

# Assessing the Cornerstone of U.S. Education Reform

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## Abstract

Drawing from the existing body of data and research on the community education concept, effective schools, and standards-based reforms, this essay examines educational achievement in the United States corresponding to and resulting from reform movements and political actions. The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is reviewed in light of its contributions to educational equity and the key changes to that law are discussed as federal political levers for the eventual adoption of the Common Core National Standards by most of the nation. Definitive statistical proof is provided that refutes the theory that setting higher, more rigorous, standards increases student achievement. Based on the National Science Resource Center Theory of Action, the effective community education process is assessed for its value in replacing standards-based education as the cornerstone of U.S. education reform.

*Keywords:* effective community education process, standards-based education

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## Introduction

Without knowledge of the history of American education, the country is at risk of repeating past failures and not recognizing or comprehending the political forces chipping away at its educational foundation. Worse yet, the country risks the loss of guiding principles upon which it once

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stood. Historical knowledge is essential to assessing and assuring that American values remain the cornerstone of future education reforms.

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### **Movements that Shaped the Foundation of Educational Philosophy in America**

The first movement in America to influence education was migration of people. Early settlers brought teaching techniques from their countries of origin. As populations grew, education expanded from “family-taught units” to schools within communities (Vinovskis, 2010, p. 2). A community-directed philosophy determined instruction.

With the movement and mixing of cultures came ever-changing curriculum and instruction. And as America moved towards independence and revolution, education was viewed as “a means of preserving liberty, securing unity, promoting good citizenship and developing the resources of the land and people” (Good, 1956, pp. 81–82). The nation was built upon common educational goals.

Educational leadership by people like Benjamin Franklin made our sovereignty and growth as a nation possible. He recognized the necessity for adult literacy and established the Junto, a mutual improvement club. It spawned our adult education movement and aided in establishing our library and university systems.

Over a century later, Josiah Holbrook established the traveling lectures of the American Lyceum Movement. And the adult education movement was accelerated further, during the Civil War, through federal law establishing the Land-Grant System of colleges. Although the war ended the travels of the Lyceum Movement, the lyceum concept reemerged later as the Chautaugua Movement (Florida Atlantic University).

The commonality of these early movements was their philosophy that given both knowledge and the opportunity to exchange and debate an idea leads to practical solutions. In those times, pragmatism was viewed as characteristic of Americans. Progress in establishing public education was steady, but rarely, if ever, without critics.

While John Dewey was disseminating the idea of “learning by doing,” others looked at applying industrial principles to the schools.

The thrust of the movement in education was criticism. ... Critics cried for results that could be seen and measured, and proposed the cutting of funds where institutions either didn't measure their products or the products didn't measure up. (Allen, 1979, p. 5)

Frederick Winslow Taylor generated the industrial efficiency principles including management of time, assignments based on skills, standardization, and strong administration (p. 5). This model gave rise

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to the Efficiency Movement sometimes called the “Cult of Efficiency.” The movement focused public attention on outcomes.

Schools adopted standardization “without the initial study of what methods, reinforcers and theories were most effective in teaching children.” Without these things in place, Taylor felt “there was no hope that the ‘Cult of Efficiency’ could have a long-range positive effect on education” (p. 5). Yet, the experiment ran from 1913 until the early 1930’s. And as that movement waned, a man little known to most Americans came to be dubbed “the Father of the Modern Community Education Movement.”

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### Our Movement into the Modern Era of Education Reform

In 1927, physical education teacher Frank Manley settled in Flint, Michigan and went to work. Wanting to help “troubled” youth, he involved the community by providing information and engaging people in working towards solutions of their own design. He caught the attention of auto-industrialist Charles Stewart (C.S.) Mott who partnered with Manley “to keep five school playgrounds open after school hours.” The philosophy of community involvement and engagement in solving their problems characterized the movement because “the essence of community education is the process that launched that first program” (Drew, 1983, p. 209).

By 1935 “The Lighted Schoolhouse,” a phrase used to describe schools being used after hours to benefit children, drew political attention. A guest editorial by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt about the lighted schoolhouses in the “Flint experiment” served to spread the concept (University of Tennessee, University of Regina). The Community Education Movement launched with the shared belief that “the ‘spirit of teamwork’ could be used to solve community problems using available community resources” (Decker, 1999, p. 8).

The movement grew despite civic unrest across the country. The education system was altered by the 1954 Supreme Court declaration that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” The call for educational equity fueled the community education movement but created a problem. Demand for Flint’s school directors grew.

Mott interns were educated to see the links and create systems around the child, [directors] were wooed away—not just by other school systems but also by juvenile welfare organizations, YMCAs, reformatories and other child-service agencies. (Mott Foundation, 1995)

Manley and Mott responded by expanding their Flint internships and workshops. By 1960, the Mott Foundation had funded community education in all 50 states (Florida Atlantic University). And in 1964, Manley furthered this movement’s political influence by presenting the

*Flint Program of Community Education* to the U.S. Office of Education (Decker, 1999, p. 44). Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, chief architect of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), later wrote:

Future schools and colleges must become truly community education and cultural center. (Keppel, 1966, p. 26)

C. S. Mott also advanced the movement in 1964 by funding a graduate fellowship initiative in cooperation with seven Michigan colleges and universities. Operating over a ten-year period, the “Mott Inter-University Clinical Preparation Program” (University of Tennessee) seeded the community education philosophy in teaching colleges, universities, communities, and schools across the country.

With the public’s focus on civil rights and the demand for equal educational opportunity, researcher James S. Coleman was commissioned to examine the extent of school segregation, the indicators of opportunity, how well the students learned, and to give an assessment of the relationship between student achievement and the kind of school the students attended. The Effective Schools Movement arose out of the controversy surrounding this type of study that used an input/output research model to evaluate educational opportunity (Mace-Matluck, 1987, p. 4).

Coleman’s report in 1966, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* known as “the Coleman Report,” created new conflict over school resources. What the public heard was “that schools had little effect on students’ achievement and success” (D’Amico, 1982, p. 4). When in fact the report contained clear statements about “inferences” being made and that this commissioned team of researchers did “not include any recommendations” about policies or practices (Coleman et al., 1966, pp. 5-6). Thus began the search for evidence that schools do make a difference.

Those “effective schools researchers” set out to “demonstrate that some schools do have a beneficial effect on students’ achievement and success, and to identify factors” in those schools (D’Amico, 1982, p. 4). They identified hundreds of schools successfully educating low socioeconomic students. And regardless of the warning of these early researchers “against using the findings as a recipe,” the findings turned into a movement to make schools effective (p. 17).

By 1982, it was noted, “significant numbers of educational decision makers have concluded that the findings from research on effective schools are accurate and efficacious” (Edmonds, 1982, p. 8). And it was during this phase of the Effective Schools Movement—with some questions still unanswered—that another education movement came down upon the nation from the federal level.

The Excellence Movement muscled its way on stage between 1980

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and 1983, emboldened by political changes and spurred by threats of international business competition, this top-down educational reform campaign threatened to sweep aside the more modest Effective Schools Movement. (Mace-Matluck, 1987, p. 18)

Coming into vogue in the business world were views expressed by Tom Peters and Robert H. Waterman in *In Search of Excellence*. They raised public debate resulting “in a spate of national studies on excellence in education, following the release of the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education,” *A Nation at Risk* (Watt, 2005, p. 4). Again, the country adopted an industry model for its education system.

The Excellence Movement was based on a Total Quality Management (TQM) model, which “gradually evolved inspired by the Japanese management philosophy called “Company Wide Quality Control” (Dahlgard-Park, 2006, p. 16). But businesses saw a “high failure rate with implementation of TQM and excellence models” (p. 17). They then explored implementation *processes* and learned from their early failures.

Conversely, the education system stayed focused on standards and monitoring excellence based on standardized testing. The Excellence Movement became the Standards Movement and its guiding principles became the cornerstone of U.S. education reform.

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### The Politics of It All

Traditionally, American leaders were guided by the basic ideal that an educated people were capable of making their own laws. And the guiding political principle of education has been that all politics is local. With those ideas in mind, the rise of the Junto, American Lyceum, and Chautaugua Movements made political and practical sense. For centuries, community-driven public schools made sense. With the politics of education remaining local, family and community members safeguarded children from the effects of state and federal political corruption and allowed beneficial social movements to positively impact schools.

Look at the Civil Rights Movement. The U.S. finally took up the fight for both improved quality of education and equal access to it. It was more than a social movement. It was more than a march towards equality. It was a bloody political battle with some politically powerful people working against the advancement of quality education for “all” children. As a former “executive branch ‘lobbyist’ for Presidents John F. Kennedy [JFK] and Lyndon B. Johnson [LBJ],” Samuel Halperin offered this insight.

In a Congress long dominated by southern conservatives, ‘adult basic education’ became conflated with efforts by liberals and the growing civil rights movement to teach ‘Negroes’ how to pass the literacy tests

that southern states had erected as effective barriers to the exercise of voting rights. (Halperin, 2006, p. 2)

“When the civil rights issue came up, of course the educational implications were involved” (Keppel, 1964, p. 19). Aware of the political barriers to passing federal education law, JFK tried nonetheless because of a sincere concern “about dropouts” and the “unemployed youth” (18). Kennedy pushed hard but failed to pass his omnibus education legislation (Vinovskis, 2010, p. 6).

The circumstances of the times, combined with political maneuvering, pushed forward much of JFK’s agenda, albeit under LBJ, with the 1965 ESEA as the education arm of LBJ’s anti-poverty laws. ESEA authorized increased resources to schools, cultural centers, libraries, state’s departments of education and cooperative research, all focused on addressing “disadvantaged” students. It didn’t come into being without a fight.

ESEA was bitterly contested at every step of the legislative process... a determined coalition of Republicans and Southern Democrats sought to kill this first pillar of Lyndon Johnson’s newly proclaimed Great Society. (Halperin, 1979, p. 350)

Being careful not to overstep federal authoritative boundaries, the creators of ESEA “leaned over backwards to strengthen state and local prerogatives” (p. 352). ESEA did not include national testing or establishment of national standards regardless of that request being made by Admiral Hyman Rickover.

Now look, we ought to have national standards for the schools, and you tell Keppel to do it. (Keppel, 1964, p. 13)

By design, ESEA excluded national standards but included assessments of effectiveness as both a local and state responsibility to help ensure educational equity.

For local authorities, ESEA required evaluating “the effectiveness of the *programs* in meeting the special educational needs of educationally deprived children” (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, SEC. 205(a)(5)). For the states, appropriate use of funds did include “support for statewide programs designed to measure the educational achievement of pupils” (SEC. 503(a)(8)) for local and state purposes.

In the segregated and politically agitated country of the 1960s, ESEA met resistance. The public was led to believe that the Coleman Report indicated an increase in school resources wasn’t warranted. But a warning was ignored that “the statistical examination of differences in school environments for minority and majority children will give an impression of *lesser differences than actually exist*” (Coleman et al., 1966,

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37). Consequently, the resource-heavy ESEA never received full funding by Congress.

Meanwhile, the community education movement continued to expand with the financial backing of C. S. Mott. But with his death in 1974, and Frank Manley before him, both funding and the political leadership of community education experienced a void. Later that year, community education organizations welcomed the federal funding for “community schools.” The move proved detrimental.

The placement of community education in the federal bureaucracy and its subsequent placement in state educational bureaucracies through federal funding, probably retarded advancement of the idea of community education as process. [Instead, the] ‘concept’ and ‘process’ were reduced to more government ‘programs.’ (Drew, 1983, p. 225)

Congress expanded the K-12 federal authoritative boundaries through appropriation of funds. Warned by the National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children (1966) to keep ESEA funding focused on children’s needs, the House Committee on Education and Labor stressed, “Title I is not solely a program to enhance basic skills in reading and math.” But “the Senate was pushing for 75% of Title I funds to focus on reading and mathematics” (National Institute of Education, 1976, p. 31). When funding focused on basic academic subjects, the federal role was redefined using the congressional appropriations process as a lever.

The public was busy with other issues. Political blunders of the Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, plus economic stagnation, grew distrust in government as well as concerns about jobs (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 3). Birth rates were down leaving school enrollment numbers dropping 13% from 1971 to ’81 (Plisko, 1983, p. 3). Politicians pushed federal education policies forward with fewer people participating in the process.

Then came the Reagan administration with Terrel Bell as secretary of education. Bell disliked growing federal control dreading it would “have everybody singing out of the same page of the hymn book” (Sweeney, 1981). And he did not favor federal curriculum and standards (Calzini & Showalter, 2009, p. 3) yet he arranged the commission that wrote the report, *A Nation at Risk*, which accelerated federal involvement.

“President Reagan endorsed most of the report, but concentrated his attention on the merit pay recommendation” (Lipsky, 1988, p. 3), termed “performance-based” in the report (Gardner et al., 1983, 38). It was called “Career Ladders” in then Governor Lamar Alexander’s *Better Schools Program* (French, 1984, p. 9), which came out just ahead of *A Nation at Risk*. By Reagan’s second term, under Secretary of Education Bill (William J.) Bennett, the *federal political agenda* took shape as *Project*



*Education Reform* (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987).

Political jockeying put all the pieces in place. By the time Governor Alexander became chairman of the NGA (National Governors' Association, 1986, p. 167) in 1985, the seven "hardest issues facing U.S. public education" (p. 173) had been decided and task forces formed. Reagan assigned Bennett to "prepare a report card" on educational progress "and describe reforms that have worked" (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987, p. 7). Spring of 1986, Bennett "asked Alexander ... to head a major effort to update this national report card" (11). August 1986, the NGA task force recommendations were released in *Time for Results*, "the report initiated and chaired" by Alexander (p. 3). Two weeks later in September 1986, Bennett released *First Lessons*, which was noted as "remarkably compatible with the NGA report" (p. 4). The federal education reform agenda was set and put in motion.

The governors served to "mobilize the public and legislators in their states to support educational reforms" (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 7). Notably influential was the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) made up of "southern governors, legislators, and education officials" (p. 19) who issued national goals called *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000* (p. 20). A call for support of the goals went out as a request for standards.

Once we have set standards, we must be willing to strive until we achieve them. ... If it takes a radical restructuring of our educational system, we must restructure it. *Charlotte (N.C.) Observer* (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 21)

The plan to reform schools became actions to "restructure" them with national standards and assessments as the cornerstone.

Too-numerous-to-mention corporations, for-profits, and non-profits added to the drive for a standards-based system of education. One example is the Carnegie Corporation of New York foundation, a long-time supporter of "diffusion of knowledge and understanding." Through the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy with Marc Tucker as executive director, they too formed a task force.

And at the 1986 NGA meeting chaired by Lamar Alexander, Mr. Tucker clarified the compatibility of the Carnegie Forum proposals with NGA, and by extension the Reagan administration.

When the Carnegie Task Force began its work, we knew the governors were the key to the necessary revolution in school policy. ... The Governors and the members of the Task Force are of one mind on the issues and on strategy. (National Governors' Association, 1986, p. 82)

Political strategies involve changing policies. Before leaving office, Reagan signed his reauthorization of ESEA, the Hawkins-Stafford



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Education Amendments of 1988. It included “requirements regarding accountability evaluation of programs conducted in accordance with national standards to be developed by the Department of Education” (Congressional Research Service, 1988, p. 14). ESEA became a political tool for furthering federal curricular policies based on standards and testing.

Education became a proclaimed federal issue in the election that followed. Yet, George H.W. Bush ran for president without bringing public attention to the ongoing development of national goals (Vinovskis, 1999, p. 23). Meanwhile, to the governors he pledged to meet about the topic (25). So between his 1988 election and taking office in 1989, planning for school restructuring occurred in private meetings with “advanced work” done by NGA (p. 25) in preparation for meeting with the president-elect. It was decided that goals should “be viewed as national rather than federal” (p. 26). And unbeknown to the public, NGA was looking at redefining the primary purpose of public education. Then NGA chairman, Terry Branstad, stated “we hope the focus of the meeting would be on tailoring our education system for the workforce of the future” (p. 29).

Businesses of all kinds joined in the restructuring. Carnegie influence continued through seed money for Marc Tucker’s establishment of the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). Tucker directly clarified to Bush the perceived need for restructuring schools, national goals, and to focus on workforce training (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1989).

History was made. The first National Education Summit in September 1989 held private meetings for the president with governors, business leaders, and a few representatives. They later issued a joint statement confirming the setting of national goals and the development of “a system of accountability that focuses on results” (Bush, 1989). Excluded from the conversations were most congressional representatives.

The plans were advanced in 1990 by establishment of the National Education Goals Panel (NEGP). And in June 1991, with Lamar Alexander as Bush’s second secretary of education, passage of Public Law 102-62 created the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST) to “advise the American people” about national standards and testing (Public Law 102-62, Title IV Sec.404).

How well advised were the American people in 1991? Secretary Alexander received a commissioned report, *Education Counts: An Indicator System To Monitor the Nation’s Educational Health*, which presented indicators corresponding to “the six national education goals proposed by the President and governors in 1989.” The report warned, “a limited set of indicators can be misleading” (National Center for Education Statistics, 1991, p. 1) and further added, “an indicator system

built solely around achievement tests will mislead the American people” (p. 25). The report was ignored.

Also in 1991, a team of Sandia National Laboratories researchers examined and reported on education in the U.S. Plus, they “had gone to Washington and presented the analysis to staffers from Congress, the Department of Energy, and the Department of Education” (Bracey, 2000, p. 134). That information didn’t receive much public scrutiny.

Instead, in 1992, NCEST called “for the establishment of a national system of educational standards and assessments as a basis for comprehensive reform.” They understood that assessments would become “high-stakes” (Koretz et al., 1992, p. 5), accountability would move away from inputs and processes and towards “desired outcomes” (p. 6) and “innovative” assessments and a “common core” (12) of standards was to be “the cornerstone” of reforms (p. 10). NCEST recommendations were made without providing “any evidence that national education standards and a national test or system of national examinations promotes improvements in educational achievement” (p. 4).

Eventually some Sandia researchers did publish a journal article about their findings. Their statistical analysis of the condition of education in the U.S., international comparisons, future workforce requirements, and “the education goals proposed by President Bush and the nation’s Governors” differed on several points (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1993, p. 259) from what the America public had previously been told. Unfortunately, the public was not advised about the conflicting conclusions.

The restructuring plans continued based on standards and assessments. The SREB *Goals for Education: Challenge 2000* transformed into Bush’s proposals for his *America 2000* program. Those ideas then became the core of President Clinton’s *Goals 2000*. And in 1996 another governor’s Education Summit was held. This time business leaders sponsored it. That summit spawned the development of Achieve, Inc. Hence, political strategies continued to push for an outcome-based education system to produce the country’s workforce, as the NGA had outlined and which was clarified in a letter to then First Lady Hillary Clinton from Marc Tucker (Congressional Record, 1998).

Just like Reagan used ESEA reauthorization to advance a federal education agenda, Clinton’s reauthorization—the 1994 *Improving America’s Schools Act*—further federalized accountability based on standardized testing and called for content standards to be set. Then came President George W. Bush’s 2002 reauthorization *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB). Among other things, it expanded standardized testing to yearly.

The nation’s schools complied with yearly testing, grew accustomed to

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the use of the data for accountability and instructional purposes, and trained the next generation of teachers and leaders under a federalized system of standards, testing, and outcome-based accountability. Without proof that standards improve student achievement, the call continued for higher, more rigorous, common standards as an essential step in reforms. Thus the common core of federal/national/state standards came to be through Achieve Inc. and their American Diploma Project (ADP) (Achieve, 2008, p. 16).

And the basic federal policy assumption that standards and assessments will bring about higher student achievement remained the basis of NCLB's replacement, the Obama era 2015 ESEA reauthorization—the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—sponsored by Senator Lamar Alexander.

With basic questions about education reforms remaining unanswered, the nation's political leaders continued their restructuring plans without evidence to support the need for, or effectiveness of, their chosen strategies. With this type of sentiment—"standards-based education has a logic that is to us compelling" (Marzano & Kendall, 1996, p. 20)—evidence was ignored. Compelling is not convincing.

Consider this:

There is no apparent reason to postulate a relationship between student achievement and proficiency standards because student achievement is an outcome of pedagogical endeavor while proficiency standards are a product of political exercise. (Stoneberg, 2015, p. 1)

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### Progress, Results, Mistakes, and Failures

Census data in 1870 estimated 20 percent of persons 14 years old and older were illiterate (unable to read or write in any language). By 1910, it was reduced to 7.7 percent. During that period in the "Black and other" category, the percentage of illiterates went from 79.9 to 30.5 (U.S. Department of Commerce). Progress was made.

Then the call for efficiency came with increased standardized testing. But it was the theory of standardization itself that was put to the test during the Efficiency Movement. Researchers examined how standardization affected curriculum and instruction in the *Cooperative Study of Secondary Schools Standards*. They concluded that judging schools based on test outcomes tended to make "instruction point definitely to success in examinations," cultivated "a uniformity that is deadening to instruction," "thwarted the initiative of instructors," and "destroyed the flexibility and individuality of an institution" (1939, p. 163). Critics of the standards model say, "the basic concept underlying the efficiency movement...did not work" (Marzano & Kendall, 1996, p. 6).

Progress in adult illiteracy continued and by 1959 it was down to 2.2 percent total with 7.5 percent for Black and other (U.S. Department of Commerce). At this point, with the 1965 ESEA being the first federal education law under the nation's new goal of educating *all* children, "academic achievement of disadvantaged students" came under closer scrutiny (Vinovkis, 2010, p. 7). However, it should be noted that a gap in evidence existed as explained in the first review of ESEA programs.

... few school districts have base-line data regarding the previous educational achievement of disadvantaged children...few school districts have qualified personnel for developing satisfactory evaluation procedures. (National Advisory Council on the Education of Disadvantaged Children, 1966, pp. 25-26)

Researchers now judging the effectiveness of the 1965 ESEA must keep in mind that issues such as identification of health problems, like finding "45 percent of children in one district to be anemic," were judged to be an achievement since it was recognized that "poor health is a major reason why disadvantaged children are not succeeding in school" (p. 13). ESEA's success should be judged based on its original purposes.

... one of the major purposes of the ESEA Title I legislation has been the funding of compensatory education services. The report shows that this purpose is being achieved. Most of the funds are spent by the school districts on instructional services... the compensatory services found in the survey are generally considered to contribute to the overall quality of education. (Irwin, 1978, p. 7)

Quality of education indicators had not yet been developed during the early years of ESEA and community education directors of that era did not focus on recording their successes. A Mott leadership coordinator explained, "I was charged with changing educational practice, not writing papers about educational practice" (Mott Foundation, 1995). One community education researcher wrote, "The strengths of many community schools are not measureable by traditional tests." Progress was in terms of "decreased vandalism, eagerness to learn, improved attendance and an elimination of pupil suspensions" (Parsons, 1970, p. 8).

By 1979, illiteracy rates were estimated at 0.6 percent total and 1.6 percent for Black and other (U.S. Department of Commerce). But as the focus of the nation shifted to educational equity, the "achievement gap" statistic caught the public's and policymakers' attention. Therefore since the 1970's, assessing the achievement gap using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scale scores has been accepted practice (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013).

In summary, most of the progress in closing the achievement gap in reading and mathematics occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Since

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then, overall progress in closing the gaps has slowed. (Barton & Coley, 2010, p. 7)

During the timeframe of the early 70's to the late 80's, the Community Education Movement hit its peak and effective schools were being researched. Although the research on effective schools was "exploratory and descriptive," it is significant that these were "schools that did make a difference; inner city schools in which achievement scores were at or above national norms" (Neufeld et al., 1983, p. 5). Researchers were documenting successes. Meanwhile, the public schools were viewed as mediocre.

Looking at public attitude towards public schools from 1969 to 1984, Gallup Poll researchers found that between 1974 and 1983 the percentage of people rating schools as excellent or good "dropped from 48% to 31%." They cautioned that the drop does "not necessarily" mean schools are less effective. A drop in the number of people with children in schools (from 39% to 27%) most likely affected the drop in approval because parents tend to more accurately assess school quality due to firsthand knowledge while nonparents generally derive their opinion from the media, which tends "to report only negative or sensational events" (Elam, 1984, 7). Oddly, at the time of this report, 68% of the public had not "heard or read anything about" *A Nation at Risk* (p. 75).

The "indicators of risk" in *A Nation at Risk* included international comparisons revealing, "that on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second ... and were last seven times." Six other standardized test results were said to demonstrate declining scores and claim was made that they equated to deterioration in the quality of U.S. schools (Gardner et al., 1983, pp. 15-16). But if only a minority of the public was familiar with *A Nation at Risk*, it is likely that even fewer were aware of the conflicting interpretations of the Sandia National Laboratories research almost a decade later.

Our most detailed analyses to date have focused on *popular measures* used to discuss the status of education in America.—To our surprise on nearly every measure we found steady or slightly improving trends. (Carson, Huelskamp, & Woodall, 1992, p. 259)

The debate over the misinterpretation and significance of international tests, although important to understand, overshadowed other indicators not used in *A Nation at Risk*.

In 1980, only 8 percent of high school seniors had taken more than three years of mathematics and only 6 percent had done so in science (Plisko, 1983, p. 19). "By 1982, 39 states had adopted 'minimum competency testing of students' and standards were set in 21 states" (p. 22). Local initiatives were much different. They included plans to increase daily

attendance (66%), increase credits in core subject areas, and improve students study skills/habits (47%) (p. 23). Little did the nation know, the U.S stood at the crossroads of local versus state and federal control of education reform.

So going forward looking strictly at the focus of the times—reading/language arts and mathematics scores, graduation rates, and international test scores—the difficulty of interpreting results must be considered in light of the complexity of American society and all the factors pointed out in the Sandia Report. Immigration numbers (Carson, Huelskamp & Woodall, 1992, p. 262), urban conditions and socioeconomic status (p. 265), and changing social demographics all affect educational indicators. And when it comes to the college entrance examination trends, the number of students taking those tests affects the reporting of trend averages (p. 269), due to Simpson’s paradox (p. 272), as does other factors including “improved test preparations” (p. 270). But regardless of the debates surrounding statistical outcomes and the inferences made from them, Sandia researchers did make a couple of irrefutable statements.

Our investigation of the NAEP data revealed that performance has been steady or improving in nearly all subject areas tested, and that the greatest gains have been made in basic skills. Furthermore, these gains have not been at the expense of advanced skills.

However, as in the dropout data, analysis of the ‘fine structure’ indicates that minority youth continue to lag far behind their White peers on the standardized tests. ... This disparity may be better correlated with the school setting or family variables than with race or ethnicity. (p. 272)

Even the commission that set in motion the idea of an educational crisis in America agreed that the nation had made real progress.

... the average citizen today is better educated and more knowledgeable than the average citizen of a generation ago... (Gardner et al., 1983, p. 12)

Since results and analysis were not thoroughly considered, and decisions based on evidence is not what occurred in the political realm of education reform during the era of the Excellence or Standards Movement, results from political actions warrant review. Recall, President H.W. Bush and then-Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander helped establish NCEST. Then “NCEST endorsed the need for national standards” (Schwartz, 2006, p. 5). At that time, only 9 percent of the nation thought “poor standards” was a “big problem” (Elam, Rose & Gallup, 1992, p. 43). So knowing that national standards were to come with national testing, some educators asked for proof that no harm would come to curriculum and instruction.



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Although the new standards are expected to be a common core, the NCEST does not explain why the proposed tests will not narrow the curriculum. (Koretz et al., 1992, p. 1)

The narrowing of the curriculum under NCLB was widespread. The Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education survey found “nearly 75 percent of teachers who say they are using news less often in the classroom, cite mandated standardized tests as the reason” (Carnegie-Knight Task Force, 2007). Studies reported significant increases in time spent on the NCLB tested subjects of English language arts and/or math. “44% of districts reported cutting time from one or more other subjects or activities (social studies, science, art and music, physical education, lunch and/or recess)” to adjust for the change in instructional focus (McMurrer, 2007, p. 3). But did focusing on standards and testing improve student achievement?

Various researchers took on the challenge of reviewing state and federal data. Different methods were used in evaluations. Different interpretations of NAEP scores during the NCLB era emerged. But there is some overall agreement.

Although both 4th- and 8th-grade math test scores rose in the post-NCLB period (until 2015), for the most part they simply continued the upward trend that had begun in the 1990s. Moreover, reading scores declined in the first few years of the post-NCLB period. Thus, these trends provide little or no support for the hypothesis that NCLB raised test scores. ... The overall test score effects of NCLB are clearly disappointing. (Ladd, 2017, pp. 462-463)

Believing that lackluster student performance was due to low standards set by some states, various groups evaluated and graded state standards (Schwartz, 2006, p. 4). Supporters of standards-based education criticized NCLB for allowing states to set their own standards because some set them lower to avoid more schools being labeled as “failed.” But what this “mistake” did allow was the following research to take place.

Retired Idaho NAEP expert, Bert Stoneberg, examined the “mapping study” done by Bandeira de Mello who estimated NAEP equivalent “rigor” scores for state’s standards-aligned assessments. Stoneberg proceeded “to correlate the estimated ‘rigor’ scores with the overall student achievement in the various states ” (Stoneberg, 2009, p. 1). In doing so, Stoneberg provided solid statistical evidence of the relationship between a state’s proficiency standards and student achievement. The Pearson r correlation coefficient (zero being no correlation, one being a complete positive linear correlation) in reading was “0.28 for Grade 4 and 0.01 for grade 8. The Pearson r in mathematics was 0.30 for both grades” (Stoneberg, 2015, 1, graphic depictions pp. 6-9).



So what Robert Schwartz saw as an “anomaly” in Connecticut in 2006, “weak standards but good performance” (p. 16), was in fact indicative of the situation in many states as well as the reverse also being seen, higher standards but poorer performance.

The rigor of a state’s proficiency standard has little relationship with overall student achievement in the state. (Stoneberg, 2015, p. 1)

Overall, while individual students advance educationally, the United States’ progress towards educational equity has stagnated under politically directed education reforms. The NCLB goal “to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice,” using a standards-based philosophy, failed.

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### **A Theory of Action As It Relates to Education Reform**

The National Science Resource Center (NSRC) theory of action (Smithsonian Science Center, 2019) aims at increasing student achievement. Its principles are applied here to systemic education reform based on the assumption that effective schools were established using the community education process. And with a multitude of variables involved in educating children, research correlations rather than strict causation is many times accepted as evidence of effectiveness. With those considerations and using the NSRC theory of action with its foundation being “*knowledge* of research and best practices,” the successes and failures of education movements in the U.S. provide the foundation of knowledge about efficacious processes, practices, and reform policies.

In the NSRC model, the foundation of knowledge is used to develop a shared vision among those concerned about reforms, affected by changes, and responsible for executing improvements. Development of a shared vision is the point in the process where the strategies used to reform schools are openly debated. It is at that point, before decisions are made, that the people whose lives might be “negatively impacted by the decisions of others” deserve the chance to be involved (Gold, Simon & Brown, 2002, p. 5). Engagement and involvement exemplify an effective community education process.

[We must have] ... participation in the process to have our ideas about what successful schooling is and how it should be judged represented . . . . In the absence of equal representation and participation, unequal outcomes are likely to persist since the terms of success are dictated by dominant groups. (Gamoran & Long, 2006, p. 17)

As the reform process proceeds from the community decision-making arena into the school district infrastructure, the NSRC theory recommends consideration of five equally important elements to improve

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education: research-based curriculum, school and community support, materials support, competent teachers, and aligned assessments. These are the elements that improve instruction leading to increased student achievement.

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### Research-based Curriculum

When the National Research Council (NRC) advised lawmakers that “the available evidence does not give strong support for the use of test-based incentives to improve education” and it was recommended that “continued experimentation with test-based incentives should not displace investment in the development of other aspects of the education system that are important” (Hout & Elliot, 2011, p. 83), lawmakers were remiss in continuing with test-based curricular policies. So taking the larger meaning of curriculum as the whole student experience in the learning process, looking back on the broad base of knowledge on education reforms, and putting aside political agendas, research tells us what aspects of the education system are more important in developing curriculum than higher standards and their aligned standardized tests.

What matters most are the factors affecting individual students; one size does not fit all. Even those supporting standards-based education know the “approaches must be tailor made to the specific needs and values of individual schools and districts” (Marzano & Kendall, 1996, p. 11). And curriculum needs to be flexible enough to meet the needs of the students. What is taught, how it’s taught, and how learning is assessed produces the curriculum. When designed to serve the population of students in a school and classroom, by definition it is standards-referenced education, not standards-based education.

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### School, Community, and Materials Support

Public policies can foster the necessary student supports. As the 1965 ESEA demonstrated, wise use of existing community resources can be legislated.

TITLE III—SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATIONAL CENTERS AND SERVICES. SEC. 304. (a) A grant under this title for a program of supplementary educational services may be made to a local educational agency or agencies, but only if there is satisfactory assurance that in the planning of that program there has been, and in the establishing and carrying out of that program there will be, *participation of persons broadly representative of the cultural and educational resources* of the area to be served. (Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965)

Community education research showed that “parent and community involvement is much more extensive in community schools [and] community-controlled schools utilize community resources, especially personnel, much more extensively than most inner-city schools” (Parsons, 1970, p. 7). Cost effectiveness research on community education was also done (Doughty et al., 1981).

Clearly, those who gained the most through the implementation of the parent involvement program were the students, demonstrated by improved academic achievement. (Hara & Burke, 1998, p. 225)

Other researchers see community organizing produce improvements in facilities and other resources (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 8). Plus historically, wise use of existing resources was crucial to the community education process and also noted as a characteristic of improvement processes that created effective schools (Edmonds, 1982, p. 10).

Community support for students is essential to achieving educational equity. The “community links to a school’s capacity to improve student outcomes, and that variations across school communities ... offer an account for some of the observed differences in rates of improvement and virtually all of the differences in [achievement gap] stagnation rates” (Barton & Coley, 2010, p. 34). Therefore if educational equity is a national goal, school improvements must extend into communities.

As the Coleman Report explained, “the ‘pupil attitude factor,’ which appears to have a stronger relationship to achievement than do all the ‘school’ factors together, is the extent to which an individual feels that he has some control over his own destiny” (1966, 23). The report’s summary clearly stated “such attitudes, which are largely a consequence of a person’s experience in the larger society, are *not independent* of his experience in school” (Gardner & Howe, 1966, p. 22). Both in-school and out-of-school factors do matter. Therefore the two must work together to support student achievement.

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### **Competent Teachers**

With teachers being the most important in-school factor directly affecting student learning, subject matter or grade-level competence has been the professions’ standard. But over the decades, conclusions on the effects of high teacher expectations on student achievement bring a new dimension to our idea of competence. Because teachers are “more likely to accept poor performance from students for whom they held low expectations” (Brophy & Good, 1969, p. 3), professional development must help teachers become “aware of the negative as well as positive consequences of the expectations that they form about

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students' behaviour and performance" (Tsiplakides & Keramida, 2010, p. 25).

Holding high expectations for all students requires a set of personal skills. Because setting rigorous standards and holding high expectations were never the same tool, but often confused, competence in a classroom requires much more than teaching to a set of standards. Researchers have noted "that barriers to effective and collaborative educational systems included a lack of teacher preparation in systemic interpersonal skills, a lack of family-friendly school programs, and teacher difficulties in focusing on family and educational strengths" (Hara & Burke, 1998, p. 224). Effective schools develop "teacher behaviors that convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimal mastery" (Edmonds, 1982, p. 4). Holding high expectations is key to increasing student achievement and requires development of interpersonal skills.

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### Aligned Assessments

Effective schools used "measures of pupil achievement as the basis for program evaluation," and in their school improvement process saw "the local school as the focus of analysis and intervention" (Edmonds, 1982, p. 4). So if assessments are to positively impact student achievement, they must evaluate classroom instruction and student learning.

To be successful, standards-referenced curriculum and instruction must be tailored to local desires, meet student's needs and pique their interests. Assessments meant to evaluate and guide learning must align to instruction, not a set of common national standards. To be a fair, valid, and reliable judge of how well the student learned what was taught, local assessments best determine the achievement of local learning objectives and classroom instruction. Assessments then give the teacher immediate useful feedback for continuously improving instructional strategies aimed at increasing student achievement.

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### Conclusion

The rigor of a state's proficiency standard had little to do with the overall student achievement in the state, not statistically and not logically. (Stoneberg, 2015, 10)

Lack of standards was never the problem in need of reforming. In fact, far too many standards to choose from became a problem (Marzano & Kendall, 1998). Although standards-based education was presented to America as reform, in reality it slowed educational progress and too often narrowed what was taught.

Reform policies demanded better outcomes without affording and fostering the necessary improvement processes and student supports. Student progress did continue through the Standards Movement era, albeit it slowly, because of teachers' efforts, local initiatives, and parent and community supports, where they existed.

Concentrated poverty has repeatedly been identified as a major contributing factor in schools that struggle with educating all their students well. And the "stagnation rate" in closing the achievement gap is likely to continue as long as it is believed that standards, and continuous standardized assessments aligned to those standards, reform schools and improves student achievement. Progress towards educational equity will be slow as long as the nation continues incessantly investing resources in a faulty theory of reform.

Higher content standards won't change "low expectations." In effective schools, teachers develop personal behaviors conveying the expectation that the student will succeed. It happens through a process of school improvement steeped in the idea that students "need to ... believe they can succeed" (Akey, 2006, p. 4). To be accomplished, that reform strategy only requires the political will and cooperation of higher education.

And if educational equity is still the national goal, the cornerstone of education reform must be replaced with both effective practices and policies, which requires both an educational and political strategy along with the right guiding principles. Samuel Halperin provides and explained just such a guiding principle by quoting from the 1965 ESEA Title I.

[Title I funds are to meet] the special educational needs of children of low-income families *and the impact that concentrations of low-income families have on the ability of local educational agencies to support adequate educational programs.* (Halperin, 1979, p. 351)

He knew; he was involved in the 1960s debates concerning poverty in America. The authors of ESEA understood how low-income communities lacked resources. Manley and Mott also understood the principle of "helping people to help themselves" as exemplified by their community education process (Decker, 1999, p. 9).

So while current policymakers "focus on improving the schools—neighborhoods also have to be changed—particularly since there is so little mobility out of them" (Barton & Coley, 2010, p. 36). "Solutions will have to be crafted with the involvement of that community, for that community, often by the community ... and not without it" (p. 37). That is a historically familiar, recurrent American concept that has gone unrecognized as "the community education concept." The process changes communities and the schools within them. It is a reform strategy that can restore what the education system has lost.

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Halperin also “counseled a strategy for the future” in “seeing community education as a set of pervasive and powerful principles about the educational process that would infuse all of education” (1983, p. 105). His perspective was through the eyes of a community educator aiming at “our professional goal of educational equity” (p. 102).

With the community education movement in full swing and its central principle embedded in the 1965 ESEA, the nation saw student achievement rise along with its most significant narrowing of the achievement gap. So what is known about the “community schools,” produced by this process and policy, is that they were not schools of choice. They were not schools where top-down mandates for wrap-around services were put in place. They were neighborhood schools where the community education process of engaging community members in solving their own problems was used (Decker, 1999, pp. 7-8) to help people help themselves. That process requires resources and focused resources is what the 1965 ESEA originally set out to deliver.

While the modern standards movement engulfed budgets and narrowed curricula, it also left too many parents and community members out of the process of school improvement. That keystone needs to be replaced. The nation needs to get away from standards-based education and get back to standards-referenced local control of curriculum and instruction with policies that cultivate the community supports necessary to improve education for all students.

Standards-based education weakened the cornerstone of U.S. education reform because it did not support the common educational goals the nation was built upon. Replacing common goals with common standards made American education common rather than exceptional. Forgotten was the fact that the nation’s common goals represented American values and the belief in the resourcefulness of its people to solve their own problems.

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