

The President's Bully Pulpit and School Reform

By *Paul E. Peterson* 04/09/2012

If one compares the growth in student performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) during the years the Bush Administration was in office with the growth during the first two years of the Obama Administration, as I have done in a recent [op-ed piece](#), it becomes pretty clear that the annual growth rate was substantially higher when George W. Bush was in office.

Neal McCluskey of the CATO Institute [does not think](#) the comparison should be made—on the grounds that the data are “too blunt to tell us much about a single administration’s policies.” Perhaps, but the same can be said for the growth of the nation’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the growth in the number of Americans who are employed. Both are gross, blunt numbers, affected by many factors other than presidential decisions, but the public holds presidents accountable for what happens under their watch. For that very reason, Obama is doing everything he can to pump GDP upward, and the White House staff seized up last Friday when employment figures revealed that the gains were only half what had been anticipated.

The public is right to insist that basic numbers on the ground move in the right direction, no matter how distant from direct presidential control they seem to be. When presidents know they are being held accountable for economic performance, they act more responsibly—or suffer the consequences. If presidents come to learn that they are also being held accountable for the nation’s educational performance, they will think more carefully about the consequences of their actions for students, not job holders.

But, says McCluskey, presidents can’t do much about education in any short period of time. Neither Bush nor Obama should not be given credit or blame for events that happen early in their term of office. That wave of the hand allows him to slice and dice the numbers to suit his convenience.

But such hand-waving ignores one of Teddy Roosevelt’s keenest insights: The bully pulpit is the most powerful weapon in a president’s arsenal. True about governing in general, it’s of particular significance when it comes to education. For learning to take

place, teachers, students, administrators, parents and neighbors must all be committed to the enterprise.

To mobilize broad movement toward a common goal is a job for presidents. They are the ones best placed to energize a nation, and some presidents have done just that.

Ronald Reagan reversed the downward trend in SAT scores almost overnight when his National Commission on Educational Excellence galvanized the nation to take the educational crisis seriously. At the time Congress passed no law, and no pile of money was added to the pot, but the White House message had a major impact nonetheless. (For details, see chapter 8 in my book, [*Saving Schools*](#)).

Similarly, George W. Bush, both in his 2000 campaign and immediately upon assuming office, insistently called for accountability reforms that would lead to No Child Left Behind (NCLB). It was not the law's rules and regulations but the national attention that had the impact. Schools, students, and teachers were put on notice that more was expected. NAEP scores jumped noticeably—from the very beginning of the Bush term.

Though presidents usually enjoy the biggest bully pulpit, Martin Luther King proved no less influential. When he called for equal educational opportunity in the South, the test scores of African American students in southern states rose dramatically. The biggest gains were among the high school students most susceptible to the calls of the civil rights movement.

The U. S. Department of Education has encouraged a certain amount of reform with its convoluted Race to the Top initiative. But President Obama's first—and most powerful—education message to all Americans came with his stimulus package. He urged its passage not so that children might learn but in order that teachers might keep their jobs. That was precisely the wrong signal, and it is not surprising that NAEP gains slowed to a virtual halt. The stimulus package did little for the nation's GDP, and it has had a negative impact on its education GDP.

-Paul Peterson