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RESPONSE OF BRUCE BAKER TO THE THIRD WAY'S REPLY

Third Way has posted a response to my critique in which the authors, joined by Jim Kessler, argue that their analyses do not suffer the egregious flaws my review describes. Specifically, they bring up my reference to the fact that whenever they are using a “district” level of analysis, they include the Detroit City schools in their entirety in their sample of “middle class.” They argue that they did not do this, but rather only included the middle class schools in Detroit (and other poor urban districts).

The problems with this explanation are many. First, several of their methodological explanations specifically refer to doing computations based on selecting “district” not school level data. For example, Footnote #8 explains: “Third Way calculation based on the following source: New America Foundation, “Federal Education Budget Project,” Accessed on April 22, 2011. Available at: <http://febp.newamerica.net/k12>”

The New America data set provides data at either the state or the district level, not the school level (see the lower right hand section of the page from the link in the footnote). And financial data of this type are not available nationally at the school level. A researcher could not legitimately select some and not all schools for financial data. My tabulations of who is in or out of the sample are based on the district-level data from the link on that web site.

Further, the authors later explain to their readers (in Footnote #40) in great detail how to construct a data set to identify the middle-class schools, using the NCES Common Core of Data’s “Build a Table” function. Specifically, the instructions refer to selecting “district” to construct the data set. That selection creates a file of district-level data, not school-level data. As such, a district is in or out in its entirety:

Third Way calculations based on data from the following source: United States, Department of Education, Institute of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data. Accessed July 25, 2011. Available at: <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/>. The Common Core of Data includes data from the “2008-09 Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey,” “2008-09 Local Education Agency Universe Survey,” and “2000 School District Demographics” from the U.S. Census Bureau. To generate data from the Common Core of Data, in the “select rows” drop down box, select “District.” [The note continues.]

In my review, I explain thoroughly that Third Way mixes units of analysis throughout their report, sometimes referring to district-level data from the New America Foundation data set, sometimes referring to NCES tabulations of data based on the Schools and Staffing Survey (not even their own original analyses of SASS data), and in some cases referring to data on individual children from the high school graduating class of 1992. In fact, the title of one section of the review is “mixing and matching data sources.” I explained in my review:

The authors seem to have overlooked the fact that NCES tables based on Schools and Staffing Survey data typically report characteristics based on school-level subsidized lunch rates. As such, within a large, relatively diverse district like New York City, several schools would fall into the authors’ middle-class grouping, while others would be considered high-poverty, or low-income, schools. But, many other of the authors’ calculations are based on district-level data, such as the financial data from New America Foundation. When using district-level data, a whole district would be included or excluded from the group based on the district-wide percentage of children qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. What this means is that the Third Way report is actually comparing different groups of schools and districts from one analysis to another, and within individual analyses.

When referring to district-level data, the district of Detroit would be included in its entirety. When referring to aggregations from tables based on the Schools and Staffing Survey, as I explain, some would be in and some would be out.

Further, the authors refer throughout to the groupings by subsidized lunch rates as quartiles. They are not. Quartiles would include even distributions—quarters—of either children, schools or districts. The selected cutoffs of 25% and 75% qualified for free or reduced lunch do not however yield quartiles, as shown by their own data.

The bottom line is that the arbitrary, broad and imbalanced subsidized lunch cutoffs chosen by the authors work well for neither district- nor school-level analysis, and they certainly don’t work for an inconsistent mix of the two. And, the authors fail to understand that applying the same income thresholds across states and regions of the U.S. yields vastly different populations. Having income below 185% of the income level for poverty provides for a very different quality of life in New York versus New Mexico.

But, in their reply, the Third Way authors also downplay the importance of any analyses that might have been done with district-level data, stating that their most significant conclusions were not drawn from these data.

As I explain in my review, it would appear that their boldest conclusions were actually drawn from data on a completely different measure, using a completely different unit of analysis, and for a completely different generation. Most of their conclusions about college graduation rates were based on individuals who graduated from high school in 1992. Further, when evaluating individual family income based data, the measure of middle class is entirely different, and we do not know whether those children attend "middle class" schools or districts at all. That is, students are identified by a family income measure and placed into quartiles, regardless of the income levels of their schools. We don't know which of them attended "middle class" schools and which did not. But, we do know that they graduated about 20 years ago, reducing their relevance for the analysis quite substantially.

For these reasons, the reply by the authors does little to help explain or redeem the report. Readers should also note that these (the issues discussed above) were only a subset of the problems with the report, which included, among other things, claims about middle class under-performance refuted by their own tables on the same page.

These are severe methodological flaws of a type one does not see regularly in "high profile" reports making bold claims about the state of American public education. In my view, the Third Way's bold proclamation about the dreadful failures of our middle class schools, supported only by severely flawed analyses, was worthy of a bold response.

Addendum

In their [reply memo](#), the authors list the total numbers of schools in Detroit and other cities that fall above and below their subsidized lunch cut off points, arguing that these are the actual numbers of schools in each city they included in their "middle class" group and arguing further that this clarification negates entirely my concern as to which districts are and are not included.

Again, whether the illogical and unfounded cut points were applied to school- or district-level data doesn't actually matter that much. It's a bad analysis either way.

But, the tabulation they provide in the reply memo, which is likely drawn from school-level data from the NCES Common Core, Public School Universe Survey, does not actually relate to the vast majority of tables and analyses reported in their original report. It appears that the authors simply don't understand this. Here's a quick rundown:

1. Financial data used in the report for per pupil expenditure calculations are not available at the school level.
2. Teacher salary and all comparisons concerning teacher characteristics were based on pre-made tables based on Schools and Staffing Survey data, which is a SAMPLE of about 8,000 or so schools out of 100,000 or so nationally. I point out in my review that these pre-made NCES tables reporting on SASS data would have schools within districts falling on either side of the cut off lines. The authors do not appear to have actually used SASS data themselves, which would provide much more flexibility in the analysis. Rather, the authors performed calculations based on tables in NCES reports using SASS data.

3. NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress) data, which are also based on a sampling approach, simply can't be parsed by school within district in any way that would represent all schools within each district that fall above and/or below the cut points used (as implied in the reply memo). NAEP data could be reported (or drawn from reports) based on average school characteristics, or based on child characteristics. Third Way appears to have used an easy table creator tool from NAEP (see their FN#52). So, yes, the NAEP tabulations would split schools within large districts. But, to be clear, these would not match the numbers of schools counts reported in the reply memo because NAEP is based on sample data. Further, the problem here is that the original Third Way report infers a relationship between the students' scores on NAEP and the financial data, when there is only partial overlap between the two—because different units are used for each. Nonetheless, the big takeaway regarding the tables of NAEP data are that NAEP scores of students who attend the middle brackets of schools score, as one would expect, *in the middle*. Such results do not logically lead to the report's conclusion that these data reveal failures of middle class schools.
4. The data on college matriculation and on graduation by age 26 (the original report's most bold conclusions) are cited to reports done by others, most significantly to the Bowen book *Crossing the Finish Line*, which in its early sections (Chapter 2), includes family income quartile data based on the National Longitudinal Studies of the 8th grade class of 1988; other data in the Bowen book (as I explain in the review) are on select states only. It is entirely inappropriate to extrapolate either the NELS 88 findings or select state findings to the national population in "middle class" schools. We may know individual family income quartile, but we do not know their schools' characteristics. It is confusing, and arguably inappropriate, for the Third Way, on page 5 of their reply memo, to claim regarding the completion rates of 26 year olds that "This is the major finding of our paper," when it is, in fact, not their finding at all, but rather a citation to a finding in a book by someone else.

While the authors seem to wish to argue that my criticism over the poverty classification applied to district-level data does not undermine their major conclusions, this is clearly not the case. Given these concerns that exist across (a) financial input data, (b) teacher characteristics data, (c) achievement outcome measures and (d) college completion data, as well as the misalignment of units across all measures, not a single conclusion of the Third Way report remains intact.