

Jay P. Greene's Blog

Lies, Damned Lies, and NYT Statistics

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Earlier this month, Max Eden and I showed how three separate data sets employing three different methodologies all reached the same conclusion: Detroit's charter schools are significantly outperforming Detroit's district schools.

So how did the *New York Times* come to paint such a different narrative?

That's the question Eden tackles at *The Seventy-Four* this week, and it isn't pretty.

First, *NYT* reporter Kate Zernike rejected the findings from a credible center-right think tank purely for political reasons. In an email conversation with Eden, she argued that the Mackinac Center is “a partisan group that is pro-school choice and anti-[Detroit Public Schools],” as though that had a bearing on whether its data were accurate.

Second, she demonstrated little familiarity with either the data source she rejected or the one upon which she relied. She claimed Mackinac “only” used graduation rates as its basis of comparison, but that's completely false. She also thought that Excellent Schools Detroit (ESD) — her preferred data source — adjusted their data for demographics, but they didn't. Mackinac did.

Far more egregious is how she portrayed the ESD data. Eden painstakingly takes readers through her calculations, but the short story is this: in calculating the average performance of Detroit's district schools, she inappropriately excluded the district schools that were so low performing that the state intervened and took over. She also inappropriately included selective-admission magnet schools that require students to maintain a certain GPA and pass a test to gain entrance — something charters and traditional district schools cannot do. She also compared a *weighted average* for the supposed “district” school performance against the *median* charter performance. Eden concludes:

If that sounds silly, it's because comparing an average to a median is statistical nonsense. The “apples to oranges” metaphor is apt but insufficient here. Essentially, Zernike took a basket of apples, pulled out the rotten ones, kept the genetically modified ones, made statistically weighted applesauce, and plopped that applesauce in the middle of a row of organic oranges. Then she drew a false conclusion that's become central to the case against Betsy DeVos's nomination for secretary of education.

Eden also took Zernike to task for digging in her heels over her demonstrably false claim that “Ms. DeVos pushed back on any regulation as too much regulation.” As Eden

details — and several others have detailed previously — DeVos has supported all sorts of regulations on choice programs. Indeed, I *wish* DeVos were as libertarian as Zernike portrays her, but the record indicates otherwise. As Eden notes, Zernike should have known better:

In a Detroit News op-ed, to which [Zernike's] article later links, DeVos called for two additional regulations: A–F school accountability grades and default closure for failing schools, both charter and district. She certainly pushed back on some regulations as too much. But the bill that passed included the additional accountability regulations for which she advocated. In fact, the final legislation boosted Michigan's accountability score on the National Alliance of Charter School Authorizers index.

Zernike, sadly, still refuses to acknowledge these glaring errors. Instead, in response to criticism, she has tried moving the goalposts and hoping no one would notice. Indeed, she's even repeating the claim that Detroit's charter sector “is no one's model” even though I have repeatedly pointed out to her that the 2015 CREDO study called Detroit's charter sector — wait for it — a “model to other communities.” As I've noted before, I think that's overstated, but you can't seriously claim that “no one” thinks Detroit is a model when, in fact, the most wide-ranging study of charter schools conducted by a research center at one of the most respected university's in the world *used that very word* to describe Detroit's charters.

Zernike has her narrative and she's sticking to it, facts be damned. Moreover, this isn't the first time Zernike has let her narrative get ahead of her reporting (for example, see pages 33-37 here for a long list of “errors of omission and commission” in her highly flawed reporting on a voucher study by Harvard's Paul Peterson).

What's particularly frustrating is that she claims to be an objective, bias-free journalist (“[I] don't really have an opinion“) when it is obvious from her reporting (or her Twitter feed) that she's a dyed-in-the-wool liberal. Now, there's nothing wrong with that. Pretty much everyone has a worldview, especially those who spend a good deal of their time thinking about issues related to public policy. The problem isn't *having* a worldview, it's not admitting it, and therefore not taking steps to make sure that it doesn't cloud your judgment (or your reporting). As Jonah Goldberg wrote recently:

Reporters routinely call experts they already agree with knowing that their “takes” will line up with what the reporter believes. Sometimes this is lazy or deadline-driven hackery. But more often, it's not. And that shouldn't surprise us. Smart liberal reporters are probably inclined to think that smart liberal experts are right when they say things the smart liberal reporters already agree with.

For these and similar reasons, liberal ideas and interpretations of the facts sail through while inconvenient facts and conservative interpretations send up ideological red flags. Think of editors like security guards at a military base. They tend to wave through the people they know and the folks with right ID badges. But when a stranger shows up, or if someone lacks the right credential, then the guards feel like they have to do their job. This is the basic modus operandi for places like Vox, which seek to explain not the facts or the news, but why liberals are right about the facts and the news. [...]

And you know what, the same thing is true for conservative journalists, because it's true of people... The distinction is that there aren't a great number of conservative journalists, certainly not in print, who don't openly admit their biases to the reader. There are literally thousands of mainstream journalists, editors, and producers who insist that they are objective — and who actually believe it. And that leaves out the fact that liberalism is besotted with the idea that liberals aren't ideological at all in the first place, which makes it even harder for them to recognize their ideological biases.

All journalists have is their credibility. Keeping it requires admitting errors when necessary. It should be clear to everyone that Zernike botched her reporting of the data on Detroit's charter schools and misrepresented DeVos's views on regulations — significant errors that have had a real impact on the narrative surrounding a cabinet pick shortly before her confirmation hearings and vote.

A responsible and credible news organization would correct the record.

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