

HOW GOV. PERDUE SPINS THE SAT

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Just before Labor Day, the 2007 SAT scores were made public. Georgia's average scores—along with national average scores—fell again.

This might have caused our leaders finally to face the failure of our schools. It might have energized them to admit the poverty of our efforts to address that failure and to take the fresh steps that are desperately needed if our schools are ever to emerge from the slough into which they have been pushed.

It did not.

Both Gov. Sonny Perdue and State Superintendent of Schools Kathy Cox launched into a dizzying spin cycle of hype and propaganda designed to blunt the impact of the bad news.

How did they do it?

They did it by the simplest rhetorical trick of all—they called the bad news “good news.” This required the kind of bizarre convolutions of reasoning that are given credence nowadays by an acquiescent press and a malleable public. It is as though our leaders—recognizing that their popular audience is formless Jell-O—have created and imposed a shaped mold to which that audience submits itself willingly.

They performed this sleight-of-hand in the following way.

In a “Statement...Regarding Georgia's SAT Scores,” posted on his web site, Perdue said, “We never like to gain ground by allowing our scores to go down,” then added, “Georgia was...continuing a positive trend.” He meant that Georgia's SAT scores “did not drop at the same rate the national scores dropped.” In other words, we can claim that we have gained ground because we did not lose as much ground as the nation as a whole did.

This is the rhetorical magic: to lose (less) ground is to gain ground.

When the press blandly reported such statements, no one exposed their absurdity.

Yet, there was more to celebrate.

The governor proudly boasted, “Georgia held steady its national ranking of 46.” Therefore, by retaining its place above only four other states, and by not sinking to 47th, 48th, 49th, or last place, Georgia has accomplished something praiseworthy.

The rhetorical magic is at work again: standing still is making positive progress.

Perdue concluded with the triumphant comment, “We will not be satisfied until Georgia's SAT scores reflect the quality of education that is being provided to students in our state every day.”

The governor needs to awaken from his political coma. The sad truth is that Georgia's SAT scores already reflect the quality of education provided here, and that reflection is grotesquely misshapen.

Superintendent Cox is in lock step with the governor in evaluating this situation. In a Georgia Department of Education press release, titled “Georgia Holds Ground on SAT,” she said, “Georgia's high school seniors kept pace with the nation on the SAT last year, which is good news.”

The rhetorical magic here is this: to fall comparably behind is to keep pace.

This is not all. There is still more to celebrate in Georgia's SAT performance.

Both Perdue and Cox take pride in Georgia's being what is called a “high participation” SAT state. In high participation states—of which there are 24—more than 48 percent of high school seniors take the SAT. Georgia is in the middle of this pack (13th) with a 69 percent participation rate.

As Perdue and Cox point out, this means that more ethnic minority students take the test in Georgia than in many other states. They present this as laudatory inclusiveness.

Such inclusiveness would be impressive if the result of it were not to set these students up for failure. The average composite scores—out of a possible 2400—for Georgia's major ethnic minorities are 1286 for African-Americans and 1425 for Hispanics, an average score per test of 428.5 and 475 respectively. These are shamefully low scores.

By boasting of this ethnic minority participation, Perdue and Cox are surreptitiously blaming these students for dragging down the state average. What they should be doing is acknowledging how they have failed these students to an even greater extent than they have failed ethnic majority students.

Finally, in a joint press release honoring the top 25 Georgia SAT schools, i.e., honoring the best of the worst, Superintendent Cox said, “This type of SAT performance doesn't happen by accident.”

Unfortunately, this judgment—meant as praise—is actually a damning indictment of the system as a whole: Georgia's SAT performance indubitably did not happen by accident. It was the predictable result of an incoherently structured education system with an ill-conceived curriculum, a system more dedicated to making excuses than to making progress.

*Education columnist Bob Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.
He may be contacted through his Web site www.doczonline.com.*