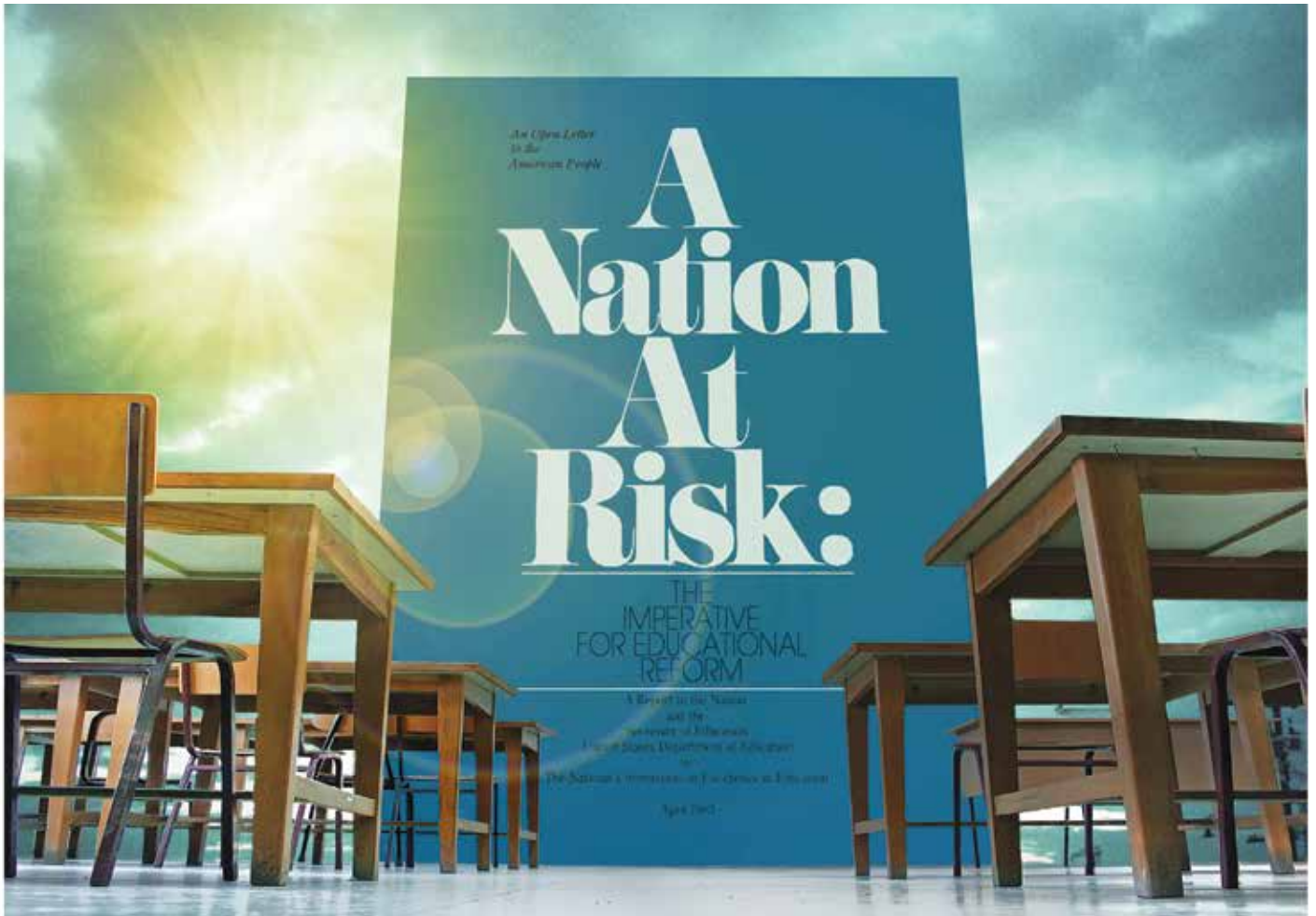


# Escaping the Shadow

## *A Nation at Risk* and Its Far-Reaching Influence



BY JAL MEHTA

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released its now famous report, *A Nation at Risk*, which warned of “a rising tide of mediocrity” in American schooling. Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education but largely written by a group of prominent academics, *A Nation at Risk* invoked a crisis so far-reaching in its impact that it still governs the way we think about public education 30 years later. Many of our current policies, and the assumptions that underlie those policies, are attributable in significant part to the way in which the report framed the debate. If the next generation of educators are to forge their own path, they will need to get out from under the long shadow of *A Nation at Risk*.

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The report, published years before many young teachers today were even born, was groundbreaking in emphasizing the importance of education to economic competitiveness and the failings of American schooling in comparison with international competitors. It presented a utilitarian and instrumental vision of education, and argued that schools, not society, should be held accountable for higher performance, and that performance should be measured by external testing—assumptions that underlay the state standards movement in the 1980s and 1990s and persist today in federal policy through No Child Left Behind.

*A Nation at Risk* has not been ignored in previous accounts of American educational history: it is often cited as a critical document.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I examine, in more detail than previous work, the creation, rhetoric, and reception of the report, as well as its profound effect.

Of all the reports and commissions on education, why did *A Nation at Risk* have such a seismic impact? Why did the authors define the educational problem as they did? Why did their definition resonate so widely? Why were critics unable to dislodge the

dominant narrative? Why has the report had such staying power in framing the debate? And how might those who disagree with its framing escape its long reach?

## Establishing a New Story Line

There was no indication in 1982 that the next two decades would witness an explosion of reform strategies aimed at increasing performance in schooling. A serious economic recession, severe state budget deficits, and President Ronald Reagan's stated intention to downgrade the federal role in education policy all pointed to education remaining a low priority.

In their 1982 textbook on the politics of education, longtime education policy analysts Frederick Wirt and Michael Kirst pointed to tax revolts, slow national economic growth, the shrinking share of the population with students in the schools, and a decreasing federal role, as factors that likely precluded significant education reform, concluding that "the 1980s will be a decade of consolidating and digesting the large number of innovations from the 1970s."<sup>2</sup>

It was into these seemingly calm waters that *A Nation at Risk* dropped in April 1983. In a short report that employed bold and ominous language, the National Commission on Excellence in Education assailed the nation's poor performance, famously declaring that the United States was caught in "a rising tide of mediocrity" that imperiled the nation's economic future. In support of its case, it cited a variety of academic indicators, most notably high levels of illiteracy, poor performance on international comparisons, and a steady decline in SAT scores from 1963 to 1980.

Quoting analyst Paul Copperman, the report claimed that this would be the first time in the history of the country that the educational skills of one generation would not be equal to those of their parents. Contrasting this declining educational picture with the centrality of skills and human capital in the knowledge-based, postindustrial economy, the report linked the future of the nation's international economic competitiveness with the reform of its educational system.

The report's recommendations called for a new focus on "excellence" for all, which would be achieved through a revamped high school curriculum with fewer electives and more required courses in math, English, science, and social studies, a combination that the authors called "the New Basics." They also called for a longer school day and school year, more homework, tighter university admission standards, more testing for students as indicators of proficiency, higher standards for becoming a teacher, an 11-month professional year, and market-sensitive and performance-based teacher pay.

The reaction to the report was instantaneous and overwhelming.\* The report was released in a White House ceremony that Reagan, disregarding the report's findings, used as an occasion to highlight his familiar agenda of school prayer, tuition tax credits, and the end of the "federal intrusion" into education. But the media coverage of the ceremony focused on the claims about the "rising tide of mediocrity," pushing Reagan's agenda to the background.<sup>3</sup>

The U.S. Government Printing Office received more than 400 requests for copies in a single hour the following day and distrib-

uted more than 6 million copies over the course of the next year. The press interest was insatiable; the *Washington Post* published almost two articles per week on *A Nation at Risk* in the year following the report's release.<sup>4</sup> An assessment in 1984 found that more than 250 state task forces—in only 50 states!—had been put together to study education and recommend changes.<sup>5</sup>

Some critics have charged that the commission "manufactured a crisis" as part of a broader neoconservative agenda for school reform.<sup>6</sup> But a careful look at the composition of the commission and the internal records of its deliberations shows that this view does not hold up. At the time the commission was formed, the agenda of the Reagan administration was the abolition of the Department of Education, not an expanded federal bully pulpit demanding educational excellence. The commission was initially formed by Department of Education Secretary Terrel Bell, whose primary assignment from Reagan was to find a way to eliminate

*A Nation at Risk* invoked a crisis so far-reaching in its impact that it still governs the way we think about public education 30 years later.

his own department. He devised the idea of a national commission to report on the quality of American education and make suggestions for improvement as a way of increasing national attention to the important functions of public education. Finding little support from Reagan's office for the appointment of a presidential commission amid criticisms that it might generate a greater federal role for education, in July 1981 Bell appointed a commission himself.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding the political motives behind the formation of the commission, its composition does not support the idea that the analysis was motivated by larger ideological, partisan, or corporate concerns. It was chaired by University of Utah President David P. Gardner and was composed of university faculty and administrators (seven members) and state and local school personnel, including principals, teachers, school board members, and superintendents (seven members), with only one business leader, one politician, and two others.<sup>8</sup>

It included some very distinguished educators who presumably would not be easily swayed by political concerns, including Gardner, Nobel Chemistry Prize-winner Glenn Seaborg, Harvard physics professor Gerald Holton, and Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti. Reagan did initially try to set a direction for the commission; one member reported that in an early meeting Reagan suggested that it focus on five fundamental points: "Bring God

\*Albert Shanker, president of the AFT at the time of the report's release, embraced it. For more on his position, see *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy* by Richard D. Kahlenberg.

back into the classroom. Encourage tuition tax credits for families using private schools. Support vouchers. Leave the primary responsibility for education to parents. And please abolish that abomination, the Department of Education. Or, at least, don't ask to waste more federal money on education—'we have put in more only to wind up with less.'"<sup>9</sup>

But the commission members did not share the president's interests and, ironically, elevated the priority of educational reform so that the abolition of the Department of Education (created in 1979) subsequently became impossible. The commission engaged in 18 months of fact-finding, commissioning dozens of papers and holding six public meetings, as well as a number of regional meetings with a variety of stakeholders, before producing its analysis. (For an inside look at the commission's work, see the sidebar on page 24.) There is no reason to think that its report did not represent the commission's honest appraisal of the state of the school system and what needed to be improved. The fact that

## Educators resented the report's implication that economic problems should be laid at their feet.

Reagan's office largely disregarded the findings of the report in drafting his remarks for the White House ceremony indicates that the administration had not gotten the report it wanted.<sup>10</sup>

Internal drafts do show that the report's inflammatory rhetoric about a system in crisis was a conscious choice made by some on the commission in order to increase its impact. An outline of the final report that was approved in September 1982 reveals a version that would have been much longer and more complimentary, including four chapters of text, beginning with a "relatively brief, positive description of the size and scope of American education" and leaving an outline of major problems to the final section.<sup>11</sup> Staff offered drafts of sections of the report in December 1982, which some members of the commission regarded, as one put it, as "not emphatic enough to measure the gravity of the need."

In January 1983, Seaborg wrote an outline that more closely resembled the final document. He wrote: "1. Clarion call, call to arms, concise, include 4, 5 or 6 top recommendations. Total of 10 pages (no more than 15 pages). 2. Strident opening sentence or two. (1) If foreign country did this to us we would declare war. (2) 'We have identified the enemy and it is us.'"

This theme was picked up by Holton, who voiced his displeasure with the "involved and complex" versions written by the commission's staff and wrote a February 14 draft that contained much of the heated rhetoric that would serve as the groundwork for the final

version.<sup>12</sup> In the end, the good the report offered about American education—high college-going rates compared with international competitors and high scores for top American students on international comparisons of achievement—was buried near the end, a minor qualification to a dominant rhetoric of crisis.

### The New Story Line Triumphs

Not everyone agreed with the claims of *A Nation at Risk*, and its over-the-top rhetoric was a source of much criticism among professional researchers and academics, who argued that the panel's desire to capture attention for its report had led it to suspend the usual standards of scientific scrutiny in order to make its provocative claims. As Harold Howe II, a former U.S. commissioner of education, said in the week following the report: "I think American education has a cold. Most people think it has the flu. It certainly doesn't have the pneumonia the committee suggested."<sup>13</sup>

Specifically, these critics noted that the international comparisons were unfair because other countries were more selective about which students took the tests; that measuring a decline in SATs neglected to consider the increase of students, particularly poor and minority students, taking the test; that SAT scores had actually increased since 1980; and that basic skills, particularly among poor and minority students, had been on the rise throughout the 1970s.<sup>14</sup>

Educators resented the implication that economic problems should be laid at their feet; critics have subsequently questioned the connection between national educational and economic performance, especially as the American economy rose in the 1990s and the Japanese economy faltered. A *New York Times* article in September 1983 reported some of the early discontent in a story headlined "'Tide of Mediocrity' May Not Be Rising as Fast as It Seems," which quoted Ernest Boyer, at the time president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, acerbically noting that "what we have is a rising tide of school reports."<sup>15</sup>

These academic qualifications, even when they were reported in the media, had little impact on the dominant story line in the mind of the public or policy elites. Public confidence in schooling, which had already been falling as part of the post-Watergate decline of confidence in public institutions, hit a new low after the release of the report in 1983.<sup>16</sup> States rushed to issue their own reports to evaluate whether they were falling short of the new measures of excellence specified by *A Nation at Risk*. Despite the claims of the critics, *A Nation at Risk* had been the rare report that galvanized not only debate but also action.

Why did *A Nation at Risk* succeed where so many previous high-level reports, including one by the College Board in 1977 that reported the same decline in SAT scores, were unable to rouse more than a moment's notice?<sup>17</sup> Part of it was undoubtedly attributable to the prominence of the report's authors. The fact that it was commissioned by the Department of Education gave it needed weight and authority and assured initial media attention. The conflict between the substance of the report and Reagan's school agenda, particularly over the issue of federal responsibility for schooling, was of early interest to the media.

The timing of the report was also important, as it was released in the midst of a recession and offered a seemingly compelling explanation of the relative success of leading international competitors like Japan and South Korea. The analysis was bolstered by a series of other reports, released shortly thereafter, that also raised



concerns about the quality of schooling and emphasized the growing importance of education to state and national economic competitiveness.<sup>18</sup> The findings themselves, particularly on the decline of SAT scores, the levels of illiteracy, and poor international performance, were also striking and widely publicized, even if they could partially be explained by the report's detractors.

In addition to the substance of its findings, the report also gained influence by telling a powerful story of decline that resonated with policymakers and the public. More than simply a jumble of numbers, the report contained an identifiable narrative arc that made it both memorable and resonant. This arc was what Robert Putnam, referring to his own work on the decline of social capital in America, calls a “declensionist narrative,” or, more simply, a story of decline and fall.<sup>19</sup>

For an audience of adults who no longer had firsthand knowledge of the schools, this narrative, supported by the glaring indicator of dropping SAT scores, proved irresistible. Critics of the report never were able to offer an equally convincing counternarrative that would tie together their assorted criticisms into a compelling story.<sup>20</sup>

## The Economic View of Schooling

Perhaps the most fundamental shift in thinking that *A Nation at Risk* encapsulates is the elevation of the economic purposes of schooling over its many other purposes. Schooling has traditionally been accorded a wide variety of functions—to create citizens and social cohesion; to promote patriotic values; to incorporate immigrants; to stimulate student growth, creativity, and critical thinking; to provide an avenue for upward mobility—only some of which are consistent with the human capital approach.

What propelled this elevation? Three separate consequences of the changing economy were likely relevant. Most often noted has been the greater role of education in *international economic competition*. This is an issue that *A Nation at Risk* placed squarely on the map, and it has not receded since. In hindsight, *A Nation at Risk* overstated the case—other factors affect productivity, and, before the most recent recession, the American economy had since overtaken many of its rivals, despite little improvement on international school comparisons.<sup>21</sup>

But the link between educational success and national competitiveness caught the popular imagination and continues to be a widely used prism in op-ed columns and political speeches.<sup>22</sup> Less noticed but more important in spurring state policy adoption was the idea that improving education was key to *state economic growth*. While international productivity comparisons are influenced by a variety of factors that differ across countries (e.g., infrastructure, regulatory climate, proximity to supply chains), the differences across states in these factors are less significant, making the quality of the labor force more critical. A group of southern governors had already begun reform efforts to improve education under this banner, and *A Nation at Risk* nationalized these state concerns.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, *A Nation at Risk* highlighted the increasing *individual returns to education*, which were of widespread concern to parents and students everywhere. In the years since, politicians have largely blurred these various economic advantages to greater educational performance, linking individual, state, and national prosperity to the bandwagon of school reform.

To be sure, individuals have always seen schooling as a key route to economic mobility, and political leaders have always stressed the relationship of education to our broader economic prosperity. In this sense, *A Nation at Risk* did not provide a new analysis. But the political debate around education does shift from one educational purpose to another—sometimes emphasizing the equity purposes of schooling, sometimes its role as a shaper of social citizenship—and *A Nation at Risk* (like Sputnik before it) did play an important role in concentrating attention on the economic functions of schooling. By linking an old set of concerns about education's economic role to a new analysis of international economic competition and the shift to a postindustrial economy, *A Nation at Risk* succeeded in elevating the economic purpose of schooling over its other purposes.



This elevation has restructured the terms of rhetorical debate and the political landscape of schooling. By raising the agenda status of education, the economic emphasis brought in a much wider array of actors, most notably state (and eventually federal) legislators and business groups. An analysis that I conducted of governors' State of the State addresses in three states—Maryland, Michigan, and Utah—found that the topic of education was four times more prevalent in addresses given in the decades since *A Nation at Risk* in comparison with the previous decade. Reading these addresses suggests that the reason for this increase is that as education became more directly linked to economic issues, it became a more central part of political rhetoric.

The idea of investing in human capital was attractive to Democrats, since it provided a way to pitch their traditional concerns about greater resources for schools in the hard language of economic investment.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the economic view of schooling proved appealing to Republican legislators eager to please business constituencies, and the market and business-derived reform strategies that followed enabled Republicans to erode the traditional Democratic advantage on education.<sup>25</sup>

For both parties, what the economic imperatives meant in educational terms—greater literacy, improved skills in math and reading, more advanced critical-thinking skills—was so fundamental as to be uncontroversial, drawing wide and deep support from the general public. In the past, the parties had largely split over the issues of busing, school finance, and greater federal inter-

# A Closer Look at the Commission's Work

BY TOMMY TOMLINSON

Having concluded that public education was getting short shrift, President Reagan's first secretary of education, Terrel Bell, determined that the country needed a close examination of education quality and a better definition of its status. To that end, he created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. He appointed David Gardner, president of the University of Utah, to be chairman and chose Milton Goldberg, acting director of the National Institute of Education (NIE), to be the executive director.

To avoid later charges of partisanship, Bell gave both men free reign to identify and select members. They chose 17 commissioners representing diverse interests and backgrounds, including university presidents, leading academics, a Nobel laureate, public school administrators, the current high school teacher of the year (coincidentally, a member of the American Federation of Teachers), and state and community leaders.

Goldberg picked his staff from among the NIE workforce. Thirteen staff members were appointed to serve the commission—seven administrative/clerical support and six professional staff. Another 21 NIE staff members supplemented the core group to add their expertise on specific issues. In my case, I was a senior associate at NIE. As soon as I heard that Secretary Bell had created the commission, I called Goldberg and declared my interest in being a member of the staff. He asked me to be the director of research. In that role, I commissioned research reviews on a range of education issues, including curriculum, learning, motivation, and American educational history, among others.

The commission's scope was initially confined to the variables that were plausibly within control of schools, colleges, and universities. These initially included time on task, structure and content of the curriculum, and expectations or standards of learning. The commissioners quickly determined that teacher quality and administrative leadership, including political and fiscal support, were also critical determinants of excellence, and they were added. Issues such as income, race, and parental background were purposely excluded.

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As a first step, Goldberg drew up a series of symposia, panel discussions, and hearings to be held around the country on a variety of topics bearing on the quality and structure of American education; transcripts of the proceedings were provided to all commission members so they could increase their knowledge about the issues in primary and secondary education. Such presentations, coordinated by commission staffer Susan Traiman, also provided publicity for the commission's work and helped establish an audience in advance of *A Nation at Risk's* April 1983 release.

**We had conceived a report along more or less conventional lines. But the addition of Holton's preamble set a much different tone.**

Leading scholars and other authorities in the field were chosen by commission staff to participate in these presentations and to prepare reports on selected topics. Thirty-one papers were commissioned, and together with the evidence from the symposia, hearings, and panel discussions, they composed the substantive background of the final report. The results of this effort were then circulated among the commissioners.

The next step was pulling all these pieces together and writing the report. The first draft was prepared by the principal staff writer, Jim Harvey, based on a combination of the commissioners' conclusions and recommendations, some final thoughts by the chair, David Gardner, and other salient findings. Shortly after the draft was sent to the commissioners, Commissioner Gerald Holton responded with the now famous preamble titled "A Nation at Risk." The staff received Holton's text by mail one morning, handwritten on the yellow pages of a lined tablet, just as he had written it on a plane to the West Coast. It was a page-turner unlike any we could have imagined. It was completely unanticipated, despite prior suggestions from Commissioner Glenn Seaborg that the report had to be a call to arms and feature the federal eagle on its cover. Seaborg contended that a report written in the standard academic style

aimed at the usual audience of academics and educators would not do. He was right in his concern, but the commission staff members were completely caught off guard by Holton's rhetoric and, like proper social scientists, were frankly not sure it was an acceptable approach.

As it turned out, Holton's preamble was precisely what Seaborg had in mind. We had conceived a report along more or less conventional lines, one that summarized the import of the issue, the charge from the secretary of education, the sense of the research, and the substance of the symposia.

It would be organized around the variables of content, expectations, time, teaching quality, and leadership. It would end with the commission's recommendations for change. But the addition of Holton's preamble set a much different tone.

Our charge was clear: we had to integrate the preamble with the substantive body of the text. While staff members did not write the famous introductory declaration, they did conceive and write the main text that described the principal conclusions, established the prime variables, and, with the advice and consent of the commissioners, set out the recommendations. One could say that the two approaches were complementary: the florid rhetoric of the introduction generated enormous public interest in an otherwise straightforward plan for reform.

A torrent of public interest and academic criticism followed the report's release. The commissioners and staff fanned out across the country to explain and expand on its findings, and promote interest in improving education at the primary and secondary level. One thing was certain: the nation had gotten the message, and people wanted a change for the better. Education was no longer the low man on the totem pole; indeed, not since Sputnik had its visibility been so high. The rest, as they say, is history. □

vention into schools. In the new environment, both parties had reasons, constitutive and strategic, to pursue reforms that promised to enhance overall school quality.

Finally, the economic vision of schooling also sets priorities in the allocation of resources and attention for school reform. In higher education, as numerous critics have pointed out, more dollars are allocated to economically important areas like technology and science, while traditionally important but less practical subjects like humanities and the arts have been neglected.<sup>26</sup>

At the elementary and secondary level, much of the attention has been paid to reading and math, the two areas for which annual testing is required under No Child Left Behind, to the neglect of untested areas. Many states have cut funding for music and the arts in order to maximize time and resources for tested subjects.<sup>27</sup> In short, the rise of the economic view of schooling has powerfully reshaped the divisions in educational politics and has focused the aims of schooling tightly around learning that has economic value.

### Shifting Responsibility for Education

Hidden in plain sight in *A Nation at Risk*'s analysis was the responsibility that it placed on schools as the source of the problem and as the solution. By pointing the finger at declining standards and a diffusing mission, the authors placed responsibility squarely on schools to the exclusion of a range of other societal factors. As they wrote, "We conclude that declines in educational performance are in large part the result of disturbing inadequacies in the way the educational process itself is often conducted."<sup>28</sup>

While the report repeatedly mentioned the importance of a wide variety of stakeholders, including parents, students, unions, business groups, and legislatures, its call for excellence focused primarily on schools themselves as the prime enforcers of a new set of expectations: "Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them." Not surprisingly, the commission's recommendations were also focused on school variables, such as increasing academic course-taking requirements for graduation.

In adopting this school-centered analysis, *A Nation at Risk* implicitly rejected the broader view that school performance is a result of both school and societal factors. A 1977 College Board report, for example, sought to explain the same decline in SAT scores; its analysis allocated responsibility much more widely. Drawing on a variety of different kinds of evidence and offering a much more careful (if necessarily less definitive) analysis, the report concluded that a range of factors, both in school and out, were partially responsible for the decline in SAT scores.

Among the nonschool factors cited by the College Board: the increase in the time students spent watching television, a growth in single-parent families, changes in the composition of students taking the test, and the impact of the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s on the psyche and motivation of individual students. The authors concluded, "So there is no *one* cause of the SAT score decline, at least as far as we can discern, and we suspect no single pattern of causes. Learning is too much a part of Life to have expected anything else."<sup>29</sup> In a warning to those who sought a simpler analysis, one that would focus attention narrowly on schools, the authors wrote: "[A]ny attempt to isolate developments in the schools from those in the society at large turns out to reflect principally the

inclination to institutionalize blame for whatever is going wrong; the formal part of the learning process cannot be separated from its societal context."<sup>30</sup>

Critics have charged that by ignoring the role of these external factors, *A Nation at Risk* unfairly scapegoated educators.<sup>31</sup> There is truth to this, but it is also the case that developments in educational research were giving increasing support to the idea that schools did, or at least could, play a powerful role in affecting student outcomes.

Research subsequent to James S. Coleman's 1966 report on educational opportunity, known as the Coleman Report, concluded that the idea that family background was so powerful that school factors did not appreciably shape student outcomes was overblown.



The researchers argued that by focusing on measurable school resources (books in the library, for example), the Coleman Report ignored the school process variables that differentiated low- and high-quality schools. These researchers—pioneers of what was dubbed the "effective schools movement"—found that high-quality schools generally shared five characteristics: "strong administrative leadership, high expectations for achievement, an orderly learning environment, an emphasis on basic skills and frequent monitoring of student progress."<sup>32</sup>

Coleman and his colleagues reached similar conclusions in their prominent studies of Catholic schools, which found that the sense of shared mission and high expectations that characterized these private schools produced higher levels of learning than similar public schools. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's book *The Good High School* put less emphasis on order and discipline but also found that a school's atmosphere, principal leadership, respect for teachers, and high expectations were key ingredients in school success.<sup>33</sup> In sum, while the specific characteristics of success were debated, and continue to be, there was a growing sense by the mid- to late 1970s that schools could make a considerable difference in student learning, even for students who came from highly challenging family situations.

At the same time, the country experienced a broader decline in collective responsibility for schooling. By the early 1980s, the desegregation movement, America's most concerted effort to assume broader responsibility for schooling, had long since

fallen by the wayside. In light of the failures of busing and the anti-welfare state political climate that it helped to produce,<sup>34</sup> political leaders of both parties became averse to discussing the antipoverty or school integration measures that many critics argued were necessary for real reform.

Margaret Weir and Ira Katznelson point to the way that postwar shifts toward suburbanization, aided by government construction of highways and Federal Housing Administration mortgage guarantees, exacerbated racial and socioeconomic segregation and eroded collective responsibility for schooling.<sup>35</sup> The consequences of these shifts for schools (and neighborhoods) that remain in concentrated poverty have been disastrous, a point that has been amply documented in a series of social scientific studies beginning with William Julius Wilson's\* *The Truly Disadvantaged*.<sup>36</sup> Journalistic critics like Jonathan Kozol and Alex Kotlowitz have

to be judged on outcomes that are at least partly out of their control, and with political reformers preaching the mantra of accountability and "no excuses." Again, the lines are teachers versus politicians and parents, as opposed to left versus right, as many school reformers on the left and center-left have welcomed greater educator accountability as a means to use schools to break cycles of poverty.

The result has been a downward spiral of distrust between policymakers and practitioners. As policymakers have sought to increase control through standards and accountability, teachers and their representatives have increasingly resisted what they see as misplaced blame and narrowing of curriculum. This resistance only hardens the resolve of policymakers to increase their levels of regulation and control, beginning the cycle anew.

Finally, embracing an essentially managerial effort to improve schools' performance precludes a broader discussion of structural reform (combating poverty, improving housing and employment) or societal responsibility for improving schools (desegregation). In this regard, the debate over schools reflects a rightward shift away from comprehensive efforts to improve high-poverty schools and neighborhoods.

## History has shown that top-down technocratic approaches have limited power in generating school improvement.

### Getting Out from Under the Shadow of *A Nation at Risk*

While international comparisons and video studies of classrooms continue to suggest American students do need a more rigorous and challenging education—confirming one part of *A Nation at Risk*'s basic message—history has also shown that top-down technocratic approaches have limited power in generating school improvement.

Today, we would do well to embrace a different set of aims, remembering that schooling is as much about expanding the mind as it is about preparing people for jobs, that policymakers must empower educators to learn and grow rather than seek to control them, and that issues outside of schools, such as poverty and healthcare, must be tackled alongside those within schools if the goal is real progress for all of our students. These are not popular positions in the public debate, because such positions require that we see schooling as more than a utilitarian enterprise, that we trust a profession constantly under fire,<sup>†</sup> and that we fight poverty in ways that the American public has traditionally not supported.

The most promising people to argue for these positions are teachers themselves. Teachers are among the few professionals in American society who recognize the intrinsic benefits of reading Shakespeare or exploring Newton's laws. Teachers are the ones who understand that you enhance the profession by making it the kind that people want to join. And teachers are the ones who experience firsthand the effects that our stingy welfare state policies have on our most vulnerable citizens. Unless, or until, educators make this case, powerfully and clearly, they will continue to operate within the paradigm created by *A Nation at Risk*. □

dramatized the traumatic consequences for children of the growth of high-poverty schools and neighborhoods and the unfairness of this arrangement in a land that promises equal opportunity.<sup>37</sup>

But this time, the social scientific consensus and moral claims for fairness were running against the political tide, and political leaders steered clear of anything that could be linked to busing.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, the school-centered analysis offered by *A Nation at Risk* provided a comfortable template for risk-averse political leaders—it put responsibility squarely on the schools and, consistent with the broader political temper of the times, did not ask for redistribution of resources or otherwise challenge the structural inequalities of schooling.

The analysis of *A Nation at Risk* placed a set of boundaries around the responsibility for improving schooling that has continued to mark the debate in the years since. The calls for educator accountability that have become prominent in recent years take as their premise the idea that schools are, at minimum, substantially responsible for student outcomes.

This emphasis on school responsibility has created a fundamental divide that has persisted through the subsequent battles over school reform, with many teachers arguing that it is unfair for them

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(Continued on page 44)

\*For more on the problem of concentrated urban poverty, see Wilson's article "Being Poor, Black, and American" in the Spring 2011 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2011/wilson](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2011/wilson).

†For more about the intense scrutiny of the teaching profession, see "Quieting the Teacher Wars" in the Spring 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2015/goldstein](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2015/goldstein).



## Supporting Students with ASD

(Continued from page 19)

collect data on an ongoing basis about student progress. If an educator is implementing the practice appropriately (as measured by the fidelity checklists) and the student does not make progress over a reasonable period of time (as shown by the student's data), the educator should consider other EBPs that have generated positive outcomes in the student's goal area (e.g., interacting socially with peers).

The increased prevalence of ASD and the interest in evidence-based practices are substantially intertwined. Increasingly, educators will teach students like Victor and Rosa. Fortunately, the EBP movement in education has provided the necessary tools for building effective programs for students with ASD. These practices alone, though, will not give them the supports they need. They must be combined with attention to program quality, targeted professional development, and educator judgment and expertise, the foundation for helping all students, not only those with ASD, succeed. □

### Endnotes

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