Preface

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, appointed by Ronald Reagan's first secretary of education, Terrel M. Bell, announced to the nation that its "educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them." In its report, *A Nation at Risk*, the commission expressed concern that the quality of the "intellectual, moral and spiritual strengths of our people" was endangered. United States schools, once the envy of the world, had been overtaken by competitors abroad. In one of its most quoted phrases, the commission spoke of a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people."

At first glance, the metaphor—a rising tide of mediocrity—seems odd, even inapt. Do tides just rise? Don't they ebb and flow? When they flow, don't good things typically happen? Perhaps a sleeping bather may on occasion be unpleasantly surprised, but flowing tides

refresh tide pools, float boats stuck at the bottom, and leave children entranced as they watch surf pound against headlands.

To be sure, shorelines struck by hurricanes at high tide may suffer harsh erosion. But how can mediocrity be equated with a tropical storm? It better characterizes those dreary days marked by overcast sky, falling drizzle, and becalmed sails.

But if the metaphor at first seems peculiar, it has acquired new meaning with the passage of time. As the globe has warmed, the slow rise in ocean levels has come to be feared. As glaciers and ice caps melt, Louisiana is losing land to the sea by the square mile and barrier islands on the Atlantic coast are gradually slipping beneath the watery surface—as the tide seeps in.

Mediocrity can seep into our educational system in just this same insidious way—imperceptibly, an inch at a time, without definitive scientific proof of its causes or consequences. Vested interests can deny it. The media can ignore it. Scholars can try to document it, even if never to everyone's satisfaction. The public can sense it but not quite understand what to do about it.

It is just this kind of slowly creeping mediocrity that the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education finds on the twentieth anniversary of the report issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Mediocrity is still on the rise, despite the need, now more than ever, for intellectual and moral strength. Far from stemming the rising tide, the recommendations of the National Commission were only selectively adopted, providing reform more symbolic than substantive.

In this volume we include the Koret Task Force report as well as individual analyses prepared by each of its eleven members. The report and the accompanying essays argue that the National Commission did a better job of diagnosis than prescription. It focused on the right issue—educational excellence—but provided an inadequate set of solutions. The commission thought time, money, formal standards, and dedication could alone stop the rising tide. Not so, say the Koret

report and essays that follow. As well as money and dedication, we need systemic change that will hold schools accountable, give parents more choices, and provide citizens with a transparent system whose accomplishments they can assess. Only if these structural changes are put into place will the public find it worthwhile to invest more resources in our country's schools.

The Koret report can be read on its own terms. But the power and persuasiveness of the report are magnified by the detailed assessments in the chapters that follow. The chapters in the first part of the book describe the major changes that have occurred since the National Commission first found the nation at risk. In the opening chapter, Diane Ravitch places the National Commission on Excellence in Education in historical context, explaining both its significance and its limitations. In chapter 2, I show that there is little sign of gains in student learning over the past three decades. Despite the efforts of the National Commission, mediocrity still abounds in American education. Caroline M. Hoxby identifies in chapter 3 the changes that did occur subsequent to the commission report: School expenditures rose, teacher pay climbed, and classes were reduced in size. But there is little sign that all these expensive undertakings had much payoff—and most other changes were more symbolic than substantive. In the two concluding essays to Part I, Paul Hill, Kacey Guin, and Mary Beth Celio identify the continuing inequities in America's schools, while Eric A. Hanushek draws out the implications for long-term economic growth.

The second part of the book explains why so much happened and so little improvement took place. Terry M. Moe identifies the powerful interests opposed to school reform, Chester E. Finn Jr. explains why teacher policy veered in a direction quite different from that recommended by the National Commission, Williamson M. Evers and Paul Clopton show how the efforts to encourage students to take more academic courses were offset by curricular and textbook changes that softened the rigor of these courses, and E. D. Hirsch decries educa-

tional inattention to the acquisition of basic facts and information during the elementary years. Part III examines two reforms—accountability and choice—that were hatched in the aftermath of the National Commission report. Although these fledglings have only begun to spread their wings, the task force recommends they be given a chance to fly. After reading these essays, I hope you will agree.

Paul E. Peterson