

The Legacy of *A Nation at Risk*

by Jonathan Burdick

In examining the commissions report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, it is imperative to understand the historical setting. The document was released in the midst of the Cold War – perhaps the reasoning behind the document’s use of such exaggerated and downright harsh language – and Ronald Reagan, a well-known supporter of privatizing schools and abolishing the Department of Education, was the President of the United States. American schools were unquestionably struggling to reach a new wave of learners and a transformation was inevitable and imminent – the question remaining was what form this change would take and who would lead the way.

The 1983 document opens up proclaiming that the United States is at risk and that all children “regardless of race or class or economics status” deserve a “fair chance” at receiving a quality education – a sentiment that teachers would unanimously agree with. The next few pages begin the comparisons between the United States and other developed nations around the world – an unnamed “unfriendly foreign power” that one can assume is the Soviet Union and Japan in particular - a strong-worded reaction to the state of the Cold War at the time. The language in these opening pages is unsympathetic and abounds with expressive metaphors and political ideologies.

Under the section titled “Indicators of the Risk” though, the commission highlights some serious problems with the educational system, using statistics to bring attention to the amount of Americans who are illiterate as well as the decline in testing scores in the previous decades before the report was released (although noticeably, the report does not find flaws within the

tests themselves). Regardless, the statistics presented are difficult to ignore and the report sums up their findings with a grave summation that this would be the first time that “in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment ... the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents.” Coming at a time that was not so far removed from the hippie culture and unrest that resulted due to the Vietnam War, the idea that the next generation might be a lost cause was not new, but it was startling for many to actually see such claims in an official government-sanctioned report.

The suggestions come from the criticisms of findings regarding content, expectations, time, and teaching. In content, the authors felt that curricula across the board have lost focus and that, while the options are available, too few of students are taking truly challenging and needed coursework in high schools. Expectations in schools, the report says, are full of “notable deficiencies,” as homework time has decreased dramatically, requirements have been lessened (particularly in terms of the more difficult math and science courses), textbooks have been watered down in their content, and students have been given too many options to take “less demanding courses” to meet graduation requirements. The “disturbing” findings on time, make the case that American students spend far less time than students in other industrialized countries on school work and too much time in school is spent “learning how to cook and drive” rather than on more academic instruction. Time in schools should be better spent. Lastly, the report emphasizes the incompetence among so many unqualified teachers, in part, the report says, because teachers are being taught too little about their content in college, paid too little for their jobs which serves as a deterrent for the best and brightest to go into the educational field, and there is a severe shortage of teachers in math and science.

Much of what is said about the problems of American education in this report rings true to educators nearly thirty years later. While the stark language used may be a product of the historical setting, the problems discussed were relevant and remain so today, even long after the document's influence has shifted the educational system to new grounds.

The impact of the document on education reforms is impossible to ignore. Almost immediately, the document inflamed “a sense of crisis over public education not living up to its intended function of training a servile work force has provided the primary rationale for what has commonly become known simply as ‘education reform’” (Scott, 2011, p. 273). Fingers were being pointed at colleges and universities for graduating students who were not prepared for the realities of teaching and academic scholars claimed that such “programs of teaching preparation should judge their graduates in terms of the dual criteria in knowledge of academic disciplines and demonstrated effectiveness in teaching” (Guthrie, 1983, p. 12). This led to reforms at all levels of education and the blame was being spread evenly – and, in some cases, being shifted as well to the homes, where the lack of parental involvement was seen as one of the underlying factors behind student success rates slipping. Others almost immediately attempted to curtail the blame being placed on teachers by arguing that the “list of culprits could be extended so no group in society is blameless ... [and there] is really no answer to the question, ‘who is the blame’?” (Dougherty, 1983, p. 3).

So wherein does the blame lie? The answer still astounds most educators nearly thirty years later: it is nowhere and it is everywhere, it seems. By 1989, efforts were in full force to redefine the educational system, as then Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton led a summit that would serve as inspiration for President George H.W. Bush's *Excellence in Education Act*, which “centered on school choice, national testing, and a program creating new kinds of schools (i.e.

charter schools) and was intended to achieve fundamental education reform by ‘reinventing the nation’s school system’” (Scott, 2011, p. 273). This particular bill would not pass, but it opened up the idea of using free market economics to define the school system. This would benefit parents by providing more choices for their young student’s education, which, in theory, would promote higher expectations and innovation within the public school system. On the other hand, the proposal would foot the bill on the school district’s themselves to pay for the alternative education – an aspect that is more relevant than ever in today’s educational world where district’s find themselves paying for hundreds of students to take the expensive route of not only physical charter schools, but online educational programs. These initiatives would soon become a reality with the passing of the *Educate America Act* in 1994 under President Clinton, an influence itself to President George W. Bush’s *No Child Left Behind Act*. With the passing of this legislation in 2001, public schools receiving federal funding were now going to have their funding come with stipulations based on student testing and required guidelines of improvements. Praise and criticism abounded as many found the increase in accountability for schools to be long overdue, while others were vocal in their distaste for what they considered to be impossible standards, needless inclusion of detrimental English Language Learners standards, military recruiter access to schools which was unrelated to raising school performance, and the soon-to-be popular argument that education would be whittled down to “teaching to the test.” One Massachusetts committee argued that the legacy of *No Child Left Behind* was in contrast to what *A Nation at Risk* proposed, saying that the “pressure of high stakes testing catalyzed by NCLB is compelling schools to focus on a narrow curriculum, depriving students of the rich learning that comes from the study of art, music, history, science, foreign language, and physical

education – all currently being pushed to the periphery or eliminated completely” (Scott, 2011, p. 276).

The historical implication of *A Nation at Risk* has been controversial among educational scholars. In 2008, the Department of Education released a report titled *A Nation Accountable* which praises the findings of the commission that released the 1983 report. Yet, *A Nation Accountable* states that the nation was at more risk than ever at the turn of the century and it was only the passing of *No Child Left Behind* that finally put American back on a productive educational track that would be competitive in the new global society - although it still gives credit to the earlier legislation for inspiring “many states [to] began to implement standards-based education systems” (Department of Education, 2008, p. 5). Other academics are not so forgiving and believe that the 1983 report was a result of Cold War hysteria and that it “received and continues to receive so much attention because it benefited from a well-designed and well-executed marketing campaign and because it was a masterful synthesis of claims, criticisms, and proposals that had been continually made since the end of World War II” (Johanningmeier, 2011, p. 353). The DOE’s 2008 report counters such claims and insists that of the particular findings examined in *A Nation at Risk*, while all were not successfully implemented at the time – for instance, time spent on academics has not increased across the board for student learners – *No Child Left Behind* used the report as a major guideline. For instance, the trend towards performance-based pay for teachers that has come up in the years since *No Child Left Behind*’s passing is drawn directly from the suggestions in *A Nation at Risk*. This in itself is controversial within educational circles. Despite this, the 2008 report cites *A Nation at Risk* for being the reason behind colleges and universities raising their recruitment standards in fields of education (p. 7), which has resulted in the graduation of more qualified teachers. It is implied by the

Department of Education that while the earlier report was not a total success – and indeed, maybe of the ideas proposed have still not been put into place – it inspired the positive aspects of *No Child Left Behind*. Others believe that instead of inspiring positive change, the report began to vilification of public school systems. The rise of charter schools is seen as a direct result of the 1983 report, and to the detriment of public schools, they have been “actively marketed as the only logical alternative to everything that ails public education ... [which] function as an instrument to undermine public education ... by draining public resources from community-based public schools” (Scott, 2011, p. 281). To some, this vilification has been the most detrimental aspect of this shift towards standard-based accountability, since sending students to charter schools channels much-needed money away from the district to these privately-run entities. The 2008 report sees this parental choice in schools as a natural way to encourage growth and innovation in schools, while giving families the free market alternative (p. 14).

The legacy of *A Nation at Risk* is muddled in political rhetoric and divisive educational theories. Perhaps one’s viewpoint of the report (and the legislation that has followed) is based more on ideology than statistical analysis of the results. Most educators would agree on the positive aspects – bringing national attention to education reform, requiring more from collegiate education of future educators – but the debate often lies on the larger issues. Is the standards-driven curriculum detrimental to learning? As of now, there are no concrete answers to this question, but as educators, academics, and politicians continue the debate, it is likely that those answers will become clearer.

References

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