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A Music Educator's First-Hand Account of the Struggle To Reform American Education (1953-2018)

This article provides the author's thoughts concerning nine major events, reports, and pieces of legislation that have shaped American education over the past 65 years. It also lists several lessons he has learned from these efforts. In addition, a number of proposals are offered for achieving genuine reform in education, and for strengthening the position of music in the school curriculum. Paul R. Lehman is a Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He served as president of the Music Educators National Conference, now the National Association for Music Education, from 1984 to 1986. This piece is adapted from his remarks delivered on March 24, 2018, at the NAFME National In-Service Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Some of these thoughts have been discussed by the author in earlier publications.

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Introduction

When I began teaching as a high school band director in Ohio in 1953, I could never have imagined the stunning changes that were looming on the horizon for American education. Never have our schools been subjected to more intense and critical scrutiny than during the next few decades. In many ways K-12 education has been transformed profoundly during this period, but in other ways little has changed. I welcome the opportunity to share these personal views, and I hope that they might provide useful background for today's readers of *Contributions to Music Education*, many of whom were not even born when some of these developments occurred.

The Joy of Teaching

First, a word about teaching. I believe that teaching is the most important job in the world, apart from parenting, and also one of the most rewarding. I know that there are lots of jokes about teachers, and especially about university professors, and that's all right. I like the story about the professor who dreamed that he was lecturing to his class and woke up and found that he was. And on one campus I visited I went into the men's room and there was an automatic hand dryer above which was a hand-lettered sign that read, "For a 30-second lecture by Professor Smith, press this button."

I heard somewhere of a professor who was in the hospital for a minor operation. His department chair came to see him and told him that the department had met and "approved a resolution wishing him a prompt and complete recovery. The vote was 25 to 24." And there was a professor who learned that a student in his class had been diagnosed with a terminal illness. He called the student in to suggest some individual study projects so that the student wouldn't have to come to class. But the student said, "Oh, I particularly want to come to your class." The professor replied, "Well, that's very flattering. Why do you particularly want to come to my class?" And the student said, "When my time should come, I would like it to be during your class because during your class the transition from life to death will be scarcely perceptible."

But the truth is that teachers make a difference. They make a huge difference. Teachers change kids' lives. And, through their students, teachers can change the world. That's why there's no job more important than teaching. In a perfect world, our best and brightest young people would all become teachers, and the rest would have to settle for something less. As for rewards, the greatest reward that comes to us as teachers is watching the success of our former students. And when our students become teachers themselves we can watch the success of our grandstudents—that is, the students of our students. Our influence as teachers never ends. Even when our students don't become teachers they become parents, and they fill all sorts of other roles in society in which they mold and shape future generations, so our influence goes on forever.

The Purpose of Education

Now a word about the purpose of education. Much of the public discussion today is based on the premise that the purpose of education is to prepare kids for jobs. I don't believe that for one minute, and neither should you. Of course, our young people will need jobs, but employability is a byproduct of education, not its primary purpose. The larger purpose of education is to prepare kids for lives that

are satisfying and fulfilling and productive. What the schools should focus on is the pursuit of truth and beauty, and the development of human capacities, and the improvement of the quality of life. Education is what we have left over when we've forgotten the things we learned in school.

In the next generation technology and robotics will change the world of work dramatically. Since we can't know what skills tomorrow's jobs will require, the best way to prepare kids for them is education. And that means preparation in the five basic fields of study: math, languages and literature, the physical sciences, social studies, and the arts. The skills employers want most all happen to be important outcomes of music instruction—namely, creativity, flexibility, discipline, and the ability to work cooperatively with others. There's nothing taught in the schools that develops those skills better than music.

Nine Major Events, Reports, and Pieces of Legislation

Let me share with you my thoughts concerning nine major events, reports, and pieces of legislation that have shaped American education as I've witnessed it over the past 65 years.

1. The Most Stunning Challenge to American Education

This period has been dominated by the struggle to reform education, and that struggle began with the launch of the first artificial earth satellite, Sputnik I, by the Soviet Union, in 1957. Sputnik I was only two feet in diameter but we can scarcely imagine today what a staggering blow it was to our national honor, our prestige, and our sense of world leadership. We suddenly discovered, in the midst of the Cold War, that we were coming in second in the space race. Much of the blame immediately fell on our education system, especially for our perceived failure in math and science education. Congress quickly passed the National Defense Education Act (NDEA), which created a wide range of programs intended to improve education in math, science, and foreign languages. The blame for our educational shortcomings fell on both K-12 education and on higher education, but the benefits of NDEA fell almost entirely to higher education.

2. Congress's First Steps in K-12 Education

The first significant federal involvement in K-12 education came with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Prior to that time the federal government had been involved with the nation's schools in only two ways: Congress had long provided financial aid to school districts impacted by federal

facilities, such as military bases, and the Supreme Court had outlawed racial segregation in schools. Now ESEA opened the door to a vast new world of federal participation in education.

This legislation provided substantial funding for a wide array of programs. These included grants to: (1) aid children of low-income families; (2) upgrade school libraries and expand textbook acquisition; (3) offer supplementary services, which sometimes were designed to include arts programs; (4) bolster education research and training; and (5) strengthen state education agencies. ESEA established a pattern of support, and all of the subsequent federal programs for K-12 education have been handled as reauthorizations of ESEA, including the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015.

3. The Legislation with the Greatest Potential To Reform Education

The most promising piece of education legislation enacted during my lifetime was one that most people today have never heard of. It was the Education Professions Development Act of 1967 (EPDA). I remember this well because I was on leave from my university job and serving as the Music Specialist in the Department of Education in Washington.

That was a tremendously exciting time because of the massive new government involvement in education as a result of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as well as the other new social programs of the Johnson Administration. The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities had been established just two years earlier. It was also a period of great turmoil in Washington because of the many protests associated with the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War. These included, while my wife and I were there, a march on the Pentagon by 50,000 protesters, the “Poor People’s Campaign,” with a tent city on the National Mall, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, and George Lincoln Rockwell—leader of the American Nazi Party—and riots in more than 100 cities across the nation.

As one beneficial outcome of the EPDA, the four major arts education associations¹ secured funding for a project called the Interdisciplinary Model Program in the Arts for Children and Teachers (IMPACT). The objective of the project was to demonstrate the effectiveness of infusing the arts into the school curriculum, and it produced positive results. But the main purpose of the Education Professional Development Act was to improve the quality of teaching in the nation’s schools by making available continuous professional development for K-12 teachers throughout their careers, which I’ve always seen as a high priority. With the EPDA we seemed to be on the threshold of an exciting new era of professional

development. And that leads directly to my next topic: the biggest disappointment in education reform during my career.

4. The Biggest Disappointment in Education Reform

What was the biggest disappointment in education reform? The Education Professional Development Act of 1967. It was approved by Congress and signed by President Johnson with great fanfare. But it was never fully implemented. Some of its provisions were gradually merged with those of other legislation but, with respect to its main purpose of providing continuous professional development, it had no effect whatsoever. The problem was a lack of funding. Congress had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory, and the most promising education legislative goal of my lifetime essentially vanished in a shameful display of mindless parsimony and was never heard from again.

5. A New Day in Education Reform

However, the period of greatest enthusiasm for education reform lay ahead. In 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education published its landmark report called *A Nation at Risk*. That report fueled the growing perception that the nation's schools were failing, and it set off a massive wave of reform efforts at every level—federal, state, and local. It spoke of the education foundations of our society being “eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity” so strong that if it were imposed by a foreign power it would be considered an act of war.

That little booklet unleashed an overwhelming array of other reports and proposals together with an unprecedented flood of legislation, mostly at the state level. Much of this legislation mandated tests that kids would have to pass to graduate from high school or to advance from, say, elementary school to middle school. The immediate result of these tests was failure by large numbers of students, which proved to be politically unacceptable. Typically the states responded first by delaying the date of implementation and later by lowering their expectations—neither of which served to improve student achievement.

The decade that followed *A Nation at Risk* was probably the most dynamic, action-filled period ever in American education. The back-to-basics movement that arose from this publication generated challenges for arts education on an almost daily basis, and I was fortunate to be right in the middle of this action because I was President-Elect of MENC/NAfME when *A Nation at Risk* appeared. That position of leadership in the 1980s, together with my experience in Washington in the 1960s, gave me a unique familiarity with the individuals, organizations, and forces that shaped American education during those eventful years.

In the history of American education, reform has come up on our national agenda every generation or so, but usually we lose interest quickly and move on to something else. This time, however, the reform movement that began with *A Nation at Risk* didn't go away. It's still with us, 35 years later. What was different in 1983 was that the business community became involved. Business leaders realized that good schools are necessary for their bottom line. There's nothing more important than an educated workforce in building a healthy business climate and creating jobs, and that's the key to economic growth and prosperity for the nation. It seemed that this time education reform was taken seriously.

In the fall of 1991 the National Governors Association issued a policy statement setting forth what the governors proposed to do to reform education, and there was no mention of the arts in their proposals. A few weeks later the Council of Chief State School Officers sponsored a conference on large-scale assessment, and I attended representing NAFME. During a break I asked Ramsay Selden, the Director of the State Assessment Center at the Council, what we had to do to get music and the other arts back on the nation's education agenda. He replied, "That's easy. You have to develop a set of standards specifying what kids should know and be able to do." And he cited as a model the standards developed three years earlier by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.

Ramsay was right. I spoke with John Mahlmann, Executive Director of NAFME, and Karl Glenn, our President, and we spoke with the leaders of the DAMT Group, all of whom agreed. (DAMT [pronounced dam-it] was our informal organization of the four arts education associations. It was an acronym for dance, art, music, and theater.) We moved quickly and by mid-January of 1992 we had assembled a task force in each of the four arts and set to work to develop national standards in this new format.

6. The Report that Ignited the Standards Movement

Then about ten days after our task forces were organized, there occurred perhaps the most remarkable and fortuitous coincidence in the history of arts education. On January 24th, a prestigious group called the National Council on Education Standards and Testing issued the report that ignited the standards movement by calling for the development of national standards in all of the various disciplines, including the arts.

That report was called *Raising Standards for American Education*. No one remembers it today, but the George H.W. Bush Administration immediately seized on the idea of standards, and within a few weeks we had received grants to pursue our work from the Department of Education, the National Endow-

ment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. (At that point, the DAMT Group felt the need for a little more dignity, so we changed its name to the Consortium of National Arts Education Associations.) The National Council on Education Standards and Testing served a useful purpose, in my view, and could have been helpful subsequently if its life had been extended. Perhaps its non-renewal may have had something to do with its unfortunate acronym, NCEST (pronounced en-cest).

The arts standards were released at a gala press conference at the National Press Club in Washington in March 1994. The Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, was present to accept the standards and he spoke enthusiastically about the importance of the arts in education. The standards received remarkably widespread press coverage across the nation, and almost all of it was favorable.

Eight months later, we saw once again that timing is everything. In November, the standards movement suffered a serious setback when the American history standards were released. Those standards were widely and vigorously attacked for an alleged anti-Western bias and for what was called political correctness run amok. The criticism reached its peak when a resolution expressing disapproval and rejection of the history standards was approved by the U.S. Senate by a vote of 99 to 1. Shortly thereafter the group writing the English standards lost its funding in a similar dispute. At that point interest in creating standards shifted dramatically from the national level to the state level, which was inevitable given our decentralized system in which the responsibility for education lies with the states, but the national voluntary standards we had created served a model for the state standards in most states.

7. The Most Overlooked Report in Education Reform

As I look back at the education reform movement, there's one document that stands out in my mind as the most overlooked, the most neglected, and the most undeservedly ignored publication of those turbulent years. It was the report of the National Commission on Time and Learning in 1994, and it was called *Prisoners of Time*.

That Commission concluded that the traditional school calendar of 180 days, with about six hours a day, is a basic design flaw in American education. They recommended that schools be reorganized around learning rather than around the calendar and the clock. They pointed out that over the years state legislatures have assigned more and more responsibilities to the schools but they never take anything away, so even though these new responsibilities may all be worthwhile, the result has been to reduce the time spent on the core subjects to about three hours a day.

The key proposal of the Commission was that every student should spend at least five and a half hours a day on the core academic disciplines, which it explicitly defined to include the arts. Schools may then offer whatever extracurricular, co-curricular, or non-curricular activities they want, the Commission said, but they can do so only by lengthening the school day and not by sacrificing the academic core. *Prisoners of Time* was both thorough and thoughtful. But, unlike *A Nation at Risk*, it failed utterly to excite interest among either the press or the public, and its recommendations had no perceptible impact whatsoever. I consider the complete disregard of that promising document to be the single greatest missed opportunity of the education reform movement.

8. The Most Misguided Effort to Reform Education

Congress has always been ambivalent about the federal role in education because education in this country is a state and local responsibility, but in 2001, it managed to cobble together a comprehensive but fundamentally misguided piece of legislation called the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This too was a promising development, overflowing with good intentions, but it failed to live up to its promise for several reasons. First, little of the funding originally anticipated actually materialized. Second, the law required that schools test kids periodically to ensure that they're making so-called "adequate yearly progress," but in a stunning lapse of common sense, left it up to the states to define what that meant. And it imposed penalties for failure to meet certain expectations. As a result, the law not only allowed the states to manipulate the test results and mislead the public, it virtually required them to do so.

Finally, in a spectacular denial of reality, NCLB required that all students be proficient in reading and math by 2014. No one who knows anything about education could imagine a requirement so monumentally naive. The only way to achieve that lofty aim would be to set the proficient level so low as to be laughable. The reform efforts of the 1980s at the state level had largely failed because they demanded achievement but provided no new resources, and now the Congress followed the same futile path.

9. The Most Colossal Delusion in Education Reform

This may be a good time to present my nomination for the prize as the most colossal delusion of the education reform movement. I nominate the notion that education can be reformed by testing alone. And nowhere is this view more firmly embodied than in NCLB. That law did absolutely nothing to improve education. It merely required that kids be tested regularly in the hope that education would

somehow, magically, improve itself. NCLB was based on a false premise. It was based on the premise that teachers and schools could reform education if they would only try harder. But trying harder is not enough. It takes more than effort. Trying to reform education simply by requiring tests is like trying to eliminate crime by making it illegal.

For more than 30 years I was heavily involved in large-scale testing programs, including the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the Advanced Placement Program, and the National Teacher Examinations. I know what tests can do and what they can't do. I know that standards-based testing is essential in order to tell us whether we're achieving our objectives, and that testing serves many important functions too numerous to list here. But with NCLB virtually the entire burden of responsibility for improving education was placed on the shoulders of testing, and testing cannot do that job alone.

Five Major Lessons

Now I'd like to summarize five major lessons I've learned by watching the nation's efforts to reform education since 1957. *Lesson 1* is that education cannot be reformed by testing alone, and I've already discussed that. *Lesson 2* is that education cannot be reformed by legislation alone. For example, in 1994 Congress boldly announced eight goals for American education by the year 2000. Goal 5 was this: "By the year 2000 United States students will be first in the world in mathematics and science achievement." But as usual, empty rhetoric and arbitrary goals weren't enough to get the job done. The most recent assessment results show that American 15-year-olds, for example, rank 38th in the world in math and 24th in science.² We're still nowhere near meeting any of those goals from 2000. *Lesson 3* is a corollary of Lesson 2: education cannot be reformed from the top down. It can be reformed only from the bottom up. In other words, it can't be reformed in Washington. It can't even be reformed solely in our state capitals. It can be reformed only by teachers in their classrooms. In the 1980s we heard legislators complain that teachers are the problem. But teachers aren't the problem; they're the solution. Without teachers, there is no solution.

So how *do* we go about reforming education? That's *Lesson 4*. In my opinion, genuine reform will require a massive, systematic, narrowly focused, all-out effort to improve the quality of instruction. The reason we've focused on testing rather than instruction is simple: Improving instruction is hard work and it costs money. It's easier simply to require tests and let someone else figure out how to prepare kids to pass them. The fallacy here is that the test results won't improve until the instruction improves.

Improving the quality of instruction begins with giving teachers opportunities for professional development year-in and year-out for as long as they teach. Our present programs of professional development fall pathetically short of what's needed in terms of scope and quality and accessibility. Reform also requires more research into the factors that affect student learning, and in my view the single most important of those factors is motivation. If students are motivated, they will learn. You can't stop them. But if they're not motivated, it doesn't matter what the lesson plan says, it doesn't matter what expensive technology is used, and it doesn't matter what the teacher does; the results will be disappointing. It's also important to devise better means for exchanging information about what works.

And that leads directly to *Lesson 5*: Education reform requires resources. Everyone wants good schools. No one is opposed to education. We just don't want to pay for it. Let's face reality. Good education is expensive. But compared with ignorance, it's a bargain. I can tell you what's expensive: crime, welfare, teenage pregnancy—these are the things that are expensive. These are the things we can't afford. And education offers a way around these fiscal rat-holes. Any thoughtful analysis of the long-term needs of society has to place a well-educated public near the top of our list of priorities. But in recent years, all across that nation, we've seen education budgets cut and teachers laid off. We need more teachers, not fewer. We ought to be spending more for education, not less. Cutting budgets for education is an act of mind-boggling shortsightedness. It's institutional irresponsibility masquerading as fiscal discipline.

Critics say that we can't solve the problems of education by throwing money at them. How do we know that? We've never tried. But I'm not suggesting throwing money around. I'm just suggesting that we fund our schools at a level that's consistent with the level of results we expect from them. Research shows a modest but statistically significant correlation between per-pupil expenditures for K-12 education and National Assessment scores in reading and math.³ It shows a statistically significant correlation between per-pupil expenditures and SAT scores, adjusted for participation rates. And it shows a modest but positive correlation between per-pupil expenditures and high school graduation rates.⁴ It turns out that funding *does* make a difference.

What We Spend

Across the U.S., on average, we spent \$11,392 per pupil per year for K-12 education in 2015.⁵ In our highest-spending state the figure was \$21,206 while in our lowest-spending state it was only \$6,575. That's a difference of more than three to one. At the same time, nationally, we spent \$33,274 per person to keep

people in prison.⁶ We're spending almost three times as much on our prison population as on our school population. Is something out of balance here? Is this really where our priorities ought to lie?

What Makes Good Schools?

What makes good schools anyway? Based on what I've seen, good schools tend to have these six characteristics:

1. High expectations for every student;
2. A rigorous curriculum and valid assessment;
3. Well-qualified teachers and strong leadership;
4. Sufficient time, materials, and equipment, including technology;
5. A safe, healthful learning environment; and
6. Support and encouragement from parents and the community.

Here is the challenge: How do we achieve these conditions in every school? If we're truly serious about reforming education, we must somehow build a system in which the kind of education available in the best schools is available in every school. Some people say that's unrealistic. But the basic question is this: Can a just society accept the unconscionable inequities we have today?

Eight Steps to Improve Education

In the *Music Educators Journal* in 2015,⁷ I suggested eight steps that states, school districts, and individuals can take immediately to improve education even as we struggle to reach reform utopia. Thus far my suggestions seem to have escaped the notice of those in a position to implement them, but I'll summarize them for you.

1. Actively seek out highly qualified teacher applicants, and don't simply hire whoever walks through the door first with a teaching certificate.
2. Provide systematic and effective mentoring for new teachers.
3. Reform the tenure review process and make it easier to dismiss ineffective teachers.
4. Ensure that every student spends at least five and a half hours a day on the core academic disciplines—which include music.
5. Establish a system of multi-level teacher certification based on professional development.
6. Base the salaries of teachers on their effectiveness, not on their degrees and years of experience.

7. Improve teachers' working conditions and treat them as professionals rather than as hourly workers.
8. Change the way we speak with kids about school by treating school as an exciting adventure, as the staging area for a successful life, and as a privilege to be embraced, not as a minimum-security prison that simply has to be endured for 12 years.

An Agenda for the Future

Now, what about the future of music in education? I'm optimistic about the future, but there are a few matters that need attention and I'd like to propose a three-step plan of action that might help to strengthen our position.

Step 1 is to expand the music curriculum in the secondary school. In my view our most conspicuous shortcoming today is the lack of an adequate general music program in most high schools. There are students in every school who are not enrolled in our major performing groups, either because they didn't happen to get started on an instrument in grade 5 or because that's not where their musical interests lie. Many of these kids would welcome a chance to study music in school, but they can't because there are no courses available to them. We've made measurable progress since the first National Standards appeared, but we still have a long way to go.

Step 2 is to reach more students. Although the figures vary considerably by state, in the typical high school, only about 20 percent of the students are enrolled in music, and that's not enough. Steps 1 and 2 go hand in hand, of course, because in order to reach more students we have to expand our curriculum. And this is important not only because all kids deserve an opportunity to make music a meaningful part of their lives, but also because the students we're not reaching include many of our future leaders.

In just a few years these will be the principals, school board members, and legislators who will make the decisions that affect our programs. They'll be the newspaper columnists and TV personalities and celebrities who shape public opinion. Will they look back on the music programs in their schools as offerings that were seen as exciting and rewarding—even by those who didn't take part? Or will they remember those programs as isolated hideaways for a select few somewhere on the periphery of the mainstream school activities? Will they see school music as a microcosm of our powerful, compelling, and glorious global musical heritage? Or will they see it as something that's separate and divorced from the music of the real world?

Step 3 is to build coalitions. This work has to take place at every level—national, state, and especially local. We have many friends and potential allies who are sympathetic to our efforts. These include church choirs and other vocal groups and symphony orchestras, both amateur and professional. They include state and local arts agencies, art galleries and museums, women’s clubs, and parent-teacher organizations. They include professional groups of all kinds and college and university faculties, and band, orchestra, and choir booster clubs. There’s no more potent source of support than the parents of our students.

All of these groups are potential allies in the struggle to maintain and expand our programs. Often, they already have a strong self-interest in our programs because it’s our programs that provide their future members or their future audiences. But we have to organize these potential partners into effective coalitions and do so before a crisis erupts because when there’s a budget crunch or an emergency that threatens our programs, it’s probably too late.

Final Thoughts

The reason I’m optimistic about the future of music education is simply that music exalts the human spirit. It transforms the human experience. It brings enjoyment and satisfaction to people’s lives, and these are qualities that are needed more than ever in a world that’s obsessed with technology and tends to view people merely as statistics in huge databases. And the way for people to get the greatest enjoyment from music is to learn more about it in school programs that are comprehensive, balanced, and sequential.

Music is vitamin M. It’s a chocolate chip in the cookie of life. There’s a magic about music, and that’s why it has held such powerful appeal to human beings in every culture throughout history. Music educators have something to give to the young people of America that no one else can give them, and it’s something that—once given—can never be taken away. It’s the joy and the beauty of music.

Any child whose school program does not include the systematic study of music has been cheated just as surely as if his or her program had not included the study of science or math. In the end, the single most basic function of education is to improve the quality of life, and there’s no aspect of education that contributes more to that goal than music. That’s why what we music educators do is so vitally important to every American today, tomorrow, and as far into the future as anyone can see.

Endnotes

¹The American Alliance for Theatre & Education, Music Educators National Conference, National Art Education Association, and National Dance Association.

²Program for International Student Assessment, *PISA 2015 Results in Focus* (2015), 5, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-2015-results-in-focus.pdf>.

³John Mackenzie, *Public School Funding and Performance* (2006), http://www1.udel.edu/johnmack/research/school_funding.pdf.

⁴Jennifer Cohen Kabaker, “Examining the Data: State Per Pupil Expenditures and State Graduation Rates,” *Ed Money Watch* (2010), <https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/federal-education-budget-project/ed-money-watch/examining-the-data-state-per-pupil-expenditures-and-state-graduation-rates>.

⁵United States Census Bureau, “School Spending Per Pupil Increased by 3.2 Percent, U.S. Census Bureau Reports” (table cited within), May 21, 2018, <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/school-spending.html>.

⁶Chris Mai and Ram Subramanian, *The Price of Prisons: Examining State Spending Trends, 2010–2015* (May 2017), 8, https://storage.googleapis.com/vera-web-assets/downloads/Publications/price-of-prisons-2015-state-spending-trends/legacy_downloads/the-price-of-prisons-2015-state-spending-trends.pdf.

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