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A Nation at Risk: A Twenty-Year Re-appraisal

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Guest Editors

Kenneth K. Wong, James W. Guthrie, and Doug N. Harris

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Preface

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“ . . . the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

A Nation at Risk 1983 (p.5)

Twenty years and several school reforms into that future, *A Nation at Risk* is still cited for its sweeping critique of the U.S. education system and the standards-based reforms it proposed as a solution.

Written by an eighteen-member Commission appointed by President Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, the report's conclusions reflect competing reform perspectives both within the education community and across societal sectors. The commission members included college and university presidents (including the President Elect of the University of California who chaired the Commission), scientists, school administrators, and business representatives. Their opinions and differences were expressed in the report, sometimes explicitly, sometimes subtly, and often by omission. During its 18-month tenure, the Commission called for and produced dozens of research papers, held eight meetings of the full commission, six public hearings, two panel discussions, a symposium, and a series of regional meetings.

Recognizing that education is a national challenge, the Commission's report signaled the need for national leadership in reforming the entire system of education. For the first time in American history, the President used his bully pulpit to define the

problems in the Nation's public education. During the first 12 months following the release of the report, the media quoted President Reagan over 100 times as referring to its findings and recommendations. Further, the Commission and its activities mobilized a wide range of societal interests, resources, and expertise to address educational problems. Building on the work of the Commission, two subsequent national educational summits involved the President, the governors, businesses, as well as civic and educational leaders. Finally, the report challenges the legitimacy of the "educational establishment" in its findings and recommendations.

Given the significance of the report, Vanderbilt's Peabody Center for Education Center and the Dean's Office at Peabody College have organized various activities to assess the effects of the report's recommendations on improving schools and student performance as the report marks its 20th anniversary. Vanderbilt's Peabody Center for Education Policy has organized a speaker forum to generate fresh ideas on the report's recommendations during the fall of 2003. This special issue of the Peabody Journal of Education will examine the underlying assumptions of the report, the context within which the commission's work was situated, and the effects of the report in improving teaching and learning as well as the performance of the public educational system.

A Nation at Risk: Findings and Recommendations in Context

The state of the national economy was a key concern underlying the Commission's strong criticism and sweeping recommendations. At the time the report was written, Asian nations seemed to be quickly overtaking American manufacturing and high-tech industries. As the report stated, "The risk is not only that the Japanese make

automobiles more efficiently than Americans . . . It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe” (p.7).

This focus on commerce was not surprising given the circumstances of the times. U.S. economic standing relative to other countries did seem to be declining. The trade deficit was growing rapidly. The 1970's and early 1980's was the occasion of an improbable combination of high inflation and unemployment, provoking concern that this was more than just an economic cycle. It appeared that our crisis was due to our own failures, as well as others' successes.

America's apparent lack of competitiveness also appeared to carry over to military affairs – a second, but lesser, focus of the report. Relations with the Soviet Union were on the decline as President Reagan embarked upon a massive arms build-up. Shoring up the military required producing, not only additional planes and tanks, but more advanced high-tech weapons, as well. Just as an inadequate workforce apparently yielded low-quality cars, so too did it produce inadequate weaponry. Thus, the report concluded that in the wake of the “Sputnik challenge,” America was engaging in “unilateral educational disarmament” (p.5).

The Commission also found high rates of illiteracy and low average test scores for American students relative to those in other industrialized nations. Declines were found in the level of achievement over time – in the College Board (SAT), national assessments, and other measures of “higher order thinking skills.” From this, the report concluded “for the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents” (p.11).

Based on these interrelated findings, the report makes recommendations that fall into five categories: (1) Standards and Expectations; (2) Academic Content; (3) Time on Task; (4) Teacher Quality; and (5) School Leadership and Fiscal Support. Perhaps the greatest legacy of *A Nation at Risk* is the subsequent implementation of its recommendations about raising standards. High school graduation requirements, more stringent content requirements, and other policies aimed at raising standards have become commonplace since the report's release.

Acceptance of other recommendations from the report has been sporadic. The direct influence of NAR is in part diffused by the release of about a dozen other major reports on education, work force productivity, and governmental performance during 1983 and 1984. For example, the 1983 National Task Force on Education and Economic Growth called for a more flexible teacher pay structure, integration of technology in schools, and alternative teacher certification. Nonetheless, several school reform initiatives are related to the NAR. Students whose parents are highly educated are doing more homework, but the change in behavior by other students appears minimal. Suggestions regarding teacher training are still discussed often, and some efforts have been made toward improving the quality of teacher education programs. However, while teachers' salaries have increased, their salaries relative to other professionals remain a contentious issue.

Equally noteworthy are recent reforms that *A Nation at Risk* did not anticipate. The theme of education in the 1990's has been *accountability*. Many claim that competition among schools through school choice programs (including vouchers, tuition tax credits, and charter schools) will force schools to compete, thereby creating incentives

for school improvement. Standardized testing is also motivated by demand for accountability because schools cannot be held responsible for their performance unless there is some way to measure it. While *A Nation at Risk* did make reference to test scores as *evidence* of school failure, there was no suggestion that more testing would represent part of the solution.

Revisiting *A Nation at Risk*

Much has changed since *A Nation at Risk* was released in 1983. Research has reinforced and contradicted basic conclusions and assumptions about what works in education. New studies on the functioning of our brains have redefined the way we teach and learn. Just as importantly, the economic stagnation and Cold War anxiety of the 1970's and 1980's has been replaced by international peace and economic growth throughout the 1990s. Not coincidentally, the public's mood about the direction of the nation has improved. Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the American public has gradually restored some confidence in governmental institutions.

The purpose of this special issue is to address three broad questions: First, was America's education system really putting the nation at risk in the early 1980s? In other words, to what extent and in what ways did the conclusions of *A Nation at Risk* reflect legitimate causes for concern versus convenient opportunities to advance other agendas?

Second, what is the legacy of *A Nation at Risk*? What effect did the report have on student learning, issues of curriculum and instruction, and the overall direction of education policy? In particular, which of the suggested policies were actually implemented? Did the implemented policies improve education quality? What important policies were adopted that were not mentioned in the report?

Third, given our current knowledge on education and human development, we will restate the report's overall concern: What risks and opportunities lay before the nation today, and how will they affect the notion of a "learning society" and our public education system? Specifically, to what degree does *No Child Left Behind* address these risks and opportunities or are other reforms also necessary?

Contributors to this volume represent diverse disciplines and policy perspectives. Taken as whole, the seven articles address the three broad issues that we have identified regarding the past, current, and future of educational reform in the United States.

Several of the authors examine the framing and reframing of *A Nation at Risk*. In "*A Nation at Risk* Revisited: Did "Wrong" Reasoning Result in "Right" Results? At What Cost?" Guthrie and Springer reassess the validity of the major assumptions behind the rationale of the Commission's findings and policy recommendations. Drawing on a wealth of data on student performance and economic trends, the authors argue that the report "was wrong in its reasoning, even if right in its recommendations and results." The Commission's recommendations, as Guthrie and Springer observe, have contributed to a "vastly enhanced federal governmental presence in American education."

Harris, Handel, and Mishel, in "Education and the Economy Revisited: How Schools Matter," revisit a central proposition of the Commission's report, namely, educational failures contributed to economic decline. In reviewing extensive evidence on the relationship between school and economy, the authors question the assumption that schools were failing to train a productive workforce. Even more fundamentally, the article argues that policy analysts tend to exaggerate (and perhaps simply) the role that schools play in fostering economic growth. As the authors conclude, "The school is only

one factor affecting worker cognitive skills. Cognitive skills are only one factor affecting productivity. And productivity is only one of many determinants of economic prosperity and competitiveness.”

This special issue also considers the context and paradigms of educational reform. Drawing on the literature as well as his own experience in school reform and governance, Viteritti examines the politics of the Commission’s work and how it contributed to ongoing efforts to improve schooling quality over time. While he acknowledged that NAR gave “velocity to the standards movement,” Viteritti call attention the need for capacity building in urban districts.

Focusing on the federal role in elementary and secondary education, Wong and Nicotera argue that NAR offers a “third way” in school reform. The Commission’s attention to standards-based reform constituted an alternative to the competing policy paradigms, namely equity versus efficiency. NAR’s standards-driven perspective, as the article observed, has shaped the policy development of federal Title I, including its latest version in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Two articles examine NAR’s impact on curriculum, instruction, and school leadership. Addressing one of the NAR’s central concerns, Smith examines the trend in raising educational standards in the last twenty years. In “Curricular reform in mathematics and science since *A Nation at Risk*,” Smith documents the substantial progress in getting more students to meet a core curriculum and increasing enrollment in advanced mathematics and science courses. These gains in course taking, however, also raise new concerns about high stakes testing and achievement gaps.

Whole school reform represents one important example of the reforms that have been spawned by the pressures of NAR -- what Berends calls the "ripple effect" -- but which were not obviously present in the report itself. Berends writes specifically about New American Schools (NAS), which includes threads from leadership improvement and curriculum reform. While these were clearly important parts of NAR, whole school reform is a distinctly different fabric that goes beyond simple requirements for increased "time on task" or "higher standards." Indeed, the approach appears to contradict NAR in its emphasis on comprehensive, school-level reform, as opposed to top-down requirements placed on all schools collectively. The chapter highlights the complex ways in which the policy debate have evolved and developed in the past two decades.

Finally, Caboni and Adisu consider the impact of the Commission's recommendations in post secondary education. In "*A Nation at Risk* after twenty years: Continuing implications for higher education," the authors examined a wide range of issues that intersect K-12 and higher education, including curriculum alignment, remediation for entering college freshmen, teacher preparation, and the climate of increased accountability. In short, all seven articles in this special issue address critical issues of educational challenge as our nation commemorates the 20th anniversary of the historic publication of NAR.