Federalism and the Politics of Data Use

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In his opening remarks at a national research conference on charter schools in fall 2006, Mark Schneider, the Commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, stated that federalism is his biggest challenge when it comes to building a more coherent system of data collection and reporting at the national level. Commissioner Schneider then went on to describe the variations among the 50 states in measuring academic proficiency, tracking school and student progress, and meeting federal reporting requirements. At the same time, state commissioners of education and legislatures are just as frustrated with what they consider to be federal intrusion in state affairs. An example is Virginia, where the state board of education has repeatedly challenged the federal testing and reporting requirements that are associated with the No Child Left Behind Act.

Clearly, the U.S. Department of Education does not have the capacity or the authority of a national ministry of education in a nationalized public education system. The Institute for Education Sciences (IES), which includes the National Center for Education Statistics, is the core unit within the U.S. Department of Education with a focus on data collection, evaluation, and research. The entire IES employs a total of about 200 professionals. The federal government relies

on state governments to gather, analyze, and report most of the data that pertain to the conditions and performance of public schools across the nation.

Data policy is further complicated by interest-based politics within each level of government. Increasingly, data are used to drive governmental decisions. Consequently, competing interests are engaging in data gathering, analysis, and reporting with the objective of influencing governmental activities. As discussed later in this chapter, among the competing interests are consumers and providers of data as well as governmental actors and agencies. Political disagreements arise not only within each level of the government but also between levels of government.

In the pages ahead, I will propose a conceptual framework for how politics shapes data policy and practice in public education. The chapter then provides examples of four different political scenarios. The chapter concludes by examining several options to promote better data policies and practices.

Proposing a Framework for the Politics of Data

The phrase "education data" suggests technical and methodological issues, not political ones, but politics is a prominent factor in shaping data policy. In contemporary policymaking in Western democracies, data have become a necessary condition for advancing legitimate claims. In education, a variety of data is gathered and used for setting policy priorities, arbitrating disagreements, and measuring the effectiveness of publicly-funded programs and agencies. At the state and district level, for example, superintendents of schools are hired and fired based in part on data measuring management and academic performance.

This chapter focuses on the use of data at the federal, state, and district levels. I will examine the roles played by the executive and legislative branches of the government, but not court decisions. Also, I will not address the politics of data use at the school and classroom levels. The key question I examine in this chapter is: How does politics affect data policy and practices? I argue that data policy is jointly shaped by the purpose of the data activity and the alignment of competing political interests.

As Table 1 shows, data policy and practices can be broadly seen as serving two purposes. First, data are used for meeting statutory and administrative requirements. State and local agencies are required to submit annual reports to the federal government in response to mandates on civil rights, safety, and

academic performance, among other things. Second, data are used for strategic planning, setting priorities, and assessing the effectiveness of policies.

Table 1

A Conceptual Framework for the Politics of Data Use

Alignment of Interests Among Policy Actors and Organized Interests	Institutional Purpose of Data Activities	
	Complying with Reporting Requirements	*Using Data Strategically*
Strong	**Compliance** Examples: definitions of subpopulations for NCLB; urban district outreach to promote choice options	**Policy Coherence** Examples: mayor-led accountability practices; gubernatorial role in building state data warehouses
Weak	**Resistance and Delay** Example: information for parents on school performance	**Fragmentation and Incrementalism** Examples: dropout rates; student achievement and teacher tenure in NYC; K-20 student data system in CA

The use of data for both kinds of purposes is shaped by political actors and organized interests. At least three sets of interests may try to influence data policy. The first type of interest is data consumers, which include parents and policymakers. Parents may seek data on the quality of a particular program or school building. They are keen to track academic progress in their school or district. They seek timely school report cards and many are interested in comparing their schools or districts with the state or national average. They also want greater transparency with regard to problems and successes in a particular school or classroom. At the school district level, policy actors are data consumers as well. They need data to craft policy options that address the concerns of parents, taxpayers, and other members of the community. They also use data for budgetary planning, capital improvement, and accountability.

The second type of interest trying to shape data policy is data providers, those government employees who gather, analyze, and report data on a regular

basis. At the federal, state, and district levels, data providers are located in various units, including the office of accountability, student assessment, research and evaluation, and school effectiveness, among others. Data providers sometimes respond to the concerns of data consumers, but they may also steer the concerns of consumers in a certain direction. For example, since data providers are dependent on public funding, they are likely to prioritize their data collection and reporting functions to ensure appropriations from the state legislature and the governor.

The third interest involved in data policy is advocacy groups that use education data to lobby for policy changes. Taxpayer organizations and business groups (such as the Business Roundtable and the Chamber of Commerce) want to know whether public dollars are spent in ways that yield better results, and are thus supportive of gathering and analyzing student performance data. They pay particular attention to data pertaining to local and state tax burdens, teacher effectiveness, school quality, parental satisfaction, and fiscal decisions. On the other hand, union organizations are keenly interested in data that show that traditional public schools outperform their competitors, such as charter schools. A major purpose of data for teachers unions is to ensure job security, adequate compensation, and other favorable work conditions for teachers, such as smaller class sizes.

Two sets of political conditions may occur, depending on the interactions of competing interests and policy actors. As Table 1 suggests, interest groups and policy actors can agree on the purpose of gathering and using education data. (I refer to this as strong alignment.) An example is the accountability requirements established by No Child Left Behind. While policymakers may disagree over the proper consequences of not meeting the NCLB expectations, there is a common understanding (in most states and districts) of the types of data that must be pulled together and reported to the federal government and the public on an annual basis. At other times, policy actors and competing organized groups may disagree on data policy and practices, leading to political fragmentation. (I refer to this as weak alignment.) For example, local school governance is often dominated by fragmented politics, particularly in urban districts where the mayor is not in charge. When faced with low academic performance and budgetary problems in these districts, key institutional actors who enjoy substantial policy autonomy—the elected school board, the teachers union, state and local political leaders, and the superintendent—are too ready to place the blame on each other.

The two sets of institutional conditions, namely the purpose of data activities and the alignment of political actors, combine to generate four different types of data policy, as shown in the four cells of Table 1. When political actors are in agreement (strong alignment), it is likely to promote two types of data policy, depending on the purpose of the data activity. Where clear political agreement exists and data are needed to meet a government mandate, policy stakeholders are likely to make sure that data are gathered, analyzed, and reported in order to comply with the requirement. When it comes to the second function of data, the use of data for strategic purposes, political actors who are in agreement are likely to achieve policy coherence by creating incentives for the strategic use of data or by supporting a clear process to seek data-driven solutions.

In contrast, when political interests are in disagreement (weak alignment), data policy and practices exhibit two other distinct patterns. When data are needed to meet statutory or administrative requirements, weakly aligned political actors are likely to generate organizational resistance to the request for data. Any requirements that data be reported are likely to be met with incremental efforts to meet a minimally acceptable level of expectations. Weak political alignment is also likely to impede the second type of data use (strategic efforts to use data). Political fragmentation perpetuates interest-based calculations for political gain at the expense of longer term strategic priorities. What follows is a more substantive discussion of each of these four patterns of activity.

Compliance with Governmental Mandates

Federalism allows substantial autonomy at the state and district levels, but this often means that federal agencies (as well as policy researchers, school reformers, the public, and the media) often encounter difficulties in gaining access to accurate education data in a timely manner from states and school districts. School districts are independent entities that are mostly governed by independently elected school boards, financed by their own fiscal authority, and managed in ways that are often constrained by collective bargaining agreements. Each of the 14,200 school districts in the U.S. has its own governing culture and bureaucratic inertia. Federally mandated reporting is often seen by districts as an insufficiently funded activity, draining away staffing resources from other service delivery activities.

There is great variation in the way districts respond to governmental mandates that data be reported. One surprising example of local autonomy is

found in the annual *Digest of Education Statistics* issued by the U.S. Department of Education. In the most recent report, there were 367 districts that did not submit enrollment information to the federal government.[1] And the number of districts that did not submit enrollment information has remained more or less the same since the late 1970s. Even though 367 districts constitute a small fraction of the total number of districts nationwide, the fact that these districts simply do not report data to the federal government tells us something about the nature of federalism.

Weak Political Alignment Generates Resistance

When political actors at different levels of government are not in agreement, it is unlikely that data reporting requirements will be met. A recent example of this can be found in the limited implementation of the school choice provisions of NCLB. In this case, the interests in conflict are those of parents and those of the school district office. NCLB requires school districts to distribute information on school performance to parents of students at certain low-performing schools; students in these schools are eligible to move to a higher performing public school or a charter school. But many school districts have been reluctant to report the information to parents as required by law. During 2002-03, only 18,000 students in low-performing schools exercised the option of moving to a higher performing school, though over 5 million students were eligible. In 2004-05, the number of students switching to better public schools increased to 48,000, as the federal government began to monitor whether school districts were providing the required information to eligible parents and students.[2] Given the lack of interest in complying with the law in many school districts, particularly in districts facing enrollment declines, it remains unclear if the choice provision in NCLB can be fully implemented across districts and states.

Political Alignment Facilitates Data Compliance

When policy actors and organized interests are ready to work toward a set of shared goals, tension over data compliance becomes manageable. The federal government has been willing to compromise in response to several state and local concerns about specific provisions of NCLB, and this has brought about greater compliance with reporting requirements. Beginning in 2003 and 2004, as more schools and districts were being identified as "in need of improvement" based on their failure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) targets, the

U.S. Department of Education negotiated with states and made adjustments.[3] Among the first policy changes was an adjustment to the rules covering the inclusion of two subgroups, students with disabilities and English language learners, in state accountability systems. There were objections from some state and local actors to holding all students with disabilities to grade-level standards and to expecting English language learners to achieve proficiency in English quickly. States were finding that schools with large numbers of students in these two subgroups were more likely to fail to meet AYP targets than schools without students in these subgroups, and some of the best schools were being identified as needing improvement based on the performance of students in the two subgroups.

Compromises have also been made in the implementation of the Supplementary Educational Services (SES) provisions of NCLB, where negotiations between the federal government and several school districts have overcome obstacles that might have interfered with data use. Under NCLB, students in certain low-performing schools can receive free tutoring services provided by school districts and outside providers. However, school districts that themselves fail to meet AYP are not eligible to offer the extra learning services to their students; in these districts, only outside providers can offer the tutoring.

Not surprisingly, many urban districts have been reluctant to offer information to parents about supplementary services provided by outside groups. Only 5 percent of school districts used up the funds that had been set aside to pay for supplemental services during 2005–06.[4] Faced with low levels of compliance with the SES notification requirements, the federal government launched a pilot program that allows certain low-performing districts to offer supplemental educational services in return for making stronger efforts to raise parental awareness of and student participation in those services. Under the pilot agreement, participating districts must provide parents with early notification that supplementary services are available, and then must report on notification procedures, program participation rates, and attendance to the U.S. Department of Education.

This agreement has led urban districts to become increasingly willing to disseminate information to parents about supplementary services. In Chicago, for example, many steps have been taken to boost participation. Parents have been notified early that their children could be eligible to receive free tutoring, the district distributed to parents a handbook explaining how to register for

the services and how to select a provider, all schools with eligible students are required to host open houses for parents and providers, and advertisements and flyers have been used to promote the availability of free tutoring services.[5] As a result, over 75,000 students registered for Supplementary Education Services with more than 40 service providers at 300 school sites during 2005-06. The alignment of federal and local interests, in other words, has facilitated a higher degree of local compliance with reporting requirements.

How Political Fragmentation Hurts Data Policy and Practice

Reporting data in order to comply with requirements is a relatively straightforward use of data. The second function of data is its use for strategic planning, setting priorities, and assessing the effectiveness of policies. Collaboration is necessary to use data in these ways. Unfortunately, interest-based politics provides insufficient incentives for collaboration. At each level of government, agency rivalries, leadership instability, and the political inertia of organizational maintenance lead to data use that is incremental rather than strategic.

Organizational Silos

Since information is a key source of influence, governmental agencies tend to insulate their own data collection and reporting functions, even when they duplicate similar efforts in other agencies. The more specialized and unique the data, the less likely the agency will be to build connections to other data systems. With very few exceptions, data sharing remains limited between state boards of higher education and state commissioners of elementary and secondary education, for instance.

Further, bureaucracies, like other social institutions, have a primary goal of maintaining themselves. Too often, school bureaucracies consider data transparency to be a threat to their control. In education, the data gathering and reporting entities are almost always the same as the operating agencies that deliver the services in the first place, leading to the possibility of data manipulation. An example is the various ways that districts and states define and track their dropout and graduation rates. For example, New Mexico defines its graduation rate as the percentage of 12th graders who graduate, which does not take into consideration students who dropped out earlier in high school.[6] Until recently, in Rhode Island, the graduation rate included all graduating

seniors, regardless of the number of years they spent in high school, and did not count "unknown departures" of students from the system.[7] The challenges of data under-reporting and data exaggeration are not unique to student performance. Similar problems exist in the use of school funds, special education classification, and other management issues.

Institutional Instability

Agency rivalry is not the only factor interfering with the strategic use of data. Federal appropriations to support data use are often the victim of instability and fragmentation at the U.S. Department of Education, which can create cycles of uncertainty about the research role of the federal government. The institutions involved with federal education research from the 1960s to the 1990s have gone through what education historian Carl Kaestle has described as "a merry-go-round" process of endless rounds of reorganization.[8] Each reorganization disrupts the ongoing relationship between the agency and the research infrastructure, including data collection efforts. Partisan changes in Congress and the White House also tend to destabilize appropriations for research since the policy priorities change. While reliable data collection requires long-term, persistent effort, shifting leadership at the federal level often frustrates such long-term investment in many districts and states.

Inertia of the Status Quo

Decisions about what kind of information to gather and how to collect the data are shaped by the distribution of power in a specific context. Policymakers are constrained by existing institutional norms, procedures, and regulations in defining the scope of options. Powerful stakeholders, such as unions, may hinder new practices of data reporting. When unions benefit from an existing set of practices, they may not want to support greater transparency, which may create challenges to the established power structure.

In April 2008, New York state lawmakers considered a proposal that would have allowed local districts the option of examining student performance on standardized tests when awarding tenure to teachers. New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has been a strong advocate for basing teacher promotions on student performance. As the mayor's legislative staff observed, "To make sure kids have the best possible teachers, we need to look at all available data. Teachers should be accurately evaluated with information about how well

they're helping students learn. We cannot afford to restrict the city's ability to set high standards."[9] In the end, both the Democratic-controlled Assembly and the Republican-controlled Senate voted to preclude local districts from setting their own standards on teacher performance, standards which may have included student test scores.[10] The New York State United Teachers was successful in its lobbying effort to preserve the status quo.[11]

The New York case illustrates the difference between agenda setting and the process of searching for policy options. Political scientist John Kingdon argues that agenda setting can be "quite discontinuous and nonincremental..." but "incrementalism might still characterize the generation of alternatives."[12] In other words, the politics of reform may push policymakers to pay attention to controversial proposals such as using student learning as the basis for evaluating teachers. However, organized interests and existing operational practices tend to restrict the range of options that are deemed politically acceptable.

Efforts to improve data systems, too, are often constrained by existing institutional arrangements and practices, so these reforms tend to take on an incremental character. In a seminal article, political scientist Charles Lindblom argued that governmental decisions are not entirely a result of rational consideration. Instead, policymakers tend to rely on what they already have and then make modest adjustments.[13] Since decision makers are not likely to have complete information and tend to be influenced by their previous practices, analysts have found incrementalism in public budgeting and other policy arenas for decades.[14]

Education is no exception to this rule, and the case of California (detailed in the chapter in this volume by RiShawn Biddle) illustrates this phenomenon well. In a recent report that examines the challenge of building a K-20 student data system in California, the Rand Corporation pointed to the fragmentary nature of the seven major student information systems that are either in operation or in development in California. As the Rand researchers observed, each governance entity "has developed its own politics and administrative practices and all have developed strong separate culture and identities as well as a protective mindset."[15] As a result, they recommended an incremental approach toward changing their data systems over the next five years.[16]

Political Alignment and the Strategic Use of Data

When political interests converge around the strategic use of data, the data system can become an analytical tool for policy evaluation. Data can be used to

uncover the underlying causes of educational problems, to form the basis for new policy initiatives, and to ensure that accountability policies are working properly. Political leadership at the city or state level has been the key to getting interests aligned behind data use in two promising examples: (1) mayors in several urban districts who are starting to do for education data what they have already done for data on crime and government operations, and (2) governors who are pushing for longitudinal student data systems.

Several big city mayors are beginning to use data to foster policy coherence for the city as a whole. During the late 1970s and the 1980s as well as the early 2000s, when cities faced severe fiscal stress, mayors began to adopt a new governing culture, sometimes characterized as the New Fiscal Culture (NFC).[17] NFC-oriented mayors tend to focus on management efficiency and emphasize "quality of life" issues, and to move away from policies defined by traditional party labels and organized interest groups.[18] In reforming the management of agencies, NFC-oriented mayors try to contract out, focus on management efficiency, and introduce outcome measures for periodic evaluation. These changes tend to overlap with the policy vision of civic-spirited business leaders and the taxpaying electorate. The quality of life issues are often defined in terms of the city's physical environment, parks and recreation, and public education.

In an extension of this New Fiscal Culture, mayors who lead school systems are likely to apply accountability and fiscal discipline to the schools in both formal and informal ways, and these often involve the use of data. They recruit administrators to improve the district's student performance data reporting, human resource information, and financial management systems.[19] By sharing financial, management and auditing expertise with the school system, city hall can improve capital projects, balance the budget, and even improve union-management negotiations. School districts run by mayors are able to achieve financial solvency, often turning a deficit into a balanced budget. In New York and Chicago, for example, bond ratings have improved since mayors have taken control of the schools.

A second example of the alignment of political forces behind the strategic use of data can be seen in states where governors are leading efforts to build longitudinal data systems. Today, nearly all states are building or have built these data systems. The Data Quality Campaign, a nongovernmental organization, has identified ten necessary elements for a "robust longitudinal data system."[20] A 2007 survey found that four states maintained a data system

that incorporated all ten elements: Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, and Utah.[21] In some of the states with the most robust systems, the governor's office has played a critical role. In Delaware, two-term Democratic Governor Thomas Carper successfully pushed the elements of a comprehensive education accountability plan through the state legislature between 1993 and 2000. A key feature of Governor Carper's reform was to link individual student test scores to teachers. The 2000 reform made student achievement "count for at least 20 percent of the performance reviews given to teachers, administrators, and other instructional staff members."[22] Governor Carper's successor, Governor Ruth Ann Minner, has continued to advocate for using student achievement to hold teachers accountable.[23]

In Florida, Governor Jeb Bush and the legislature launched the A-Plus education accountability reform in 1999. The plan was designed to end social promotion, reduce class size, and expand preschool programs. The accountability system required annual testing of students in math and reading in grades three through eight, thereby allowing the state and districts to assess individual student performance gains from grade to grade.[24] In his state-of-the-state address during his 2002 re-election campaign, the governor advocated for greater scrutiny of student performance data and stronger state intervention in low-performing schools.[25] Since 2002, the Florida Education Data Warehouse has allowed policymakers and researchers to conduct longitudinal analyses at the student level.[26] The Warehouse pulls data from multiple sources and is maintained by six full-time programmers.

Strategic use of data can also be facilitated by a convergence of political and research interests. A good example of such a strategic alignment is Project STAR (Student Teacher Achievement Ratio), a statewide randomized experiment on class-size reduction that was implemented in Tennessee from 1985 until 1990. The project was supported by an unusual coalition.[27] Among the key players was Democratic lawmaker Steve Cobb, an influential chair of the Ways and Means Committee in the Tennessee House of Representatives, who supported Republican Governor Lamar Alexander's comprehensive education reform plan in 1984. Cobb was also a formally trained sociologist who valued rigorous program evaluation. Cobb was joined by Helen Pate Bain, a former president of the National Education Association and a strong advocate for class-size reduction. The collaborative effort also included researchers from each of the four major public and private higher education institutions in the

state, thereby ensuring support from the postsecondary sector. The coalition overcame the natural tendency toward disagreement between leaders of the two political parties, union and management, public and private higher education interests, and policy reformers and researchers. Consequently, the Tennessee legislature appropriated $12 million to hire the extra teachers needed to reduce class size for a four-year period to support the experiment. As the longest running randomized field trial in education, Project STAR provided Tennessee lawmakers with clear evidence on the benefits of smaller class size in the early grades and in rural schools.

Implications for the Future of Data Policy and Practice

The use of data in education will continue to be shaped by political alignment and the functions of those data. Clearly, there is a need to build broad-based coalitions at all levels of the federal system to improve the quality of data systems so that they can be used to address the most challenging education problems. At issue are the necessary political conditions that foster the strategic use of education data. This concluding section will explore several options for the future of data policy. One option is to take a centralized approach, with the federal government serving as the primary agent for data collection, verification, and reporting. A second option is to leave data policy to the states, but with the expectation that all states will ultimately meet the criteria of a robust data system as defined by the Data Quality Campaign. A third option is to involve quasi-governmental or nonprofit entities in data work. Such an arrangement may foster public-private partnerships in the long run.

Federalizing Data on Accountability

The current climate of education accountability has created an interest among policy actors and the public in comparing student achievement across districts and states. However, 50 states have generated 50 systems of standards and accountability, a fact that makes comparisons across state lines extremely difficult. Analyses using performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) as a yardstick have revealed large discrepancies between scores on state-designed tests and scores on the NAEP, which means that states are setting the bar for proficiency at very different levels. States also use different threshold levels for counting the scores of various subgroups of students toward AYP calculations. While California discounts the scores of

students in subgroups smaller than 100, Pennsylvania has a lower threshold of 40 students for each subgroup. Definitional variations like these mean that a school's test scores may be counted as making AYP in one state but not another state. Given these discrepancies and the likely cost savings that would come with a single system, one might argue for a stronger federal role in standardizing data that pertains to accountability.

Expanding State Leadership

As discussed earlier, state policy actors and organized interests can collaborate on data work to address strategic purposes. Project STAR in Tennessee, and the good work of several states whose longitudinal databases have met most of the criteria set forth by the Data Quality Campaign, are good examples. Where governors take the lead and sustain their commitments, robust data systems can be created and maintained. State political leaders may be willing to spend their political capital on data work for several reasons. First, state action preempts federal micromanaging of data issues. Second, states can make sure that data are used to support their policy priorities. Third, the process of building and maintaining a statewide data system will promote collaboration between the state and school districts. Finally, state-led data policy is consistent with the current governance arrangement in our federal system, where states have constitutional authority over education.

Cultivating Public-Private Partnerships

One likely future scenario may involve both public and private investment in education data. As states and districts face periodic budget cuts for K-12 education, the focus will be on making sure that basic data are gathered and reported for mandated purposes, and the strategic use of data may suffer. Additional support from private foundations and other sources to support the Data Quality Campaign and other similar efforts can strength the analytic capacity around state data systems.

Florida has pursued an innovative strategy of engaging the private sector to support its education data system. Access to education data is used as an incentive to get private companies involved. In response to Florida's Request for Proposals (RFP), 13 companies submitted bids to help the state in creating the Education Data Warehouse (EDW). The EDW was designed to be a repository for a collection of longitudinal data from different policy arenas, including K-20

education, welfare, corrections, employment, and others. The EDW began with an initial state investment of $7 million for gathering and organizing student and staffing data for K-20. Through the RFP process, the private sector was encouraged to develop new applications for the database; in return a company would gain access to K-20 education data without having to spend resources to gather them. The incentive of instant data access seemed to work. The state's final decision was between two major companies, IBM and Microsoft. The latter was chosen because of the breadth of technical services, licenses, tools and applications it offered to teachers, schools, and policymakers.[28] For the last four years, Microsoft has enhanced the capacity of the Education Data Warehouse at no financial cost to the state of Florida.[29] With Microsoft's help, the state now stores data on student demographics, enrollment, courses, achievement test scores, financial aid, and employment. It also stores data on staff demographics, certifications, instructional activities, curriculum, and education institutions. Through the efforts of the public-private partnership, the Education Data Warehouse has recently been connected to the Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program (FETPIP) to form the Integrated Education Data Systems (IEDS). The FETPIP provides follow-up information on students and trainees who have graduated or completed the training programs. The IEDS can address both short-term and long-term strategic concerns about education and the work force. In short, Florida has gone beyond the ten elements of a robust data system by linking to postsecondary and labor force activities.

Externally funded, independent research teams can also add value to the process of data analysis and reporting.[30] Non-governmental research organizations, networks, and companies have track records of research activities that meet professional standards, and they tend to focus on policy effectiveness rather than on regulatory compliance. Many examples of independent research organizations that analyze and otherwise add value to education data can be cited. The Hoover Institution's Koret Task Force has conducted comprehensive assessments of education reform in Arkansas, Texas and Florida. Each of the state reports critically examines the conditions of education in that state and offers specific recommendations for improving standards and curriculum, assessments, and accountability, the organization of school districts, choice and charter schools, and teachers (including certifying and preparing teachers, rewarding effectiveness, and building a solid teacher workforce in the future). Another example is the

Chicago Consortium on School Research (CCSR) that includes all the key stakeholders in governmental agencies, higher education institutions, and advocacy groups in Chicago school reform. For two decades, the CCSR has organized a comprehensive, longitudinal student-level database for assessing key policy challenges, including standards for academic promotion, breaking up large high schools, the effectiveness of local school councils, and the implementation of district-wide curriculum standards. Several of the CCSR recommendations have been adopted by the Chicago Public Schools.

While non-governmental research organizations may gain cooperation from state and local officials in data collection for evaluation purposes, governmental oversight remains necessary to guard against potential conflicts of interest. Most importantly, designers of education intervention programs should not be the sole source in conducting their own evaluations or influencing governmental decisions affecting the conduct of the evaluation. The credibility of evaluations must be validated through a refereed process.

It is an ongoing challenge to get political interests aligned to support data needs. My brief summary of Project STAR in Tennessee suggests that it can be done, but managing to get all the interests aligned remains somewhat rare. There is the old saying, "good government is good politics." In the current accountability climate, elected officials need to champion a new set of norms that "good data are good politics." In crime prevention policy, for example, mayors are using CompStat or similar data information systems to collect, process, and act upon data measuring criminal activity in targeted neighborhoods very quickly. The electorate has rewarded those mayors who are able to use crime statistics to combat the problem. As the public continues to support stronger accountability and greater transparency in education, political leaders will find it electorally rewarding to use data for strategic purposes as well.

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