

Race-norming: adjusting job test scores according to race

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WASHINGTON (AP) — You've heard the debate over quotas. Get ready for the next battle cry over civil rights: "Race-norming."

If it's an unfamiliar term, Republican critics of the Democrats' new civil rights bill are hoping to change that. Race-norming describes the practice of adjusting scores on job-placement tests to account for race.

Black and Hispanic job-seekers who take the test are graded against only other blacks or Hispanics who have taken the test previously. The scores are then ranked by percentile using one of three scales: one for blacks, one for Hispanics and one for whites and others. As a result, scores of blacks and Hispanics are generally boosted. Minority candidates for jobs may end up with higher percentile scores than some whites and Asian-Americans who actually outperformed them in the raw, unadjusted results. The practice is little known by the public, but it has been widely used for a decade.

Some 34 states, by congressional estimates, make racial adjustments of job seekers' test scores, as do some private employers. The states have been encouraged by a U.S. Labor Department policy that was suspended only recently and is under review by the Bush administration.

Typically, a person seeking a job as an auto mechanic, waiter, plant worker, bank teller or any of thousands

of blue-collar and clerical jobs applies at the state employment agency and is given a standard aptitude test.

The result is sent to prospective private employers, without the applicant ever knowing his or her score was adjusted for race. Often the employer isn't told either and is unaware that two candidates with the same score actually performed differently on the test.

"That's discrimination, any way you slice it," argues Rep. Henry Hyde (R-Ill.), sponsor of an amendment to the civil rights bill that would ban the practice. "This practice of 'cooking the books' is a distortion, a deception and a fraud," Hyde said.

The House Judiciary Committee defeated Hyde's amendment last month on a strict party-line vote. Hyde plans to offer it again on the floor, and Sen. Alan Simpson (R-Wyo.), plans to do the same in the Senate.

Opponents believe that once known, "race-norming" will stir the same kind of white resentment that the issue of racial quotas has generated. President Bush vetoed the civil rights bill last year, arguing it would lead to hiring quotas.

The adjustments are made most frequently to a test developed by the Labor Department in the 1940s called the General Aptitude Test Battery, or GATB. They are used by state employment agencies, which screen some 20 million job seekers a year. Here is one example of the effects on that test's scores.

A 99 percentile score would be nearly perfect, mean-

ing only 1 percent of other test-takers did better on the test. To earn that score on the GATB, a white person would have to earn a raw grade of 405 out of a possible 500. A Hispanic person would need a raw score of 382, and a black person would need a score of 355.

Those scores are drawn from conversion charts, which have already calculated the results of previous test-takers. There are separate grading curves for blacks, Hispanics, and everyone else. Civil rights advocates say adjustments are necessary because raw test scores aren't accurate predictors of job performance.

The government itself has been deeply divided over the issue. The chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Evan Kemp, opposes the practice. The commission has no formal policy.

But EEOC lawyers have pressed for test adjustments by employers in private negotiations to settle discrimination complaints against at least five major companies. Kemp said he recently ordered the commission's lawyers halt that practice. He declined to name the companies.

"I think it's shocking. I think it's a violation of Title 7," Kemp said, referring to the section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that prohibits hiring decisions based on race.

At its core, the dispute reflects a fundamental conflict of the civil rights debate today: the principle of fairness to the individual against the principle of equity for an entire racial or ethnic group.

"The practice goes on sub rosa," said one govern-

ment official closely involved in the issue, but who spoke only on condition of anonymity. "What goes on privately is not announced publicly."

Bob Litman, deputy director of the Labor Department's U.S. Employment Service, said the adjustments arose as a way to counteract racial and ethnic differences in average scores on the GATB tests. Blacks and Hispanics as a group tend to score lower than whites on the GATB, as they generally do on other standardized tests, he said. Litman argues that the test is valid and has been shown to be a good predictor of job performance for all racial groups. But if only raw test scores were used, he said, minorities would tend to be screened out disproportionately. Some private employers adjust their tests as well.

Charles Wonderlic Jr., vice president of E.F. Wonderlic & Associates, a Northfield, Ill., company that publishes a private employment test, provides conversion tables to its clients so they can adjust the scores if they wish. But he estimates only 5 percent of his 15,000 clients adjust the scores for race. Both sides in the debate cite a 1989 study of the GATB test by the National Research Council.

The study concluded the test isn't racially biased and predicts job performance equally well for blacks and whites. But it also endorsed the use of adjusted scores as a way to ensure that able black and white workers have the same chances for job referral.

Choice School Bill

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member of the Forsyth County School Board, echoed McKinney's concerns. "I'm in favor of keeping the public schools the way they are now. I'd have to see more specifics before supporting this choice bill or any other. I'm also worried that lower income parents don't have enough information to make the best choice for their child," commented Bailey. When asked whether the church could provide sufficient information to inform parents, Bailey answered, "I don't believe the church is the best vehicle to inform parents on schools. The school system and possible the Education Department at Winston-Salem State University would better inform parents on education issues."

However, Hazel Mack, a Legal Aid Attorney and Adjunct Professor of Law at Wake Forest University holds a different viewpoint on empowering African-American parents through this choice option. "It's (the choice bill) a start. How good this bill will turn out will depend on the goodwill of Governor Martin and his successor to implement the choice program effectively. The bill also depends on the African-American community's willingness to use this opportunity to take control of educating our children, which is something only we can do," commented Mack.

Mack has no problem with black churches starting private schools and state money supporting these schools through the tuition grant bill.

"Black churches entering into the primary and secondary school business is hand-in-hand with our tradition if we will only do it," continued Mack. She also took exception with those who doubt whether low income parents can make good choices about their child's education. Having grown up in Happy Hill Gardens, she commented, "What's in a person's pocketbook is not the measure of their intellect."

Mack issued this call to action, "Those of us who support empowering parents to take back our children's education have to be about the business of educating the rest of our community. Our community must become single-minded about this effort and the parental choice bill holds a great opportunity for more control than does the current situation. Each one must teach one."

Though the NAACP has opposed similar legislation, the Rev. William S. Fails, Chairman of the local NAACP Education Committee has mixed feelings. "I don't really support or oppose school choice. I'm concerned about those who must use public schools, particularly if both the rich and the poor leave, what about those in the middle? We really need all income levels reflected in the public school population."

Fails believes that parents using the grants would have more input into their child's education and that many would be able for the first time to afford a highly specialized education. However, he also is concerned about parents who may go for status and fluff in some private schools which would not effectively educate their children.

Fails sees nothing wrong with the Black Church entering the Monday-Friday school business but wonders about its effect on society. "How would society handle the emergence of schools that are 98 or 95% African-American? Many of the people who fought for integration are going to be very concerned. Any Choice Bill has got to have an ironclad no-cut contract so that we, as a people, see that this

choice bill is not the first sign of the end of a second reconstruction," said Fails.

Bertha Blackwell, another parent, and an active NAACP member, has yet another perspective. "I'd like to see the income eligibility be raised to \$20,000 for a family of 3, because many single parent divorcees who have no child support, do have aspirations for their children's education. These parents aren't exactly wealthy." She did however admit that she would rather the bill pass with lower income levels rather than failing because of a higher income eligibility level.

Blackwell, a campaign worker for County Commissioner Mazie Woodruff in both 1988 and 1990, was asked whether she expected the Commissioner to support the parental choice bill. "I can't speak for Mrs. Woodruff."

County Commissioners Earline Parmon and Woodruff were out of town and unavailable for comment. Members of the local delegation to the General Assembly, which is in session could not be reached for comment as of presstime.

But school board member, Candy Wood, felt the schools of choice proposal in this school system would not work. She said how well that idea works really depends on the size of the school system.

"I think for our school system, it would be difficult to set up schools of choice because of the transportation issue," said Wood, who chairs the minority concerns committee of the school board.

She said it works if you have a car and have the time to drive your child to and from school. But what if you are poor and don't have a car or the time? She said it would be difficult to run a school bus system efficiently with children in the same neighborhood all attending different schools.

School board chair Garlene Grogan said it was a trend that deserves discussion. "My personal opinion is that we might not want to do wholesale schools of choice, but some form of it, adapting it to our system. I do think the board will be discussing it more."

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