POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL DATA COLLECTION

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September 1985

P-7158

The Rand Paper Series

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the politics of educational data collection. It will discuss the human side of data collection, rather than the technical side. It will explore the sources of resentment that can lead state and local education agencies to evade federal data requests or provide inaccurate responses.

My choice of this topic was stimulated by "The Sorry State of Education Statistics," by Cooke, Ginsburg, and Smith. That paper's great contribution is to call attention to the importance of deliberate misreporting in determining the quality of federal education data. Technical improvements, such as those emphasized in the National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) call for papers, are very important, but they get at only part of the problem. The part of the problem that is not amenable to technical solution is the respondent's interest in cooperating with the data collection effort, and ensuring that his or her answers are accurate.

In this paper I draw primarily on my own experience: first as the director of a major federal data collection effort (the National Institute of Education (NIE) Compensatory Education Study, 1974-1977); and second as the principal investigator on a number of Rand studies about state and local responses to federal education requirements. In the first role I had to negotiate with state and local education agencies to gain their cooperation with NIE's data collection efforts; in the second, I expressly set out to understand the causes and consequences of the strong antagonisms between federal and state officials that I had observed during the NIE study. Both experiences convinced me that much of the political backlash against federal education programs in the late 1970s was ultimately founded in personal and professional rivalries between regulators and the regulated. Those rivalries were inevitable because federal agencies tried to impose constraints in areas that state and local officials thought were their own business.

Though I thought that the polemical atmosphere that prevailed in the late 1970s was harmful, my goal was not to assign blame for it. The atmosphere was simply the result of a sustained rivalry among federal, state, and local administrators. The natural human tendencies to form unfavorable stereotypes of rivals and to seek outside support by delivering lurid accounts of rivals' misdeeds helped to heat up the conflict. My goal was to understand the roots of the conflict so that its negative effects on educational politics and management can be controlled.

In the case of national education data, it was clear that the conflict reduced the quality, standardization, and timeliness of state and local reporting. State and local officials often understood the goals of federal data collection efforts in ways that might astound federal officials. It was therefore inevitable that many would comply minimally with requests and make serious efforts to avoid federal impositions on their time and independence.

This paper reviews the factors that lead state and local agency officials to resist federal data collection efforts or provide low-quality responses. It then identifies some potential correctives--federal government actions that might make it easier for states and localities to understand and cooperate with national data collection programs.

SOURCES OF STATE AND LOCAL RESISTANCE

Administrative Burden

This is the most frequently-cited cause of resistance and resentment against federal data collection efforts. It is a good rationale for state and local resistance because it is easy for officials to articulate, and it makes perfect sense to members of the public who also feel harassed by federal reporting requirements. But burden is not just a rallying cry: it is a real problem. In the course of my Rand research, it became clear that federal data requests are seldom treated as part of the routine organized work of state and local agencies. Except in the largest and best-organized school districts, they are additional loads that intrude on the schedules of already fully-

programmed staff members. State and local agencies can organize their work to make federal requests seem less burdensome, but they have little incentive to do so. The onus of ameliorating the "burden" problem consequently falls on the sponsors of federal data collection efforts.

NCES' recent efforts to reduce the number and complexity of requests strike at the heart of the problem. But burden will remain an issue as long as state and local administrators believe that federal agencies make assignments cavalierly, without careful assessment of the need for data or of states' and localities' real obligation to provide it. That leads to the second source of resistance.

Federal Presumptiousness

In strictly legal terms, states and local education agencies (LEAs) accepted the responsibility to answer federal data requests when they first took federal grant funds in the mid-1960s. But many of the obligations were imposed post-hoc, and bear little obvious connection to the administration and evaluation of today's grant programs. Furthermore, many of today's administrators were not around when the original contract was made, and either do not know about it or feel no personal obligation to live up to it. Thus, in today's context, the simple assertion that the locals have a legal obligation to provide data is not very effective. Respondents need to be convinced that the data are going to be used for a plausibly important purpose, not simply to sustain a federal bureaucratic routine. Some possible ways to help make clear the purposes of federal data efforts are discussed below.

Fear of Harm

Overt opposition is not the only form of resistance to federal data requests. Many agencies are afraid to ignore requests, but resist by providing flawed or incomplete information. There are two basic motives for such resistance: the desire to avoid enforcement actions, and the wish to avoid embarrassment at home.

Avoiding Enforcement Actions. Local officials know that some federal agencies gather data that can trigger compliance reviews or be used to frame lawsuits. Though officials in the more sophisticated school districts know the difference between NCES' (or NIE's) data

collection and, say, the Office of Civil Rights' (OCR), officials in smaller districts often do not. To most local administrators the federal education bureaucracy is a big black box. Distinctions that seem utterly clear in Washington--between audits and sample surveys, and between OCR compliance reviews and exploratory research--are not at all clear to many local administrators. In the course of my research for Rand it became clear that local officials would regard my colleagues and me as potential informants for federal enforcement agencies until we proved otherwise. They routinely assumed that any data collection effort was the most threatening kind imaginable.

Avoiding Embarrassment. Local officials are understandably reluctant to give NCES data that could make them look bad. This motive is especially intense when the data are or could be used in interstate or interdistrict comparisons. But it applies even when the study sponsors have no plans to identify the agencies from which the data were collected.

The more sophisticated school districts are not unwilling to make public disclosures, even of sensitive budgetary and student performance data. They often devote considerable resources to collection, analysis, and publication of just such data. Given the degree of public scrutiny such reports get, most are very careful to maintain decent professional standards of analysis: bad news gets reported carefully, but it gets reported. District officials are doubly reluctant to give raw data to anyone else. Others may not adhere to as high a professional standard of analysis as the district's own research or evaluation division maintains; and whatever the quality of analysis, outsiders (including federal agencies) are unlikely to be as careful as local officials about the timing and phrasing of disclosures about the district's problems and accomplishments.

The avoidance of interdistrict comparisons may be a less important motive now than in the past. The public and elected officials now expect such comparisons to be made, and are not likely to support educational administrators' efforts to withhold data. The wide attention given Secretary Bell's state-by-state comparison chart, the continuing strength of the accountability movement, and the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) and National Education Association's (NEA)

new acceptance of testing and comparisons among teachers all reduce the legitimacy of LEA efforts to withold data.

HOW TO MANAGE OR REDUCE RESISTANCE

The following suggestions are arranged to correspond roughly with the foregoing list of problems. But the correspondence is only rough: no one recommendation is a perfect solution to any one of the problems. But taken together the list of recommended actions will, I think, greatly reduce the severity of state and local resistance.

Reduce Data Reporting Burden by Avoiding Universal Surveys

The premise of this recommendation is that school districts will resist federal data requests less if they get fewer of them. The complaints against federal data burden could be significantly reduced by a greater use of sample surveys. Although samples undoubtedly produce less precise estimates than population surveys, they are likely to produce better data in the long run. If each national survey involves only a fraction of the LEAs, the number of data requests to a given LEA can be reduced. This will particularly benefit the smaller school systems that are the least well equipped to supply data. They are likely to fall into sampling strata that have many members, and will therefore rarely be chosen for a study sample. Because larger districts usually fall into sampling strata that have relatively few members, they will be chosen more frequently than smaller districts. But the larger districts will still experience some reduction in their response burdens.

Make Greater Use of Contractors to Collect Data

My conflict of interest is obvious here, but I will make the point because I think it is true: contractors can usually get better respondent cooperation than federal agencies can. The reasons are simple: local educators can more readily believe that professional research firms are interested in doing research, not compliance reviews. Second, individual research firms can build reputations for fairness and professionalism that put respondents at ease. That is very difficult for any government unit to match, for reasons discussed above: the

differences between government agencies that do research and those that do investigations or enforcement are not readily apparent outside metropolitan Washington.

Contractors may not be able to substitute for NCES in the conduct of mandatory surveys of the entire national LEA population. The success of those studies probably requires the implicit threat of a tangle with the Department of Education for non-cooperators. But private firms are likely to get far better cooperation--and results--for the smaller sample surveys and exploratory studies.

Report Study Results to the Participating LEAs

School systems will contribute more willingly to NCES studies if they expect to benefit directly from the results. The largest and richest LEAs run their own data programs, and may see little need for supplements from NCES. But the vast majority of school systems could use more data, particularly about student and teacher characteristics, than they are able to collect or analyze themselves. NCES data collection would be more welcome if local officials knew that it would ultimately produce information they could use to do their jobs better. Of particular value would be information that LEA officials could use in reports to their own school boards and the public. If local officials knew that NCES data collection led to the creation of such reports, their resistance to it would surely be much reduced.

Because many districts lack the machinery and analytical talent necessary to use raw data, this suggestion implies special work on NCES' part to report the data in forms that school districts themselves want to use. NCES should offer participating school districts a menu of possible reports that could be created from the data being collected. These reports could be simple tabulations and non-inferential statistics that might be supplied with brief interpretive texts. Preparing such a menu would require a rudimentary market survey by NCES, to identify the range of alternatives that LEAs would find useful. It would then be necessary for NCES to build analytical routines that could produce any of the reports automatically. A small special NCES staff would be required, to perform quality control and continually monitor the adequacy of the menu. The reports to LEAs should be data-driven and non-

inferential, so there should be no need for complex text-writing, editing, or clearance.

Make Allies of Members of Congress

An important way for NCES to ensure cooperation from state and local education agencies is to make allies of members of Congress. Members of Congress are naturally sympathetic toward public agencies in their constituencies, and ready to support them in disputes with federal bureaucracies. State and local officials who ignore federal demands--whether substantive rules like civil rights regulations or procedural requirements like data requests--can expect their Senators and Representatives to help if the going gets rough. This is especially true if the requirements are based on subtle administrative rationales or reflect political agendas that the members of Congress do not support.

The lack of positive Congressional support has been a major problem for many educational data collection efforts. NCES, the evaluation divisions of the old U.S. Office of Education and the present Department of Education, and NIE have all run afoul of LEAs that refuse full participation in studies, and either threaten or actually do pull their Congressional representatives into the dispute.

But Congressional support for state and local resistance is not universal or automatic. When the political imperative behind a requirement is obvious or when the relevant federal activity is clearly useful and productive, members of Congress are unlikely to support their constituents' refusal to cooperate.

The best way to reduce Congressional support for local agencies' refusal to provide data is to make the value of the data collection effort evident to members of Congress. The recent use of NCES data in widely-discussed national reports on teaching has increased support among members of Congressional education committees. But to gain support among the majority of members of Congress it is necessary to provide information that is directly relevant to the individual members' constituencies.

An annual report on the status of education in each state and Congressional district would be a good demonstration of the value of NCES' efforts. The reports should not entail new data collection; the financial, administrative, and student data that NCES now collects should be sufficient for most members' needs. The key is to focus the reports directly on the members' own constituencies and to deliver them directly and with some fanfare to the members' offices. The design of such reports can be refined over time, as members express their interest in specific information and modes of reporting. But the most important gain for NCES will be registered quickly, as Congressmen, Senators, and their staffs come to recognize that federal education data collection efforts help them understand their own constituencies.

Negotiate with OCR to Reduce Their Data Demands

OCR's school district surveys are a real problem for NCES. School systems properly count the OCR surveys as part of the overall federal data burden; and their fear that data requests can lead to enforcement actions is largely based on OCR's use of survey results. In these ways, the OCR data program handicaps NCES studies. Most of these negative effects could be avoided. OCR could conduct sample surveys, imposing data burdens on only a small fraction of LEAs, without hurting the quality of its data or reducing its ability to target for compliance reviews: even a small sample could identify more places with suspect patterns than OCR could ever investigate.

Seek Advice From CSSOs Individually, Not in Groups

Few researchers have difficulty gaining the Chief State School Officer's approval for data collection in a particular state. As individuals, Chiefs generally have a broad policy perspective and are eager to cooperate in studies that might illuminate important national issues. Their cooperation is not automatic--they need a good explanation of the study's importance--but they usually answer a request quickly, without invoking complicated procedures.

Dealing with Chiefs in groups or through organizations can be a very different story. When a data collector seeks clearance from a group he or she confronts the tendency for the entire group to support individual members' objections. Each member may have one or two objections that could be readily resolved in direct negotiations. But if the group aggregates individual members' objections, its collective judgment may be that the study's problems are insuperable.

"Clearance" groups have a particularly fierce dynamic: they must pass a negative judgment every now and then to maintain morale and prove to constituents that they are doing a job. This applies to federal forms clearance organizations as well as to external groups representing state education agencies (SEAs) or LEAs. In dealing with such groups I am frequently reminded of an instruction that Franklin D. Roosevelt reportedly gave to his staff: "Find me a bill to veto: I want Congress to know that I'm still here."

The most difficult forum for the clearance of education research plans is an advisory group composed of mid-level representatives of SEAs or LEAs. The individual members of such groups are serious and competent, but they have little to gain and something to lose from approving a data collection request. No one will ever thank them for clearing a study that later proved to be very valuable; LEA officials are likely to complain about the data burdens imposed by a study, whatever its ultimate value.

As individuals, the Chief State School Officers are best equipped to weigh the likely burdens of a study against its ultimate payoff. They can and will complain about undue burdens and will require data collectors to accommodate the needs of local administrators. But they also can and will support a study that is needed and well designed.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing suggestions are not guaranteed to eliminate state and local resistance to NCES data collection. But they should certainly reduce it. There is, however, a cost. To reduce resistance NCES must invest the staff time and other resources necessary to design more parsimonious sample surveys, assess the needs of LEA officials and

members of Congress, negotiate with other federal agencies, and deal with important stakeholders like the Chiefs individually, rather than in groups. These are major costs to pay. NCES professionals would probably prefer to spend their time improving data definitions and analysis routines. But politics is time-consuming, and state and local resistance is a political problem, not a technical one.