THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE GREAT AMERICAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education

DIANE RAVITCH
In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the leading reform ideas in American education were accountability and choice. These ideas were at the heart of President George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind program, which he signed into law in January 2002. No Child Left Behind—or NCLB—changed the nature of public schooling across the nation by making standardized test scores the primary measure of school quality. The rise or fall of test scores in reading and mathematics became the critical variable in judging students, teachers, principals, and schools. Missing from NCLB was any reference to what students should learn; this was left to each state to determine.

I was initially supportive of NCLB. Who could object to ensuring that children mastered the basic skills of reading and mathematics? Who could object to an annual test of those skills? Certainly not I. Didn’t all schools test their students at least once annually?

As NCLB was implemented, I became increasingly disillusioned. I came to realize that the law bypassed curriculum and standards. Although its supporters often claimed it was a natural outgrowth of the standards movement, it was not. It demanded that schools generate higher test scores in basic skills, but it required no
curriculum at all, nor did it raise standards. It ignored such important studies as history, civics, literature, science, the arts, and geography. Though the law required states to test students eventually in science, the science scores didn't count on the federal scorecard. I saw my hopes for better education turn into a measurement strategy that had no underlying educational vision at all. Eventually I realized that the new reforms had everything to do with structural changes and accountability, and nothing at all to do with the substance of learning. Accountability makes no sense when it undermines the larger goals of education.

How did testing and accountability become the main levers of school reform? How did our elected officials become convinced that measurement and data would fix the schools? Somehow our nation got off track in its efforts to improve education. What once was the standards movement was replaced by the accountability movement. What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward. No education experience was needed to administer such a program. Anyone who loved data could do it. The strategy produced fear and obedience among educators; it often generated higher test scores. But it had nothing to do with education.

Tests should follow the curriculum. They should be based on the curriculum. They should not replace it or precede it. Students need a coherent foundation of knowledge and skills that grows stronger each year. Knowledge and skills are both important, as is learning to think, debate, and question. A well-educated person has a well-furnished mind, shaped by reading and thinking about history, science, literature, the arts, and politics. The well-educated person has learned how to explain ideas and listen respectfully to others.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, efforts to revive liberal education in the schools seemed to be gaining ground; many states were reviewing their academic expectations with an eye to strengthening them in all grades. In 1991 and 1992, the agency that I headed in the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to consortia of professional groups of teachers and scholars to develop voluntary national standards in history, English language arts, science, civics, economics, the arts, foreign languages, geography, and physical education. I acted at the direction of Secretary Lamar Alexander, who believed as I did that all children should have access to a broad education in the arts and sciences.
The efforts to establish voluntary national standards fell apart in the fall of 1994, when Lynne V. Cheney attacked the not-yet-released history standards for their political bias. As chairperson of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Cheney had funded their development along with the Department of Education. Cheney's scathing critique in the *Wall Street Journal* opened up a bitter national argument about what history, or rather, *whose* history, should be taught.  

Cheney lambasted the standards as the epitome of left-wing political correctness, because they emphasized the nation's failings and paid scant attention to its great men. The standards document, she said, mentioned Joseph McCarthy and McCarthyism nineteen times, the Ku Klux Klan seventeen times, and Harriet Tubman six times, while mentioning Ulysses S. Grant just once and Robert E. Lee not at all. Nor was there any reference to Paul Revere, Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Jonas Salk, or the Wright brothers. Cheney told an interviewer that the document was a “warped and distorted version of the American past in which it becomes a story of oppression and failure.”  

Editorialists and radio talk shows across the country weighed in on the dispute, some siding with Cheney, others defending the standards. Every major newspaper and newsmagazine covered the story of the angry ideological conflict. The controversy quickly became a debate about the role of minority groups and women in American history, which was placed in opposition to the role of great white men. Radio host Rush Limbaugh said the standards should be “flushed down the toilet,” but they were endorsed by many editorial boards and historians.  

Unfortunately, the historians at the University of California at Los Angeles who supervised the writing of the history standards did not anticipate that their political views and their commitment to teaching social history through the lens of race, class, and gender would encounter resistance outside the confines of academe. They insisted that their critics were narrow-minded conservatives who opposed the standards' efforts to open American history to a diversity of cultures.  

Meanwhile, in D.C., the administration changed from George H. W. Bush to Bill Clinton, and in the turnover, there was no provision for oversight of the standards, no process by which they might be reviewed and revised, again and again, to remove any hint of
political bias. After Cheney raised a ruckus about the history standards, elected officials in Washington wanted nothing to do with them. The Clinton administration disowned them, pointing out that it had not commissioned them. In January 1995, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution condemning them by a vote of 99–1 (the lone dissenter, a senator from Louisiana, thought the resolution was not strong enough). After the vitriolic front-page battle over the history standards, the subject of standards, curriculum, and content became radioactive to political leaders.

I was disappointed by the national history standards, but unlike Cheney I thought they could be fixed by editing. When the controversy first exploded into public view, I told Education Week that the document was a very good start, but “they should keep working on it, make it more parsimonious, and get out whatever seems to be biased in terms of politics. It shouldn’t have a whiff of political partisanship from the left or the right.” I wrote a letter to the New York Times, which had editorially supported the standards, warning that the history standards had to be “depoliticized,” because they were jeopardizing the bipartisan movement to set voluntary national standards. In the Chronicle of Higher Education, I argued that the history standards should be revised, not abandoned. I worried that the controversy would “lead to the demise of the entire effort to set national standards, even in less contentious fields, such as mathematics and science.” I insisted that national standards would succeed only as long as they were voluntary and nonpartisan and avoided “any effort to impose ‘correct’ answers on disputed questions.” I concluded that the project to develop national standards was at a crossroads; either we as a nation would recognize that much more time was needed to do it right, or the entire effort would be abandoned. I predicted, “The questions that will soon be answered are: Will we learn from our mistakes and keep trying? Or will we give up?”

In hindsight, it is clear that we gave up, in reaction to the media firestorm. The politicians whose leadership and endorsement were needed to establish national standards lost interest. Senators, congressmen, and governors watched the spectacle and determined that it was political suicide to get involved in the contretemps. To Republicans, national standards were anathema, a policy that would turn our education system over to leftist academics, a point that Lynne Cheney drove home again and again in her newspaper articles and public appearances. To Democrats, national standards sounded like a good idea—after the debacle associated with national standards—was political suicide.

Even as the administration was focused on accountability, around the nation concluded that it was political suicide to get involved in the controversy. The law they wrote directed academic standards, pick its own standards, and avoid setting voluntary national standards.

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ise to establish national standards and assessments8—but after the
debabel associated with the history standards, the Clinton adminis­
istration backed away from national standards.

Even as the history standards came into disrepute, the Clinton
administration was writing its own legislation to promote standards
and accountability. Having seen the political disaster that erupted
around the national history standards, administration strategists
concluded that it would be politically impossible to forge federally
directed academic standards, even voluntary ones. So they punted:
The law they wrote said that every state should write its own stan­
dards, pick its own tests, and be accountable for achievement. The
task of identifying what students should learn—the heart of curricu­
ulum standards—was left to each state.

The Clinton administration's Goals 2000 program gave the states
federal money to write their own academic standards, but most of
the state standards were vague when it came to any curriculum content.
It seemed that the states had learned from the battle over the history
standards that it was better to say nothing than to provoke contro­
versy by setting out any real curriculum standards. Most state stan­
dards were windy rhetoric, devoid of concrete descriptions of what
students should be expected to know and be able to do. One excep­
tion was Massachusetts, which produced stellar state standards in
every subject area. But most states wrote social studies standards
in which history was mentioned tangentially, with few or no refer­
ces to names, events, or ideas. The states seemed to understand
that avoiding specifics was the best policy; that standards were best
if they were completely noncontroversial; and that standards would
survive scrutiny only if they said nothing and changed nothing.

A few examples should suffice. A typical middle-school history
standard says that "students will demonstrate an understanding of
how ideas, events, and conditions bring about change." A typical
high school history standard says that "students will demonstrate
an understanding of the chronology and concepts of history and
identify and explain historical relationships." Or, "explain, analyze,
and show connections among patterns of change and continuity by
applying key historical concepts, such as time, chronology, causality,
change, conflict, complexity, and movement."9 Since these state­
ments do not refer to any actual historical event, they do not require
students to know any history. They contain no historical content that
students might analyze, debate, or reflect on. Unfortunately, they are typical of most state standards in history. The much-maligned voluntary national history standards of 1994, by contrast, are intellectually challenging, because they expected students to discuss the causes and consequences of the American Revolution, the Great Depression, world wars, and other major events in American history. Without specificity and clarity, standards are nothing more than vacuous verbiage.

State standards for the English language arts are similarly vapid. Few states refer to a single significant work of literature that students are expected to read. In most states, the English standards avoid any mention of specific works of fiction or nonfiction or specific major authors. Instead, they babble about how students “interact with text,” apply “word analysis and vocabulary skills to comprehend selections,” “relate reading to prior knowledge and experience and make connections to related information,” “make text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections,” use “language processes” as “meaning-making processes,” engage in “meaningful literacy activities,” and “use effective reading strategies to achieve their purposes in reading.” Students should certainly think about what they read, but they should read something worth thinking about.¹⁰

The standards movement died in 1995, when the controversy over the national history standards came to a high boil. And the state standards created as a substitute for national standards steered clear of curriculum content. So, with a few honorable exceptions, the states wrote and published vague documents and called them standards. Teachers continued to rely on their textbooks to determine what to teach and test. The tests and textbooks, written for students across the nation, provided a low-level sort of national standard. Business leaders continued to grouse that they had to spend large amounts of money to train new workers; the media continued to highlight the mediocre performance of American students on international tests; and colleges continued to report that about a third of their freshmen needed remediation in the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics.

When Governor George W. Bush of Texas was elected president in 2000, he decided that education reform would be his first priority. He brought with him the Texas plan: testing and accountability. Bush’s No Child Left Behind program melded smoothly with a central feature of the Clinton administration’s Goals 2000 program: namely, leaving it to their own tests. I demonstrate adequate student proficiency to increasingly on decide what “proficient” means. Children should be allowed to engage in meaningful literacy activities, and “use effective reading strategies to achieve their purposes in reading.” Students should certainly think about what they read, but they should read something worth thinking about.

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namely, leaving it to the states to set their own standards and pick
their own tests. Under the terms of NCLB, schools that did not
demonstrate adequate progress toward the goal of making every
student proficient in math and English by 2014 would be subject
to increasingly onerous sanctions. But it was left to each state to
decide what “proficiency” meant. So the states, most of which had
vague and meaningless standards, were left free to determine what
children should learn and how well they should learn it. In effect,
they were asked to grade themselves by creating tests that almost all
children could eventually pass. NCLB was all sticks and no carrots.
Test-based accountability—not standards—became our national
education policy. There was no underlying vision of what education
should be or how one might improve schools.

NCLB introduced a new definition of school reform that was
applauded by Democrats and Republicans alike. In this new era,
school reform was characterized as accountability, high-stakes test-
ing, data-driven decision making, choice, charter schools, privatiza-
tion, deregulation, merit pay, and competition among schools.
Whatever could not be measured did not count. It was ironic that
a conservative Republican president was responsible for the larg-
est expansion of federal control in the history of American edu-
cation. It was likewise ironic that Democrats embraced market
reforms and other initiatives that traditionally had been favored by
Republicans.

Nothing better portrayed the new climate than a charged battle
during and after the 2008 presidential campaign over the defini-
tion of the term “reformer.” During the campaign, the New Republic
chided Democratic candidate Barack Obama for waffling on edu-
cation reform. A real reformer, said this usually liberal magazine,
was someone who supports competition between schools, charter
schools, test-based accountability, performance pay for teachers,
and No Child Left Behind, while being ready to battle the teachers’
unions. This agenda, the article asserted, was shared by influential
center-left think tanks in Washington, D.C., such as the Center for
American Progress.12

After Obama’s election, the media vigorously debated the new
president’s likely choice for secretary of education. For a brief time,
it appeared that the new president might pick his main campaign
adviser on education, scholar Linda Darling-Hammond of Stanford
University. This prospect alarmed the champions of corporate-style
reform, because Darling-Hammond was known as an advocate of teacher professionalism and a critic of Teach for America; the new breed of reformers thought she was too friendly with the teachers’ unions. Consequently, writers in the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, and other publications warned President-elect Obama not to choose Darling-Hammond, but to select a “real” reformer who supported testing, accountability, and choice. True reformers, said the pundits and editorialists, fought the teachers’ unions and demanded merit pay based on student test scores. True reformers closed low-performing schools and fired administrators and teachers. True reformers opposed teacher tenure. Never mind that these had long been the central tenets of the Republican approach to education reform. 13

This rhetoric represented a remarkable turn of events. It showed how the politics of education had been transformed. The same views might as well have appeared in conservative journals, such as National Review or the Weekly Standard. Slogans long advocated by policy wonks on the right had migrated to and been embraced by policy wonks on the left. When Democratic think tanks say their party should support accountability and school choice, while rebuffing the teachers’ unions, you can bet that something has fundamentally changed in the political scene. In 2008, these issues, which had been the exclusive property of the conservative wing of the Republican Party since Ronald Reagan’s presidency, had somehow managed to captivate education thinkers in the Democratic Party as well.

Where did education reform go wrong? Ask the question, and you’ll get different answers, depending on whom you ask. But all roads eventually lead back to a major report released in 1983 called A Nation at Risk.

It is important to understand A Nation at Risk (ANAR), its role in the rise and fall of the standards movement, and its contrast with No Child Left Behind. ANAR encouraged states and the nation to craft genuine curriculum standards in many subjects; this movement foundered when the history standards came under attack. Consequently, education leaders retreated into the relative safety of standardized testing of basic skills, which was a poor substitute for a full-fledged program of curriculum and assessments. In the trade-off, our education system, standards, and dumbed-down A Nation at Risk of the late 1960s are fondly is sure to dish toward the freewheeling ANAR. No one who loved experiments and reforms of the era well-stemmed from a desire to broaden the competition. Other densome requirement Neill’s Summerhill, was forbidden. Tear down requirements. Free the choice. Let the teacher teach English like learning. Get rid of requirements, grades, requirements, grades, On it went, with refound one another. 14

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A Nation at Risk was a response to the radical school reforms of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whoever remembers that era fondly is sure to dislike ANAR; conversely, whoever was skeptical toward the freewheeling reforms of those years is likely to admire ANAR. No one who lived in that time will forget the proliferation of experiments and movements in the nation's schools. Reformers differed mainly in terms of how radical their proposals were. The reforms of the era were proffered with the best of intentions; some stemmed from a desire to advance racial equity in the classroom and to broaden the curriculum to respect the cultural diversity of the population. Others were intended to liberate students from burdensome requirements. Still others proceeded in the spirit of A. S. Neill's Summerhill, where any sort of adult authority was strictly forbidden. Tear down the walls between the classrooms, said some reformers. Free the children, free the schools, abolish all rules and requirements. Let the English teacher teach math, and the math teacher teach English. Let students design their own courses and learn whatever they feel like learning whenever (or if ever) they feel like learning. Get rid of graduation requirements, college entrance requirements, grades, tests, and textbooks. Down with the canon. On it went, with reformers, radicals, and revolutionaries competing to outdo one another. 14

And then one day in 1975, the New York Times reported on its front page that scores on the SAT—the nation's premier college entrance examination—had fallen steadily for over a decade. 15 The College Board, which sponsors the SAT, appointed an august commission to consider the likely causes of the score decline. The SAT commission in 1977 found plenty of reasons, including the increased numbers of minority students taking the test, whose test scores on average were lower than those of traditional test takers. But, said the commission, the test score decline was not entirely explained by the changing ethnic composition of the test takers. Some erosion in academic learning had probably been caused by large social forces, such as increased television viewing and the rising divorce rate, as well as political upheavals, such as the Vietnam War and Water­gate. Significantly, the commission also concluded that changes in the schools' practices had contributed to the steady slippage of SAT scores, especially in the verbal portion. Students were taking fewer
basic academic courses and more fluffy electives; there was less assignment of homework, more absenteeism, and "less thoughtful and critical reading"; and, the commission noted, "careful writing has apparently about gone out of style."16 The SAT report was soon followed by doleful federal reports about the state of the nation's schools, documenting falling enrollments in math and science and in foreign language study.17

Then in 1983 came A Nation at Risk, the all-time blockbuster of education reports. It was prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a group appointed by President Reagan's secretary of education, Terrel Bell. Bell was a subversive in the Reagan cabinet, a former school superintendent and a bona fide member of the education establishment. Whenever the president launched into a lecture about his desire to restore school prayer or to promote vouchers, Secretary Bell was notably silent.18

The report was an immediate sensation. Its conclusions were alarming, and its language was blunt to the point of being incendiary. It opened with the claim that "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. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments." The nation, it warned, has "been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament." Beset by conflicting demands, our educational institutions "seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them."19

In the years since A Nation at Risk was published, academics, educators, and pundits have debated whether the report was an accurate appraisal of academic standards or merely alarmist rhetoric by the Reagan administration, intended to undermine public education. The language was flamboyant, but that's how a report about education gets public attention. If it had been written in the usual somber, leaden tones of most national commissions, we would not be discussing it a generation later. A Nation at Risk was written in plain English, with just enough flair to capture the attention of the press. Its argument and recommendations made sense to nonspecialists. People who were not educators could understand its message, which thoughtfully addressed the fundamental issues in education. The national news media featured stories about the
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A Nation at Risk
was notable for what it did not say. It did not
echo Reagan's oft-expressed wish to abolish the U.S. Department
of Education. It did not support or even discuss his other favorite
education causes: vouchers and school prayer. It did not refer to
market-based competition and choice among schools; it did not
suggest restructuring schools or school systems. It said nothing
about closing schools, privatization, state takeover of districts, or
other heavy-handed forms of accountability. It referred only briefly,
almost in passing, to testing. Instead, it addressed problems that were
intrinsic to schooling, such as curriculum, graduation requirements,
teacher preparation, and the quality of textbooks; it said nothing
about the governance or organization of school districts, because
these were not seen as causes of low performance.

Far from being a revolutionary document, the report was an
impassioned plea to make our schools function better in their core
mission as academic institutions and to make our education system
live up to our nation's ideals. It warned that the nation would be
harmcd economically and socially unless education was dramatically
improved for all children. While it did not specifically address issues
of race and class, the report repeatedly stressed that the quality of
education must improve across the board. What was truly at risk,
it said, was the promise that "all, regardless of race or class or eco-
nomic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for devel-
opmg their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost."20 To
that end, the report recommended stronger high school graduation
requirements; higher standards for academic performance and stu-
dent conduct; more time devoted to instruction and homework; and
higher standards for entry into the teaching profession and better
salaries for teachers.

The statistics it cited showed declining SAT scores from 1963
to 1980, as well as a decline in the number and proportion of
high-scoring students on that test; lowered scores on standardized
achievement tests; poor performance on international assessments;
large numbers of functionally illiterate adults and seventeen-year-
olds; the expansion of remedial courses on college campuses; and
the cost of remedial training to the military and businesses.21

The primary cause of this inadequate academic performance,
the commission said, was the steady erosion of the content of the
Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses. Students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to ‘general track’ courses in large numbers.” The proportion in this general track—neither academic nor vocational—had grown from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979. This percentage exceeded that of enrollment in either the academic or the vocational track. This “curricular smorgasbord,” combined with extensive student choice, led to a situation in which only small proportions of high school students completed standard, intermediate, and advanced courses. Second, the commission cited data to demonstrate that academic expectations had fallen over time—that students were not doing much homework, that high school graduation requirements were minimal, that college entry requirements had fallen, and that students were not taking as many courses in math and science as their peers in other nations. 22

Although the report offered many recommendations, the most consequential, listed first in the report, was that high school graduation requirements should be strengthened. All high school students, the commission urged, should study what it called “The Five New Basics.” This was to consist of four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and one-half year of computer science. In addition, college-bound students should study at least two years of a foreign language. The commission proposed that foreign language study begin in elementary school and that schools include courses in the arts and vocational education in addition to the new basics. 23

The commission did not just list the subjects to be studied; it succinctly defined the essential goals of each subject, without using jargon. For example, the commission said that the teaching of English “should equip graduates to: (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and use what they read; (b) write well-organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas, and values of today’s life and culture.” The teaching of mathematics “should equip graduates to: (a) understand geometric and algebraic concepts; (b) understand elementary probability and statistics; (c) apply mathematics in everyday measure, and test the; (d) the traditional course mission recommended curricula” be developed formal education immediately; the commission can and to prepare them for A Nation at Risk. High school students, it called on school districts, seven hours) and the many as 200 or 220 days and for special classes disruptive.

Those preparing to be expected to meet high only their aptitude for academically based.” Decisions about should be tied to peer rewarding, average ones or terminated.”25 The refers in relation to their teacher quality include the commission a dispensable investment rewards and the change or poorly educated would and civic life. It was rig the matter, the definit
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g of mathematics "should metric and algebraic con-
ity and statistics; (c) apply mathematics in everyday situations; and (d) estimate, approximate, measure, and test the accuracy of their calculations." In addition to the traditional course of study for college-bound students, the commission recommended that "new, equally demanding mathematics curricula" be developed "for those who do not plan to continue their formal education immediately."24 Again, none of this was revolutionary; the commission called on schools to educate all students well and to prepare them for whatever path they chose after high school. A Nation at Risk proposed that four-year colleges and universities raise their admissions requirements. It urged scholars and professional societies to help upgrade the quality of textbooks and other teaching materials. It called on states to evaluate textbooks for their quality and to request that publishers present evidence of the effectiveness of their teaching materials, based on field trials and evaluations.

A Nation at Risk urged "significantly more time" for learning. High school students, it said, should receive more homework. ANAR called on school districts and states to lengthen the school day (to seven hours) and the school year (from the current 180 days to as many as 200 or 220 days). It called for firm, fair codes of conduct and for special classes or schools for children who were continually disruptive.

Those preparing to teach, said the commission, should be expected to meet high educational standards, by demonstrating not only their aptitude for teaching but also their competence in an academic discipline. Teachers' salaries should be increased and should be "professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based." Decisions about salary, tenure, promotion, and retention should be tied to peer review "so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated."25 The report recommended differential pay for teachers in relation to their quality, but proposed that judgments about teacher quality include peer review.

The commission correctly observed that "learning is the indispensable investment required for success in the 'information age' we are entering."26 And it was right to say that those who are uneducated or poorly educated would be effectively excluded from material rewards and the chance to participate fully in our shared political and civic life. It was right to point to the curriculum as the heart of the matter, the definition of what students are expected to learn.
When the curriculum is incoherent and insubstantial, students are cheated.

*A Nation at Risk* was certainly not part of a right-wing plot to destroy public education or a precursor to the privatization movement of the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Nor did it offer simple solutions to complex problems or demand the impossible. Every one of its recommendations was within the scope of the schools as they existed then and as they exist now, and none had any potential to harm public education. The report treated public education as a professional, purposeful enterprise that ought to have clear, attainable goals.

Some critics complained that the commission should have paid more attention to social and economic factors that affect educational outcomes, such as poverty, housing, welfare, and health. That’s a fair criticism. But the commission was asked to report on the quality of education in the nation’s schools, so it focused on the academic aspects of education. When critics said ANAR unfairly blamed the nation’s economic woes in the early 1980s on the schools, they took their argument too far, as if schools have nothing at all to do with a nation’s economic health. When the economy subsequently improved, the critics asked, “Why aren’t the schools getting credit for the upturn?” The critics confused the relationship between schools and the economy. Of course schools create human and social capital. Of course they are not the immediate cause of good times or bad times. Schools did not cause the Great Depression, nor can they claim credit for boom times. But economists have long recognized that good schools are important for a nation’s future economic, civic, social, and cultural development.

The one consequential error of *A Nation at Risk* was its implication that the fundamental problems of American education resided solely in the nation’s high schools and could be corrected by changes to that institution. The report assumed that elementary schools and junior high schools or middle schools were in fine shape and needed no special attention. But a closer look might have persuaded the commission that many students arrived in high school without the foundation of basic skills and knowledge essential to a good high school education. If the high school curriculum was a smorgasbord, the curriculum in the early grades was equally haphazard, lacking in coherence or content. This meant that students began their freshman year of high school with widely varying levels of preparation,
American School System

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Today, when we contrast the rhetoric of A Nation at Risk with the reality of the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2002, A Nation at Risk looks positively idealistic, liberal, and prescient. A Nation at Risk was a report, not a legal mandate; if leaders in states and school districts wanted to implement its recommendations, they could; but they were also free to ignore the report and its recommendations. No Child Left Behind, however, was a federal law; any state or district that refused to comply with its mandates risked losing millions of dollars targeted to its neediest students. A Nation at Risk envisioned a public school system that offered a rich, well-balanced, and coherent curriculum, similar to what was available to students in the academic track in successful school districts. No Child Left Behind, by contrast, was bereft of any educational ideas. It was a technocratic approach to school reform that measured “success” only in relation to standardized test scores in two skill-based subjects, with the expectation that this limited training would strengthen our nation’s economic competitiveness with other nations. This was misguided, since the nations with the most successful school systems do not impose such a narrow focus on their schools.

Whereas the authors of A Nation at Risk concerned themselves with the quality and breadth of the curriculum that every youngster should study, No Child Left Behind concerned itself only with basic skills. A Nation at Risk was animated by a vision of good education as the foundation of a better life for individuals and for our democratic society, but No Child Left Behind had no vision other than improving test scores in reading and math. It produced mountains of data, not educated citizens. Its advocates then treated that data as evidence of its “success.” It ignored the importance of knowledge. It promoted a cramped, mechanistic, profoundly anti-intellectual definition of education. In the age of NCLB, knowledge was irrelevant.

By putting its emphasis on the importance of a coherent curriculum, A Nation at Risk was a precursor to the standards movement. It recognized that what students learn is of great importance in education and cannot be left to chance. When the standards movement collapsed as a result of the debacle of the national history standards,
the reform movement launched by ANAR was left without a strategy. To fill the lack, along came the test-based accountability movement, embodied by the No Child Left Behind law.

So, the great hijacking occurred in the mid-1990s when the standards movement fell apart. The passage of No Child Left Behind made testing and accountability our national education strategy. The controversies over national standards showed that a national consensus would be difficult to achieve and might set off a political brawl. State education departments are averse to controversy. Most states settled for “standards” that were bland and soporific to avoid battles over what students should learn. Education reformers in the states and in the federal government endorsed tests of basic skills as the only possible common ground in education. The goal of testing was higher scores, without regard to whether students acquired any knowledge of history, science, literature, geography, the arts, and other subjects that were not important for accountability purposes.

Whereas A Nation at Risk encouraged demands for voluntary national standards, No Child Left Behind sidestepped the need for any standards. In spirit and in specifics, they are not closely related. ANAR called for sensible, mainstream reforms to renew and repair our school system. The reforms it recommended were appropriate to the nature of schools: strengthening the curriculum for all students; setting clear and reasonable high school graduation requirements that demonstrate students’ readiness for postsecondary education or the modern workplace; establishing clear and appropriate college entrance requirements; improving the quality of textbooks and tests; expecting students to spend more time on schoolwork; establishing higher requirements for new recruits into the teaching profession; and increasing teacher compensation.

These recommendations were sound in 1983. They are sound today.

In the half-dozen years after 1983, almost everyone who served on the National Commission to Improve American Education agreed with Bush’s specific goals for the nation’s schools: children in America would be first in the world in the percentage of students who would master “challenging” skills, be prepared to compete in the global economy, be free of drugs, and acquire the critical thinking skills to lead the world. In retrospect, such ambitious and unachievable goals were not attainable by the states. Perhaps the goal should have been more realistic, based on what was already at hand. Perhaps standards should have been established that tied better to what states could do, rather than what states could not do.

Still, the dire warnings about America’s schools continued to grab the nation’s attention. In 1988, President George H. W. Bush and his task force called for a goal to make the United States the best-educated nation in the world. This goal, too, would have been nearly impossible to achieve. And even if the goal were achieved, what would the quality of American students matter to the nation’s competitiveness in the world economy? The focus on test scores and accountability for schools has proven to be a distraction from the most important goals of student learning and achievement.


CHAPTER TWO

1. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics had already written mathematics standards.


5. U.S. Congress, Senate, Congressional Record (January 18, 1995), S1026–S1040.


11. The law said that the state plans must include challenging academic standards, and that state plans had to win the approval of the U.S. secretary of education. However, by June 2003 every state plan was approved, even though many did not have challenging academic standards. Lynn Olson, “All States Get Federal Nod on Key Plans,” Education Week, June 18, 2003.


20. Ibid., 8.

21. Ibid., 8–9.

22. Ibid., 18–22.

23. Ibid., 24–27.

24. Ibid., 25.

25. Ibid., 30.

26. Ibid., 7.


28. See, for example, Richard L Later,” Cato Unbound, April 7, richard-rothstein/a-nation-at-risk

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20. Ibid., 8.

21. Ibid., 8–9.

22. Ibid., 18–22.

23. Ibid., 24–27.

24. Ibid., 25.

25. Ibid., 30.

26. Ibid., 7.


CHAPTER THREE