

Education Week

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From 'Math Wars' to the Political Trenches?

Evers could bring a sharp tongue to key Ed. Dept. policy post.

By [Alyson Klein](#) and [Sean Cavanagh](#)

Williamson M. Evers, an advocate for providing students with a strong foundation in core math content in the early grades, has been tapped to fill a high-level federal policy position at a time when the Bush administration has put forward a number of proposals revamping math and science nationwide.

Mr. Evers would become the assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy development, if confirmed by the Senate. He has been a research fellow since 1995 at the Hoover Institution, a conservative-leaning think tank at Stanford University in Stanford, Calif. He's also served as an education policy adviser in Iraq, and on both of President Bush's presidential campaigns.

During the 1990s, Mr. Evers was a strong and frequent critic of what he and others described as weak and vague forms of instruction in math, which they believed emphasized conceptual understanding and overly abstract principles at the expense of students learning basic computation skills.

Mr. Evers participated in that debate, often referred to as the "math wars," when he served on a California state commission charged by then-Gov. Pete Wilson, a Republican, with establishing statewide academic standards.

Mr. Evers and others partly blamed what they viewed as substandard math curricula on the voluntary standards published in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, a Reston, Va.-based organization whose work influenced curricula in states and districts. The NCTM has argued that its standards were aimed at helping students move beyond rote memorization and drills to learning to solve math problems in different settings and contexts.

The NCTM revised its standards in 2000, a change that drew generally positive reviews from Mr. Evers in an *Education Week* commentary he co-authored that same year.

"[M]athematics instruction needs to be balanced," Mr. Evers and his co-author, Stanford University mathematics professor James Milgram, wrote. "Students today certainly need calculation and symbolic-manipulation skills that go beyond the merely mechanical."

They must also be able to "handle new situations flexibly and confidently, to be able to recognize where mathematics can be applied to problems," they wrote.

President Bush's nomination of Mr. Evers comes at a significant time for math and science instruction. The president has for the second straight year proposed a number of measures to improve math and science teaching and coursework. In addition, the administration last year formed the National Mathematics Advisory Panel, a 17-member group charged with identifying proven strategies for improving math instruction. The official who Mr. Evers is slated to replace, Mr. Luce, was a non-voting member of the panel and took an active role in its work.

Williamson M. Evers

Age: 58

Nominated for: assistant secretary for planning, evaluation, and policy development, U.S. Department of Education



**Williamson M.
Evers**

Experience:

- Research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, 1995 to present
- Senior adviser for education to Administrator L. Paul Bremer of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, July to December 2003
- Member of the California State Commission for the Establishment of Academic Content and Performance Standards, where he focused on math and science standards, 1996-1998

Excerpt about school finance lawsuits:

“Once adequacy proponents come up with their cost figures, they demand resources from the political system, usually through the courts. But, if provided, would such money be effectively used? After all, one should not judge a foreign-aid program based simply on the amount of money spent, nor should one review a Hollywood picture based on its budget.”

From “High-Spending, Low-Performing School Districts,” a chapter written with Paul Clopton in *Courting Failure*, edited by Eric A. Hanushek, 2006

SOURCE: *Education Week*

One of the panelists is NCTM President Francis M. “Skip” Fennell, who said he had heard of Mr. Evers’ past criticism of the math organization but did not know enough about his current views to comment on the nomination.

“I would not want to prejudice myself until I’ve had the opportunity to meet him,” Mr. Fennell said.

Mr. Milgram said Mr. Evers’ views of math were shaped by his experiences as an economist, and as a parent with concerns about how math was being taught in the 10,000-student Palo Alto Unified school system.

“He’s looking at [economic] outcomes, and he’s seeing that the outcomes are disastrous,” Mr. Milgram said. Mr. Evers’ concerns were not those of a mathematician, but of someone concerned about the “impact of the instruction,” Mr. Milgram added.

Although Mr. Evers has primarily focused on studying curriculum, testing, and accountability issues, he has waded into other controversial areas of education policy. As a school board member for the 250,000-student Santa Clara County, Calif., school district in 2005, Mr. Evers supported a state ballot resolution that would have made it easier to terminate tenured teachers.

"If a teacher rapes a student or walks off with district funds, they can be fired," Mr. Evers told the *San Jose Mercury News* at the time. "But it is very hard to fire a teacher for not being successful in getting children to learn."

From July to December 2003, Mr. Evers served as a senior education adviser in Iraq, where he helped create a teacher-training program and oversee the development of new textbooks. Mr. Evers wrote in a Jan. 15, 2004, essay in *The Wall Street Journal* that he was recruited by the White House and the secretary of defense's office, and approved by Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority.

In the essay, he wrote that "Iraqi children and grown-ups smile, always say 'Welcome' and wave" and that "Iraqi parents love standardized testing and were fervently concerned not to let either the war in March and April [2003], or the subsequent guerrilla skirmishes, interfere with the nationwide testing program."

'Very Demanding'

He was one of the 13 specialists on Mr. Bush's education policy advisory committee during the 2000 presidential campaign, along with now-Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings and her predecessor, Rod Paige. Mr. Evers also worked as an education adviser on the president's 2004 re-election campaign, according to published reports.

Some who have dealt with Mr. Evers describe him as difficult to work with. Delaine Eastin, a Democrat, who as California superintendent of public instruction worked with Mr. Evers when he served on the state education standards panel, plans to write a letter urging the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee to reject his nomination.

"He's a my-way-or-the-highway kind of guy," she said in an interview. "He was the kind of person that just interrupted people and tried to dominate the conversation."

But Leslye A. Arsht, the deputy under secretary of defense for military community and family policy in the Department of Defense, offered another view.

"Bill has a very sharp mind, he is demanding, but he is a great colleague to work with," said Ms. Arsht, who served alongside Mr. Evers in Iraq and helped facilitate some of the California commission's discussions. She said that while the panel was "contentious at times," its work resulted in standards that are "among the best in the country."