

The Hidden Agenda of the Report on Excellence

If the U.S. is "at risk," it is because schools have too many responsibilities, too few priorities.

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Here's a short reading comprehension test for all of you who have read *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education.

The *main* point of the report is that we should:

- (a) have merit pay for teachers
- (b) raise teachers' salaries
- (c) have prayer in the school and tuition tax credits
- (d) use more federal funds to support education
- (e) none of the above.

In the event that you have not read the report, you should be told immediately that the correct answer is (e), "none of the above." If you answered (a), (b), (c), or (d), you have probably been reading the newspapers and magazines or watching TV debates between educational experts and politicians—all of whom seem to be living proof of the main point of the report, which is that our schools are not developing the intellectual skills we need to compete with other industrialized nations.

President Reagan's initial response to the report, incredibly, was (c), which he has since changed to (a). Democrats and liberals, almost equally incredibly, respond resoundingly with (d), and the NEA and AFT reach accord with (b).

In their typically technocratic way,

these leaders ignore a discussion of *ends* and a thoughtful analysis of the allegations and instead focus on *means*, on quick fixes to a problem they do not adequately understand. And, of course, their solutions are all in terms of what their respective constituencies want to hear.

For all of its faults, the report does not deserve these mindless reactions. It is generally even-handed, stating that education is "only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem" (of our competitive weakness in the world), and it cautions us to "avoid the unproductive tendency of some to search for scapegoats among the victims, such as the beleaguered teachers."

The major emphasis of the report is on *content* and *time*. Required courses

have decreased, electives have increased, and students have "migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to 'general track' courses in large numbers." In 1964, only 12 percent were taking a general program; in 1979, 42 percent were. Fewer students are taking foreign languages, mathematics, U.S. government, and fourth-year English. More and more elect from the "curricular smorgasbord . . . appetizers and desserts . . . which are mistaken for the main courses": home economics, physical education, driver education, training for marriage and adulthood, and other "personal service and development courses." Because of this alone, less *time* is spent on the academic areas, but additionally less time is spent on homework, less time is spent in school

Photo by Sister Paula Drass, 3rd Prize Winner, 1983 Photo Contest



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(compared to other nations), and time spent in school is often used ineffectively.

The causes of the situation are not explained by the Commission, though some are alluded to: college and high school graduation requirements and college admissions requirements may lack sufficient rigor, and the states may require or expect too little of students.

The report does not mention the sins of commission of the states as well: in Illinois, for example, state law and the state board of education mandate that school children be taught "driver and physical education, health, safety, career and conservation education, and even honesty, justice, kindness and humane treatment of animals."¹ This should come as no surprise to us, as the schools in our society, says the Commission, "are routinely called upon to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve. . . . These demands . . . exact an educational cost as well as a financial one."

What the Public Wants

The resulting smorgasbord in education, though deprecated by the Commission, is embraced by the public; indeed, its major attitude is not that the schools are doing too much, it's that they should do more. Consider the Gallup Poll findings in Figure 1.

The large number of respondents who felt the schools were not doing enough in many areas reveals a strong ambivalence toward the schools: on the one hand, a high level of expectation and faith in what the schools can do; on the other hand, a disappointment in performance.

In general, Americans are satisfied with their schools, and the hysterical hyperbole of the Commission ("If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war") is falling on deaf ears. The Gallup Polls show very little change in the public's grading of the schools over the last five years (see Figure 2).

A recent report compiled by *Better Homes and Gardens* was even more positive (see Figure 3). The Gallup Poll takes a scientifically random sample of the population; the BHG survey, precisely because it was random but sampled those who voluntarily mailed in the

Figure 1. Gallup Poll Findings on the Public's Perception of the Attention Schools Focus on These Areas.

	Too Much %	Not Enough %	Right Amount %	Don't Know %
1. Developing students' moral and ethical character	2	62	21	15
2. Teaching students how to think	2	59	25	14
3. Preparing students who do not go to college for a job or career after graduation	2	56	29	13
4. Preparing students to become informed citizens prepared to vote at 18	2	55	28	15
5. Preparing students for college	3	43	39	15
6. Developing students' appreciation of art, music, and other cultural interests	7	37	41	15

Figure 2. The Public's Grading of the Schools According to the Gallup Poll.

Ratings given the public schools	National Totals				
	1982 %	1981 %	1980 %	1979 %	1978 %
A rating	8	9	10	8	9
B rating	29	27	25	26	27
C rating	33	34	29	30	30
D rating	14	13	12	11	11
FAIL	5	7	6	7	8
Don't know	11	10	18	18	15

Figure 3. Better Homes and Gardens Survey. How do you rate the quality of education offered at your children's school?

	TOTAL	Age of Respondent			Education of Respondent		
		Under 35	35-39	60 & Over	H.S. grad. or less	Attended college, graduated	Graduate work
Excellent	30%	32%	30%	21%	26%	30%	35%
Satisfactory	49	46	52	34	51	49	48
Poor	11	8	12	21	14	11	7

Note: Percentages are based on the number of respondents indicating they have children in school.

questionnaire, represents higher-than-average income levels, home ownership, and female respondents (82 per-



Kenneth Bowers

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cent). This population is generally more knowledgeable about schools, more apt to vote on school board issues, and is closer to the children attending school—hence, perhaps, a more reliable population than the Gallup sample.

These surveys of public opinion hardly show a widespread dissatisfaction with the schools. Additionally, those under 35, who are more likely to have several children in school, are more satisfied, as are those who have the most education themselves.

More Time Needed

Once we understand that the proliferation of nonacademic “personal development” and “general track” courses is really what the public wants (and may even be what we need to solve various social problems), and once we understand that these courses have diluted the *time* we can spend on the courses that develop our intellectual skills and economic productivity, only one solution is possible. We must spend more time teaching our children. Either the school day or the school year must be lengthened. And if we require more time of our teachers, we must pay them more (although we should pay them more in any case). And to do this, we must increase our taxes.

The distinguished members of the Commission—which include a Nobel Laureate, university presidents, scholars, and seasoned school teachers, administrators, and board members—are not fools. They surely cannot expect massive, voluntary tax increases to be accepted in America in these recession-ridden times. Nor can they expect Americans to embrace their suggestion to lengthen the school year from 180 to 220 days (an additional eight weeks) or to lengthen the school day. (The 1982 Gallup Poll found 37 percent favored a 210-day school year while 53 percent opposed it. Almost identical responses were made to extending the school day by one hour—37 percent in favor, 55 percent opposed.)

This recommendation has to be regarded as a diversion. Yet if we need more time to teach the additional science, mathematics, English, social studies, computer science, and foreign languages the Commission recommends, where will it come from?

Forced Choices

Inevitably, much as we would like to have everything, we will be forced to

choose between surviving in a tougher, more competitive international market and retaining the “personal development” and “general track” courses. Computer science or driver education? The choice seems easy. It is not.

The reform of education will create job displacements that will be difficult to engineer and will be resisted by the NEA and AFT. Can tenured driver educators be retrained to teach computer science? The powerful constituencies behind our curricular smorgasbord will not sit idle. Apart from student or parent preferences between computer science and driver education, we may discern a conflict between IBM and General Motors, a conflict between Digital Computer and the automobile insurance giants.

Is there an identifiable constituency for more foreign languages? Marriage and family courses can probably marshal Planned Parenthood, the Population Council, and a host of other liberal groups. It is inevitable that our society must prepare for difficult confrontations and expect acrimonious conflict. Change and reform create winners and losers. This is the hidden agenda of the report.

Perhaps some master tactician has realized this and has counseled Reagan, the Democrats, and the teacher unions to create smokescreens and diversions so that the crucial reordering of curricular priorities can occur outside the glare of publicity. If this be so and the reordering takes place, all well and good. The danger, however, is that the reordering will not be done.

In 1955, another official report, that of the White House Conference on Education, stated:

Many a school which seemed good enough a generation ago now seems a disgrace to the community where it stands. . . . We recommend that school authorities emphasize the importance of *priorities* in education. . . . There is a real danger that in attempting to do everything a little, schools may end by doing nothing well.²

We have mindlessly avoided setting clear priorities over these last 28 years. We have been all things to all students, and by doing nothing well we have become *A Nation at Risk*. □

¹Education Week, June 8, 1983, p. 13.

²Committee for the White House Conference on Education, *A Report to the President* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955).

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