Re-evaluating the Nation’s Educational System: A Frightening Reality

A Commentary on Educational Reform

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Abstract

In 1983, A National Commission on Excellence in Education, formed to evaluate the quality of the country’s Educational System, submitted a report of their findings to the American people. This report was titled, “A Nation At Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform.” In 2008, the U.S. Department of Education released a follow-up report indicating progress in our schools, since the original evaluation. This review, “A Nation Accountable: Twenty-five Years After A Nation at Risk,” reinforced that America’s educational system remains in peril. In fact, maybe even in greater danger, than before, at falling behind other industrialized nations. Why are America’s schools still at risk? Why have we not reached the goals recommended in educational reform? Both questions will be addressed in this commentary as further support that our Nation’s educational system is still in need of intervention.
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A Commentary on Educational Reform

In August of 1981, a National Commission on Excellence in Education was created to evaluate the quality of education in the United States. The purpose of this group of eighteen professionals representing fifteen states was to identify the problems facing schools and then make recommendations to reform them. The Commission was given eighteen months to complete their work. At that time, a report of their findings, A Nation at Risk, was to be published to the American public. The report gave insight into what was determined to be the strengths and weaknesses present in education. The Commission addressed the main educational issues and provided solutions to be viewed as a resource in implementing the appropriate course of action.

The Secretary of Education, in 1983, was T. H. Bell. Bell outlined the following areas to be examined by the Commission:

- assessing the quality of teaching and learning in our Nation’s public and private schools, colleges, and universities;
- comparing American schools and colleges with those of other advanced nations;
• studying the relationship between college admissions requirements and student achievement in high school;
• identifying educational program which result in notable student success in college;
• assessing the degree to which major social and educational changes in the last quarter century have affected student achievement; and
• defining problems which must be faced and overcome if we are successfully to pursue the course of excellence in education. (p. 5)

Although the Commission was to focus on the teenage youth, their findings and recommendations affect all youth. So, what did this year and a half study find? According to the A Nation at Risk (1983) report, it determined 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.

(United States Department of Education. (p.7)

Is this what the American people expected? Did they want to hear that we were no longer a leader in the educational world?
The news was a wake up call. It drew attention to where attention was needed the most, our youth.

President at that time, Ronald Reagan, had initially responded to the education reform document with plans to fix America’s educational system. His answer to the Nation’s problem was to support education with school vouchers and tuition tax credit, school prayer, reduce federal educational spending, and abolishing the Department of Education (Coeyman, 2003). In a time when the thought was to allow the state and local governments to have control over education, the government later realized that this issue was better handled as a national responsibility.

What did the Commission find that made them think our Nation was at risk? According to the report, when our students were compared to students in other countries, “on 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times” (Dept. of Ed, 1983, p. 9). The research found that, “23 million American adults are functionally illiterate” (p. 9). It went on to state that students’ achievement on high school standardized tests averaged lower than 26 years previously. The majority of gifted students were not performing to their ability. College scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) scores had dropped for the past 17 years. This decline included a major
drop in the number of students achieving high scores of 650 or more. Achievement in the areas of science, English, higher thinking skills, writing, and mathematics had steadily declined. The findings revealed that often, remedial education was required for students entering college, the military, or in the business world. The Commission found that more students were unprepared to enter college or employment after graduation (p. 10).

On a personal level, I can relate to this frustration. I was born several years after the Soviets launched the first man-made satellite, Sputnik in 1957. This resulted in America feeling a need to promote science, math, and foreign language, which lead to the creation of The National Defense Education Act in 1958. Growing up in the aftermath of Sputnik, my early schooling felt the results as science and “new math” became a focus. By the time I was in high school, I think the emphasis on preparing American students had weakened. I was a dedicated student, outstanding attendance, followed the academic requirements, and graduated with honors after three years of high school. But was I truly prepared? I really do not remember school personnel stressing that it was important to set high expectations or push to reach personal limits. As long as I did what was required that was all that was expected. Also, I do not recall my college entrance exam scores after all these
years, but I'm sure they were not outstanding. Upon entering college, I needed a remedial math course. How did this happen when the Nation’s focus had been on better educating our youth? After all, I had completed the requirements for graduating high school and did so with good grades. Had our educational system become mediocre as stated by the “A Nation at Risk” report? Maybe this can be explained when the report states, “...we tend to express our educational standards and expectations largely in terms of ‘minimum requirements’” (p. 14).

The Commission’s findings found four areas (content, expectations, time, and teaching) that they felt explained why educational performance had declined. “In many schools, the time spent learning how to cook and drive counts as much toward a high school diploma as the time spent studying mathematics, English, chemistry, U.S. history, or biology” (p. 19). My high school courses consisted of Home Economics where we learned how to sew and cook and driver’s training. Although I agree that these are valuable skills and I’m grateful for taking them I do not think they reflected a rigorous academic track. Results also showed a pattern of movement for students following a general track of courses, “12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979” (p. 17), instead of a vocational and college preparation.

The amount of time spent doing homework had decreased. Number of hours spent in school per day and days per year are
considerably less than other industrialized nations. Even time spent in math, biology, chemistry, physics, and geography was approximately three times less than other industrialized countries (p. 18).

Educational expectations were also reported in the findings. In 1980 no high schools required students to take a foreign language.

Thirty-five States required only 1 year of mathematics, and 36 require only 1 year of science for a diploma. One-fifth of all 4-year colleges in the United States must accept every high school graduate within the States regardless of program followed or grades. (p. 18)

Textbooks had also become less challenging in reading level and content. “In 13 States 50 percent or more of the units required for high school graduation may be electives chosen by the student” (p. 18).

Last, the Commission found that, “not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exist in key fields” (p. 20). This was also an area I felt a connection
to in the fact that the report came out in 1983 and I graduated with my B.A. in Education in 1982.

What did America do with the shocking news about the state of our educational system? The report stressed the need for immediate reforms and gave recommendations:

This Commission calls upon educators, parents, and public officials at all levels to assist in bringing about the educational reform proposed in this report. We also call upon citizens to provide the financial support necessary to accomplish these purposes. Excellence costs. But in the long run mediocrity cost far more. (p.28)

Recommendations were in the areas of content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support. The recommendations included, “State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened” (p. 22), “schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards” (p. 24), “significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics...This will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or a lengthened school year” (p. 25), “improve the preparation of teachers or to make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession” (p. 26) and finally, “citizens across the Nation hold educators and elected officials responsible for providing the leadership necessary to achieve these reforms, and that citizens provide
the fiscal support and stability required to bring about the reforms we propose” (p. 27).

I am sure no one figured that reforms would happen overnight, but did anyone imagine that twenty-five years later we would discover similar results (Dept. of Ed, 2008)? Did the American public hear the plea or did it fall on deaf ears? The public and government say they are concerned and support educational reform, so why are we still a Nation at risk?

I will begin by reviewing the U.S. government’s response to A Nation at Risk. In 1987, then Secretary of Education, William Bennett, suggested schools be held accountable in preparing youth in standards deemed appropriate by the Nation’s government. The reform movement led President George H.W. Bush to call a governors’ conference in 1989 to develop K-12 performance goals (Coeymen, 2003). As a result, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was established and signed into law by George W. Bush in 2001 (Davis, 2008). This legislation required schools to improve student’s basic skills or face tough sanctions (Toppo, 2008). “During Bill Clinton’s presidency, Congress passed the Improving America’s Schools Act of 1994, which required state academic-content standards and tests, and the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994), which provided federal funds to aid states in writing those content standards” (Dept. of Ed, 2008).
Organizations began to appear that promoted improving teacher quality. Other programs, like The New Teacher Project, Teach for America, American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence, National Council on Teacher Quality, were started to encourage teacher excellence through merit pay and alternative teaching certification (p. 7). In 2006, Teacher Incentive Fund was established to support states in rewarding teachers for their outstanding performance (p. 6).

Consequently, we became a public more informed and focused in the right direction to reform. Congress also had the support of the business and civil rights communities. The government led with financial support. Taking inflation into consideration, $499 billion was spent on public education in 2005, up from $118.4 billion in 1983 (Dept. of Ed, 2008). Everyone seemed on the bandwagon to support educational reform, but at varying degrees or speed.

On one hand, some recommendations were put into effect immediately while others have yet to take hold. Was the public not completely convinced, or was the funding not effective to support these reforms? Were schools not following through with the government’s suggestions? Federal support was provided in the beginning but had been reduced by at least $1 billion due mainly to other priorities like the war in Iraq (Davis, 2007). However, “despite the fact that Americans spend more money per
student than almost any other country in the world” we are falling behind many other countries academically (Dept. of Ed, 2008).

Maybe teachers thought this was just another one of those passing fads the government was trying to push. The NCLB Act, which had “resulted in schools and districts gathering achievement and graduation data that highlighted how much work needs to be done at the secondary level, (p. 4), was up for review in 2007. That year, the National Education Association (NEA) developed a plan to lobby Congress in what they felt was necessary in reforming NCLB. America’s largest education union was asking for a $23.5 billion increase in the educational budget, a reduction in class size, and a national minimum wage of $40,000 (Davis, 2007).

Regardless of the reasons, our Nation remains at risk in not being a world leader. According to the U.S. Department of Education’s review of our progress since the previously cited study and 1983 report, “We remain a nation at risk but are also now a nation informed, a nation accountable, and a nation that recognizes there is much work to be done” (Dept. of Ed, 2008, p. 1). The result of this evaluation was published in the document, “A Nation Accountable Twenty-five Years After A Nation at Risk” (Dept. of Ed, 2008). One distinction is now we are a
nation that is better informed about the state of our educational system and what is required to remedy the situation.

Therefore, if society understands the issues at hand, is aware of suggested reforms, and the urgent necessity to fix the educational system, then why is it taking so long? The government continued to implement, recommend, and assess public education reforms. The results were that in 2005, only 36 percent of high school graduates had mastered the recommended “four years of English, three years of math, science and social studies and one-half year of computer science” (Toppo, 2008). Schools adopted standards-based education in hopes to provide higher expectations in academic performance. This has been a positive area of reform with “clearer, grade-level specific, and more academically challenging” (Dept. of Ed, 2008, p. 5) content standards. Although a seven-hour school day and 200 to 220 day academic year were recommended, there have been few followers in this area (Toppo, 2008, p. 2). Another outcome was improved teacher qualifications; although this provides little evidence that teachers’ subject-matter knowledge or effectiveness as a classroom teacher has improved (p. 6). And finally, governmental leadership has been mixed in providing assistance. Financially, educational spending has increased greatly at the local, state, and federal level (p. 7).
Further support of this claim that we have yet to reach our goal comes from Governor Strickland’s recent State of the State address. Strickland provided a plan for Ohio’s Educational reform. His proposal included more enrichment, creativity, and innovation in the classroom; expand learning opportunities, increasing the school year by 20 days over the next 10 years; require all-day kindergarten; address the achievement gap and dropout rates; replace the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) with the ACT; requiring a four-year residency program for new teachers before earning a professional license; creating Teach Ohio program to encourage subject knowledge professionals to earn their teaching license; changing school funding; and mandatory performance audits to address school districts’ academic accountability (Frost-Brooks, 2009). Implementation is scheduled to take eight years for these transformations. This is just another indication that we, as a nation, are not where we are expected to be in regards to educational reform.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress provided continual proof that students were not mastering the basic standard of learning (Lips, 2008 p. 2). “Regrettably, millions of American students continue to pass through the nation’s public schools without receiving a quality education” (Lips, 2008). This result of not reaching our goals is dramatic. Lack of quality education costs society financially and threatens
national security, not to mention the personal price individuals pay. Proof of the risk that our nation faces can be found in the high rate of adult illiteracy, uneducated individuals earn less income, on an average have a shorter life span, have higher health care bills, increased criminal activity, do not make as much positive contributions to society, are more dependent on government services therefore costing taxpayers more money (Lips, 2008).

A Nation at Risk has been a chief catalyst in providing the necessary need for reform of our public school systems. The reform movement transformed American education. There has been greater state and local control to hold public schools and students accountable. We are more focused on academics and aware of the need to provide quality education for all students in order to prepare them for the 21st Century world. The mission of the National Education Association (NEA) is to “prepare every student to succeed in a diverse and interdependent world” (neatoday, 2009). Are we there yet? I think not. We definitely have made great strides in the right direction, but I believe at a slow pace. Intervention is vital as we strive for excellence.

Where will our educational system be in another twenty-five years? I hope we do not have to wait that long to see drastic changes that return our Nation to the top of the educational
world. Our children are our future. Investment in educational reform is a commitment we must keep. We owe it to them and ourselves to move in the direction that provides for a stronger America.
References


