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Education: See All the Spin

Now that education is widely considered the leading domestic issue, the nation needs valid, reliable information about the condition of American schools. As the presidential campaign of 2000 commences, political pressures are unfortunately distorting the national data that get reported to the public.

When national reading results were released by the National Assessment Governing Board in February, Vice President Al Gore appeared at the press conference to announce that reading scores were up and that this "great progress" was a direct result of the Clinton-Gore education program. He called on Congress to pass the administration's proposed legislation and then departed, taking two-thirds of the audience with him.

Never before had any federal official loftier than the secretary of education participated in a press conference to release scores from the federally funded National Assessment of Educational Progress. By law, the reporting of NAEP test scores is supposed to be strictly nonpartisan and nonpolitical. In 1992 NAEP's governing board rebuked President Bush for making reference to test scores before their official release, and now again the chair of the governing board issued a complaint about the vice president's inappropriate political intervention.

After Gore left the press conference, Pascal D. Forgione Jr., the commissioner of education statistics, pointed out that reading scores for eighth-grade students had improved a bit between 1992 and 1998, but there was "no net gain" for students in fourth grade and 12th grade. Far from the "amazing" progress that political appointees were describing, improvements in reading were slight at best. The vice president had used the event to generate headlines about successes that didn't happen; worse, he attempted to claim credit for what little progress the nation was making; worse still, he left the impression that NAEP scores can be used to promote the political program of whoever happens to be in office, this despite the fact that Congress (at the behest of the Reagan administration) took considerable pains to try to insulate

NAEP from political manipulation of every sort.

Another misuse of federal data for partisan purposes occurred in early March, when the Department of Education issued a report showing that poor students were registering higher test scores since 1994. The political spinners claimed that any gains made by poor students could be attributed to current federal programs—especially Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which is soon to be reauthorized. Quietly acknowledged

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in the same report was the fact that students in high-poverty schools are now reading no better than in 1990, and that 70 percent of children in such schools are still scoring "below even the basic level of reading."

There's been some progress recently, in other words, but not a great deal. Still, governors of both parties have a right to be irked by the administration's effort to take credit for the modest test-score gains posted in the past few years. They know that the federal government puts up only 7 cents of every dollar spent on education, and that education is one of the top two spending priorities (with health care) in every state. Since NAEP data describe educational performance but cannot legitimately be used to specify the reasons for improvements or declines in test scores, it is inappropriate for anyone to cite them to tout a particular federal program or instructional approach.

Even the usually professional National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) has recently issued misleading data on an important public policy issue and has thereby made the problem appear to be getting better when

it is not. Less than two years ago, NCES published a massive study showing that vast numbers of teachers were teaching academic subjects in which they had neither a major nor minor in college, including 39 percent of science teachers, 34 percent of mathematics teachers, 25 percent of English teachers and 17 percent of social studies teachers. But in January, NCES released a new survey claiming that the numbers of "out of field" teachers were far lower: 12 percent of science teachers, 18 percent of mathematics teachers, 14 percent of English teachers and 11 percent of social studies teachers.

Had there been a sudden and dramatic improvement in teacher preparation? No, the agency had changed its definition of whom to count, producing what even NCES admits is an underestimate of the problem. The earlier survey had included all those who were teaching a subject that was not their main field. The 1999 survey was restricted only to those who said that a certain subject (science, mathematics, social studies or English) was their full-time, main teaching assignment. Thus, the very teachers likeliest to be teaching out of field were not counted: the social studies teachers assigned to teach mathematics, the gym teachers handling science or social studies, and others who were not assigned to teaching what they studied in college or graduate school.

Something dangerous is happening when government officials begin to spin federal data about education for their political benefit or to convince the public that things are better—or worse—than they actually are. Government-generated data are the primary source of information about the overall progress and condition of U.S. education. If data produced by the Department of Education are no longer perceived to be apolitical and credible, the nation will lose the ability to engage in a rational discussion about educational improvement.

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