

Children at Risk

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American education is still failing to meet its commitment to low-income, black, Hispanic, and learning-disabled students. Needed are an end to racial, linguistic, and sex discrimination; more dollars for the disadvantaged, improved services for the handicapped, better diagnostic tests; and comprehensive early childhood education.



JOAN MCCARTY FIRST

The doors to public schools are more open than they were 20 years ago to low-income persons, blacks, Hispanics, and the learning disabled. The bad news is that there is a lack of commitment to making those students successful once they are in school. These are the findings of an independent Board of Inquiry¹ commissioned by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS) to investigate the status of children of greatest need in public schools. NCAS is a network of child advocacy organizations that address public school issues at the federal, state, and local levels. These groups share a commitment to public education, maximum student access to appropriate educational experiences, and state and local advocacy as a constructive approach to school improvement.

As part of its year-long study, the Board held 15 days of public hearings in 10 cities² during late 1983 and throughout 1984. At these hearings, students, dropouts, parents, educators, and other citizens shared their experiences with and worries about public schools in their communities. Based on information gathered from these hearings and a review of recent research, the Board prepared a report, *Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk*.³ Here we summarize the Board's findings and present some of their recommendations for change.

Racial Discrimination

In 1985, more than 30 years after the *Brown* decision, 63 percent of America's school children still attend predominantly minority schools. The study found that, compared with white students:

- Black students are three times more likely to be suspended from high school, often for trivial reasons.
- Black students are three times more likely to be placed in classes for the mildly mentally handicapped.
- Black students drop out of school at a rate more than twice that of white students.



Gerald Goldsmith

Class Discrimination

The income level of a child's family is still the major determinant of the quality and quantity of the education a child receives. The average child from a bottom quarter income family receives four fewer years of education than a child from a top quarter income family.

Many of the testimonies at the public hearings concerned the various forms that class discrimination takes in schools. For example:

- Many districts allocate fewer resources to schools in poor neighborhoods than to schools that serve primarily middle- and upper-income level students.
- Only half of the almost ten million children eligible to receive Chapter I services actually receive those services.
- Teachers often alter expectations on the basis of students' social class.

Cultural Discrimination

Only half of the 2.7 million students with limited-English proficiency receive the special help they need. That figure falls to 10 percent for Hispanic students. Only 3 percent of teachers are adequately prepared to instruct

limited-English-proficient students, although 25 percent of all teachers have such children in their classrooms. Special language-responsive programs are made available to only a small segment of the non-English-proficient population, and existing programs suffer from untrained teachers, inadequate instructional materials, invalid testing, and a lack of administrative support.

Sex Discrimination

Female students experience lowered expectations in public schools and by high school often function well behind male students in reading, science, social studies, and mathematics. Vocational education programs are often segregated by sex, with females clustered in programs that prepare them for the lowest paying jobs.

Pregnant and parenting teens are the young women most discriminated against in schools. Of the over one million teens who become pregnant each year, 10,000 are under age 15. A disproportionate number of these young women are minority students. Teens who are parents are much more likely to drop out of school than are

“The income level of a child’s family is still the major determinant of the quality and quantity of the education a child receives.”

teens who are not, and young, single mothers face almost certain poverty.⁴

Special Education

Handicapped students, their parents, and concerned educators described both problems of limited access to special services and problems related to children being inappropriately labeled as handicapped.

When PL 94-142 was passed, Congress assigned high priorities to identifying and serving out-of-school handicapped children and to meeting the needs of the severely handicapped. The Board of Inquiry concluded that schools appear to have met these objectives fairly well with regard to elementary-age children. However, large numbers of three- to five-year-olds, secondary students, 18- to 22-year-olds, and emotionally disturbed children of all ages remain underserved, as well as children of migrant

families, military dependents, adjudicated and incarcerated youth, and foster children.

On the other side of the coin, many children who are not handicapped end up in the special education system. Sometimes a lack of adequate regular education options designed to meet the needs of children with diverse learning styles results in this misplacement. Biased assessment and evaluation tools may support discriminatory referrals. Poorly defined criteria for entrance into categorical special programs, inferior curriculum, and failure to establish exit criteria that clarify what the child must accomplish to qualify for return to the regular classroom also contribute to inappropriate placements.

The children most likely to be misclassified are minority youngsters who perform adequately in a variety of family and community roles but experience difficulty in school. They are often assigned to special education, having experienced academic failure in the regular classroom, a failure that is routinely ascribed to the child, rather than to the classroom setting or the school environment.

The processes by which school districts are usually reimbursed under PL 94-142 require them to declare students handicapped and then determine their needs for special services. Thus, the service delivery system that attaches labels to children in order to ensure that money is spent on students of greatest need also acts as an incentive to school districts to place more children in special classes, often inappropriately.

With its emphasis on higher standards, the current education reform movement may increase the risk of many low-achieving minority and disadvantaged students being inappropriately labeled as handicapped. Unless higher academic standards in public classrooms are accompanied by additional resources directed toward strengthening mainstream programs, an increasing number of children may be placed in double jeopardy by being assigned handicapped status in addition to their minority status.



Stacey Ujha

Misuses of Testing

Over-reliance on standardized achievement tests as a basis for making educational decisions may have far-reaching effects on students. In districts where testing is in widespread use, the Board urged that the relationship of testing practices to three major, interrelated concerns be carefully examined: (1) the availability of additional resources to assist children who are labeled "failures" as the result of their poor performance on tests; (2) the effects of testing on *what* is being taught and *how* it is being taught; and (3) the effect of tests on school exclusion rates.

The Board of Inquiry found particularly troublesome policies that require school districts to label children as handicapped or academically deficient in order to receive funds needed to provide services to them. The Board considers funding mechanisms of this type to be a contributing factor in the disproportionate placement of minority students in classes for the educable mentally handicapped and in the growing number of students being classified as learning disabled. Nationally, the learning disabilities category grew by 125 percent between 1976 and 1982.

Finally, there is a great need for school districts and state departments of education to collect data concerning the effects that intensive testing programs and other school reform strategies have on exclusion rates. Reform legislation does not have monitoring provisions in some states, while other states require the collection of extensive data, but do not require that they be collected by race, sex, or ethnicity.

That school exclusionary practices have always had a disproportionate effect on minority children has been well documented by Office of Civil Rights Elementary and Secondary School Surveys carried out during the last decade. Failure at the school, school district, and state level to document that reality is certain to diminish the likelihood of remedy. Because the roots of the problem of disproportionate impact of school suspensions on

minority students rest in the ways that teachers make referrals, collection of referral data is an important part of any local self-monitoring effort. Finally, the absence of a uniform system for collecting dropout data is a widely acknowledged problem.

Despite the fact that there is no reliable body of evidence indicating that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties, retention at grade level is a widely employed remedial strategy. Even before the beginning of the national movement to raise academic standards, more than an estimated one million students each year were being retained at grade level.⁵

School Finance

The quality of education a child receives is profoundly affected by the accident of whether the child lives in a high tax wealth or low tax wealth school district. Testimony documented vast differences in per-pupil expenditures among states, among school districts inside states, and among school buildings inside school districts. Despite efforts in many states to equalize education expenditures, property taxes are still the primary source of funding for public education. This results in special problems for property-poor districts. Since Robin Hood approaches to equalization are doomed to failure, the most practical solution requires the allocation of massive amounts of state money to

districts at lower tax wealth levels. Achieving a satisfactory remedy to the lack of adequate financing for public education is made extraordinarily difficult by the fact that while 90 percent of the nation's children attend public schools, only 27 percent of American adults have children in public schools.

Summary of Recommendations

Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk identifies 104 strategies for achieving public schools that are both excellent and fair. The following recommendations, excerpted from the report, note appropriate changes in policy and practice that are needed if academic excellence is to be defined in a way that embraces equity issues.

We call for continued, rather than diminished, federal, state, and local attention to the rights of the disadvantaged and those discriminated against because of race, language, sex, or handicapped condition.

We seek:

- To minimize discrimination in the schools by restoring and expanding support for programs serving economically disadvantaged students, recognizing that it is false economy to cut programs which work for poor children.

- To reaffirm commitments to non-discrimination by race by vigorously pursuing efforts to eliminate racially identifiable educational programs and altering school practices which result in minority children dropping out, becoming "push outs" or staying in the educational system but failing to learn.

- To minimize discrimination against students from linguistic minorities by recognizing the importance of bilingual education as a technique which supports their

A Longer and Harder Road

Harold Howe II

The "children at risk" that we identify are growing in number and proportion in our schools. For economic and humanitarian reasons, we need to make them successful. They require the same quality education that several other national studies have called for, but the road for them is longer and harder. They need a combination of encouragement and special help that this nation, by reordering its priorities, can easily afford.

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Billy E. Barnes

Harold Howe, co-chair of the National Board of Inquiry, conducting hearings on behalf of the National Coalition of Advocates for Students.

academic development and by moving towards an acceptance of bilingualism as a means of enriching our society.

- To renew commitment to the ideals embodied in Title IX (Education Amendments of 1972) sex discrimination legislation, thereby assuring that female students will have an opportunity to develop their talents and skills fully.

- To promote changes in special education which will improve services for children with moderate and severe handicaps while developing more regular education options for children with milder learning difficulties so that they can attend school without being labeled handicapped.

We call for greater willingness on the part of those in positions of responsibility to adjust schools to the diverse needs of all students who attend them.

We seek:

- To end tracking and rigid ability grouping, recognizing that such practices work against the best interests of both the most vulnerable and the most able students in the schools.

- To eliminate the use of inappropriate testing practices as a basis for making educational decisions which have far-reaching effects upon the futures of young people.

- To broaden curriculum and teaching practices so that they better meet the needs of diverse student populations, based upon the proposition that individual children have differing needs and abilities.

- To move vocational education programs away from the current narrow focus upon job skills and toward the broader goal of preparing young people for a changing world of work.

We call for more democratic governance of schools which assures parents a significant role in making decisions about the education of their children and teaches children principles of democratic partici-

pation and the exercise of constitutional rights.

We seek:

- To reinstate federal mandates for parental involvement in local programs.

- To remove barriers to parental involvement and create opportunities for parents to participate in decisions about school staffing, education programming, school discipline and resource allocation.

- To assure students of their due process rights in such matters as school suspension and expulsion.

We call for the establishment of comprehensive early childhood education, day care programs, and in-school support services for children and youth as a means of preventing school failure.

We seek:

- To recognize the usefulness and cost effectiveness of high quality early childhood education and child care programs as a means of preventing school failure.

- To respond to the needs of an increasing number of young people whose chances of remaining in school would be increased if they had help with serious personal and social problems.

We call for the enactment of more equitable and adequate systems for financing schools, so that the quality of education available does not depend upon where a child lives.

We seek:

- To increase tax equity through state systems of raising revenues that are not dependent on regressive taxes and that insulate property poor districts against excessive local taxes.

- To eliminate inequality in educational access, resulting from disparities in funding for schools.

- To raise funding levels for programs serving children at risk, so that every eligible child is assured of adequate services.

We call for more systematic attention to the problems of jobs for youth and drop-outs by federal, state, and local education authorities.

We seek:

- To ensure that a comprehensive school-to-work transition program is available for all youth.

- To strengthen counseling services for noncollege-bound youth and develop job-placement services in high schools.

- To encourage broadly based community councils charged with responsibility for examining what could be done locally to revitalize the local economy and create jobs for youth.

Neither the Board of Inquiry nor the advocacy community is naive enough to assume that the changes urged in *Barriers to Excellence* can be accomplished quickly or easily. In all likelihood their achievement may require collaborative energies of more than one generation of educators and concerned citizens. Why is it important for that effort to begin now? Paul Ylvisaker, former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education and co-chair of the National Commission on Secondary Schooling for Hispanics, has answered that question simply: "Because we are confronted with a generation of children too precious to waste." □

The Board of Inquiry was co-chaired by Harold Howe, a former U.S. Commissioner of Education, who is now senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Marian Wright Edelman, President, The Children's Defense Fund.

The ten cities were Boston, Louisville, Chicago, Lansing, New York, Atlanta, Columbus, Cleveland, Seattle, and San Antonio.

Unless otherwise noted, documentation for facts and opinions expressed in this article is contained in *Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk*. Copies are available for \$5.50 each (prepaid) from: NCAS, 76 Summer St., Suite 350, Boston, MA 02110.

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