



ASCD®

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Policy Points

A NATION AT RISK?

“We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

—*A Nation at Risk*

In 1981, then-Secretary of Education Terrell Bell chartered the National Commission on Excellence in Education to examine the quality of teaching and learning in elementary and secondary education. President Reagan refused to make presidential appointments to the commission, so Bell hand-selected the group's members, who spent 18 months assessing the quality of public education, comparing America's schools and colleges with those of other countries, analyzing social and educational changes that affect student achievement, and defining obstacles to achieving excellence in education. The result was a report on the strengths and weaknesses of the American education system titled *A Nation at Risk*, released in April 1983.

Since then, *A Nation at Risk* has become shorthand for pessimists wishing to describe a declining education system, communicating the imperative for improvement lest the country lose its status as the preeminent global leader in all facets of commerce and life. It defined the state of education at that time and made a series of recommendations to stop the claimed educational decline and to reverse the attendant risk to our economic stability and international status. The report became the catalyst for standards-based, testing-focused education reform at the federal, state, and local levels for three decades. But should it have been relied on to the extent that it has been? This edition of *Policy Points* takes a

In 1981, President Reagan said, “Certainly there are few areas of American life as important to our society, to our people, and to our families as our schools and colleges.”

closer look at what was actually called for 30 years ago, and what has transpired since then.

AMERICA AT RISK?

The report presented a doom-and-gloom picture of an America headed toward second-rate status based on the failure of its schools to produce students able to compete in the global economy. Indeed, the report's assessment of the state of American education was dramatic—the “rising tide of mediocrity” and “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” are its most referenced and memorable lines. It cited the dismal achievement of American students on international tests, as compared with their foreign peers, and noted the displacement of American workers and products by foreign competitors. The dire picture painted by the report's

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strident rhetoric has long overshadowed the fact that its appraisal and predictions of educational disaster were so astonishingly wrong and the exact opposite of what has happened. In reality, the generations of public school students that have graduated under the school system the report decried as wholly inadequate have contributed to a nation that

- Has seen its workforce productivity increase by 125 percent since 1983,
- Is the global leader in technology and innovation,
- Is the world's undisputed military superpower,
- Leads all nations in the number of patents in force, and
- Is still the preeminent education destination of choice for those seeking technical degrees and career opportunities.

RIGOROUS STANDARDS AND CURRICULAR CONTENT

The report recommended increasing high school graduation requirements and updating textbooks to include more rigorous and challenging material. Criticizing colleges and universities for their lax admission requirements, the report also recommended that students entering postsecondary education should be subject to higher standards, including increased achievement levels on standardized tests. In the intervening years, states established increasingly strong standards, and most recently 46 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards.

“The Commission deeply believes that the problems we have discerned in American education can be both understood and corrected if the people of our country ... together with those who have public responsibility in the matter, care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required.”

—Commission Chairman David Pierpont Gardner

TEACHER PREPARATION AND RESPECT

The report cited widespread shortages of qualified teachers, particularly in math and science; teacher preparation programs that weren't providing adequate training; low salaries as compared to other professions; and a lack of resources to attract students to the profession. It recommended boosting teacher pay and tying salaries, promotion, tenure, and retention decisions to effective evaluation systems, which many states are just now piloting and implementing (see *Policy Points on Teacher Evaluation*, February 2013). Today, teacher salaries are still not competitive with other professions—the average starting salary in education is over \$4,500 less than the national average for all professions requiring a college degree, and over \$20,000 less than the starting salary in engineering.

TESTING

Comparing them to their peers overseas, the report lambasted the poor performance of U.S. students on international assessments. However, a subsequent analysis revealed that individual student subgroups actually showed steady improvement on standardized tests from 1970–1990. *A Nation At Risk* recommended that students be tested at major transition points from one level of schooling to another. Since then, annual standardized testing in grades 3–8 in both reading and math has become the norm and, per the No Child Left Behind Act, these test results have become the sole measure of student achievement and school quality.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The 1983 report identified conflicting demands placed on schools to address social, emotional, political, and personal problems that had detracted from schools' "core mission." Today, there is much greater appreciation for the influence a students' social and emotional well-being has on learning, and the Whole Child approach helps schools, families, and communities address these deep and varying social needs together for students' comprehensive success.

Read the report for yourself at www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED226006.pdf and make your own assessment of its findings and recommendations.

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