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Subject: policy idea: rating public schools

Consumer ratings for public schools: A perfect new Clintonian policy idea would have four attributes:

- 1-it would address a top-ranked voter concern, such as education.
- 2-it would conform to the voters' belief the federal government should not be creating big new programs but should be providing citizens with "tools," especially information, which they can use to improve their own lives.
- 3-it would likely cause open dissention among congressional Republicans--sparking lots of extremist anti-government rhetoric--but would also have a good chance of eventually winning sufficient if grudging Republican support.
- 4-it would actually work if we tried it. .

Here's an idea with, I believe, all four attributes: Have the President announce during the SOTU that in order to help parents make more informed choices about which schools to send their children to, he is calling on the federal government to collect and disseminate information about the performance of every k-through-12 public school in the country. In other words, information that can be used to **rate public schools**.

When parents chose a public school for their children, they do so with little solid information. They go by reputation, SAT scores, teacher-to-pupil ratios, spending-per-student, and the race and socio-economic class of the student body. These are proxies for school quality. They measure inputs and norms, not actual performance. Though not wholly unreliable, these measures fail to capture the thing parents care most about (or should care about): how much improvement of learning goes on in this school compared to other schools? If my child begins the year with x level of learning, what are his or her chances of getting to y by the end of the year in this school compared to other schools? In other words, what is the "value add" of this school?

The President could make this rating system happen by requiring (with congressional approval) that the Department of Education collect, on a nationwide basis, the following three new sets of data :

1-student achievement tests broken down to the school level. The federal government already has a reliable measuring rod in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Broader use of the NAEB would be expensive and controversial, but it would work.

2-graduation rates for every high school. Currently each state calculates graduation rates differently and the data they gather is incomplete. Federal standards would make the

information much more reliable and comparable

3-data tracking students' achievements 3-to5 years after graduation (job, income, further education, etc).

It's important to note that Washington would merely be providing data that would make rating systems possible. **The federal government would not be doing the actual rating of schools.** That job is better left to private organizations, such as newsmagazines and education reform groups. Each of these organizations would be free to weigh the data differently and to throw other criteria into the mix, such as SAT scores or extracurricular programs. The point is, without the federal government providing the above data, no rating system can work (which explains why no one has tried to put one together).

Choosing a school can be the most important choice a parent will ever make for a child. Such ratings would empower parents to make better, more informed choices. More than that, it would be a powerful engine for school reform. Numerous experts have noted that the vast majority of parents have the Lake Wobegon view that their kids' schools are above average. This system might help shake off that complacency. Experts have also noted that the mere act of grading institutions causes managers of those institutions to make improvements.

Republicans will probably object that this idea means more federal spending and federal intrusion into state and local education matters. If fact, measuring school performance is less intrusive than other policies, such as setting high academic standards (and the measurement system can probably be done on a voluntary basis). But just as the standards debate highlighted an internal contradiction in conservative ideology (you cannot be for local control **and** high standards), this debate will highlight another (you cannot be for parental "choice" in education but against giving parents the information they need to make those choices wisely).

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