

# The Essential Points of *A Nation at Risk*

The National Commission on Excellence intended to say that education is important, that schools are tilting toward mediocrity, and that America should have the best.

MILTON GOLDBERG

With four or five million copies now in print, *A Nation at Risk* is one of the most widely read reports on education ever issued in this country. Its 36 pages of text are the result of 14 months of intense activity by the 18 members of the Commission on Excellence, who could have produced a report ten to 20 times that length. In the end, we opted for getting our message across as briefly and unequivocally as possible. In my view, the Commission intended to deliver several essential messages. Whether or not they were actually delivered in *A Nation at Risk* is a matter of personal perspective.

### Three Essential Messages

First, the report affirms something that has been part of our consciousness almost from the beginnings of our country, which is that inattention to our schools puts the well-being of the nation at risk. While there are many issues we need to address in correcting the ills of American society, education is the one factor that undergirds our prosperity, our security, and our stability. So the Commission's central message is that if you care about your country, you must care about your country's schools.

The second message, perhaps as controversial as any thing in the report, is that American schools are tilting toward mediocrity and not toward excellence—even though the Commission saw and paid homage to many examples of excellent teaching, excellent programs, and first-rate student accomplishment. One of the reasons the Commission reached that conclusion is that we *did* see those examples of remarkable effort and accomplishment and were able to contrast those examples with the other—mediocre—things we saw and heard.

The third essential message of the report is that this country does not have to put up with a mediocre educational system. *A Nation at Risk* pays tribute to the accomplishments of American education and the ways in which this country has responded, at all levels, to the crises it has confronted. The point is that we *can* expect the best and we ought to work to get it.

### Five Recommendations

Beyond these three major messages, *A Nation at Risk* made five specific recommendations, which concern the "five alterables" that educators, parents, and citizens can affect now and over the next few years to improve conditions in schools. These are not the only things that need attention, but the five that are at the heart of improving instruction.

The first alterable is the *curriculum*. We must look at what we are presently doing in schools and decide whether or not those things are in the service of our central mission. Should we be using time for the courses we are presently teaching? Are there ways to improve the use of the school day in order to address what the Commission calls the Five New Basics?

The second alterable is *time*; whether the time of the entire school day is used

the way we want to use it. The Commission understood that to lengthen an already inefficient day does not make good sense. You must first determine that your present time is being used efficiently and for the right purposes. If you still need more time to accomplish your purposes, the Commission recommends lengthening the day or year, or doing whatever is needed to provide youngsters with the learning they need.

The third alterable has to do with *standards and expectations*. The Commission essentially concluded that we are expecting less and getting it, and that we need to do something about that. The standards and expectations we have for youngsters in school are in some cases a spillover from the way we view things in our larger society. And this has to do with the responsibility accepted by all adults for children's education, an issue I will address later on.

The fourth recommendation concerns *teaching*—not merit pay. The report says that teaching is not an honored profession in American society and that it won't be until it can provide teachers with adequate status (meaning more money), less disruption from essential tasks, differentiated salaries, and some way to recognize outstanding performance. Unless we address the question of teacher status in American society, the other reforms are most unlikely to be accomplished.

The fifth recommendation concerns the place of *leadership* in carrying out these reforms. The Commission addresses the central importance of the principal, the superintendent, and the commissioners of education in providing the necessary leadership to address all of these issues. The way issues are addressed and resolutions are implemented will differ from community to community and from state to state. But

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in order for that to happen, we need responsible leadership at all levels—local, state, and federal.

#### Four Points Worth Noting

Finally, I'd like to mention four points that are discussed in the report at some length, but which have received relatively little attention in the press and even among educators. They tend not to be discussed because they are not listed in the recommendations.

The first point concerns what the report referred to as the learning society. The Commission believed that one of the reasons we have the kinds of schools we have today in many communities is that we don't care enough about learning. Not just in schools, but in America, learning is seen as something you do in the first quarter of your life to get a job later. And then you coast. The report says that in order for schools to really be the kinds of places we would like them to be, we must all become better models. We must all demonstrate that we care about learning more, not just in the schools, but in all of our institutions, and that we must praise learning and teaching more in all our institutions. We must demonstrate as adults that learning is not just some-

thing for kids. It is for all of us because, as a matter of fact, we never stop learning. We should be conscious of that, and proud of it.

The second point concerns a message to parents and students, which has not been said often enough in recent years: The essential responsibility for learning rests with the parent *and* the student. This refers back to the third alterable of standards and expectations. Our expectation should be that students are going to manage, and we must make that message clear to parents and students. No matter what the conditions of the home, the student must take some responsibility for learning, a responsibility that increases as the student gets older. We, as educators, must make the message clear to parents and students in a direct way. We, as parents, must show that we recognize our own importance in the learning process, as well as the central nature of the student's responsibility.

The third point has to do with a question I am sometimes asked: Can you have excellence and equity, too? I say, if you can't, then something is terribly wrong with our society. Equal access to a mediocre education is an empty promise. We must continue to

strive for access and equity, but not at the expense of a high quality education or vice versa. Equity and access are not inseparable, but they should be.

The fourth point I want to make as a former elementary school principal. A *Nation at Risk* and many of the other reports that have come out recently have focused on the high school. But anybody who has ever worked with young children knows that if something good doesn't happen at the elementary level, there is not a heck of a lot you can do when they get to the high school. So my fourth point is that the first eight years of school must provide the base for whatever happens later. While there have been improvements in many school districts, particularly in the lower grades, we must do an even better job in those K-8 years than we have in the past.

I'd like to summarize all these messages, recommendations, and points with a brief statement from *A Nation at Risk*:

It is the America of all of us that is at risk, it is to each of us that this imperative is addressed. It is by our willingness to take up the challenge and our resolve to see it through that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again. □

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