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With the perspective of two decades, it is now apparent that A *Nation at Risk* was the most important education reform document of the twentieth century. Upon its release in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Excellence Commission), it created a media sensation. Unlike most other such documents, which sank without a trace, A *Nation at Risk* captured national attention, shaping the terms of the debate about schooling for a generation after its publication.

Although the report received an unusual amount of press, its format followed a well-worn path. Across the twentieth century, American educators perfected the art of "reform by commission." Whenever it seemed important to rouse the public or fellow members of their profession to a particular course of action, educators formed a commission to write a report and call for what they saw as needed reforms. The first such commission—famously known as the Committee of Ten because it had ten prestigious members—made the first

such statement in 1893, which was ever after known as the *Report of the Committee of Ten.* (Over the next two decades, there was also the Committee of Five, the Committee of Seven, and the Committee of Fifteen, but none was as renowned as the Ten.) The Ten addressed the question of whether the curriculum for college-bound students should be different from the curriculum for the great majority who did not intend to go to college. At the time, only a tiny proportion of youth ever attended high school or prepared for college. Nonetheless, the Ten called for strong academic preparation for all, on the grounds that a strong academic education was the best preparation for life regardless of one's future occupation.

After the remarkable attention paid to the Ten's report, educators regularly created commissions and issued reports, usually diametrically opposed to the recommendations of the Ten. For example, the most significant report of the early twentieth century, known as the *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* (released in 1918), declared that academic studies should be relegated to equal status with instruction in health, vocation, "worthy home-membership," citizenship, character, and "worthy use of leisure."¹

Such public statements by prominent educators became something of a ritual within the pedagogical profession. Over the decades, as more and more of them poured forth, keyed to the latest crisis in school or society, they gained less and less attention. The fact that so many of them were written by education professionals for other education professionals often made them incomprehensible to the larger public.

In A Nation at Risk, by contrast, the American public found a report that was written in plain English. Here was a report with a message that noneducators understood. The public's powerful response signaled that A Nation at Risk spoke to deeply held concerns; its calls for higher expectations and higher standards had clearly struck a chord. Unlike any such document in our national past, it reached

far beyond the professionals and energized reforms that twenty years later have still not run their course.

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An unintended effect of A Nation at Risk was that it salvaged the U.S. Department of Education. During his first presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan had promised to abolish the department, which had been created in the closing months of the Carter administration. Reagan believed that the department would inevitably expand the reach of the federal government into issues that he thought should be left to state and local officials. However, Reagan's secretary of education, Terrell Bell, did not agree with Reagan's plan (nor did Reagan have the votes in Congress to get rid of the department; indeed, no bill was ever formally filed in Congress). In his effort to demonstrate the power of the bully pulpit, Secretary Bell asked Reagan to appoint an independent commission to study the condition of American education. When the president declined to do so, Secretary Bell, in August 1981, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education as a cabinet-level activity. The favorable attention accorded the commission's report upon its release in April 1983 ended the debate about abolishing the department and guaranteed its political survival.

The Excellence Commission included several eminent educators, such as: the commission's chairman, David P. Gardner, president of the University of Utah and soon-to-be president of the University of California; Nobel laureate Glenn T. Seaborg of the University of California; Gerald Holton of Harvard University; and A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University.

Their report warned in vivid language that the nation's future prosperity was threatened by the woeful condition of American education. In its most memorable and oft-quoted phrase, the Excellence Commission wrote that the once-proud American education system was "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our

very future as a nation and a people." The commission further maintained, "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.... We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."²

A Nation at Risk was one of several critiques of American education released that same year, including the Twentieth Century Fund's *Making the Grade* and books by Ted Sizer, John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and myself. A Nation at Risk, however, was accorded the highlevel prestige that the backing of the federal government and the presidency endow. Not only the press, but also political leaders, educators, and citizen groups reacted with alacrity to the report's recommendations. Across the nation, task forces, study groups, and committees sprang up to examine the implications of the report for states and school districts.

A Nation at Risk argued that the nation's future prosperity was imperiled by recent declines in student achievement. In the industrial era, it said, an educated elite was sufficient, but in the emerging "information age," knowledge, learning, and "skilled intelligence" were necessary for all. To demonstrate its claims, A Nation at Risk reviewed test score data drawn from national and international sources, including the SAT, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the College Board achievement tests, and international tests. If achievement continued to decline, it implied, other nations—with better educated populations—would overtake the American economy and leave us behind.³

At the time, a few critics from the academic world complained that the report's diagnosis was far too gloomy and that its bellicose imagery was overstated. Over the years, academic critics continued to deride the data presented by the Excellence Commission and question its assertions about grade inflation and low standards (of course, they did not object to its recommendations for more spending). A decade

later, they regarded the American economy's long boom and the Japanese economy's prolonged recession as proof of A *Nation at Risk*'s misguided rhetoric. How, after all, could the economy be so successful if it relied on allegedly poorly educated workers? Either there was no relation between the quality of education and economic success, or the education system was already good enough to produce enough skilled workers for a robust economy.⁴

In retrospect, it seems clear that the report's attempt to draw a straight line between the quality of the schools and the health of the economy was on shaky ground (see the chapter 5 essay by Eric Hanushek for a discussion of the relationship between education and economic growth). It would be ridiculous to claim that a nation's economic well-being is unaffected by the quality of education available to its citizens. But the connections are not as clear-cut as A Nation at Risk asserted, and there are many other factors, such as immigration of educated workers, opportunities for remediation, out-of-school learning opportunities, and the abundance of postsecondary institutions, that may compensate for the failings of the formal K–12 education system.

The Historical Context

A Nation at Risk was uniquely a document of the early 1980s. It was the leading edge of a wave of critiques, a reflection of a broad consensus about the damage done to students by low expectations. It appeared at precisely the moment when the public was ready for its message. The American economy was in recession, while the economies of Japan and several other Asian nations were booming. Since the early twentieth century, the tradition among educators in search of new funds or new programs (or both) has been to hitch education to whatever issue was the foremost national concern. The formula of this longstanding tradition went like this: Whatever the crisis was, new education programs would solve it. In the early decades of the century,

when the industrial revolution was well under way, reformers insisted that the schools needed more vocational programs to meet the labor needs of American business. The rhetoric of education-as-panacea was trotted out during the Depression, the Second World War, the Atomic Age, and the Sputnik era. With new funds and pedagogical changes, promised educators, the schools would solve the crisis of the day.

The early eighties presented, in addition to an economic crisis, a heap of public discontent about schooling that had been accumulating since the sixties. At the time, numerous journalistic accounts reported that schools had abandoned most academic requirements, replacing them with frivolous, fluffy electives, like cooking for singles. Parents worried whether students were learning basic skills, especially when they saw allegations in the newspaper about high school graduates who couldn't read their own diploma. Many state legislatures responded to this generalized concern by mandating minimum-competency tests to ensure that students were able to read, write, and figure.

The eighties was not the first decade to see intense criticism of low standards in the public schools. In the fifties, there were loud complaints by critics of anti-intellectualism like Arthur Bestor, Mortimer Smith, Jacques Barzun, and others who eventually formed the Council for Basic Education. In the main, however, these critics were ignored because the American public continued to have a high opinion of its schools. Public schools, it was widely believed, were synonymous with the fate of our nation; they were a bedrock democratic institution that opened a pathway to merit regardless of social origins. Leaders of education dismissed the critics of the fifties as "enemies of the public schools," even though they were not (they were critics of fads and foolish ideas, not of public education). Nor did state and federal education officials pay attention to the complaints of the critics.⁵

The warm regard that public education enjoyed in American culture began to dissipate in the late sixties and early seventies as radical critics hammered away at the public school system for whatever faults

they discerned in American society. Jonathan Kozol's award-winning *Death at an Early Age* portrayed the Boston public schools as havens for sadistic, racist teachers; other critics painted equally gloomy pictures—of American public schools as racist and of teachers as rigid, insensitive, hostile to children, and ignorant about pedagogical innovation, among other things. The radical critics agreed that planned curricula, testing, textbooks, homework, and the other practices associated with schooling were instruments of oppression. Their goal was child liberation, the creation of permissive environments in which there was no authority and in which children learned because they wanted to and studied whatever interested them most. In one of the more temperate tracts of that era, a prominent critic, Charles Silberman, insisted that the public schools were not really malign, just mindless.⁶

Under attack from the left, educators sought to reinvent traditional schooling, trying innovations such as open education, schools "without walls," curricula relevant to student interests, and studentdesigned curricula. Schools of education embraced the innovations and identified themselves with the radical attacks on traditional teacher-led schooling and public education. The ferment excited those pedagogical leaders who agreed with its direction, but it was disheartening for teachers and parents who wanted schools and classrooms where adults were in charge. It also played havoc with curriculum, standards, grades, and other traditional elements of schooling.

By the mid-seventies, after nearly a decade of what seemed to be a cultural revolution in the schools, troubling reports began to emerge. In 1975, the *New York Times* reported that scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test had been falling since the mid-sixties. The shock value of this information cannot be overestimated. Not only were average scores falling on both the verbal and mathematical tests, but the percentage of students scoring at high levels (over 600 and over 700) had fallen sharply.

In response to this disheartening news, the College Board, which was responsible for the SAT, created a blue-ribbon commission to examine the causes of the score decline. That group, called the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline, was headed by Willard Wirtz, former secretary of labor, and included such prominent educators as Harold Howe II, Ralph W. Tyler, Benjamin Bloom, and Robert L. Thorndike. Its report, On Further Examination, was virtually a rehearsal for A Nation at Risk. Most of the initial score decline from 1963 to 1970, the panel concluded, was caused by changes in the composition of the pool of test-takers, that is, by increases in the number of low-scoring students who took the collegeentry test. However, after 1970, scores fell even faster than before, and little of that decline could be attributed to the changing demography of the test-taking population. Most of the post-1970 decline was the result of what the panel called "pervasive changes," changes in schools and society. Of the school-based causes, the panel regarded as most significant the fact that students were taking fewer basic academic courses and more nonacademic electives; studies from Massachusetts showed that schools had been adding such courses as Film Making even as course offerings in eleventh-grade English and world history were being eliminated. The panel also pointed out that "less thoughtful and critical reading is now being demanded and done" and that "careful writing has apparently about gone out of style." The panel cast blame on absenteeism, social promotion, less homework being assigned, and a general lowering of standards. Coming as they did from a blue-ribbon commission with impeccable educationist credentials, these charges set the stage for A Nation at Risk only six years later.7

In the late seventies, no one suggested that criticism of the quality of education was partisan or that it emanated from "enemies of the public schools." In the closing years of the administration of President Jimmy Carter, two presidentially appointed commissions lamented the state of instruction in specific subject areas. In 1979, a commission

created to examine the teaching of foreign languages concluded that "Americans' incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous, and it is becoming worse." High school enrollments in foreign-language study, it pointed out, had fallen from 24 percent of each grade in 1965 to 15 percent in the late seventies. Worse, only one of every twenty high school students ever studied a second year of a foreign language. Colleges had ceased to require foreign language study for admission, in response to campus revolts in the late sixties against such requirements, and high school students stopped taking foreign languages once they were no longer necessary for college admission. In 1980, another Carter-appointed commission lamented the condition of education in mathematics, science, and engineering; it pointed to lower standards in the schools and to the weakening of college entrance requirements as causes.⁸

High Expectations

These earlier studies and critiques by highly respectable agencies paved the way for A Nation at Risk. When the National Commission on Excellence in Education began its deliberations in 1981, the public was already disillusioned with the pedagogical faddism and extremism of the seventies. Schools that had torn down the walls between classrooms were rebuilding them; schools that had been built without walls were installing them. A "back to basics" movement prompted several state legislatures to adopt new testing requirements for high school graduation.

As it set to work, the Excellence Commission solicited papers from educators. One of the most influential was Clifford Adelman's study of high school transcripts from 1964 to 1981. Adelman, a researcher at the U.S. Department of Education, concluded that during this period there had been a "systematic devaluation of academic (and some vocational) courses." Students were spending less time in academic study and more time in nonacademic courses for which they

received credit toward graduation. The curriculum in high school was "diffused and fragmented." The typical high school curriculum of the day was divided into three tracks: academic, vocational, and general. As graduation requirements diminished, enrollment in the general track—which was neither academic nor vocational—jumped from 12.0 percent in the late sixties to 42.5 percent by the late seventies. Consisting of courses like driver education, general shop, business math, remedial studies, consumer education, and home economics, the general track had become the dominant program in American high schools.⁹

One of the most important prescriptions advanced by A Nation at Risk was that schools should have high expectations for all children and should expect all to complete a reasonably demanding academic curriculum. This was a radical message. In the checkered history of reform-by-commission, only the 1893 Committee of Ten had made a similarly egalitarian claim on behalf of the intellectual capacity of all children. Seemingly unaware of the historical precedent, the authors of A Nation at Risk held that "All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost."¹⁰

Among educators, this message was translated to mean "All children can learn." This earnest maxim repudiated the long-established practice of separating children into different programs on the basis of their likelihood of going to college. "All children can learn" changed the rules of the game in American education; it shifted educational debate from discussions about access and resources to discussions about results. It was no longer enough to provide equal facilities; it became necessary to justify programs and expenditures in terms of whether students made genuine gains. The rhetoric and philosophy of "all children can learn" had a strong impact on educational issues as it became increasingly clear that educators not only had to set higher expectations, but also had to devise methods and incentives to get almost all students to learn more and exert greater effort. After A

Nation at Risk, states and school districts scrutinized their standards and curricula, changed high school graduation requirements, and insisted that students take more courses in academic subjects.

Many researchers challenged A Nation at Risk. Those who didn't like its conclusions objected in principle to the call for higher standards and a more academic curriculum. Others complained that the data were not sufficient to sustain the report's arguments. We now realize that the available data concerning the quality of education in the United States are limited and spotty. Despite the existence of a sizable education research industry, we still lack solid information about student achievement and effective pedagogy. The National Assessment of Educational Progress is the only consistent barometer of student achievement; however, its reports reveal little about the causes of differential achievement, and there are genuine questions about the motivation of high school seniors who take this no-stakes examination in which no one will ever know the scope of any individual test-taker. While the American public accepts the validity of almost any test results, testing experts do not. Indeed, testing experts are not happy with most extant tests. It seems fair to say that we need tests that accurately reflect the curriculum that is taught and that report results in a timely manner.

A Nation at Risk's Achilles' heel, if a report may be said to have one, was its thesis of educational decline. Critics could rightly charge that the report had waxed nostalgic about an imaginary golden age. They could then blast this image by counter-claims that the schools were as good as ever, that any decline was a blip, and that a golden age never existed. We now know that the drop in test scores, which was real, actually ended about the time that A Nation at Risk was released. But to argue about whether there was a golden age or whether the schools were better in 1983 than in 1973 or 1963 or 1953 is pointless. The issues are the same as they were a half-century ago, when Arthur Bestor wrote:

If we are to have improvement, we must learn to make comparisons, not with the wretchedly inadequate public schools of earlier generations, but with the very best schools, public or private, American or foreign, past or present, of which we can obtain any knowledge. ... If some other nation designs a better military plane, our aeronautical engineers do not point smugly to the fact that our own aircraft are better than they were in 1920 or 1930 or 1940.¹¹

The challenge before us is, as it has always been, to secure equal educational opportunity. Every American child should have the same opportunities for an excellent education. All should have the same chance to maximize their potential, to contribute to the common good, and to live a full and rewarding life. The real issue was and is whether the schools are good enough to prepare students for the challenges that will confront them. For the schools of 2003 to be better than the schools of 1983 is no great feat. For the schools of 2003 to be among the best in the world is what matters most for students today and for the future of American society.

Notes

- National Education Association, Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education: A Report of the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, Bulletin No. 35 (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Education, 1918), 5.
- 2. National Committee on Excellence in Education (Excellence Commission), A Nation at Risk (1983), 5.
- 3. Excellence Commission, A Nation at Risk, 7.
- 4. See Maris Vinovskis, "A Nation at Risk and the 'Crisis' in Education in the Mid-1980s," in The Road to Charlottesville: The 1989 Education Summit (Washington, D.C.: National Education Goals Panel, 1999), 10; see also David Tyack and Larry Cuban, Tinkering Toward Utopia: A Century of Public School Reform (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 34.
- Diane Ravitch, The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 70.

- Jonathan Kozol, Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Minds and Hearts of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967); Herbert Kohl, 36 Children (New York: New American Library, 1967); Nat Hentoff, Our Children Are Dying (New York: Viking Press, 1966); James Herndon, The Way It Spozed to Be (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968); James Herndon, How to Survive in Your Native Land (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971); George Dennison, The Lives of Children: The Story of the First Street School (New York: Random House, 1969); John Holt, How Children Fail (New York: Pitman, 1964); George B. Leonard, Education and Ecstasy (New York: Delta, 1968); Charles B. Silberman, Crisis in the Classroom (New York: Random House, 1970). For a discussion of these books and trends, see Diane Ravitch, The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945–1980 (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 228–66.
- The Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline, On Further Examination (New York; College Board, 1977), 26–27.
- President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 6; National Science Foundation and U.S. Department of Education, Science and Engineering Education for the 1980s and Beyond (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 3, 46–48.
- Clifford Adelman, "Devaluation, Diffusion, and the College Connection: A Study of High School Transcripts, 1964–1981," prepared for the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1983).
- 10. Excellence Commission, A Nation at Risk, 8.
- Arthur Bestor, Educational Wastelands: The Retreat from Learning in Our Public Schools, 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 4–6.