

On Excellence and Mediocrity: A Conversation with Milton Goldberg

A former school administrator in the Philadelphia schools and later Acting Director of the National Institute of Education, Milton Goldberg is Executive Director of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The Commission was right, he insists, to call American education "mediocre."



ities that until then had been closed to them. When our military points out that the literacy level of many of the recruits is so low they cannot read simple training manuals, I think we've got to be concerned about that.

Why did the report present such a negative picture of American education? There are lots of things positive that could have been said, but about the only place they appear is in the "we can do it" section near the end.

I do not see the report that way, but if that's what people feel it says, then it may be a failing, because that was not the intention of the Commission. There are sprinklings of praise earlier than that, Ron. We referred to "heroic examples" of excellence, and we recognized the enormous contributions schools have made over the years to the well being of the nation. We could have devoted even more space to positive examples, but the Commission felt it was very important to draw the attention of the American people to the central issue.

The word "mediocrity," has captured a lot of attention and made some educators angry, but according to the dictionary, "mediocrity" means "ordinariness." Now, we've talked to a lot of people, including educators, who feel that that's the right term. It's not so much related to the achievement of schools as to our expectations—what we've come to accept. Getting a C appears to be as good as getting an A or B. It's not so clear that it's important to work hard. That's true not just of our schools and our youngsters, but of the society as a whole.

Yes, there are references in the report to growing impatience with shoddiness in American life. That suggests it's very difficult to separate a society from its schools and vice versa. It also suggests it may be very hard to bring about improvement.

When I talk to audiences about the report I tell them that just worrying about the recommendations will not get at all the crucial issues. On the other hand, we can't tie ourselves up in Gordian knots waiting for society to change.

RON BRANDT

What has been your role with the Commission on Excellence?

As Executive Director I headed a small staff of individuals who essentially did the work the Commission assigned to us: scheduling, arranging visits to schools, commissioning of papers, analyzing data of various sorts, and so on.

Does the report reflect your views, then?

First, let me say *A Nation At Risk* is the Commission's report. Every member can point to some aspect of the statement as his or her personal contribution. Another thing that makes it so powerful is that there are no minority reports. Here were 18 individuals with very different orientations—a high school teacher, a superintendent of schools, a principal, a business leader, presidents of universities—and they reached consensus.

I agree with the report. There may be specific things I would express differently, but I think that is true of each of the Commission members.

Has the response been what Commission members hoped for?

They hoped for an expression of nationwide concern around the issues that

they believed needed attention and it's clear they've gotten that.

By using terms like "unilateral educational disarmament," the report implies that the purpose of education is to prepare our populace for military and economic competition with other countries. That may be appropriate in communist countries, where decisions about education are made in the interest of the state, but in a democracy we are more concerned with individual fulfillment. Do you think it is appropriate in our country to make educational decisions on the basis of national interest?

To make them only in the name of national interest would be to lose sight of the importance of the individual, but I don't believe that's the intention of the report. On the other hand, conceiving of education only in terms of the individual overlooks the immense contributions of American education to the well being of the nation. How can we forget that millions of immigrant children were provided access through education to the best that American society had to offer, and over the last couple of decades education has opened doors to minor-

We have an opportunity for leadership.

Do you see similarities between the Commission's report and some of the other recent reports on education?

I've had the good fortune to sit on a fair number of panels with people from the other studies and I find these studies quite symmetrical. There are some obvious differences, but the essential conclusions support one another. John Goodlad's book begins with a statement far more pessimistic than any statement in our report suggesting the possible collapse of public schools. Ernie Boyer's book talks about very serious problems in the schools and suggests we are closer to mediocrity than to excellence, but to his credit, Ernie points out various good things he saw as well.

Let me ask about two or three findings cited in *A Nation At Risk*. One is the increase in the proportion of students taking the "general" program from 12 percent to 42 percent. Any idea of the reasons for that trend?

I think it can be traced to the growth of electives in the schools and evolution of the idea that credit in English, science, or social studies is no more important than credit in any other course. That has made it hard for students to see what represented the central academic program as differentiated from the other programs.

I think there was something else, however. During this same period our standards and expectations for youngsters suffered. It became harder and harder for us to state our goals, or even to know whether we had any. That's not to suggest that some kids didn't get a good program in the general course, but even the name shows we're less certain of its purpose.

Three school districts I have been associated with made a deliberate decision to stop classifying students according to those three tracks. Is it possible that some high schools report all of their students as "general" because they simply don't have three official programs?

I don't know for sure. We didn't gather those data ourselves; we got them from the National Center for Education Statistics. But as you probably know, we did look at a random sample of high school transcripts, so we were able to glean something from them.

I was surprised to find no documentation in the report—no references to research or other sources. Why wasn't the report documented?

Everything in the report, except for the Commission's conclusions, came from the sources listed in the back. If anybody calls us and asks for the source of particular pieces of data we can provide it and have done so.

In some ways the Commission's decision about format of the report was among the more important they made. They chose not to footnote everything because their purpose would be best served if their report didn't look like (1) a federal report or (2) a research report. They didn't try to reproduce all the data they had gathered. The report represents the Commission's conclusions about that data and their recommendations.

Speaking of those recommendations, how did the members decide that a much longer year and more required courses was the answer? On what basis are those recommendations made?

I want to make clear that the main recommendation about time is that school districts make more efficient use of their *present* time. Beyond that, however, the Commission wanted to make the point that we ought not to be bound by the traditional length of day or year—that if more time was needed, changes should be made.

As for the curriculum recommendations, the Commission's term, the "New Basics," is somewhat metaphorical and half-facetious, because, except for computer science those are by-and-large the courses you and I took in high school. The Commission felt that given the very rapid changes in society and our inability to project exactly what skills will be needed, it's best to provide a solid core program for all youngsters. They felt strongly that having this kind of program did not restrict the possibility of providing good vocational programs, programs in the arts and humanities, and so on. They were convinced that it would be an enormously important stabilizing influence to have all youngsters study the basic areas.

That was the pattern in American high schools at one time. If it worked, why didn't we just keep doing it?

The Commission spent some time reviewing trends over the last 30 years or so. They found that as the population of

our schools became more diverse, it was thought to be in the best interest of the youngsters to differentiate. They concluded in retrospect that it had not been in their best interest; that schools should have diverse *materials* but not a completely different *curriculum*.

I participated in some of those decisions to loosen graduation requirements. One of my values is that people should do things not because I decide for them but because they decide for themselves. I had a vision of parents and counselors thoughtfully helping students make the right decisions. You're saying that the evidence gathered by the Commission shows we didn't live up to that ideal very well.

No. Parents have to play a much larger role in helping guide their youngsters and in providing the proper learning environment and support for the school. But I don't think we've given parents and students all the help they need to fulfill their appropriate roles.

The Commission report specifically calls on students and their parents to assume more responsibility. That's more than a rhetorical statement. But we educators have to pay more attention to the specific skills youngsters need in order to be able to take charge of their own learning. That's especially apt in light of the calls for more homework.

It's clear that students aren't going to learn all they need to learn in school, but homework is not unlike the inefficiently used school day. The issue involves the kinds of skills the youngster must bring to the homework and the kinds of support the home has to provide. Those are the matters we've got to raise aggressively with the larger community. We have to say, "Okay, we've got responsibilities, but so does everybody else."

I'd like to return for a moment to the recommendation that school districts and state legislators strongly consider a longer school day and a 220-day school year. Is that a realistic recommendation in light of present financial conditions?

The Commission members realized that some of their recommendations were going to be costly. Their views about money, if I remember their conversa-

tions accurately, were similar to their views about time. You don't want a 7 hour day until you're certain that the present 6 hours are being well used. On the other hand, you don't want to put off what might be a good decision forever while you're making sure everything is exactly right. The same is true of money. The Commission believes that in reshaping the school program, in redefining and refocusing the mission of the schools, some reallocation of resources will be necessary. But some additional resources may also be needed.

I'm pleased to say there seems to be interest in a lot of states and localities in providing more resources for the schools. But that puts an extra burden on us. As states and localities debate the issues, increase taxes, allocate additional funds, we've got to do an even better job of making clear how we're spending those dollars. The Commission's view was summarized in the line, "Excellence costs but mediocrity costs more."

Another recommendation is the one dealing with grade placement of students, which calls for grouping students according to their academic progress rather than "rigid adherence to age." Most educators are well aware of the problems in this area. Some of the most difficult decisions I had to make as a school principal were between two equally undesirable choices; neither promotion nor retention made any sense for some students. So I was disappointed to see those words because the Commission seemed to be joining the nationwide attack on social promotion without helping the general public understand the complexity of the matter.

That's probably an example of the way we omitted discussions that might have been useful in order to produce a brief, punchy, dramatic statement. I agree that the promotion issue is complicated. The Commission did conclude, however, that schools need to find ways to reward effort. It's not only a matter of figuring out what to do with youngsters who are not doing well; it's equally important to think about the youngsters who are doing well. We've got a lot to learn about that and that's one of the areas where I hope some models will begin to evolve.

There have been efforts to change the entire school organization to cope with that very problem. They are

generally referred to as "individualized instruction" and one well-developed model—still in use—is known as Individually Guided Education. There may have been mistakes, but I think those efforts were in the right direction. Perhaps the Commission should have told the American people that schools need to get away from classifying students by grade levels.

I think that's quite right. That may be analogous to the constraints of the traditional school day and year and maybe that's something we could have said more explicitly—that to come to grips with this amalgam of issues we need to break the bonds that have constrained us. The school day and year are obvious, but another one is probably the school organization itself.

There seems to be a certain ambiguity in the report about the federal government's role in curriculum development. At one point the report says the federal government should be involved in "curriculum improvement."

Yes.

But not curriculum development?

Well, they called it curriculum improvement. What form it would take depends on what the field has to say about it.

The report also said that before instructional materials are put on the market they ought to be tested; there ought to be evidence that they have contributed to student learning. Ken Komoski¹ of EPIE called for "learner verification" for years, but there was no response from publishers. It's probably unrealistic to expect publishers to put that much money into testing their materials, so if the recommendation is going to be followed, something more specific has to happen.

Yes, I think there's a lot yet to be said on that issue. Improvement of textbooks and other materials is a real concern. It's going to require imaginative leadership and probably, as we said earlier, some breaking of the bonds that presently constrain us.

Another question: the Commission praised the educational achievements of several nations, all of which have strong national ministries of education

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somewhat insulated from local political influences, and yet concludes that we can achieve the same results with our highly decentralized system. How did they reach that conclusion?

I believe it was on the basis of the success we've enjoyed in the past—success not in spite of diversity, but because of it. The Commission did not point out the failings of countries with centralized systems because they wanted to focus on some issues Americans ought to be concerned about. By stating that there were some successes in those countries they were not suggesting that we ought to emulate those countries. They felt, rather, that we should use the power of diversity, which we've always been proud of in this country, and—in the American tradition—upgrade the schools to a point where they will once again be better than schools anywhere in the world.

What should local administrators be doing, then?

They must address the reform issue in terms of their own local conditions. Anybody who has ever worked in a local school system and doesn't say that has forgotten what he did there. We also must recognize that upgrading the curriculum, for example, inevitably raises concerns about time, about the quality of the teaching force, about shortages of special kinds of teachers, and so on. In other words, all these issues are connected to all the other issues. And while we don't want to let the recognition of that inhibit us from making hard decisions about what we need to do today, we must not forget those connections—because if we don't worry about part B today, we're going to have to worry about it tomorrow. □

¹P. Kenneth Komoski, "Learner Verification: Touchstone for Instructional Materials?" *Educational Leadership* 31 (February 1974): 397-399.

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