The various commissions, panels, and task forces issuing reports on American education reveal an appalling lack of understanding of the function of general education in a free society.
Leopards break into the temple, and drink the sacrificial chalices dry. This occurs repeatedly, again and again; finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and become a part of the ceremony.

—Franz Kafka

Since midcentury American public education has been buffeted incessantly by conflicting clamors for reform. Each clamor for reform is eventually met by a clamor for counterreform to undo the excesses of the previous one. The schools have become so inured to attacks from every conceivable and inconceivable source that they have come to regard these attacks as part of the ceremony.

Yet the schools have not been intransigent. Nor have they sought to marshall their defenses against destructive attacks while moving to benefit from constructive criticism. Instead, by and large, the ceremonial response of the schools has been to ride the dominant sociopolitical tide of the times. Witness how readily the schools shifted from the back-to-basics retrenchment of the early 1950s to discipline-centered curricula and the pursuit of academic excellence—with priority on the sciences and mathematics—during the late 50s and early 60s.

From there, the schools responded to the call for "relevance" and "humanizing" the curriculum in the late 60s and early 70s, only to return to the basics in the late 70s and early 80s. And now, heading toward the mid-80s, they are once again seeking "academic excellence"—with priority on the sciences and mathematics.

Witness also the shift from emphasis on the gifted and talented during the era of the Cold War and space race, to the priority given the disadvantaged during the "war on poverty," and now back again to the gifted and talented. Innovations have been promoted and discarded segmentally like fads and fashions— instructional television, teaching machines and programmed instruction, team teaching and differentiated staffing, modular-flexible scheduling, independent study, mastery learning, and so on. Reforms ranging from the new mathematics to the open classroom have been painstakingly adopted and painlessly discarded.

No less than any other era, the contemporary scene is marked by waves of conflicting and contradictory criticism and reinvented demands for reform. Following an era of damaging retrenchment, public school educators may be justified in hesitating to find fault with any of the recent reports and studies of our schools when these documents call for a vast increase in our investment in education. But unless the profession sorts out the contradictory demands and prescriptions for reform, the schools will continue to be buffeted by conflicting demands and will ride whatever sociopolitical tide is dominant.

A Nation at Risk

In the current welter of reports and studies, the media have devoted the

"Unless the profession sorts out the contradictory prescriptions for reform, schools will continue to be buffeted by conflicting demands and will ride whatever sociopolitical tide is dominant."
Most of the recent reports on educational reform point to the need for a common core of studies in our secondary schools.
more rigorous in content, but makes no mention of the need to combat the censorship of school books and other curricular materials. The report gives lip service to our world as a "global village" and the democratizing function of our schools, but fails to broach the need for international understanding. Instead, the schools are regarded narrowly as instruments for regaining our dominance over world markets. No mention is made of the fact that the largest and fastest growing sector in the world economy is in military production and trade. No mention is made of the cost of this global military-industrial commerce to the health of our nation's economy and the corresponding neglect of our social well-being.

In short, this thin report of 36 pages, completed at a cost of almost half a million dollars over a period of almost two years, is a great disappointment. Chaired by the recently appointed President of the University of California and including in its membership such academic luminaries as A. Bartlett Giammetti, President of Yale, and Glenn T. Seaborg, Nobel laureate and former President of the University of California, the report of the Commission on Excellence should have produced a paragon of excellence. Instead, the Commission resorted to superficial analysis, distortions of data, and reckless accusations.

**Action for Excellence**

Within weeks of the appearance of *A Nation at Risk*, the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, sponsored by the Education Commission of the States, issued its report, *Action for Excellence*. The membership of the Task Force included 13 governors, 14 chief executives of major corporations, six educators, four leaders of educational organizations, and one head of an industrial labor union. The tone and content of *Action for Excellence* are very similar to *A Nation at Risk*. Such words and phrases as "emergency," "urgency," "crucial to our national survival," "mobilizing," and "global competition" ring through the opening pages of *Action for Excellence*. "Japan, West Germany and other relatively new industrial powers have challenged America's position on the leading edge of change and technical invention," it declares. In a text of only 42 pages, the Task Force offers the needed prescription for regaining our preeminent position in global industrial competition. Echoing the National Commission on Excellence, it calls for broadening the definition of basic skills and emphasizing "mastery of higher order skills" to meet the demand for "highly skilled human capital in the "new era" of "global competition."

Many educators may take heart from the recognition, however belated, that the era of reducing the curriculum to minimum competencies and lowest common-denominator skills through back-to-basics has led to a decline in thinking abilities, and that a new era of curriculum reconstruction has arrived. However, the Task Force reveals no conception of general education to meet the needs of youth in a free society. The broadened basic skills identified in *Action for Excellence* are geared to industrial-business productivity. Appearing in the Appendix of the report is a list of "basic skills and competencies for productive employment" as developed by the business-industrial membership of the Task Force. In addition to basic skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, and science, the Task Force identifies competencies in reasoning, economics, computer literacy, and basic employment. "Good" citizenship is listed under "basic employment." The Task Force does not mention democratic citizenship and what this entails in terms of critically examining the prevailing problems and issues of our times in the perspective of our historic experience. The arts, health, physical education, and recreation are conspicuously absent. More time and intensive work are advocated in the academic subjects while "soft, nonessential" courses are to be eliminated.

Other recommendations of the Task Force include raising teacher salaries and instituting merit pay, increasing federal aid to education, and establishing partnerships between businesses and schools. In connection with these "partnerships," the Task Force advocates that business and industrial leaders "share with school managers (sic) their expertise in planning, budgeting and management," establish "customized job-training efforts between businesses and schools," and conduct "courses actually taught in offices and factories." Existing federal-state supported programs of vocational education are ignored. No mention is made of the dismal failure of earlier programs for engaging business and industry in education and job training for our youth, such as through the job corps programs conducted by business and industry with federal funds.

Early in this century, John Dewey warned that an enlightened, democratic social order requires "a vocational education which does not subject youth to the demands and standards of the present system, but which utilizes its scientific and social factors to develop a courageous intelligence, and to make intelligence practical and effective." To Dewey, a free society cannot use the public school simply to turn out more efficient workers adapted to the present economic regime, but must equip individuals to control their own economic careers and to develop their insight to help bring about a reorganization of industry consonant with a democratic society. In contrast, the Task Force seeks to mold the rising generation to fit the needs of the existing industrial machinery.
EDUCATING AMERICANS FOR THE 21st CENTURY:
A plan of action for improving mathematics, science and technology education for all American elementary and secondary students so that their achievement is the best in the world by 1995.

“...runs through the military-industrial complex, or the failures of our political leadership at national, state, and local levels to meet their campaign promises. No mention is made of the reduction of federal support of school lunch and nutrition programs, nor of the effects of inadequate nutrition on learning.

Like the National Commission on Excellence, the authors of Action for Excellence fail to recognize the need for a coherent curriculum in general education—a curriculum so conceived that our rising generation can develop the social power and insight necessary for effective citizenship and good government in a free society.

School leaders may be reluctant to fault a report that calls for strong federal commitment to education backed by greatly increased financial support. Indeed the precedence for such a commitment is well-established at all levels of education—elementary, secondary, and higher. But if there is a lesson to be learned from the federally supported curricular reform programs of the Cold War era, it is that the wider public interest must not be sacrificed for narrow nationalistic interests. Judging from Action for Excellence, we have not learned this lesson.

Educating for the 21st Century
A more considered report, couched in somewhat less inflammatory language than either A Nation at Risk or Action for Excellence—yet one that is likely to raise at least as many problems and issues as it seeks to solve—is the report by the Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology. This Commission, appointed by the National Science Board of the National Science Foundation, issued its report in September 1983 under the title, Educating Americans for the 21st Century: A Plan of Action for Improving Mathematics, Science, and Technology for All American Elementary and Secondary Students So That Their Achievement is the Best in the World by 1995. The National Science Board (NSB) Commission, chaired by a former U.S. cabinet member, included five college administrators, five college professors, three industrialists, a former Air Force Chief of Staff, one state school administrator, two school administrators, one head of an educational organization, and one TV entertainer.

“The Nation that dramatically and boldly led the world into the age of technology is failing to provide its own children with the intellectual tools needed for the 21st century,” begins the report, which goes on to warn that “Already the quality of our manufactured products, the viability of our trade, our leadership in research and development, and our standards of living are being challenged.” Toward the end are the following statements, reminiscent of the era of the Cold War and space race:

Prepared citizens (especially in science, mathematics and technology as well as other basic academic and technical subjects) are required for the operation of the Nation's essential industries and services, the ability of those industries to compete internationally and for military security...

Federal involvement is necessary when certain critical skills are extremely short or when there is a great need for an urgent program to produce vital talent (e.g., shortages of trained doctors or other medical personnel in wartime or the national response to Sputnik).

Under the caption, “Lessons from Other Countries,” the NSB Commission proceeds to point to the International Study of Mathematics Achievement of 20 years ago and the International Study of Science Achievement of 13 years ago as evidence of our failure. This alleged failure is documented with a reference to Torsten Husen, despite the fact that Husen warned against making the kind of misinterpretations of the findings made by the NSB. In appallingly unscientific fashion, the NSB compares the mass of American 18-year-olds with a small elite of other nations, ignoring Husen’s clear and repeated warnings against comparing a small elite school population, such as in the European nations, with the large comprehensive, and cosmopolitan school population of the U.S. Only after upholding Japan as the appropriate standard does the NSB Commission acknowledge that Japan has a culturally homogeneous student population, and that Japanese high school students must acknowledge that Japan has a culturally homogeneous student population, and that Japanese high school students must survive an examination cauldron under a system of relatively limited opportunities for higher education and upward social mobility.

“We must return to basics, but the ‘basics’ of the 21st century are not only reading, writing, and arithmetic,” declares the NSB Commission. “They
include communication and higher problem-solving skills, and scientific and technological literacy—the thinking tools that allow us to understand the technological world around us." As in the case of other reports of national commissions on education, the schools are blamed for a decline in student thinking abilities. And although the National Assessment test scores are cited as evidence of this decline, the report fails to note the analysis made by the National Assessment staff attributing this decline to the back-to-basics retrenchment that was imposed on the schools during the 1970s.

In addition to raising the requirements in mathematics, science, and technology in K-8, the NSB Commission calls for minimum state-mandated requirements for high school graduation to include three years of mathematics including one year of algebra, and at least three years of science and technology, including one semester of computer science. Statewide performance standards should be instituted, and the federal government should develop and maintain a national mechanism to measure student achievement in order to make national, state, and local comparisons. College entrance requirements should include four years of high school science, including physics, chemistry, and one semester of computer science; and four years of mathematics, including a second year of algebra and course work in probability and statistics.

Although the NSB Commission rightly criticizes the existing segmented and fragmented science curriculum, and calls for curriculum articulation in science, it overlooks the need to address the social implications of science and technology through correlation of the sciences and the social studies for purposes of general education. In seeking to reestablish the priority of science and mathematics over other subjects in the curriculum, the NSB Commission ignores the need to build a coherent curriculum in general education. Moreover, the Commission fails to address the needed relationships between technology and vocational education. Vocational education is virtually dismissed as being concerned with narrow job-related skills.

Choosing to overlook the shortcomings and failures of the unprecedented national curriculum-reform projects during the Cold War era of the 50s and 60s, when the National Science Foundation expended hundreds of millions of dollars for the "new" mathematics and "new" science disciplines in our schools, the NSB Commission recommends that, "The National Science Foundation, which has recognized expertise in leading curriculum development, should again (sic) take the leadership in promoting curriculum evaluation and development for mathematics, science and technology." It also recommends spending several billion federal dollars for this effort over the next six years, as a necessary investment in "our Nation's human capital."

Finally, the NSB Commission calls on the President of the U.S. to immediately appoint a permanent National Education Council to report regularly to the President and to provide leadership in developing, coordinating, and implementing plans to improve and maintain the quality of the nation's elementary and secondary education in mathematics, science, and technology. The Council would establish national goals for education, ensure the necessary assessment of student achievement, and monitor and report annually on the progress being made.

The wider ranging implications of the report of the NSB Commission raise incalculable dangers of establishing the same mechanisms employed by the USSR in subordinating education to the interests of the state. In 1916 Dewey pointed to this danger in tracing the evolution of German nationalism, which turned the schools to serving the interests of the military and in struggles for international supremacy in commerce. As a consequence, the "state" was substituted for humanity and cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism. 11

The Paideia Proposal
Mortimer Adler has long been an advocate and popularizer of the perennialist school of thought. In The Paideia Proposal: A Curriculum Manifesto, Adler speaks for members of his "Paideia Group" in calling for a general, one-track curriculum for all throughout the 12 years of "basic schooling"—with no electives except for the choice of a second language.

His 22-member Paideia Group is dominated by fellow perennialists from the higher echelons of academe, including three Van Dorens from Adler's Institute for Philosophical Research, two leading members of the Council for Basic Education, and a former headmaster of Phillips Academy. However, considering that the membership also included the school superintendents of Chicago and Atlanta, a public high school principal, and the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, it is surprising that there are no dissenting opinions in the report.

Adler's one-track curriculum would consist of:

- The acquisition of organized knowledge by means of didactic instruction in language, literature, and fine arts; mathematics and natural science; and history, geography, and social studies
- Development of intellectual skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening, calculating, and exercising critical judgment
- Enlarged understanding of ideas and values through Socratic questioning

Adler's conception of mind as a muscle to be developed, or as a vessel to be filled, is expressed throughout. He sees
the mind being improved by the acquisition of information; drill and exercise (with the teacher functioning as an athletic coach); and, finally, "raising the mind up from a lesser or weaker understanding to a stronger and more fuller one" by Socratic questioning.

In various sections of the report, Adler misrepresents Dewey's views on vocational education. Dewey was unalterably opposed to vocational training as social predestination. But Dewey called for a kind of vocational education in the comprehensive secondary school that would enhance social sympathy and insight in a democracy, and lead to the improvement of social conditions.

Mortimer Adler's *Manifesto* should be read by educators as a curious artifact of perennialist/essentialist notions on the school curriculum and the nature of the learner.

**The Carnegie Foundation Report**

If any of the current wave of reports on the state of American public education stand out in avoiding accusatory and condemnatory language, and in seeking constructive avenues for improvement, they are *High School* by Ernest Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and *A Place Called School* by John I. Goodlad, former Dean of Education at UCLA. Both of these reports involved actual study of conditions in selected schools throughout the nation, as well as the analysis of other data in formulating recommendations on needed reforms in educational policy and practice.

The Boyer report for the Carnegie Foundation is based on the observations of 25 educators who each spent 20 days visiting 15 public high schools representative of a "cross-section of American public secondary education." A panel of 28 educators and lay citizens served as an advisory capacity. The aim was to identify, through the field visits, ways of improving secondary education. Selective literature and data on education from a variety of sources were also used.

The Boyer report identifies four essential goals and functions of the high school namely that it should help all students:

- Develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through a mastery of language
- Learn about themselves, the human heritage, and the interdependent world in which they live through a core curriculum based on consequential human experiences common to all people
- Prepare for work and further education through a program of electives that develop individual aptitudes and interests
- Fulfill their social and civic obligations through school and community service.

The Boyer report appropriately criticizes the many school-reform proposals for lacking a larger vision, such as represented by the above goals or functions of the high school. Although Boyer criticizes the use of the bookkeeping device known as the "Carnegie unit" in inventorying academic credits, he proposes a core of common learning listed by "academic units" that are virtually identical to Carnegie units. This core, totaling 14½ units, is to consist of the following:

- Language, 5 units (Basic English, writing, 1 unit; literature, 1 unit; speech, ½ unit; foreign language, 2 units; arts, ½ unit)
- History, 2½ units (U.S. history, 1 unit; western civilization, 1 unit; non-western studies, ½ unit; civics, 1 unit)
- Science, 2 units (physical and biological, 1 unit each; mathematics, 2 units; technology, ½ unit; health, ½ unit)
- Seminar on work, ½ unit; and senior independent project, ½ unit.

Boyer warns that the separate courses must be connected... How this is to be done is left to the teachers and students to work out.”

**In the classroom** by making the necessary "connections between the disciplines" How this is to be done with a list of 17 different required courses is left to the teachers and students to work out. But it is the senior independent project of one-half credit (a written report focused on one contemporary issue) that will draw on the various academic subjects and connect them so as to reveal "the world as a complicated place," contends Boyer. That a single-semester course is too little and too late to accomplish such a function should be apparent from our experience with the old Problems of Democracy course. Moreover, all of our experience should have made it clear that now faculty and students will not derive from a list of disjointed courses a coherent curriculum revealing the necessary interdependence of knowledge.

Even the faculties and students at our leading colleges will not accomplish such a task unless it is built into the very structure and function of the total curriculum in general education. High school students need to be engaged in extended writing projects on pervading social issues through classes not only in English composition, but in literature, social studies, and history. The applications of mathematics and statistics in the sciences, social sciences, and vocational studies must be made continuously.

Problems in public health need to be broached in biology (ecology) and the social studies. Boyer holds that "the study of health must become a priority in our schools." Yet his proposal calls for only one-half unit of health. No provision is made for physical education and recreation as part of the common core.

But the most baffling aspect of the common core in the Boyer proposal is the requirement of two years of a second language for all students in high school, built on an earlier study of a second language in elementary school. No mention is made of the great failure of the efforts to develop second-language fluency despite the expenditure of enormous federal funds under the National Defense Education Act, when foreign languages were offered almost universally in our elementary schools and elaborate electronic language laboratories were installed in our secondary schools.

Language is a living process and the absence of opportunity to communicat...
in a second language in daily life would leave us with little more than another empty curricular requirement. In fact, the Bover proposal provides for a total core requirement of only 2½ units in English in high school. It would appear to be far more profitable to offer foreign languages as electives and to increase the core of English to four years, with a concerted emphasis on correlating and synthesizing the work in composition and literature with social studies and history.

Despite acknowledging the appalling problem of youth unemployment, the expressed interest of many of our youth in vocational education, and the recognition on the part of the general public of the need for career preparation in high school, Bover dismisses vocational education in high school as inadequate or irrelevant. Using the same logic, Bover would be hard pressed to justify most of the so-called academic subjects in the curriculum. Yet he employs such logic in denying the noncollege-bound students access to the federal-state supported programs in vocational education (unless they opt to enroll in a specialized vocational school). Instead, they would pursue “elective clusters” in career exploration or selected academic subjects during the last two years of high school.

The result, according to Bover, would be a single-track program for all students. He correctly calls for the elimination of the three-track system—academic, vocational, and general—as did Conant a quarter of a century ago. But unlike Conant, who advocated the availability of federal-state supported programs of vocational education within the structure of the comprehensive high school, Bover confuses the enrollment in such programs with tracking. Tracking occurs when students in vocational and college preparatory programs are separated from one another not only in their respective programs, but also in their courses in general education and other studies. One unanticipated outcome of present-day arrangements whereby students attend an area vocational center on a shared-time basis is that, upon returning to their home school, they are tracked together in their academic and elective classes, and even in physical education.

Bover also confuses classes in industrial arts and general automotive shop with vocational education. Such classes were never intended to meet a vocational education function. His proposal would lead to the further decline of the comprehensive high school as vocational education would be left to the segregated, specialized vocational school. In effect, the comprehensive high school would be reduced to a college preparatory/general academic school, and the makings of a dual system of education would be in place. In seeking ways to improve the quality of learning in our high schools, the Bover report falls prey to the historic academic/vocational dualism whereby the quality of mind is the province of the academic side of the curriculum. The report fails to recognize the possibilities whereby the various sides of the curriculum can be mutually enriching, such as in the case of our great land-grant universities.

A Place Called School
A Place Called School” by John Goodlad is derived from the findings of an eight-year project, “A Study of Schooling,” which involved a sample of 38 schools, including 12 high schools, in 13 communities in seven sections of the nation. A team of data collectors devoted almost a month in each community where systematic observations were made in over a thousand classrooms. Goodlad buttresses his own findings with an array of data from other studies as well as drawing upon source material from other professional literature. Although he claims that the schools in the study were selected for “diversity and representativeness,” he states at the start that because schools vary so widely, no single set of recommendations are valid for all schools, though he sees the problems that emerge as being common to most. At the same time, he acknowledges that his agenda for improving the schools extend beyond many of the specific topics investigated, and that the reader bringing different values to any such agenda would be justified in reaching quite different recommendations.

Goodlad notes that only 75 percent of class time is devoted to instruction and that the overwhelming proportion of this time is in the mode of teacher “telling.” Only rarely are students ob-

** SOURCES OF THE VARIOUS REPORTS ON EDUCATION **

** Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do ** by the College Entrance Examination Board, 1983, No Charge. The College Board, 888 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10010. Phone: 212/582-6210.


Goodlad recognizes the need for general education in a free society, and reveals an awareness of the rich literature on general education.\

“Goodlad recognizes the need for general education in a free society, and reveals an awareness of the rich literature on general education.”
The American High School: Its Responsibility and Opportunity

The current flurry of reports calling for the reform of American secondary education reflects many conflicting and contradictory prescriptions. Conspicuously absent from these documents is any consideration of our historic struggle to develop the unitary, cosmopolitan, comprehensive high school. This institution has given our nation the greatest educational yield in the world; at the same time, the attainment of our most intellectually talented youth is fully comparable to that of any other nation's school system. No concerted attention is given to the unfinished task of meeting the needs of youth for vocational education within the unitary structure of the comprehensive high school. Conspicuously absent from these documents is any concerted consideration of the lessons to be learned from the rich heritage of literature on the role, function, and structure of the comprehensive high school—such as the work of the American Youth Commission and the Educational Policies Commission, the Eight-Year Study, the Committee on the American High School of the John Dewey Society under the chairmanship of Hollis Caswell, and the work of J. B. Conant on the comprehensive high school.

The negativism toward American public elementary and secondary education in the recent era of sociopolitical retrenchment contrasts sharply with the positive and optimistic attitude that prevailed at midcentury, an attitude that could impel Henry Steele Commager to make this assessment:

No other people ever demanded so much of education as have the American. None other was ever served so well by its schools and educators.

Because we are a "new" nation we sometimes forget how very old are some of our ideas. The U. S.—today the oldest republic—also has the oldest public school system in the world.

For a century and a half American schools have served and strengthened the commonwealth. They provided a citizenry as enlightened as any on earth. They justified and vindicated democracy's promise. 20

A decade and a half later, amidst the rising national concern for the disadvantaged, Commager reiterated his faith in the power of education by declaring that "education is the beginning of social reform and regeneration." 21 Before the turn of the century, Dewey had written, "I believe that education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform." 22 Throughout the first half of this century the very idea of progress was intimately linked with progressive educational reform. The attitude was not one of naive optimism. Universal secondary education and open-access higher education became a reality. And this was accomplished against all odds with the most heterogeneous population of any modern nation. Had we adopted the divided school system of the Old World, higher education would have remained restricted to a privileged elite. The unique unitary structure of the cosmopolitan comprehensive high school kept the educational arteries open and gave the United States the highest educational yield of any nation without sacrificing the quality of achievement that accrues to those of highest ability.

Despite these accomplishments, the seventies were an era of retreat, as several "national commissions" called for the lowering of the school-leaving age to 14, shortening the school day and school year, and dismantling the comprehensive high school in favor of specialized high schools. 23 Nevertheless, the contagion of education had spread farther and penetrated deeper with each generation and, in the process, each generation of parents sought more and more formal education for their own children. No national commission could convince a generation of parents to lower their expectations for the education of their own children. Yet a price was paid as a result of efforts to undermine public confidence in public education, to reduce the curriculum to the "basics," to cut back on our investment in education, and to abandon our commitment to the unitary structure of the comprehensive high school.

In recognizing the failure of the past decade of educational and curricular retrenchment, we appear to be at a new crossroads. The road taken will be determined not by the fantasies of crystal-ball gazing and futurology, but rather by what we do here and now in attacking our most pervasive problems through means that are consonant with the democratic ideal of optimizing educational opportunity for all. 24

2 Ibid., p. 18.
3 Ibid., p. 1.
9 Ibid., p. 65.
10 Ibid., p. 6.
17 Goodlad, op. cit., p. 346.