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Immeasurable Talent: Trump's Erosion of School Accountability and Choice

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Abstract

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the premier standardized test used by policymakers and education experts to guide their policymaking decisions. Its use as a tool to gather long-term trends of students and the rigor that goes into its curriculum earned it the moniker of the Nation's Report Card. But due to Trump's recent cuts to the Department of Education, many of its core functions are being gutted. Layoffs of bureaucrats involved in all aspects of NAEP's lifecycle have crippled the programs core functions of assessing the state of the nation's education. This paper analyzes what those impacts may be and how they fits into Trump's education agenda of deregulation of education and school choice. I conclude, that not only will this policy have a large impact on future policies due to data droughts but this also serves as a missed opportunity for Trump to promote the achievement gap between public, private, and charter schools to push for his school choice agenda.

Immeasurable Talent: Trump's erosion of school accountability & choice

On March 20th, 2025, Trump signed an executive order to direct Secretary of Education Linda McMahon to close the Department of Education (Exec. Order No. 14242, 2025). While constitutionally, only Congress can call for the outright removal of a Cabinet administration, Trump has wielded his executive authority over agency personnel and funding to disrupt many longstanding and essential services. While the effects of these cuts are numerous and their impacts will ripple throughout the nation, this paper will highlight one particular program whose cuts are considerably concerning: the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Often called the Nation's Report Card, NAEP is a longstanding program used to assess the current state of education in the United States. While the Trump administration had initially promised to leave NAEP unaffected from the \$1 billion of cuts to the Department of Education's budget, he has since backtracked and gutted the program almost in its entirety (Blad 2025). These cuts threaten not only to derail a critical tool researchers and policymakers have for molding and analyzing the effectiveness of different policies, but arguably weaken his own education platform. In this paper, I will first provide important historical context on the creation and usage of NAEP by the Department of Education. Next, I will outline Trump's administration's cuts to the NAEP specifically, and how they risk degrading one of the most powerful data collection tools in a policy makers arsenal. Then, I will explain how these cuts fit into Trump's overarching goal of promoting local autonomy over education through his prioritization of school choice initiatives. Finally, I will show that the data NAEP provides to Americans is not only necessary for providing critical information about schools to parents in order to make informed decisions, but also why that data serves as a missed opportunity for Trump to further bolster his education policy platform.

The History of NAEP

Traditionally, education policy had largely been left up to the states to govern. The first official foray into federal policy making came with Lyndon B. Johnson and his passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 (Wong 2020). This program laid the groundwork for the roles and responsibilities that the modern Department of Education would eventually carry out. The department as we know it wouldn't be fully established until 1977 with the Department of Education Organization Act (Stallings 2002). Expanding on the preexisting federal capacity for national education data collection, which the government had been carrying out since 1838 (Stallings 2002), the newly formed Department of Education was tasked with strengthening the working relationship between federal and state agencies and promoting educational equity without superseding local and state level autonomy (Stallings 2002). Such a large concentration of resources promoted broader popular discussion about the role of the federal government in education. Slowly the need and desire for national standards or goals for education became clear. Thus, the Department turned their attention to revamping the foremost gauge of education trends and student achievements in the U.S., NAEP.

Starting in 1969, NAEP was initially as a voluntary exam run by a state consortium in partnership with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (Stallings 2002). Its mission has been to monitor trends in American education and her students. NAEP was an innovative departure from the standardized testing of the past. Up to that point, national standardized testing varied considerably from year to year (Stedman 2009). NAEP standardized the tests across iterations in order to better understand and analyze the long-term trends of American students. By 1988 Congress concretely outlined the creation of the two section NAEP exam that we know today (Stedman 2009). The first was the main assessment for 4th, 8th, and 12th graders. The

second was the long-term trends assessment for those aged 9, 13 and 17. The main assessment became used for asking contemporary questions about the state of education while the long-term trends assessment was used to evaluate changes over time in education (Stedman 2009). The exam itself is created through a rigorous research and multi-year approval process by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Assessment Governing Body, meaning that unlike other exams where patterns can be learned, and cheated, NAEP is one of the truly few fair metrics with which to compare students across the nation from multiple different institutions (Stedman 2009). By comparing students nationally, the Department of Education was better able to create concrete standards without directly favoring one state's curriculum or another. While state standardized tests can vary in content and standards for excellence, the NAEP tests are developed based on public input from across the nation to ensure that the curriculum is not simply one agencies decree on what should be taught, but that the standards are created democratically (Stedman 2009).

It is because of these novel testing criteria and frameworks that the data collected by NAEP has proven to be so useful to policymakers in order to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of legislation, or potential changes that need to be made in the curriculum. In Iowa, NAEP showed state legislatures that 8th and 12th graders in their state were less likely than students in other states to take advanced math classes (NAEP 2025). In response the state charged the Statewide Mathematics Leadership Team to take actions to encourage higher participation. Without NAEP, these deficiencies may not have even been discovered or addressed because of the varying interpretations of advanced math classes from state to state. Another good example is North Carolina. In 2005, NAEP results revealed that 8th graders in North Carolina were scoring below the national average (NAEP 2025). In response, the state

enlisted 200 literacy coaches to middle schools all across the state. Without the equitable grounds for comparison that NAEP creates, North Carolina may have never realized their deficiencies and addressed them. These insights are not only actionable, but also effective. In Mississippi, where NAEP scores were traditionally far below the national average, legislators revamped state standards to match the standards of NAEP and by 2019, Mississippi was at the National Average for 4th grade reading and writing (NAEP 2025). Policymakers on both the state and federal level continue to use this program as an important metric for not only determining what can be done now to improve education, but also for planning ahead and ensuring that every generation of students are adequately prepared for the future.

The exam is also critical to deciphering hidden trends that may not appear across all state exams, but are nonetheless vital to understanding the state of education in America. During the Bush Administration, one of his main policy goals was reducing the achievement gap between minority and white students. Thus, Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy into law, creating the first educational accountability legislation that required scores to be reported by race and ethnicity (Stedman 2009). While he originally touted the initiative to be a resounding success, NAEP trend data actually showed that this was not the case. Analysis showed that the reading gap between white and Black 17 year olds was actually larger in 2004 than it had been in the early 1980s, with math and science gaps being somewhat greater than in the 1990s (Stedman 2009). It is only through NAEP's use of long-term trends and the ubiquity of the exam that researchers were able to come to this determination, and counter claims that the disparity had closed. For these reasons, NAEP is often called the "gold standard" of assessments because of how rigorous, encompassing, and innovative the exam is and is why the information it produces is valuable and irreplicable by state or local means.

Trump's Cuts

Despite this, Trump seems intent on destroying the program. Trump has already reduced the Department of Education's headcount from 4,000 employed government officials to about half that. Those fired include 105 union-represented positions and half of the 167 staff employed just two years ago (Blad 2025). These bureaucratic positions are vital to the oversight of the test and ensuring that proper conduct is followed when administering and taking the exam.

Traditionally, these employees would communicate with test administrators in order to make decisions or resolve issues that may come up, such as what to do when not enough students were recruited for the experimental questions used to field new questions or content for future potential exams (Stedman 2009). These test administrators are contracted out by the federal government for collection and distribution of the exams. This complicated operational spider web had to be carefully managed to ensure the integrity of the exam and its results. Varying protocols when it comes to issuing and collecting the test may invalidate the data as a result of numerous dependent factors that are not accounted for by the test creators. However, because of Trump's cuts, the once vast array of Department of Education employees who would need to contact their contractors daily has been reduced to a single person, overseeing not just NAEP but all of the Department of Education's data collection efforts (Barshay 2025). Without proper oversight of these processes, the value of the data becomes diminished, along with its usefulness for policymakers. Like any experiment, the need for a controlled environment is one of the most crucial factors to its integrity. The loss of that would ruin any extrapolation researchers would hope to gain from the exam, especially when it comes to comparison across decades of exam scores. By cutting these crucial oversight mechanisms, Trump threatens to make the data collected as useless to policy makers as the paper it is printed on.

Not only is he destroying the accountability metrics, but also the quality of the exams themselves. In February, Trump fired the panel of educational professionals specifically tasked with examining the quality and content being asked on the exams (Barshay 2025). The administration has also placed Biden-appointed commissioner of the National Center for Education Statistics, Peggy Carr, on administrative leave well before her term's end of six years. (Blad and Schwartz 2025). All these cuts have left a once powerful agency with only three employees heading the NCES (Blad 2025). Employees who had just days before been working on the creation of the next exam were placed on indefinite leave until funding is reappropriated (Barshay 2025). With such little manpower, the rigorously researched standards that NAEP is charged with creating will fall into complete disarray. The objectivity and uniform nature of the exam had been some of the core attributes that earned it the "gold standard" moniker. Firing these government workers risks destroying one of the only objective sources of data for national comparison, leaving question marks above any findings derived from its scores.

Such large gaps in educational data integrity can have a lasting impact for policymakers not just today, but far into the future as well. Trump has already canceled the 2025 NAEP test (Barshay 2025). With the cancelation of this year's exam, NAEP is facing a 13-year drought of long-term trends data as the last two previous exams, 2016 and 2020, were canceled due to budget constraints or the COVID-19 pandemic (Loveless 2016). Such a drought can have a cascading effect especially for an exam like the long-term assessment that relies on the regular participation of students in order to make conclusions about trends in education. While some may argue that the year to year exam may be able to supplant the information garnered from the long-term assessment, its important to note that the question and contents of these two tests vary because of differing intentions. Content on the long-term exam is kept relatively similar to the

exams of the past, dating back to even its inception in 1969 (Stedman 2009). Keeping these consistent elements is essential to ascertain real trends from years past, and going into the future. The main assessment, on the other hand, can change much more rapidly. The longer these holdouts continue, the less effective NAEP can be as a trends assessment, and the less useful the data becomes to policymakers trying to strengthen education policy. Without the long-term assessment, historic analysis of student performance like that done on NCLB's effect on the white-black achievement gap could've never been possible. Trump is letting one of the sharpest and most powerful data collection efforts on education rust away, like any tool that's left uncared for.

Trump's Goals

But what is his end-goal with these cuts? To learn that, one only has to look at the name of the executive order he recently signed, *Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities*. In April 2017, Trump signed an executive order in his first term that directed the Department of Education to reexamine regulations that might violate a state's autonomy over education (Wong 2020). This included reexamining policies implemented by previous administrations to promote equity in education across the country. Under Trump's guidance, then Secretary DeVos killed the Civil Rights Data Collection, a biennial survey meant to measure schooling opportunities and quality across different demographics, because it was deemed an unnecessary space for federal oversight (Wong 2020). With the help of a Republican controlled Congress, Trump also deployed the Congressional Review Act—used only once successfully before his term—to repeal guidance and oversight written into the ESSA such as the requirement that schools must include 95% of their student body population in their annual assessments and reports (Wong 2020).

Degrading federal regulations and oversight over education is only one prong of his attack. Trump has continued to take steps to empower parents to pick alternative education options like private schools and charter schools for their children rather than attend their mandated district public school. This policy, often referred to as school choice, has been the crux of Trump's plan to make American education great again. Every year from 2017 to 2019 Trump signed a Presidential Proclamation affirming the importance of school choice (Wong 2020). More recently, Trump has put his support behind state initiatives to increase state funding for school voucher programs. These vouchers are given to families in order to offset the tuition cost of other non-public education institutions. By using vouchers, policy makers hope to redirect funds from public schools and enable parents to shop around for the best school for their child. For example, Texas recently passed a law that devotes \$500 million towards creating one of the largest taxpayer-funded voucher programs (Sayantani 2025). Trump praised this in a Truth Social post, "It is our goal to bring Education in the United States to the highest level, one that it has never attained before. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!" (Sayantani 2025). Like many critics of NAEP and federal education in the past, Trump's concern with federal overreach in state jurisdiction over education is clear. By cutting the Department of Education, he hopes to encourage more parents to bring free market thinking to the education sphere.

Access to Information

While there are certainly inefficiencies in our current educational systems, Trump's actions are more akin to throwing out the baby with the bathwater than trimming fat. For starters, removing a program that promotes the free flow of information about the quality of schools from state to state is antithetical to the free-market education policy that Trump supports. One study found that when access to data on academic achievements is difficult for the end user, low-

income families in particular are more likely to default to easier to determine attributes like proximity instead of test scores (Burgess and Greaves 2021). All NAEP data is publicly accessible through the NCES program, with an intuitive user interface that can easily create a graphical representation of trends for users, making interpretation of complex data much simpler for parents. Further, knowing which schools are and aren't high performing is essential for school choice. One study conducted in New York found that providing families a simple list of above-average performing schools led to more students in higher-performing schools simply because they are able to avoid applying to low-achieving ones (Burgess and Greaves 2021). Access to this information has also been shown to invite more active parental participation in their child's education process (Burgess and Greaves 2021). Overall, evidence suggests that providing information to parents directly affects the decision-making process during the school choice process. By cutting NAEP, Trump is directly reducing the amount of accessible, nationwide, and diverse data easily accessible to parents and will have a net-negative effect on the schools that parents end up choosing.

While some of this data may be accessible through state and local tests, NAEP is still a critical mechanism for determining what high achievement means to them. States like Alabama and Arizona specifically have looked at NAEP in order to set goals for their own education policies and revise state assessments to be in line with NAEP proficiency standards (NAGB). Without NAEP, the criteria for high-achieving schools could vary wildly. Underperforming schools may be able to get by in some states more than others due to differences in expectations. This also makes the issue of parental assessment of schools much more difficult. Parents may be left blissfully unaware of how much their selected institution will prepare their child for the job market, or what college outcomes they may hope to achieve. Like inconsistent mile markers, a

lack of clear standards makes it difficult to tell between states what students had learned, and how much they still needed to grow, making the overall decision-making process much more complicated. NAEP acts not as a hard floor or ceiling for states, but as a general benchmark around which they can innovate and try novel teaching techniques they deem effective. But without those consistent consensus-based standards, states are left in the wind with no context for how well or poorly their policies or students are performing in relation to the rest of the nation. In order to make school choice effective, NAEP is essential to making state standards more consistent and transparent and avoiding apples to oranges comparisons.

Branding and Marketing Weapon

NAEP could easily become one of Trump's best branding and marketing weapons. NAEP data has consistently shown that charter and private schools perform well above the national average on NAEP testing compared to their public counterparts. While Trump cited lower test scores for students across the nation in his executive order, NAEP results for schools in Washington D.C. for that same year show that reading and writing scores for their students actually improved, unlike the national average (Eakin 2025). One factor that may have contributed to this is the fact that the Washington D.C. school system has the highest share of charter and private schools in the nation, with over 55% of students attending one or the other (Eakin 2025). Further, private catholic schools vastly outperformed their public-school counterparts in both reading and math (The Nation's Report Card). While some critics may cite confounding efforts such as school choice as an indicator for parental involvement in schooling or average income gaps between private and public-school families, NAEP scores are nonetheless a value-add for many private schools (Eakin 2025). The head of the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) has in fact encouraged private schools to participate

in NAEP whenever invited to (Snyder 2023). Rather than cutting the program, Trump should be parading the results through the streets as a testament to his policy goals. Yet, instead of using the data to garner support, he decides to weaken one of the only mechanisms to track the achievements of both private and public schools.

Conclusion

Data collection has always been one of the core responsibilities of the Department of Education. As one of the agencies most long-standing and informative data collection efforts, NAEP has been shown to have an impact both historically and contemporarily on education policy. The rigor and research that goes into its creation and implementation makes it the “gold standard” of standardized testing and accountability for schools across the nation. But, due to the long-term elements of the program, Trump’s recent cuts to the Department have a risk of crippling all future investigations on the effectiveness of any legislation hoping to improve educational outcomes. This applies not only in abstract, but to the current policies goals of the administration today. By gutting NAEP, the administration is weakening an accessible resource for parents and students to learn more about their local school system and make informed decisions about where they may want to send their children to be educated. Rather than draining this sea of publicly accessible and actionable data, Trump should instead use the data to support his own school choice initiatives. Many NAEP statistics show that overwhelmingly private and charter schools outperform public schools across many different subject areas. In the wake of a once strong federal agency, Trump has left our nation’s educators and policy makers with only the bones of a once powerful tool that will have longstanding impacts today, and tomorrow.

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