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Three Decades of Education Reform: Are We Still "A Nation at Risk?"

In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* laid bare the state of American education and exposed what that meant for individuals and the country. Here, seven education experts from AIR weigh in on whether the report made a difference and where education is today.

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Gains and Gaps: Education Performance After *A Nation at Risk*

Perhaps *A Nation at Risk*'s most important legacies are the educational reforms in our schools since its publication. We have seen Effective Schools, Accelerated Schools, and Schools Within Schools and, nationally, the Education Goals movement. The standards movement that emerged in the 1990s has morphed into the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as No Child Left Behind, followed by Race to the Top, and now the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

Have these education reforms led to student progress? That depends on which indicator is used, but the data overall suggest that *A Nation at Risk* has had a positive effect. One positive is greater rigor in the courses that high school students take. U.S. Department of Education data show that the percentage of

students finishing a geometry course rose from 64 percent in 1990 to 88 percent in 2009 while the percentage completing a chemistry course increased from 49 to 70. Gains in the percentage of students taking pre-calculus and physics have also been impressive, though by 2009 only about 35 percent of our high school students were completing these key math and science courses. Meanwhile, the percentage of students who graduate within four years has risen from 74 to 78 percent in just the past decade. By the numbers, the news is good.

But do the nation's children actually know more? Here, the message is more mixed. The National Assessment of Educational Progress long-term trend data for 17-year-olds show that both their scores in reading and mathematics have been essentially flat since the mid-1980s. The reading scores of 13-year-olds grew only slightly during these decades but their mathematics scores grew more impressively. The greatest growth has been in 4th graders' mathematics performance. Gains in their reading results have been more modest, though better than those for the 13- or 17-year-olds.

Clearly, the best single solution is quality pre-school education.

Internationally, the United States continues to lag behind such countries as Korea, Japan, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Indeed, the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment results showed American students ranking 14th in reading and 17th in science.

One red flag raised in *A Nation at Risk* was the achievement gaps between white students and black and Hispanic students. Although these gaps remain vexing and seemingly intractable, National Assessment of Educational Progress data show that the nation's minorities have made substantial strides at Grades 4 and 8, especially in mathematics. In 1990, only one percent of black 4th graders were proficient. By 2011, 17 percent were. Hispanics went from five percent proficient in 1990 to 24 percent proficient in 2011. For both minorities, the gains in mathematics and reading between 1990 and 2011 in Grade 8 were only slightly less impressive.

One reason huge gaps between the scores of white students and those of blacks and Hispanics persist is that white students' performance has also improved. For example, 44 percent of the white 4th graders were proficient in 2011, compared to 17 percent of blacks and 24 percent of Hispanics.

Closing these gaps is made harder by the demographic changes afoot. While the percentage of black students is likely to remain close to its current level, the Pew Hispanic Center projects that by 2050, Hispanics will account for over half of all U.S. students. In California, Hispanics already comprise over half, and they make up over 40 percent of all students in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

Can any policies or actions close the achievement gaps between whites and minorities? We know that the gaps start early. Minorities and children in poverty show up for kindergarten well behind white and Asian students and never to catch up. Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study show that new black kindergarteners lag far behind white students in vocabulary, reading, and mathematics. And in mathematics and reading, Hispanics are slightly behind blacks.

Clearly, the best single solution is quality pre-school education. Two small-scale projects that involved random assignment to experimental and control conditions, the Perry Preschool and the Abecedarian projects, showed that high-quality early childhood programs have significant short- and long-term effects on academic performance. Another pre-school program, and one with a larger sample size, has had both short- and long-term positive educational effects 15 and 19 years later—the Chicago Child-Parent Center Program, initiated in 1967 to serve poor, largely African American families. Evaluations using a quasi-experimental design have shown that program participants arrived at kindergarten scoring three months more cognitively ready than nonparticipants and later proved less likely to be retained in grade and to need remedial or special education services. When they did need extra help, they needed fewer services than nonparticipants too. Fast forwarding, these same program participants at age 23 and 24 were more likely than nonparticipants to have graduated from high school and to have attended a four-year college.

Quality curriculum, well-trained teachers, and parental involvement doubtless contributed to these model early childhood programs' success. But these programs must still address poverty's impacts. The most effective programs provide far more than just education—they also provide so-called wrap-around services. They train parents, nurture involvement, offer such family services as healthcare, and provide nutritious food. In short, they take care of all of the child's basic needs.

On balance, then, we have seen some performance gains since *A Nation at Risk* was published, especially for 4th graders and especially in mathematics. But substantial gaps between the performance of whites and minority students at all grade levels persist. Closing them and truly taking the message of *A Nation at Risk* to heart requires redoubled attention to quality preschool education.

Beatrice Birman

Institute Fellow

Beatrice Birman is an AIR Institute Fellow, with three decades of experience evaluating education programs. Her areas of expertise include federal education policy, programs for students placed at risk, school reform, and teachers' professional development.

A Nation at Risk's Policy Legacy

In the early 1980s, when I was a program analyst in the newly formed federal Education Department, I was thinking about changing careers. Work in federal education programs and policy didn't seem promising. President Reagan's election mandate was to abolish the new department on grounds of federal intrusion. Then came *A Nation at Risk*, a small document that made a big change in the national conversation and set the stage for federal education policies for decades to come.

Why the impact? Was it the message? Or the messenger?

First, it was the message. The report's tone was urgent, sounding an alarm that our schools were failing their students and putting the nation's world stature at risk. The proposed solution was focusing more on content (primarily for high schools), raising expectations and standards for student learning and conduct, increasing time devoted to learning, and valuing and rewarding teachers more. For a report coming from Washington, especially at that moment, the tone and the breadth of message were unique. The vantage point was clearly national but not federal, emphasizing the importance of excellent education for all, not just the at-risk students targeted by most federal programs.

Second, it was the messenger too. The report had high impact partly because it was a surprise coming from an administration that had assumed office arguing for a federal retreat from education. The commissioners tried to light a fire under state and local officials, parents, teachers and students, and universities and learned societies, exhorting all to champion excellence in education. While not its main thrust, the report also reinforced the traditional federal focus on helping key student groups, protecting civil rights, and funding research and gathering statistics. All that said, *A Nation at Risk* set the stage for reshaping the federal role in education, strengthening and increasing the presence of federal programs and policies in the nation's schools, and laying the groundwork for several decades of state, local, and federal reforms.

A Nation at Risk created an appetite for better ways to monitor student performance and compare nations and even states.

What policy changes did the report set in motion?

Arguably, *A Nation at Risk* created an appetite for better ways to monitor student performance and compare nations and even states. Until the 1980s, calls for state comparisons on the National Assessment of Educational Progress were considered toxic. Yet, in 1988 Congress passed the first legislation allowing for states to participate in voluntary assessments of representative samples of students, thus enabling state-to-state comparisons. Eventually, the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act made participation in these state assessments (in reading and mathematics for grades 4 and 8) a condition for receiving Title I funding.

A Nation at Risk's most visible and lasting influence has been laying groundwork for raising standards and expectations for students—that is, standards-based reform. By calling for meatier content and raising standards and expectations for student learning, especially in secondary and higher education, the report and others in its wake in the 1980s contained data that created a drumbeat of bad news about education. A national education summit in 1989 brought together a Republican President and the nation's governors (with Arkansas' Bill Clinton playing a prominent role) to call for setting national education goals for all students.

At the same time that public discourse reflected a sense that America needed a drastic education overhaul, there was growing dissatisfaction with the outcomes of K-12 federal education programs, particularly the large Title I program. Title I's stringent monitoring requirements had begun to strike some as barriers to good educational practice. One example: many Title I students were pulled out of their

classrooms to receive services, missing regular instruction and getting stigmatized to boot. And federal programs had evolved into a patchwork of overlapping programs, each with its own logic but also with requirements that were confusing and inconsistent when implemented together at the school level. Partly to address such issues, successive reauthorizations began to loosen some of Title I's process requirements by, for example, channeling funds to whole-school improvements and focusing accountability for federal funds increasingly on outcomes rather than tracking federal dollars to students.

By questioning the quality of the nation's schools as a whole, *A Nation at Risk* challenged a fundamental assumption underlying federal education programs: that the nation's schools were basically sound and the main problem was that some groups of students were not able to take advantage of what schools had to offer. At-risk students, this logic went, needed extra help and so federal policy and legislation had for decades targeted low-achieving students in high-poverty schools, students with disabilities, and English learners. But if the nation's schools weren't good to begin with, what would better access to instruction really accomplish? By helping to shift federal emphasis toward improving schools as a whole, the report made some of the earlier policies seem inadequate, like tinkering around the edges.

In the next years, moves to higher standards for all students coupled with greater flexibility and accountability for outcomes gained further traction in federal education policy. These moves were reinforced by academic critiques of the lack of coherence in the nation's education system. Analyses (by Mike Smith and Jennifer O'Day, and others) of how different levels of the education system interconnect and why programs and policies need to be aligned through systemic reforms made it clear that "add-on" federal policy would not work. The 1994 Elementary and Secondary Education Act reauthorization, the Improving America's Schools Act, and its companion, the Goals 2000 Educate America Act, embodied some of the shifts in thinking about the federal role. The new Title I law required states to establish high educational standards to receive federal money, and Goals 2000 provided the funds to develop them.

Over time, however, the reforms took on a life of their own, both reflecting and deflecting the vision put forth in *A Nation at Risk*. Support for high standards was embraced with some enthusiasm as states worked to raise academic bars and increase graduation requirements, and in the 1990s many professional organizations, often with federal support, got involved in developing standards. But progress also stalled with objections to federal involvement in setting standards, a perceived violation of the traditional state and local control of education. And over time, Title I policy came to be increasingly riveted on high-stakes accountability. Although outcomes-based accountability had been part of the 1994 law, the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, better known as No Child Left Behind, laid out far more stringent consequences for missing performance objectives. Although states weren't allowed to abandon high standards, setting achievement targets and avoiding the consequences for not achieving them by the 2014 deadline became relatively more important. In some places, the high-stakes measurement at the heart of No Child Left Behind reportedly led to such consequences as gaming the system, teaching to the test, and narrowing the curriculum. The vision of a standards movement born of lofty aspirations was constricted in unintended ways.

So what is the real legacy of *A Nation at Risk* 30 years later?

Its authors embraced higher educational standards and a traditional, limited role for the federal government—cooperating with states and localities to help at-risk students and shouldering responsibilities that states and localities aren't well-equipped to handle. The surprise was that their recommendations would open the door to a far stronger federal role in education.

Today, the move to the Common Core State Standards Initiative in some ways marks a return to the vision embodied in the report with the benefit of 30 years of experience. Common Core's focus is on college and career-ready standards, recognizing that improved assessment is the key to success; and it is a national (not federal), state-led initiative. But in other ways, the federal government genie is out of the bottle, with programs like Race to the Top often driving rather than simply supporting state and local education initiatives.

Still, unlike the pre-*A Nation at Risk* era, education has become a national priority, one taken up in presidential debates and the halls of Congress, as well as by state legislatures, local governments, and the media. This sense of education's importance to national well-being is *A Nation at Risk*'s true legacy. And, because education has been center stage in Washington, the report also enhanced the personal well-being of the young policy analyst of 1983, who has had a long and challenging career in education policy and reform.

Gary Phillips

Vice President and Institute Fellow

Gary W. Phillips is a vice president and Institute Fellow at AIR whose research advances the state-of-the-art in statistical and psychometric techniques. Dr. Phillips received his Ph.D. from the University of Kentucky with joint training from the college of education and department of statistics.

Why Local Educators Haven't Heeded the Warnings in *A Nation at Risk*

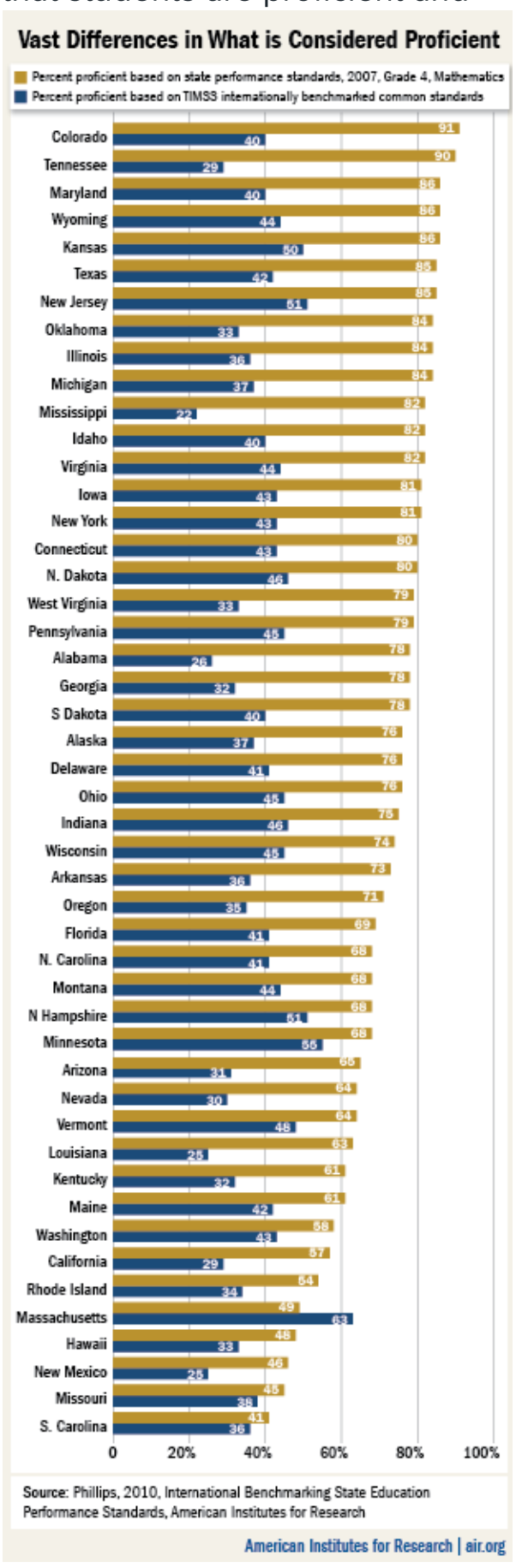
For the last 30 years national education leaders have believed that our underachieving educational system has put our nation at risk. One persistent problem with that belief is that the international data examined by national policy makers to support the claim don't match the state data reported to the local press and parents. International assessments generally show that the United States is, at best, in the middle of the pack among other industrialized nations while state data generally show that students are proficient and performing above average. No wonder the crisis experienced by policy makers doesn't seem so urgent to local governors, boards of education and parents. And no wonder local educators haven't acted on what national policy makers consider crises.

A graph helps illustrate the problem. The beige bars represent the state performance in 2007 based on the data reported by states to the federal government under the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, also known as No Child Left Behind. Look at Tennessee, for example. In 2007, the state reported that 90 percent of its 4th graders were proficient in mathematics based on challenging performance standards established by the state.

What percentage would be proficient if Tennessee had taken an international test such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)? And what would happen if Tennessee used a common and internationally competitive performance standard, such as TIMSS' High standard, to report the rate of proficiency? See the blue bars on the chart for the results. Now only 29 percent of Tennessee's students appear proficient. From an international point of view, Tennessee has 29 percent of its Grade 4 students proficient in mathematics. However, from a state point of view, 90 percent of its Grade 4 students are proficient in mathematics.

The discrepancy between these two metrics stems from a flawed data system. Our federal government, which sponsors international studies, uses a different metric than the state government, which develops its own test. The different metrics report different results. It's like a doctor having two thermometers calibrated in different ways—one national thermometer and one state thermometer. The national thermometer says the patient is running a fever and needs treatment while the state thermometer is saying the child's temperature is just fine.

It's difficult for the messages of *A Nation at Risk* to penetrate to the local level where actual educational change must take place. Until we develop a common metric that measures student performance based on internationally competitive standards, we will continue to see alarming national reports shelved in local schools.



David Osher

Vice President and Institute Fellow

David Osher is an AIR vice president and AIR Institute Fellow. His work is on children's services, youth development, social and emotional conditions for learning and healthy development, and culturally competent interventions for children and youth with mental health problems and for their families.

It’s Not Just About Test Performance

The nation is still at risk, particularly if we apply measures that go beyond the one frequently applied to *A Nation at Risk:* test performance. Yes, National Assessment of Educational Progress results and Programme for International Student Assessment comparisons matter, but so do other indicators. In fact, this famous 1983 report's problem statement was broader, embracing nation building and equity—what the commissioners called “the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society.” The report noted that “a high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom” and that “all, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.”

This is a much taller order than higher test scores. And if nation building and equity standards are the measure, the United States may be at greater risk than test scores show—witness the growing gap between affluent Americans and the nation’s poor.

Setting the bar high, as* A Nation at Risk *did, was a good idea in 1983 and it’s an even better idea today.

A shared approach to education has always been hard given our federal system and local school boards’ authority. But the odds of success are slipping further as housing segregation increases, ever more students get private educations, some states reject the Common Core State Standards Initiative for ideological reasons, and more schools revert to grouping students homogeneously, giving segregation within and among schools a boost.

The story is much the same on the equity front. Compared to their more privileged counterparts, black, Latino, Native American, and economically disadvantaged white students are all more likely to experience harsh or exclusionary discipline and to attend schools that lack adequate academic and student support resources. As Lisa Delpit put it while speaking of black children, these children have strengths and need “*more* content, not less,” critical-thinking as well as basic skills, a caring classroom community, help building more strengths, and a connection to something greater than themselves. Instead, many students of color and economically disadvantaged students get tased by a laser focus on remediation and test performance.

While the risk of an advantage gap may be greater now—as researchers Greg Duncan, Sean Reardon, and others have shown—it existed before 1983. *A Nation at Risk* was written just as the modest safety net created during the War on Poverty was starting to fray and the gap between rich and poor was starting to grow faster.

Academic progress, nation building, and equity may lag today partly because of how the report conceptualized risk and partly because of how that risk was interpreted. Perhaps the problems then were seen too narrowly. The National Commission on Excellence in Education, which wrote the report, was asked to “defin[e] problems which must be faced and overcome if we are successfully to pursue the course of excellence in education.” But the commissioners stopped short of addressing how poverty and discrimination affects learning and how opportunities to learn are allocated. Nor did they identify ways to fund adequate education for all in light of the Supreme Court’s 1973 *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriquez* decision, which legitimated school funding based on property taxes.

As another example of good intentions never translated into hard-hitting recommendations, the commission members also said they didn’t “believe that a public commitment to excellence and educational reform must be made at the expense of a strong public commitment to the equitable treatment of our diverse population” and articulated the “twin goals of equity and high-quality schooling.” But the commissioners’ recommendations didn’t address the many factors that affect attendance, engagement, learning, and test performance—so-called conditions for learning. Focusing narrowly on the students’ “hard work, and self-discipline, and motivation” without attention to these other enabling factors blunted the force of the important call for higher standards and achievement.

Setting the bar high, as *A Nation at Risk* did, was a good idea in 1983 and it’s an even better idea today. Our knowledge today is greater, our tools more powerful, and our need for all to succeed in school more pressing. But reaching high educational standards to close the opportunity gap requires closer attention to what stands in the way in schools, communities, and policy.

Jennifer O'Day

Institute Fellow

Over the past 25 years, Dr. O'Day has carried out research, advised national and state policy makers, and written extensively about systemic standards-based reform, educational equity, accountability, and capacity-building strategies. Her recent work has included strategies for intervening in low-performing, high-poverty schools identified under systems of state, local, and federal accountability.

Two Steps Forward, Many More to Go

Ask any historian to date the opening salvo in the current battle to transform U.S. education and he or she will likely point to the April 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk.* Alarmist and hyperbolic, this report catalyzed (but did not cause) what would evolve into multiple waves of education reform aimed broadly at preparing all American high school graduates to step into college or career.

Today, thirty years later, many analysts and observers still wrestle with the report's recommendations and assess our progress on some. Emphasizing the positive, some point to the substantial increases in academic course-taking in our high schools and note the modest gains in scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress—gains that are significantly more pronounced when broken out by sub-group. Others will observe that all but a few states have now agreed upon a common set of college-ready standards in literacy and mathematics, addressing the "confused vision" criticized by the report's authors. And then there are the examples of whole systems, like Garden Grove and Long Beach in California or Houston in Texas, that have seen progress on multiple measures of student performance and attainment, teacher quality, and system management over the past decade or two.

Unequal opportunities outside of schools can severely limit the impact of school-based approaches.

Yet even the most sanguine observers will agree that as a nation our progress has been modest at best. National test score gains do not come near expectations, and we continue to lag behind other developed nations in international comparisons—particularly on the Programme for International Assessment, which assesses students' ability to apply their knowledge to real world situations. Gaps between sub-groups, despite slight narrowing, remain persistent and large—as much a three grade levels on eighth-grade mathematics and over two grade-levels in fourth-grade reading. Too many of our students, particularly historically under-served groups, attend high schools where barely half of the students graduate. And we have been losing ground relative to other developed nations in high school graduation and college going.

Why did we not realize the turnaround "over the next several years," as the report's authors thought possible? One factor, often noted, may be interest-group and partisan political battles over particular reform recommendations or strategies. Americans may consistently agree that "education is extremely important to one's future success" and that it should rank among the nation's top funding priorities (as the report's authors observed), but we are less likely to all agree on how our educational systems should achieve the goals we individually hold dear. Partisan cries that the new Common Core State Standards Initiative represents "federal intrusion" exemplify such politicking.

Yet I would argue that even during periods of relative political agreement, our strategies themselves have fallen short in several key areas, from which we can learn in our attempts to continue and accelerate educational improvement. Here I highlight two.

First, over-relying on top-down mandates or threats has thwarted both the individual and organizational learning needed for fundamental transformation. Mandates lead to compliance (or sometimes resistance), while threats usually diminish the risk-taking needed to solve persistent and systemic problems. Both approaches assume that educators, schools, and districts already have the capacity needed to take the desired action. Thus, *A Nation at Risk* sparked a flurry of top-down policy reforms, such as higher graduation requirements, that intensified traditional practice without preventing policy fragmentation or engendering bottom-up creativity.

The early period of standards-based reform sought to address both these shortcomings by creating policy coherence around a common vision of what students should know and be able to do (top-down direction) while capitalizing on the bottom-up energies and creativity of networks of teachers and schools to craft the means for getting there. During this period, we saw teachers in early implementing states and locales collaboratively poring over student work and engaging with test-developers to create novel assessments that supported complex problem-solving and deeper levels of literacy. But impatience with mistakes and slow progress undermined attention to long-term capacity building, and policy rhetoric and action turned quickly to hard-edged accountability to force improvements. Research on both individual and organizational response to threat finds a consistent pattern of reliance on known practices and avoidance of risk, a pattern often observed in U.S. schools during the past twelve years.

Second, our approaches to equity have barely touched the deep-seated disparities of race, class, language, and ethnicity. Certainly, common standards and graduation requirements within states have helped give all students at least *some* access to a challenging academic program, and the "no excuses" focus on disaggregated results has reportedly encouraged school personnel to accept responsibility for the learning of all their students. But school accountability policies have also tended to locate the causes of inequities inside individual schools, too often ignoring systemic contributors to school failure such as unequal resources or personnel- and student-assignment policies that concentrate struggling students in schools staffed by novice or poorly trained teachers. Unequal opportunities outside of schools can also severely limit the impact of school-based approaches. Systems that have been more successful in narrowing gaps have moved beyond a narrow focus on schools to partner with parents, early childhood programs, health and social welfare agencies, community-based organizations, prospective employers, and post-secondary institutions.

Bottom line: Have we accomplished the goals set forth in *A Nation at Risk?* No. Are we in a better position now than we were in 1983? Most definitely. We know more about teaching and learning and about system change. We have 20-plus years of experience with standards and with a focus on student learning. Forty-five states have adopted the internationally competitive Common Core State Standards Initiative and have made their implementation a priority. And some of the bottom-up energy and creativity let loose in the early standards movement is starting to re-emerge. But ours is a deeply divided and impatient nation. Will we have the focus, perseverance, and commitment to equity needed to build on past progress, learn from our mistakes, and give all kids a fighting chance for success? I certainly hope so, and I intend to remain part of that effort.

Terry Salinger

Institute Fellow

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A Nation of Readers at Risk

Revisiting *A Nation at Risk* affords a good opportunity to revisit what I see as a companion piece that came out two years later: *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Prepared at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, this 1985 report presented the work of the National Academy of Education's Commission on Reading to continue the emerging "discussion across the country of policies for improving schools." While *A Nation at Risk* was a general call to action on our national future, the Commission on Reading synthesized several lines of research into a volume that educators, policy makers, and informed citizens could read.

Despite their differences, both volumes took up a serious problem—an educational system that needed fixing. And both reports got some traction. The Goals 2000 Panel, Reading First, increased interest in STEM, the Voluntary National Tests, and even the formation of the Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences all trace back in some ways to *A Nation at Risk*.

So where are we now as we look back on the years since these two reports rocked the education community? The obvious question is whether anything has changed, and the obvious answer is, well, yes and no. Schools have changed in many ways, partly to meet the needs of more students whose first language is not English, accommodate massive teacher turnover and shrinking budgets, and prepare students to enter increasingly complex and changing post-secondary environments.

Many of the observations about poor student attainment voiced in* A Nation at Risk *are now as accurate and as disturbing as ever.

But in other ways, conditions haven't changed, and many of the observations about poor student attainment voiced in *A Nation at Risk* are now as accurate and as disturbing as ever. Proof of the status quo can be found in a new report on the latest survey of adult skills from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which assessed the problem-solving, numeracy, and literacy skills of individuals aged 16 to 65 in 24 countries. Scores of middle-aged Americans, folks who were entering the workforce 30 years ago, fell in about the middle of the range—that is, nothing more than average. Scores for younger U.S. participants were even weaker.

One thing that has changed is reading research. A major criticism of *Becoming a Nation of Readers,* levied even by its own authors, was that many of its recommendations were backed by thin and inconclusive research, no matter how much they appealed to common sense. The 2000 *Report of the National Reading*

Panel helped fill that void with an evidence base for early reading instruction. For rigor's sake, its authors reviewed only experimental studies, and its core recommendations undergirded the structure of the prescriptive Reading First, a federally funded early reading initiative. But later, the Department of Education's evaluation of Reading First found no significant difference between the reading comprehension—the ability to make sense of and use what one reads—of children in Reading First schools versus those in matched schools.

Yet, even a strong research base on teaching and learning reading hasn't budged reading achievement. The stubborn risk uncovered 30 years ago that graduates may not possess the "levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to [a] new era" and "will be effectively disenfranchised" from material goods, living wages, and full participation "in our national life" remains as grave as ever because success in today's post-secondary world requires increasingly sophisticated literacy skills. Our accumulated understanding about literacy teaching and learning notwithstanding, too many students don't acquire the proficiency needed to succeed or even get by in today's economy. Without adequate reading skills, many Americans are essentially disenfranchised from early childhood onward. Most students who fail to thrive as readers and writers in the elementary grades find their chances of academic success dwindling with each passing grade.

The past 30 years have seen a huge amount of money spent on research (good and bad) on reading teaching and learning. To make good on this investment and help those who can't read and write as well as they could, we need to address the challenges they face in and out of school. The section on reading as a "motivated process" in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* may shed light on why literacy skills haven't improved and on how to raise them. This wonky term doesn't refer to what teachers do to "motivate" students—think stickers or stars or honor rolls. Rather, it refers to learners' perceptions of their own abilities and of the value of what they are being asked to learn. For too many students, early enthusiasm about learning to read sinks fast, and teachers' actions and classroom learning settings can help kill interest. Convinced that learning something as abstract as reading has little intrinsic value, students don't persist, their expectations of success fall, and intellectual passivity sets in.

Unfortunately, some "interventions" only exacerbate students' growing feelings of disenfranchisement. Segregating them in drill sessions that take them "back to the basics," for instance, doesn't demonstrate the value literacy can have in their lives. At best, drilling just maintains students' weak skills—a far cry from engendering critical thinking.

But let's be realistic about the learning process instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Critics of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* cautioned that the research on motivation in reading was not as rigorous as research on, say, learning phonics. Research on motivation and reading rarely informed federal initiatives for reading improvement and, when it did, the focus was on motivation and engagement in specific lessons, not in the hard day-in and day-out work of becoming literate.

With what we know now, could we do better? Today, we still lack a full understanding of how to motivate students and get them to value learning to read and write for reasons other than grades and test scores. But we do know that the seeds of disenfranchisement begin take root early and must be addressed early if our educational systems are going to prepare all students to make their way in today's schools and society. Also, since the mid-1980s, we have come to understand the importance of early vocabulary development, of reading in different genres, and of writing to support reading growth.

Zeroing in on these aspects of literacy development has the potential to motivate readers. But it's seeing the value of the hard work it takes to become literate that must start early if it is to persist throughout the school years. Instructional approaches that inadvertently convince young learners that learning to read is "too hard" or that settle for mediocre levels of cognitive involvement in reading jeopardize success in school and the pursuit of lifelong learning.

Current knowledge and current need combine to make an increased emphasis on early learning imperative and urgent. We're still a nation at risk.

Jane Hannaway

Vice President; Director of Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research

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The Bad News: The Problems Remain. The Good News: The Conversation Has Dramatically Changed

It was the spring of 1983. I was a new assistant professor at the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University. *A Nation at Risk* had just been published. It was a hard-hitting report, arguing that the country's future was threatened "by a rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools.... and "that more and more young people emerge from high school ready neither for college nor for work... " Further, it claimed, "(I)f an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war." That was 30 years ago, but it sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Since Princeton is Princeton, I behaved like Princeton professors (at least as they did then) and invited my seminar students home for dinner and discussion. I also invited Ernie Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, former U.S. Commissioner of Education under President Carter, and author of another book published in 1983 that raised a clarion call about U.S. education, *High School: A Report on Secondary School in America*.

The dinner conversation was lively and interesting at the time, but even more interesting in retrospect. The students were nationally among the best. They had attended demanding high schools and competitive colleges and were at one of the country's top universities preparing for careers in public policy. The conversation showed that they got some things; and other things they didn't.

What surprised them was the sorry state of American education. Poorly performing schools were not part of their experience; their schools had served them well. Their comments said a lot about often unseen inequities and different realities across the American education landscape. What they did understand, as students of public policy, was both the societal importance of improving schools and the difficulties of doing so. They understood that the quality of our human capital was key to our future national economic well-being. They understood that gross differences in educational opportunities would challenge the nation's social fabric. They also knew that change would not be simple, especially given the decentralized nature of American education, the poorly understood nature of the education 'production process,' and the absence of common standards and of readily available metrics to assess student performance at an actionable policy level. Traditional instruments of public policy, such as regulation, incentives, and competition did not fit easily. They were stumped.

Teachers near the top of the performance distribution within a school, research now shows, can get nearly a full year's more growth from their students than teachers near the bottom.

Given the availability of only weak public policy instruments and the limited informational base to undergird the development of new policies, maybe we should not be surprised that by most measures—performance of students on standardized tests, performance ranking relative to other countries, student readiness for careers and college—things haven't improved much over the last 30 years.

But some things have changed. And those things may bode well for the future. From a public policy perspective we are in a better position. Most important, we have more and better information, and data are getting richer and more meaningful.

To begin with, as a consequence of federal legislation in 2001, we can compare performance across all states with a common metric, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. State-level assessment systems can now track individual student performance within the state over time and measure student gains. And there is significant voluntary movement among states to institute common assessments of individual students, allowing more informative comparisons. In many states, we can now even link teachers to students and their achievement gains while taking into account student backgrounds.

With the help of these data, we have learned that teachers are not widgets that easily substitute for one another, as human capital policies in education have traditionally assumed. Indeed, teacher productivity generally varies more within than across schools, a finding that surprised many veteran education analysts. Teachers near the top of the performance distribution within a school, research now shows, can get nearly a full year's more growth from their students than teachers near the bottom.

These findings are difficult for policy analysts and even vested interests to ignore. Yet, concerns about how precisely student test performance measures the effectiveness of individual teachers open legitimate questions about how to best use this information in policy. Still, we know there is something very important there. More recent research is beginning to show that the effect of good teachers goes well beyond measures based on student test scores. The large-scale detailed databases we now have show that good teachers have long-term effects, including whether students go to college and, later, what they earn.

I wish I could go back to the Princeton seminar of budding policy analysts and do a fast-forward to explore with them how the newly developing informational basis for policy in education might affect their views of the future. I am sure it would be a considerably more optimistic discussion, likely focusing on how policies might better recognize and reward the many teachers who are making a big difference, both for individual students and, down the road, our country.

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