

Real Education Reform for the 1990s

By Chester E. Finn, Jr.

As just about everyone now realizes, there's been a big education reform movement these past seven years — seven, that is, if you trace its origin to *A Nation at Risk*, the famous 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. We've been at it more like ten to twelve years if you locate its origin in the stirrings visible in many states in the late seventies that gave rise to high school proficiency tests, minimum competency tests for teachers, and the like.

The impulse to reform American schools arises from sources not the least bit obscure. People looked about themselves and saw student test scores falling on many gauges, perhaps most visibly the Scholastic Aptitude Test. They observed indisputable evidence of young people getting high school diplomas who were barely literate. They heard employers — including such large-scale public sector employers as the armed services — complaining about the shoddy preparedness of their new recruits. More generally, they saw a country with faltering economic productivity and mounting anxiety about its international competitiveness, the vitality of its culture, even its national security.

As I reconstruct the sequence, the Excellence Commission gave voice to a widespread public anxiety and the remarkable reception given its report was due in no small part to the fact that Americans were ready for someone to utter this message.

The Commission declared us a “Nation at Risk” and did so in uncommonly eloquent and forceful terms. It was promptly echoed, in some cases actually preceded, by dozens of other reports, studies, manifestos, and the like, all coming to essentially the same conclusions: our well-being as a society is menaced by the weak education that most of our young people are acquiring.

The result has been this period of extraordinary ferment, change, and reform in American education. It began in the high schools but has since lapped over into elementary schools, to some extent into early childhood education, and, in slightly different and less forceful terms, even into higher education.

Return to Civilian Control. It has been nationwide but decentralized, with its epicenter at the state level of our federal structure, not in Washington and not, in most instances, in cities and towns. History, I am certain, is going to regard the 1980s as a time in which American public education became far less a local endeavor than it had been, and much more the aggregation of fifty statewide systems.

I believe history will also judge the eighties as the decade when education was returned to civilian control. Though there are important individual exceptions, by and large the reform impulse had not come from within the education profession but from the laity, from business leaders, elected officials (especially governors), community groups, newspaper editors,

Chester E. Finn, Jr. is Director of the Education Excellence Network and Professor of Education and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on February 23, 1990.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1990 by The Heritage Foundation.

and others who, in an earlier time, would have felt they had no proper role intruding into the center of the education enterprise. While their impulse has its civic and cultural dimensions, the great driving force behind it has been the desire for economic growth and competitiveness, both for the country as a whole and for regions and individual states. The most dramatic examples of this have been a half-dozen southern governors who looked about them and asked whether Arkansas or South Carolina or Georgia was fated always to be in the economic cellar and just what would have to be different to attract high-tech manufacturing and service industries. Without exception, they concluded (and the South has been much helped in this by a worthy organization called the Southern Regional Education Board) that serious economic growth hinged at least in part on major improvements in their schools and colleges. I cannot count the number of times I heard former Tennessee Governor Lamar Alexander begin a talk about education reform with the statement "Better schools mean better jobs for Tennessee."

The reform movement has included a great deal of activity, a lot of states passing what they judged to be comprehensive education improvement legislation, and many localities with their own versions of the same.

Public attention and concern have also been sustained for a remarkably long period. Seven years is an extraordinary life span for a domestic policy issue, and as of yet this one shows no sign of going away. Public investment has increased greatly, too, by some 29 percent in constant dollars when measured in terms of per pupil expenditure.

No Demonstrable Gain. What do we have to show for all this fuss and bother, all this concern and effort, all this outlay and enthusiasm? Alas, not nearly enough.

I won't try here to recapitulate the data, most of which are spread across the newspapers week after week. The main thing to be said is that, when measured in terms of student achievement, which is the only gauge that finally matters and the measure that got us into the reform effort in the first place, we can see virtually no demonstrable gain for the country as a whole. Sure, we cite exceptions. California, for example, has some statistics suggesting that as many as a third of their students are learning more than they were learning a decade ago. There has been a welcome improvement in the National Assessment scores of black and Hispanic youngsters (though they're still too low). We've seen a slight gain in high school graduation rates. There are also some indicators of changes that may turn out to be associated with further modest boosts in achievement, such as the number of high school students taking academic courses. Public satisfaction with the schools is up a little.

And, of course, there are scads of quantitative measures in which we look good, though that was also true before the current round of school reform began. I refer to such indicators of changes as the percentage of high school graduates who go on to college. If I were Ben Wattenberg in search of good news, I could cite a dozen measures that one might say suggest decent performance on the part of our education system.

But they are not nearly so persuasive as the manifold evidence that the system's performance remains woefully weak in terms of learning outcomes — educators may call them cognitive outcomes, others would say skills and knowledge. It was mainly to achieve those outcomes that we created an education system in the first place. Yet they're mighty drab. National Assessment scores are basically flat. SAT scores, after regaining in the early 1980s 16 of the 90 points that the average score had lost between 1965 and 1980, are also virtually

level. We lag well behind most other industrial nations according to every available measure of student achievement. At a time when European leaders are seriously considering requiring every secondary graduate to demonstrate competency in three foreign languages, we find that only about a quarter of our eleventh graders can satisfactorily compose a piece of persuasive prose in English.

Unprepared for Higher Education. As for those stupendous numbers of young Americans who go on to higher-levels of education, it is indeed the case that almost 70 percent of our high school graduates make their way into college (and other kinds of post-secondary institutions) within a few years. But there is a great deal of evidence — I won't restate it here — suggesting that a large and growing proportion of those entering college are not really ready for "higher" education and that a mounting share of what occurs on many of the nation's college classrooms might be best termed remedial, in effect, furnishing students with the secondary education they didn't get in high school. Of course they did not get a secondary education there, partly because they did not receive a proper elementary education in the earlier grades.

I will not dwell here on the woebegone evidence of educational preparedness that business and government leaders continue to report among their new employees, or the immense sum their employers are spending, more or less like the colleges just mentioned, to provide the people with the education they should have received in school.

The upshot is that we are still not doing very well. It's premature to declare the excellence movement a washout, but I can cite few signs that it is in the process of becoming a real success.

Why, one naturally wants to know, are we accomplishing so little, and what should we be doing differently?

Let me recount four large mistakes we made in the course of the reforms of the late 1980's.

First, most Americans appear to believe that somebody else's part of the nation is at risk, not their part. We acknowledge that there are big problems with education in general but we don't think they involve Ethan or Tawanna or Rachel or the school down the street. I could cite ample evidence and research findings. For the moment, suffice it to say that while most Americans — students, parents, teachers, and administrators alike — acknowledge that we're living amid what could be termed a wholesale education catastrophe, the problem does not somehow make it down to the retail level. Hence, few individuals feel any strong impulse to modify their own behavior or that of their children or the staff of the neighborhood school. Yet, if we don't achieve behavior alterations in millions of individual cases, it is clear that our aggregates and averages aren't going to change. There is considerable aptness for American education in 1990 to be drawn from Pogo's insight that "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Second, despite all reform efforts, we haven't really changed some key variables, of which perhaps the most important is the amount of time that young Americans spend learning things of an academic sort. (There is no shortage in the time they spend learning other sorts of things, many of which we'd just as soon they didn't.) The first great finding of education research (and common sense and everyday experience) is that you tend to learn that which

you study, and to learn it in rough proportion to the amount of time you spend studying it. Yet American youngsters have shorter school days and years than anyone else in the industrial world. In general, they have less homework, they do less reading, they watch more television and they are more apt (at the secondary level) to consume gobs of time in after-school jobs. To me it's pretty clear, even if sad, that few of them will volunteer their lives to matters academic. To me that says we must either oblige them to or devise ways of making it worth their while. To date, however, we haven't done either.

Third, on the matter of making it worth their while, there is much evidence that American society gives essentially the same treatment to high school graduates who took easy courses, got poor grades, and didn't learn much, as it provides to high school graduates who took difficult courses, studied hard, earned high marks, and learned a great deal. Disregard the small fraction of the population that is competing for admission to Yale and Berkeley and consider the vast majority of high school graduates. Whether they did poorly or superbly in school, they still get into college wherever they want to matriculate, ordinarily into the only college they apply to. They get financial aid if they need it, and perhaps even if they don't.

If they'd rather start a job, they can get one of those, too. And because the employer seldom looks at their transcript, asking only whether they got a diploma, they will get the same job and the same pay whether they were outstanding students or slackers. What is more, according to some revealing research by Cornell's Jon Bishop, for as long as the first ten years out of high school, their earnings will be the same whether they did well or poorly in school. Why kill yourself studying when there are essentially no tangible rewards for anything greater than going through the motions, putting in your time? Much as I would like to live in a society in which people learn a great deal for the sheer joy of it, in truth I think we need to entangle people's self-interest with their educational attainment. And this, for most people, we haven't done.

Fourth, we haven't been clear about our goals and objectives. In industrial terms, we've never written the specifications for the educational product we hope to see emerge at the other end of the project. If you have a clear product design, no matter what line of work you are in, practically everything else falls into place: in education, you can readily figure out the details of the curriculum, how to balance teacher supply and demand, what uses to make of technology, what textbooks to assign, what sorts of accountability systems to devise, or how best to allocate resources. Conversely, when you cannot describe the product you want, you are bound to go through a great deal of wasted motion. What would an adequately educated young American actually know and be able to do? What would a really satisfactory education system look like? We haven't been able to give satisfactory answers to such queries. Instead, we've been tinkering with the process absent any clear concept of the project.

Of the four problems I've sketched, there have been serious efforts to solve only the last, and these are of recent vintage. I refer primarily to the national goal-setting exercise that the President and the governors have been engaged in, beginning at their Charlottesville Education "summit" in September 1989. After much pulling and hauling, they finally settled on six education goals for the nation. These were reviewed by the President in one of the less stirring segments of his State of the Union Speech and, with slight modifications and a lot of amplification, were formally adopted at the winter meeting of the National

Governor's Association in late February 1990. They are beginning to be accompanied by myriad sub-objectives, strategies, and plans for tracking systems and for issuing annual reports on progress.

The goals themselves are mostly fine, in the sense that if we achieved them our schools — and our kids — would be the envy of the industrial world instead of its laughing stock. What's more, most of them read better than they sounded in the State of the Union message. Goal three, for example, says that "by the year 2000 American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve having demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including English, mathematics, science, history and geography."

Tough Questions. I think that's terrific. Of course it begs some tough questions, such as the meaning of "competency" and "challenging," the mode of demonstration, and the tricky matter of who chooses the subject matter. Granted it, like the other five, conveniently spans the whole decade, by the end of which neither Bush nor any incumbent governor will be in office. But if we're to have education goals, this is a good one. And I've already made clear my view that reform efforts in the absence of goals are mainly wasted motion.

I also find no significant fault with the three goals having to do with drug-free schools, dropouts, and literate adults. Two others are more problematic, however, one of them — about our kids leading the world in science and math — just because it is so wildly ambitious that no one is likely to take it seriously; the other, about all youngsters starting school "ready to learn," because it sounds terrific but will largely be interpreted as a mandate to shift ever more responsibility for child-rearing to the state. So I'm not totally sanguine about all six goals. Still, our stalled efforts to move the education system are apt to be far more productive if we know our destination.

Kidnapped by the Establishment. Moments after Bush outlined them, however, the goals were kidnapped and held for ransom by the education establishment and a lot of congressional Democrats. Beginning that night with Speaker Tom Foley, and continuing over the next several days, every time an educator or Congressman opened his mouth, this message emerged: "We won't take your goals seriously unless you put a heap of extra federal dollars on the table first. And while you're at it, Mr. President, you'd better come up with a federal strategy to achieve those goals, a strategy we can scrutinize before we decide whether to lift a finger."

I could supply two dozen quotes from figures prominent in the educational and political worlds that convey this basic message. Regrettably, some of the Democratic governors were doing much the same before the winter NGA meeting was over. (I could also note a few exceptions, perhaps most honorably Gordon Ambach, head of the Council of Chief State School Officers.) One implication, of course, is that education progress is something to be bought with money rather than effort. Another is that the heavy lifting is somehow the responsibility of the federal government. But what is most lamentable is that people talking like this are, in effect, staking out an excuse, ten years ahead of time, for not achieving these (or any other) goals. And in doing so they have signaled that perhaps they don't even intend to try very hard.

That's what can happen to goals, even good ones. We have an unbelievably stodgy, smug, doctrinaire and inertia-filled education system. Looking at it, one recalls the original meaning of "conservative" as disinclined to change established ideas and practices. (I note, in

-passing, that a lot of us who these days are sometimes called conservatives are actually radicals when it comes to education.) The larger point, however, is that this is not a self-correcting system. It responds mainly to external pressure, incentive, reward, and punishment. For a time, in the Bennett years, I thought perhaps it also responded to sustained argumentation. I now believe that it wasn't the eloquence or persuasiveness of the arguments; it was the likelihood — perhaps the fear — that real political pressure would follow if a steamed-up populace took action.

This Administration seems disinclined to steam up the public, though, and even less disposed to alienate the education system and its barons. This means there have been no effective replies to the kinds of statements that many establishment figures and politicians have been making about the new national goals. The absence of a clear, strong, and articulate reply, in this sort of policy arena, always leaves the political and rhetorical advantage with those who spoke last and loudest.

I certainly am not declaring the goal-setting effort a failure. I have considerable faith in the ability of governors to muster public support at the state level and to leverage real policy change, the more so when they enlist the business community in their efforts. And governors are only just beginning to play their part. But I am discouraged by the stance that the education community has taken and by the Administration's muted response.

Vast Undertaking. If we can't be persuasive about goals, how will we root out the other three big problems I described? How will we muster the gumption and steadfastness to look John Q. Public in the eye and tell him that he and his child and the school down the street are failing? How can we generate the public fervor that will be needed to overcome the innate resistance of young people (and many of their parents) to being obliged to study more than they do now? How will we ever be able to persuade employers to handle the good students among their new hires differently from the weak ones, or the colleges to treat well-prepared applicants differently from those who scraped through school with the minimum? These are vast undertaking, the kinds that require basic shifts in the cultural assumptions and ingrained practices of large institutions and millions of people. I am none too sanguine about our capacity to make those changes.

That's what we should be focusing on now, those cultural values and institutional practices, even as we also set forth the particulars of our education reform agenda. The latter is no small task in its own right, of course. We'll start with clear goals, a first-rate information feedback system by which to monitor progress toward them, and consequences tied to the feedback system such that good things happen when goals are reached and, when they are not, some sort of intervention occurs lest the failure repeat itself.

Elaborating this into a full policy agenda will entail ten or a dozen significant changes and we'll have to knit them together with care. But none of them is bizarre or unprecedented. For most, we would cite current examples of places now trying them, albeit one by one, not in the combinations we'd need. I'd draw curriculum, for example, from California and accountability for South Carolina and New Jersey; choice from Minnesota; school site management and parent control from Chicago and Miami; alternate certification of teachers from New Jersey; school-level report cards from California or Illinois; teacher career ladders from Tennessee and Cincinnati; "no pass-no play" rules from Texas; parent education from Missouri; increasingly hard-nosed business involvement from several

places, and so on. We will argue about key particulars, such as how large the core curriculum should be and whether the choice plan will include private schools. But eventually we could settle on a pretty solid reform plan that would really work for the United States in the 1990s.

And that is not to waste time with redesigns. But how can we ever see it put into place absent from those changes we first need to make in the cultural, attitudinal, and political environment within which the reforms will be installed?

There are half a dozen signs of what I have come to think of as the radicalization of the school reform effort, and if the governors and the business community stick to their guns we may see more such in the next few years. I'm not despairing. I'm wary of the silver bullet, though, the panacea-type remedies, whether labelled privatization or professionalism or restructuring or accountability or choice. Each of those five ideas — as well as some others — will have a place of honor in a thoroughly redesigned education system, but none of them alone will do the job. In this I differ from friends and associates who are disposed to say that if only we'd do this one thing (often whichever happens to be *their* thing), then everything else will straighten itself out. To commit a particular heresy in the environs of The Heritage Foundation, given the extent to which parents seem content with their own children's education and disinclined to alter their behavior, I have no confidence that empowering mom and dad through a choice system will itself result in more learning. (I am more optimistic about a choice scheme that incorporates clear information by which parents can see if Johnny or Buffy and their schools are or aren't meeting certain standards.)

Speaking the Unpleasant Truth. There's a missing element, though, which I will describe as an organized national movement for better education, something that would harness the impulses of the governors and the business community and a lot of other frustrated and exasperated people. I would have to operate primarily outside Washington — both because federal policy is an education sideshow, not the main ring, and because Congress in particular is frozen into a set of 25-year-old ideas about education that I think are hopeless to defrost. And it would have to operate on several fronts: political, cultural, and economic. We do not have any such entity today. Recall the extraordinary work of the Committee on the Present Danger during the most naive days of foreign policy appeasement. Looking around the world today, we see evidence not only that the Committee on the Present Danger was right but also that its strategic advice, once taken, has made a huge difference in the international sphere. The key to its contribution, it seems to me, was for influential and respected individuals to speak the unpleasant truth in plain language in a loud but steady voice, even though it flew in the face of conventional wisdom and political prudence.

We would be well served if we had such an entity now on the education front. But the assignment is even harder. Jimmy Carter, at least could be voted out of office, and Brezhnev had the decency to die. Nothing in the education system will be changed that easily.

