



Introduction

A Nation at Risk *at Forty*

Stephen L. Bowen

Executive Summary

Forty years ago, the release of *A Nation at Risk* led to what we know today as the modern school reform movement. With its calls for increased academic rigor, more productive use of instructional time, more effective teaching, and more impactful leadership, *A Nation at Risk* set in motion policy and practice changes at every level of the education system. The last four decades of school reform can be divided into four eras:

1983–1989: The States Respond The states were the first to respond to the recommendations of *A Nation at Risk*. It is estimated that states launched three thousand reform measures in this era, including changes to graduation requirements, teacher certification and training, and use of instructional time.

1989–2002: Standards and Systems Once it became clear that a series of marginal, disconnected reforms were insufficient, more systemic approaches were attempted. States adopted academic standards, expanded standardized testing, and began tracking school and student performance. Charter schools and other choice options were launched in this era as well.

2002–2015: The NCLB Era With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the federal government took the lead role in education reform, requiring states to take a series of actions related to standards, assessment, accountability, and school improvement. States and districts made some progress in this era, but some elements of the law proved unworkable.

2015–2023: ESSA and COVID-19 The Every Student Succeeds Act replaced No Child Left Behind, moving some reform authority back to the states. School reform efforts were largely halted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which closed schools and had significant impacts on schools and students.

As the nation's schools face challenges in their recovery from COVID-19, there are lessons to be learned from the past forty years of reform, which are explored in the essays in this collection.



By the time then president Ronald Reagan entered the State Dining Room a little after 4 p.m. on April 26, 1983, his day had already been busy. He was scheduled to deliver a speech to Congress on Central America the following day, and he later noted in his diary that he had been “scrambling all day” to prepare.¹ He had started his morning with a briefing by his national security team but was pulled away from speech preparation by several phone calls and a visit from the NATO secretary general, with whom he discussed nuclear missiles in Europe. After lunch, Reagan made still more phone calls, discussed job training programs with the governor of New Hampshire, and met with members of the House Intelligence Committee to discuss Nicaragua.² Indeed, when Reagan finally did step to the microphone, several minutes behind schedule, he lightheartedly blamed his tardiness on “members of the Congress.”³

Reagan was in the State Dining Room to formally receive a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a bipartisan eighteen-member task force empaneled by then education secretary Terrel Bell. Bell tasked the commission with examining “the quality of learning and teaching in the nation’s schools,” a review and analysis made necessary, Bell had said in his instructions to the panel, by “the widespread public perception that something is seriously remiss in our educational system.” After eighteen months of work, including a series of convenings and public hearings as well as the commissioning of more than forty research papers, the commission had produced a report as notable for its brevity—thirty-six pages plus an appendix—as it was for its alarming tone, which was well reflected by its attention-grabbing title: *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*.⁴

In his brief remarks in receipt of the report, Reagan thanked the members of the commission and noted they had found that “our educational system is in the grip of a crisis caused by low standards, lack of purpose, ineffective use of resources, and a failure to challenge students to push performance to the boundaries of individual ability.” To Bell’s chagrin, Reagan spent little time describing the commission’s recommendations, preferring instead to highlight elements of his own education reform agenda, which included “tuition tax credits, vouchers, education savings accounts, voluntary school prayer,” and, again to Bell’s dismay, “abolishing the [US] Department of Education.”⁵

After thanking the commission again, Reagan closed his remarks with a characteristically self-deprecating joke about his own 1932 degree from Eureka College being “honorary” and took his leave.⁶ In an interview later that afternoon with *USA Today*, Reagan reiterated his view that “there is a parallel between the Federal involvement in education and the decline in quality over recent years.”⁷ He then wrapped up his day by hosting a dinner for forty guests followed by a movie, but at some point that evening, he made note of the commission’s report in his personal diary. “It’s a great report & lays it on the line,” he wrote.⁸

The president and those around him could be forgiven for thinking that of all the matters he had tackled that day, from foreign policy to national security to job creation, the *least*

impactful might have been the slim report he received about K-12 education. The opposite proved true. As the chapters in this series detail, *A Nation at Risk (ANAR)* not only proved to be a sensation, it led to a wave of school reform efforts across the nation. Indeed, the report would give rise to what we know today as the modern school reform movement. With its calls for increased academic rigor, more productive use of instructional time, more effective teaching, and more impactful leadership, *ANAR* would set in motion policy and practice changes at every level of the education system.

But after forty years, what has been the result? And where do we go from here? The chapters in this series each tackle a distinct area of school reform that emerged in response to the needs described in *ANAR*. Each chapter provides background and context, describes the evidence of impact, draws conclusions, and makes recommendations for policymakers. The goal: to evaluate the evidence and determine what can be learned from four decades of effort to transform the nation's schools.

Forty years on, significant challenges remain. The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating effects on student learning, and chronic absenteeism remains at alarming rates. Even prior to the pandemic, student achievement, as measured by standardized tests, seemed to have plateaued despite ever-increasing resources—in time, dollars, research, technology, and human capital—being devoted to school reform. How the nation and its schools confront the challenges ahead will be informed in no small part by the reform journey of the past forty years, a journey set in motion by the thunderous response to the commission's report.

1983: A NATION AT RISK ARRIVES

On the day it was released, the *ANAR* report hit, it was said, “with a bang that still echoes.”⁹ In Bell's telling, the response to *ANAR* was “overwhelming.” It made the front page of every major newspaper, was included in evening news broadcasts, and triggered calls and letters to the US Department of Education from across the nation.¹⁰ Sensing that he had a hit on his hands, Reagan took to the road and, with Bell in tow, participated in education events all over the country. More than six million copies of the report would be distributed by the US Government Publishing Office over the course of the following year.¹¹

That *ANAR* triggered a response unlike any federal report before or since was largely attributed to the provocative portrait it painted of an education system failing the nation. “For the first time in the history of our country,” it reported, “the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.” The report famously warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” that was “eroding” the “educational foundations” of the nation. “What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur,” the authors wrote: “others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.”¹²

What was at stake, the commission claimed, was not simply the future prospects of the nation's learners, but those of the nation itself. Education is a "major foundation for the future strength of our country," the authors wrote, "the foundation for a satisfying life, an enlightened and civil society, a strong economy, and a secure nation."¹³ This linkage, between the quality of the schools and the broader civic, economic, and spiritual health of the nation, was a key sentiment of the report and, as it turned out, an enduring one. K-12 education, by long tradition a local issue despite a small but growing federal role, was now catapulted into the national spotlight.

And then there was the report's tone. In the years following its release, commentators would variously describe *ANAR* as everything from "harsh" and "hard hitting"¹⁴ to "incendiary"¹⁵ and "apocalyptic."¹⁶ It accused the country of "squandering" achievement gains made in the shadow of Sputnik, a comparable wake-up call from a generation prior, claiming that the nation had been "committing an act of unilateral educational disarmament." The report summoned Cold War visions of an "unfriendly foreign power" imposing the system on us against our wills. This we would view, the authors indelibly asserted, as an "act of war."¹⁷

The commission was not content merely to sound the alarm, however. The report contained nearly forty recommendations for change, divided into five broad categories: content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support. In remarkably short order, policymakers would begin adopting these and other reforms and, perhaps more importantly, would largely embrace *ANAR*'s central argument that prosperity and school quality were closely linked.

Importantly, the authors of *ANAR* did not call for a wholesale reimagining or reinvention of public education. They credited the "American educational system" for rising to past challenges and celebrated the public's long-standing commitment to its schools, which they saw as the "most powerful" tool for reform. What the nation needed to overcome, they wrote, was "weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, underuse of talent and lack of leadership," and they were confident that thoughtful implementation of their proposals would achieve that goal.¹⁸

A NATION AT RISK IN CONTEXT

While *ANAR* proved to be the most high-profile report highlighting the need for school reform, it was far from the only one. In the fall of 1975, for example, Americans had been shocked by reports that scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test had been dropping for a dozen years. Searching for an explanation, a 1977 report denounced a pervasive school culture where absenteeism is "condoned," where "promotion from one grade to another has become almost automatic," and where "homework has apparently been cut about in half."¹⁹ The National Science Foundation claimed in 1981 that academic rigor at the high school level had dropped to the point that "a third of the nation's school systems required

only one year of mathematics and one year of science.”²⁰ The only graduation requirement in California, it was reported, was two years of physical education.²¹

Even prior to the commission’s report, state leaders had begun to see education as an area of policymaking worthy of their focus. Fully two years before the release of *ANAR*, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), an education-focused association of fourteen southern states, had released the report of its own education task force. Like the commission, SREB called for raising standards, increasing salaries and training for teachers, addressing teacher shortages, and investing in school and district leadership.²² Shortly after the release of *ANAR*, the Education Commission of the States put forward its own report, which included a similar series of “action recommendations” developed by a mix of governors, state legislators, business leaders, and educators.²³

ANAR added to this call for reform, but the report’s authors also suggested that something bigger was going on in the country. They described “a growing impatience” with the “shoddiness” so common in life in the United States and a “national sense of frustration” characterized by a “dimming of personal expectations and the fear of losing a shared vision for America.”²⁴

The nation’s malaise, driven by rising crime and urban decay, a lost war in Vietnam, the resignation of a president, and widespread economic turmoil, led to a collapse in the public’s satisfaction with the state of the nation. As the 1970s came to an end, an overwhelming 78 percent of Americans told Gallup pollsters they were “dissatisfied” with the way things were going in the United States.²⁵ Confidence in the schools had fallen as well. From 1974 to 1983, the percentage of respondents giving their local school a grade of A or B dropped from 48 percent to 31 percent—a “negative change of opinion by 25 to 30 million people,” reported pollsters.²⁶

In short, the commission’s impassioned call to restore the “intellectual, moral and spiritual strengths of our people” by reforming the nation’s schools fell on fertile soil. The country was ready for a change. The only question that seemed to remain was who would lead the way.

1983–1989: THE STATES RESPOND

It was *ANAR* itself that helped put governors and other state leaders in the education reform driver’s seat. “What had been a sleepy backwater of state politics mostly delegated to state boards of education and state superintendents,” wrote an observer, “was all of a sudden a critical issue” for state leaders.²⁷ Governors of both parties jumped at the chance to advance education reform as a core priority, and many, including then governor of Arkansas Bill Clinton, became national leaders on the issue. As an indicator of the seriousness of their commitment to school reform, then governor of Kentucky Martha Layne Collins took the novel step of naming herself state secretary of education.²⁸

As a group, the governors wasted little time getting underway. In a paper marking the twentieth anniversary of *ANAR*, Robert Schwartz would write that it was “difficult to overstate the sheer volume of education reform activities unleashed in the states” following the release of *ANAR*:

In a document issued only fifteen months after the Commission’s report, [the Education Commission of the States] reported that over 250 state task forces had been created to study virtually every aspect of education. In that short period, forty-four states raised graduation requirements, forty-five strengthened teacher certification and evaluation requirements, and twenty-seven states adopted measures to increase instructional time.²⁹

In chapter 6 of this series, **Eric Bettinger** describes a series of reforms coming out of *ANAR* that were aimed at rethinking the basic architecture of schooling. Educators and policymakers sought, for instance, to restructure the school day and year, adjust class sizes, and create opportunities for school- and district-led innovations. There was a renewed focus on education leadership and increasing interest in new school models. A “small schools” movement emerged, for example, out of concern for the growing size of US schools and a sense that such schools were “too impersonal to reach every child.”³⁰

Teachers and teaching were a particular focus for the authors of *ANAR* and were seen by state leaders as areas where they could make rapid progress. Two chapters are dedicated to policy proposals in those areas. As **Thomas S. Dee** describes in chapter 4, a number of states raised teacher pay and reformed professional development programs, and several launched career-ladder programs, which had been a specific recommendation of *ANAR*.³¹ States also experimented with new teacher evaluation systems and pay-for-performance models.

Attracting skilled people to the profession was another focus of the report, and as **Michael Hansen** explores in chapter 3, states began reworking their teacher certification and training programs as well as adopting alternative routes to the classroom. The late 1980s, for example, saw the launch of Teach for America, an effort to strengthen the nation’s teacher corps by recruiting recent college graduates and preparing them for the classroom with training and support. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards emerged in this era as well, as an alternative means of designating highly effective teachers.

As reforms of this type were put into place—it was estimated that three thousand reform measures were enacted in this era—governors quickly faced the formidable challenge of measuring their impact.³² In the early 1980s, few states had any reliable data about how well their students were doing and virtually no data on how their states compared to others. In response to this need, the ever-helpful Secretary Bell produced what came to be known as the “wall chart,” which used scores on the SAT and ACT exams to rank the states on student performance. Governors pushed back almost instantly—the two assessments were used almost exclusively by college-going students, and the percentage of test takers in a given student population varied dramatically from state to state—but the wall chart was an attention-getter, and in the dismay it caused the governors who were sensitive about their rankings,

it helped stimulate a robust discussion about how best to assess academic achievement both within and across the states.

Whether they could measure against them yet or not, the governors also quickly realized that having each state set its own education goals made little sense. To convince taxpayers that increased spending on K-12 education was worth it, states would have to show that progress was being made, both on each state's own terms and relative to the progress of neighboring states. Through the mid-1980s, the governors, working through organizations such as SREB and the National Governors Association, began pushing the idea of national education goals, shared "North Stars" toward which their own state-level efforts could be oriented.³³

As the end of the 1980s approached, though, it became clear that the flurry of state-level reforms launched in the years after *ANAR* had not resulted in the kind of seismic change in outcomes the report had called for. These initial reform efforts, some claimed, had suffered from a top-down, "one-size-fits-all" approach that was disconnected from the realities of the classroom as well as a lack of internal coherence that would have made them work together in thoughtful ways. To truly transform the nation's schools, it was thought, something more—and more systemic—was needed.

1989–2002: STANDARDS AND SYSTEMS

While *ANAR* is seen as having kick-started the modern school reform movement, a handful of events in the late 1980s and early 1990s gave the movement its enduring shape. First, in September 1989, then president George H. W. Bush hosted an education summit for the nation's governors in Charlottesville, Virginia. Bush had campaigned on becoming the "education president," and while he shared his predecessor's sense that K-12 education should be a state-led issue, he was intrigued by the growing interest in national education goals. Establishing these goals seemed like a smart way to signal the administration's commitment to K-12 education without creating a more substantial federal footprint, and their development was the key focus of the convening.³⁴ It would not be until the passage of the Goals 2000 legislation in 1994 that the National Education Goals would be formally established in law, but for the first time, the nation's leaders had put into writing what they hoped public schools would accomplish.

Interestingly enough, the very first of those goals spoke to ensuring that young children were actually prepared to go to school in the first place. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, interest in preschool programming had grown, driven by a small number of studies showing promising results from high-quality programs.³⁵ As **Deborah Stipek** describes in chapter 1, though *ANAR* made scant mention of early childhood, policymakers were quick to embrace it as an improvement strategy. In the years that followed, states and districts would dramatically expand public support for early childhood education. Enrollment in state pre-K programs, for example, would "jump from about 290,000 to nearly 725,000" by the end of the 1990s.³⁶

With both *ANAR* and the new national goals calling for increased academic rigor for all students, policymakers next faced the challenge of translating these high-level aspirations into something more concrete and measurable. To meet the new national goal of having students demonstrate “competency in challenging subject matter,” for example, clear definitions of both “competency” and “challenging” would need to be developed for each content area.³⁷ An attempt was made to create truly national learning standards—federal grants were provided to fund their development—but this proved to be a disaster. The first federally funded standards out of the gate, in the subject of history, of all things, were released in 1994 and prompted such widespread pushback that the US Senate voted ninety-nine to one to condemn them. The one holdout, it was noted, “wanted an even stronger condemnation.”³⁸ It would ultimately fall to the states to individually develop their own content standards, an approach, as would later become apparent, with pitfalls of its own.

The question of how these standards would actually drive real reform at the level of the individual classroom was answered in part by a landmark paper by Marshall Smith and Jennifer O’Day, released in 1990. In “Systemic School Reform,” they observed that “even when standards are raised and more or better resources are allocated, little lasting change occurs.”³⁹ The reason for this, they posited, was that “the fragmented, complex, multi-layered educational policy system” that governed the nation’s schools undermined the development of coherent strategies to improve teaching and learning.⁴⁰ Smith and O’Day suggested that this coherence could be had by having the disparate elements of the system—everything from curricula, assessments, and instructional materials to teacher training and in-service professional development—aligned around a common set of learning standards. Smith and O’Day’s paper helped form the intellectual basis for the standards-based strategies that would dominate education reform efforts in the years to come.

Others thought differently. Many in the K-12 space saw the layering on of new regulations and top-down mandates, which had accumulated dramatically in the years following *ANAR*, as only making a complicated and bureaucratic system even worse. Rather than try to bring alignment to a vast, disconnected system by somehow getting all of the various players to row in the same direction, why not place key decision-making about teaching and learning where it belonged—inside the schools themselves? Accordingly, policymakers in a number of states enacted laws enabling “bottom-up” reforms, creating opportunities for greater innovation at the local level. As an example of this thinking, a number of states, beginning with Minnesota in 1990, passed legislation creating charter schools. These schools, publicly funded but independently run, would continue to grow in popularity and would prove to be among the most enduring reforms from this era. By the 2020–21 school year, 3.7 million students would attend nearly eight thousand charter schools.⁴¹

Reformers with a more free-market sensibility embraced private-school choice as an alternative approach, believing that school leaders would respond to competitive pressure more readily than additional mandates from above. A number of states and districts, beginning with Milwaukee, launched private-school voucher programs to test this approach. In chapter 10, **John D. Singleton** explores the ways that states adopted and expanded these and other choice options, both public and private. Despite the controversies this approach would inspire in the

years ahead, it proved popular with parents and families. By 2016, just more than 30 percent of the nation's schoolchildren would be homeschooled or be attending public or private schools of choice.⁴²

The use of education technology was expanding as well. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, personal computers became a common feature of the nation's classrooms, and with the advent of the internet and the passage of various state and federal funding mechanisms, billions of dollars were spent on school connectivity. The deployment of all of this technology was typically accompanied by the near-ubiquitous promise that it would utterly and swiftly transform teaching and learning. In chapter 7, **Tom Vander Ark** reviews the rapid evolution of education technology since the era of *ANAR* and judges its impact, drawing lessons for how we might think about coming innovations such as artificial intelligence.

Throughout the 1990s, these various strands of reform were accompanied by growing levels of federal involvement. The 1994 reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, titled the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA), created a federal grant program to support the creation of charter schools and put the federal imprimatur on the standards-based model of systemic reform. For the first time, federal law not only directed states to develop standards and regularly assess students against them, but it also required states to disaggregate this assessment data and report student outcomes for various student subgroups in order to identify achievement gaps. Perhaps more importantly, given where federal law was to go in the years to come, IASA also required states to set performance targets for Title I schools and determine whether they were making "adequate yearly progress" on their journey of improvement. If not, "corrective action" was to be taken to turn them around.⁴³

There was scant enforcement of these provisions from Washington, which was still cautious about overstepping its traditionally arm's-length relationship with the schools, but a new federal role was established in this era—a shift, as an observer put it, "from the historical focus on ensuring equity for disadvantaged students and impoverished schools to a new commitment to improve academic performance of all students and schools."⁴⁴

2002–2015: THE NCLB ERA

By the turn of the century, it was clear that the bold ambitions of the post-*ANAR* reform era, including the National Education Goals, were not going to be realized. Then senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan was among those who had predicted as much in 1994, having compared the nascent education goals—US students would be "first in the world in mathematics and science achievement" was among them—to Soviet-era grain production quotas.⁴⁵

The states, to their credit, continued to push forward with key reforms. For example, the number of states establishing academic standards continued to grow. By 2000, forty-nine states had standards in place for English, math, social studies, or science, with forty-four states having adopted standards in all four content areas. Forty-one states were also

assessing student achievement in at least one content area by that point, with twenty testing in all four content areas.⁴⁶ States were expanding choice options as well, with more than fifteen hundred charter schools in place by 2000, serving nearly three hundred forty thousand students.⁴⁷

Even so, there was concern that these strides were not enough. States had adopted standards, but the rigor of those standards was in question. A 2000 analysis by the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found only eight states worthy of an “honors grade” for their state standards, with the remainder “vague, uninspired, timid, full of dubious educational advice, and generally not up to the task.”⁴⁸ States were also struggling with what to do about schools that were continuing to fail their kids. By 2001, forty-one states required the reporting of student outcomes through school “report cards,” but only seventeen states rated or ranked their schools in any way, and only ten identified their most underperforming schools. Few had any power to impose sanctions on failing schools or mandate that they take corrective actions.⁴⁹

Heading into a presidential election year, policymakers questioned whether to double down on the standards-based reform model, with some school choice and other “bottom-up” approaches included as well, or to go in a different direction.

That question was answered with the election of George W. Bush and the enactment, in early 2002, of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Much of what the new law required—the adoption of rigorous standards, regular assessments of student achievement, a focus on underperforming schools—was directionally consistent with reforms since *ANAR* and with *IASA*. As **Michael J. Petrilli** describes in chapter 11, it was in the area of school accountability that the twelve-hundred-page law broke new ground. Seeming to have learned little from the overambition of the National Education Goals, NCLB established a new goal that all students would demonstrate proficiency in reading and math by 2014. Building on the adequate yearly progress (AYP) concept enshrined in *IASA*, states were to track and report school-level and student group progress. The law also required that states take a series of steps to turn around any schools that were falling behind.

States and districts struggled mightily with these new requirements. At the state level, the identification of schools in need of improvement, combined with the mandated implementation of a series of cascading intervention strategies, quickly strained state capacity. Before long, a majority of states reported that they lacked the staff capacity to implement elements of the law.⁵⁰ As Petrilli also notes, it quickly became clear that “many schools and systems didn’t know what to do in response to the accountability pressure—or couldn’t steel themselves to make the requisite changes in long-established practices and structures.”

The lack of leadership capacity at all levels quickly emerged as an issue. Leaders at the school and district levels, who were typically “trained to be managers, rather than instructional leaders,” struggled with the large-scale organizational changes school turnaround required.⁵¹ State education agencies, whose primary role had long been to ensure box-checking compliance with state and federal regulations, likewise lacked the expertise to lead the kind of systems

change NCLB envisioned. At the federal level, “shifting expectations, lengthy delays in offering states feedback, and sometimes conflicting advice depending on which federal administration a state official happened to encounter” complicated matters still further.⁵²

Schools and districts were feeling the pressure to improve, however, and reform efforts continued. As **Michael T. Hartney** details in chapter 9, a number of states looked to governance reform as a way to facilitate systemic change. While policymakers of the 1980s and 1990s had explored site-based management and other bottom-up governance models, policymakers in the NCLB era looked to mayoral control or state takeover as a means of overcoming the intransigence of local political actors such as entrenched school boards. In cities like Washington, DC, and post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, significant reforms were undertaken under these new governance approaches.

As frustrations with NCLB mounted, the Bush administration began providing flexibility to states by waiving certain provisions of the law. By the time Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, however, it was clear that NCLB was starting to fray at the edges. Thirty-five percent of all schools failed to make AYP that year, a number that would grow to 48 percent by 2011.⁵³ A polarized Washington was in no mood to compromise on revisions to the law, so the Obama administration attempted a workaround by using federal economic recovery funding appropriated in response to the 2008 economic downturn to underwrite the Race to the Top (RttT) initiative. This \$4 billion competitive grant program was designed to entice states into adopting the administration’s preferred reform strategies. Consistent with reform efforts to date, these included improving teacher effectiveness, expanding charter schools, strengthening state standards, and turning around underperforming schools. While it did prove effective in nudging states to adopt these reforms, RttT’s impact on student achievement was questionable, to say the least. In 2016, the US Department of Education, in its own 267-page analysis of the program, came to the definitive conclusion that “student outcomes could be interpreted as providing evidence of a positive effect of [RttT], a negative effect of [RttT], or no effect of [RttT].”⁵⁴

Among the initiatives backed by the Obama administration was the Common Core State Standards, a voluntary set of national standards for English language arts and math, developed by the states. Between 2010 and 2012, all but four states adopted the Common Core standards in the hope that not only would they bring the academic rigor that had been called for since the days of ANAR, but also, in their national reach, they would better facilitate the creation of high-quality instructional materials, student assessments, and professional development resources.⁵⁵ Over time, though, the Common Core standards were sucked into the same vortex of partisanship and ill feeling that came to engulf NCLB. By 2017, eight Common Core states had dropped the new standards entirely, and another twenty-one “had either changed or were in the process of changing” them.⁵⁶

The Obama administration had hoped to have better luck with school turnaround, launching the federal School Improvement Grants (SIG) program, which aimed to “turn around 1,000 schools every year for five years.” Utilizing the existing federal Title I funding structure, the administration flooded almost \$7 billion in funding to SIG from FY 2007 to FY 2014, with \$3.5 billion

allocated in the 2009–10 school year alone. In yet another indication of the immense challenges accompanying turnaround efforts of this kind, a 2017 study by the Institute of Education Sciences found that this staggering investment of resources had “failed to produce meaningful results.”⁵⁷ School district leaders who received SIG funding told researchers that they had struggled with having enough time to implement needed change, given the sheer complexity of putting transformative strategies into place.⁵⁸

In Newark, New Jersey, **Cami Anderson** led one of the most high-profile turnaround efforts in the nation, inheriting a district with plunging enrollment, where “only 40 percent of third-graders could read and write at grade level” and where school buildings dated back to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln. In chapter 12, she depicts the numberless challenges of districtwide turnaround efforts and details the research and best practices that drove the development and implementation of the “One Newark” plan, which anchored subsequent reform efforts there.

As members of Congress came to the table in 2015 to update NCLB, criticism of the law seemed to be coming from every direction. On the political right, there was anger that, in the face of congressional inaction in reauthorizing federal education law, the Obama administration had used waivers and initiatives such as RttT to advance its own reform goals. Obama’s support for charter schools and for the use of student achievement data in teacher evaluation systems won him no fans among the teachers’ unions and those on the political left.⁵⁹ From left, right, and center, an anti-testing backlash erupted. In 2015, for example, 20 percent of New York students in grades three through five opted out of state testing altogether, a protest reflecting deep concerns that under NCLB, school curricula were narrowing, pressures on kids and teachers were mounting, and “the joy of learning” was suffering.⁶⁰

To many, NCLB had been an important step forward despite the pushback, especially with regard to its requirement that schools shine a bright light on achievement gaps by disaggregating student assessment data and reporting outcomes by student group. Also lost in the debate over the law was the fact that student performance had indeed risen, particularly among poor and minority students.⁶¹ The challenge for policymakers was how to address concerns about the law while preserving, and hopefully building on, the modest achievement gains and increased transparency that had been realized.

2015–2023: ESSA AND COVID-19

When later asked how it was that Congress managed to successfully develop a replacement for NCLB when few expected it to, then US representative John Kline said that “the secret sauce was the fact that everybody was fed up with No Child Left Behind.”⁶² The resulting legislation, titled the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), was signed into law in December 2015 and would dial back on the widely acknowledged flaws with NCLB, though key elements of that law remained. The anti-testing movement notwithstanding, the annual assessment provisions stayed in place, as did the requirements to identify achievement gaps by disaggregating

performance data by subgroup. States would still be required to identify and work to improve underperforming schools but were given far more flexibility both in identifying those schools and in the improvement strategies they then implemented. The goal of 100 percent proficiency was dropped, but data and reporting requirements were stepped up in order to provide greater transparency.⁶³

Perhaps most importantly, the law scaled back the federal role generally, providing the states with greater autonomy and increased responsibility for improving student outcomes. The standards-based “triad” that had been in place since the 1990s—state-level learning standards, aligned student assessments and progress determinations, and mandated accountability provisions—remained in place under ESSA, but it was up to the states to make it work in their own local contexts. There was a risk in this, to be sure, and there were concerns that, “left to their own devices, districts and states might not serve all students equally well.”⁶⁴ To help allay these concerns, ESSA required states to deeply engage with their key stakeholders as they developed their new accountability plans.

Away from Washington, there were efforts to learn from what had worked—and had not worked—under NCLB. From the very earliest days of the accountability movement, for example, there had been calls to not lose sight of what Richard Elmore called the “instructional core,” which is the complex interplay, inside the classroom, between teacher, student, and academic content. The lesson of the standards-based reform movement, Elmore wrote, was that it was “impossible to improve student performance without eventually improving the quality of teaching and learning that occurs in classrooms and schools.”⁶⁵ As **Robert Pondiscio** describes in chapter 5, supporting teachers in their classroom practice by strengthening curricular materials and improving instructional pedagogy received renewed attention in these years. A number of states, for instance, have invested heavily in high-quality instructional materials, incentivizing districts to adopt them and providing professional development to support their use.

The broader welfare of students and families has been an area of increasing interest as well. The success of models such as Harlem Children’s Zone, which provides a host of education and support services to the low-income families it serves, led to the adoption of similar “whole-child” approaches elsewhere. In chapter 2, **Maria D. Fitzpatrick** describes how the thinking underlying these approaches—that students are better able to learn if their basic needs are met and that schools are “the most effective places” to address many of those needs—has driven the development of a variety of new approaches such as “community schools,” which streamline and integrate support services for students and families.

What progress was being made by these and other efforts was largely halted in March 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtually overnight, schools across the nation were closed to in-person instruction, and school systems struggled to provide learning opportunities and other school-based supports, such as school meals, remotely. Federally required testing and related accountability provisions were suspended, and in some areas of the country, schools remained closed for in-person instruction well into the following year.

Even today, the sheer scale of the pandemic’s impact on students and families is difficult to fathom. Once they were resumed, standardized test scores revealed staggering levels of lost learning, erasing twenty years of achievement gains. For impacted students, this could result in a lifetime of lower earnings.⁶⁶ Though schools and districts have invested heavily in remediation strategies to boost academic recovery, research suggests that absent more fundamental reforms to improve the pace of student learning, there is little chance these efforts will succeed to the degree required.⁶⁷ Worse still, recovery efforts rely on students attending school, and data suggests that levels of chronic absenteeism have skyrocketed. It is estimated that an additional 6.5 million students across the nation have become chronically absent since the pandemic began.⁶⁸

To support states and districts in their recovery efforts, Congress provided unprecedented levels of relief funding. More than \$190 billion was committed to K-12 education through the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief fund (ESSER).⁶⁹ By way of comparison, the largest pot of federal money that flows into K-12 schools each year, Title I, was funded at \$18 billion for the most recent fiscal year.⁷⁰ Reports of ESSER spending by states and districts suggest that recovery dollars are going toward tutoring, extended learning opportunities, and other strategies to address learning loss, but whether they will have the needed effect remains to be seen.⁷¹

Even prior to *ANAR*, debates about school spending have always accompanied efforts to reform the nation’s schools. Education spending jumped in the years immediately following the report’s release, with total K-12 spending in the United States growing from \$128 billion to \$184 billion in the five years between 1982 and 1987—an inflation-adjusted increase of 25 percent.⁷² In constant terms, total K-12 revenues more than doubled in the twenty-five years between 1980 and 2005, as reforms were launched at both the state and federal levels.⁷³

As **Eric A. Hanushek** notes in chapter 8, with the single exception of a drop in revenue following the 2008 recession, “real per-pupil spending (i.e., adjusted for inflation) has risen continuously for more than one hundred years.” The impact of all that spending, Hanushek continues, is “highly variable,” making it nearly impossible to “describe when funds are particularly effective or ineffective.” Demands for increased funding, which have accompanied every effort at reform, will almost certainly emerge again in the fall of 2024, when ESSER relief funds are set to expire.

The nation’s schools will face additional burdens by that point as well, just as they do today. Despite the efforts described above, researchers report there has been “little, if any, progress” in closing pandemic-related learning gaps.⁷⁴ An increasing number of students are seeking mental and behavioral health supports, and schools continue to confront staffing shortages.⁷⁵ School closures drove parents to seek other learning options, and enrollment declines in many districts are leading to school closures and budget shortfalls.⁷⁶ Perhaps most concerning, the country’s confidence in its schools continues to deteriorate. Twenty-six percent of those surveyed by Gallup in 2023 reported “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the public schools, down from the 29 percent who shared that view in 2019. In 1983, the year of *ANAR*’s release, 39 percent of respondents signaled that level of confidence in the nation’s schools.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

Perhaps sensing that they needed to leaven their report's dire tone, ANAR's authors closed it on a hopeful note. "We are the inheritors of a past that gives us every reason to believe that we will succeed," they wrote. "Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again."⁷⁸

They were also clear-eyed about what lay ahead. Enacting their proposed reforms would "take time and unwavering commitment" as well as "widespread, energetic, and dedicated action." The nation's "willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see it through," they wrote, would mean the difference between success and failure.⁷⁹

As the chapters in this series detail, widespread, energetic, and dedicated action is indeed what their remarkable little report inspired. Such action remains necessary today. The nation and its schools face challenges that are as great or greater than those they confronted forty years ago, and there is much to learn in the pages to follow about what was tried and why and what that tells us about the best path forward.

NOTES

1. White House, "White House Diaries, April 26, 1983," Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/white-house-diaries/diary-entry-04261983>.
2. White House, "Daily Diary of President Reagan, April 26, 1983," Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Library, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/102281/042683.pdf>.
3. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Receiving the Final Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-receiving-final-report-national-commission-excellence-education>.
4. National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: US Department of Education, 1983), 1.
5. Terrence Bell, *The Thirteenth Man: A Reagan Cabinet Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 130.
6. Reagan, "Remarks."
7. "Interview with *USA Today*," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/interview-usa-today>.
8. White House, "Daily Diary."
9. Chester E. Finn Jr., *Troublemaker: A Personal History of School Reform Since Sputnik* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 98.
10. Bell, *Thirteenth Man*, 131.
11. James W. Guthrie and Matthew G. Springer, "A Nation at Risk Revisited: Did 'Wrong' Reasoning Result in 'Right' Results? At What Costs?," *Peabody Journal of Education* 79, no. 1 (January 2004): 11.
12. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5, 11.
13. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 17.
14. Thomas Toch, *In the Name of Excellence: The Struggle to Reform the Nation's Schools, Why It's Failing, and What Should Be Done* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 15.

15. David Gordon, "Introduction," in *A Nation Reformed? American Education 20 Years after A Nation at Risk*, ed. David Gordon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003), 1.
16. Edward B. Fiske, "A Nation at a Loss," *New York Times*, April 25, 2008.
17. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 5, 14.
18. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 15, 16.
19. Bill Peterson, "TV, Variety of Social Factors Blamed in Fall of SAT Scores," *Washington Post*, August 24, 1977.
20. Toch, *In the Name of Excellence*, 8.
21. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battle over School Reform* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2000), 408.
22. Southern Regional Education Board, "The Need for Quality: A Report to the Southern Regional Education Board by Its Task Force on Higher Education and the Schools" (Atlanta: Southern Regional Education Board, June 1991), 7-9.
23. Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, *Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation's Schools*, Education Commission of the States, June 1983.
24. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 11-12.
25. "Americans' Satisfaction with the Way Things Are Going in the US (Trends)," *Gallup News Service*, March 1-8, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/230249/americans-satisfaction-things-going-trends.aspx>.
26. Stanley M. Elam, ed., *Gallup Polls of Attitudes Toward Education, 1969-1984. A Topical Summary* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1984).
27. Jal Mehta, *The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 187.
28. Toch, *In the Name of Excellence*, 19.
29. Robert B. Schwartz, "The Emerging State Leadership Role in Education Reform: Notes of a Participant Observer," in *A Nation Reformed? American Education 20 Years after A Nation at Risk*, ed. David Gordon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003), 133.
30. Peter Meyer, "New York City's Small Schools Revolution," *Education Next*, May 12, 2015, <https://www.educationnext.org/new-york-citys-small-schools-revolution>.
31. Pam Grossman, "Teaching: From a Nation at Risk to a Profession at Risk?," in *A Nation Reformed? American Education 20 Years after A Nation at Risk*, ed. David Gordon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003), 71.
32. Toch, *In the Name of Excellence*, 36.
33. Maris Vinovkis, *From A Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind: National Education Goals and the Creation of Federal Education Policy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 20.
34. Finn, *Troublemaker*, 152-53.
35. Elizabeth Rose, *The Promise of Preschool: From Head Start to Universal Pre-Kindergarten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 90-91.
36. Rose, *The Promise of Preschool*, 104.
37. Chester Finn Jr., "Agenda-Setters and Duds," in *Carrots, Sticks and the Bully Pulpit: Lessons from a Half-Century of Federal Efforts to Improve America's Schools*, ed. Frederick M. Hess and Andrew P. Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2011), 219.
38. Ravitch, *Left Back*, 435.
39. Marshall S. Smith and Jennifer O'Day, "Systemic School Reform," *Journal of Education Policy* 5, no. 5 (April 2008), 236.
40. Smith and O'Day, "Systemic School Reform."

41. Libby Stanford, "Charter Schools Find Quiet Support in a World Focused on Private School Choice," *Education Week*, August 21, 2023.
42. Ke Wang, Amy Rathbun, and Lauren Musu, "School Choice in the United States: 2019," NCES 2019-106 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>.
43. Patrick McGuinn, "From ESEA to NCLB: The Growth of the Federal Role and the Shift to Accountability," in *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What It Means for Schools, Systems and States*, ed. Frederick Hess and Max Eden (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017), Kindle.
44. Patrick McGuinn, "No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965–2005" (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 100.
45. George F. Will, "It's All Family," *Baltimore Sun*, February 17, 1994.
46. Craig D. Jerald, "The State of the States 2000," *Education Week*, January 12, 2000, <https://www.edweek.org/education/the-state-of-the-states-2000/2000/01>.
47. National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, 1999–2000 through 2012–13" (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_216.90.asp.
48. Chester E. Finn Jr., "Foreword," in *The State of the State Standards 2000*, ed. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Michael Petrilli, The Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, January 2000, vii, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/state-state-standards-2000>.
49. Thomas S. Dee, "Learning from the Past: School Accountability before ESSA," Hoover Institution, Hoover Education Success Initiative, June 15, 2020.
50. Center on Education Policy, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act* (Washington, DC: Center for Education Policy, 2005).
51. Paul Manna, *Collision Course: Federal Education Policy Meets State and Local Realities* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), 87.
52. Manna, *Collision Course*, 158.
53. Jeffery R. Henig, David M. Houston, and Melissa Arnold Lyon, "From NCLB to ESSA: Lessons Learned or Politics Reaffirmed?" in *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What It Means for Schools, Systems and States*, eds. Frederick Hess and Max Eden (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017), Kindle.
54. Lisa Dragoset, Jaime Thomas, Mariesa Herrmann, John Deke, Susanne James-Burdumy, Cheryl Graczewski, Andrea Boyle, Courtney Tanenbaum, Jessica Giffin, and Rachel Upton, *Race to the Top: Implementation and Relationship to Student Outcomes*, NCEE 2017-4001 (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education, 2016), xv.
55. Catherine Gewertz, "The Common Core Explained," *Education Week*, September 30, 2015.
56. Amelia Harper, "New York Is Latest State to Tweak, Rebrand Common Core," *K-12 Dive*, October 10, 2017.
57. Emma Brown, "Obama Administration Spent Billions to Fix Failing Schools, and It Didn't Work," *Washington Post*, January 19, 2017.
58. Matt Barnum, "8 Lingering Questions to Confront after the Failure of Obama's \$7B School Turnaround Plan," *74 Million*, January 26, 2017.
59. Henig, Houston, and Lyon, "From NCLB to ESSA," Kindle.
60. Scott Levy, "Making Sense of the Opt-Out Movement," *Education Next* 16, no. 4, 54–64.
61. Chester E. Finn Jr., "School Accountability—Past, Present, and Future," Hoover Institution, Hoover Education Success Initiative, November 19, 2020.

62. Alyson Klein, "How ESSA Passed: The Inside Scoop," in *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What It Means for Schools, Systems and States*, eds. Frederick Hess and Max Eden (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017), Kindle.
63. Charles Barone, "What ESSA Says: Continuities and Departures," in *The Every Student Succeeds Act: What It Means for Schools, Systems and States*, eds. Frederick Hess and Max Eden (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017), Kindle.
64. Max Eden and Frederick Hess, "The Long Path to ESSA," *Education Next*, February 15, 2017.
65. Richard Elmore, "Change and Improvement in Educational Reform," in *A Nation Reformed? American Education 20 Years after A Nation at Risk*, ed. David Gordon (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2003), 30.
66. Eric Hanushek, "The Economic Cost of the Pandemic: State by State," Hoover Institution, Hoover Education Success Initiative, January 4, 2023.
67. Margaret Raymond, "The Pace of Recovery after COVID," Center for Research on Educational Outcomes, 2023.
68. Thomas S. Dee, "Higher Chronic Absenteeism Threatens Academic Recovery from the COVID-19 Pandemic," August 2023, OSF Preprints August 10, doi:10.31219/osf.io/bfg3p.
69. "Federal Stimulus Funds for Education," National Council of State Legislators, May 13, 2022, <https://www.ncsl.org/resources/details/federal-stimulus-funds-for-education>.
70. Anne Hyslop and Rebeca Shackelford, "Title I Funding Has Doubled—But Its Most Potent Formula Is Stuck in the Past," *74 Million*, February 21, 2023.
71. "States Leading: How State Education Agencies Are Leveraging the ESSER Set-Aside," Council of Chief State School Officers, <https://learning.ccsso.org/states-leading-how-state-education-agencies-are-leveraging-the-esser-set-aside>.
72. Toch, *In the Name of Excellence*, 37.
73. US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Biennial Survey of Education in the United States, 1919–20 through 1949–50; Statistics of State School Systems, 1959–60 and 1969–70; Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education, 1979–80; and Common Core of Data (CCD), "National Public Education Financial Survey," 1989–90 through 2018–19*.
74. Matt Barnum, "Recent School Year Saw Little Academic Recovery, New Study Finds," *Chalkbeat*, July 11, 2023, <https://www.chalkbeat.org/2023/7/11/23787212/nwea-learning-loss-academic-recovery-testing-data-covid>.
75. Kevin Mahnken, "COVID's 'Complicated Picture': Mental Health Worse, Staffing Tight, Enrollment Frozen at Nation's Schools," *74 Million*, May 24, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/staffing-down-enrollment-frozen-federal-data-offer-complicated-picture-of-schools-during-the-pandemic>.
76. Linda Jacobson, "Exclusive Data: As Post-Pandemic Enrollment Lags, Schools Compete for Fewer Students," *74 Million*, May 10, 2023, <https://www.the74million.org/article/exclusive-data-as-post-pandemic-enrollment-lags-schools-compete-for-fewer-students>.
77. Gallup News Service, "Education," June 1–22, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx>.
78. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 34, 36.
79. NCEE, *A Nation at Risk*, 36.



The publisher has made this work available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>.

Copyright © 2023 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University

The views expressed in this essay are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the staff, officers, or Board of Overseers of the Hoover Institution.

28 27 26 25 24 23 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



STEPHEN L. BOWEN

Stephen L. Bowen is the executive director of the Hoover Education Success Initiative (HESI). He began his career in education as a middle and high school social studies teacher, is a former state legislator, and served as the Maine Commissioner of Education. He came to Hoover from the Council of Chief State School Officers, where he was deputy executive director.

A Nation at Risk + 40

The modern school-reform movement in the United States was set in motion by the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Countless education policy changes at the local, state, and national levels came as a result. *A Nation at Risk + 40* is a research initiative designed to better understand the impact of these efforts. Each author in this series has gone deep in a key area of school reform, exploring the following questions: *What kinds of reforms have been attempted and why? What is the evidence of their impact? What are the lessons for today's education policymakers?* As the nation's schools work to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, this series not only describes the education-reform journey of the past forty years, it also provides timely and research-driven guidance for the future.

The Hoover Institution gratefully acknowledges Allan B. and Kathy Hubbard, the Daniels Fund, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and the Koret Foundation for their generous support of the Hoover Education Success Initiative and this publication.

Hoover Institution, Stanford University
434 Galvez Mall
Stanford, CA 94305-6003
650-723-1754

Hoover Institution in Washington
1399 New York Avenue NW, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
202-760-3200

