided the heads of public secondary schools, through the relevant académie, with a set of indicators to facilitate the running of schools, known as IPES (Indicateurs pour le pilotage des établissements secondaires), together with data for each académie and for France as a whole and computer software supplied by the ministry.

This set of indicators satisfies a number of needs felt by those who work in the education system. After describing these needs and the chosen way of meeting them, this article will focus on assessment of the 'performance' of lycées (upper secondary schools), through the concept of added value in particular, and will go on to examine the conditions necessary for the optimal use of these indicators.

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Patrick Alt (France)
The origin and organization of the IPES system

The need to meet several different types of requirement

The concern to provide schools with indicators dates back to the 1970s. There has, however, been a change in the objectives and conception of these indicators in the last ten years, due partly to changes in school management policy and a strong demand for assessment indicators to facilitate measurement of a school's performance, but also to the evolution of information systems.

In the 1970s and until the end of the 1980s, for example, school management charts (tableaux de bord), developed at the ministry, contained indicators that facilitated analysis and decision-making. They proved, however, to be a complex and cumbersome tool because of the difficulty of obtaining the necessary information.

The rationale underlying the school plans (projets d'établissement), an idea introduced in the early 1980s and consolidated by the 1989 education act, prompted the design of new indicators to assist initial diagnosis, the making of choices, the fixing of objectives and the evaluation of the plan's implementation. Indicators were developed locally by the various parties involved in the system, with the result that the plans could not be assessed in a homogeneous manner.

Furthermore, the publication by the press of gross baccalauréat pass rates and the lycées 'league tables' based solely on these rates, ignoring various other aspects of their activities and their context, combined with the popularity of these publications with the general public, made it urgent for the education system to produce its own reports on the performance of schools by providing indicators of success that took account of the problems they encountered. As a result, three performance indicators for lycées, based on the results of their pupils in the baccalauréat examination and included among the battery of IPES indicators, were published and made available to all those involved in the education system, from senior officials to parents.

This was also a time of rising unemployment, especially for those with fewer qualifications, and of increased job insecurity and a general malaise prompted by these trends. Scholastic success and obtaining the highest possible qualifications thus came to be regarded as a safeguard against this anxiety about the future.

These factors—the many forms of assessment, the ranking of lycées by certain newspapers or periodicals, the introduction of 'school plans', national and regional investment in education, and public disquiet about the future—contributed to the rise of a demand for indicators for the evaluation of schools. At the same time, progress in the procedures used for the collection of data on pupils, teachers and educational structures has made it possible, using new, computerized information systems, to standardize the information gathered and thus provide schools with a standard set of indicators.

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