

# Our Schools and Our Future

. . . Are We Still at Risk?

FINDINGS AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS OF  
THE KORET TASK FORCE  
ON K-12 EDUCATION

**T**wenty years ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (Excellence Commission) delivered a thunderbolt in the form of a report called *A Nation at Risk*. With the hindsight that two decades can provide, it is clear that this report awakened millions of Americans to a national crisis in primary and secondary education. *A Nation at Risk* bluntly and forcefully pinpointed the problems facing our public schools and insisted that their solution would require a new commitment to education quality, on the part of school administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Though the Excellence Commission did not consider some of the far-reaching reforms that would later become an important part of the national discourse, it did help set the stage for such reforms by pointing to worrisome signs of weakness and decay in our school system.

That system did not suddenly crash in the early eighties. The declines, shortcomings, and inadequacies so starkly set forth in *A Nation at Risk* had been accumulating for many years. But until the Excellence Commission documented and framed them as grave problems in urgent need of attention, many Americans—especially those within the field of education—had supposed that the schools were doing an adequate job and that, whatever its shortcomings, the system was sufficient to meet the country’s needs.

The Excellence Commission called an abrupt halt to this smug contentment. It admonished the nation in forceful, martial language that America faced a momentous problem, one that threatened its national security, and its economic vitality. Not since the late fifties, when Sputnik startled the nation with the possibility that the Soviet Union was surpassing us in science and mathematics, had there been such alarm over the academic weakness of U.S. schools.

Within a few years after Sputnik, the sense of urgency had faded and the focus of reform had turned away from academic performance. Well-intended efforts to address racial segregation, meet the needs of handicapped youngsters, compensate for disadvantage, and provide bilingual schooling for immigrants eclipsed concern about student achievement. They also produced much red tape, litigiousness, and contentious battles over means and ends. Teacher organizations, at the same time, asserted their right to bargain collectively and to strike, which brought them unprecedented power over schools and school systems, even as other interest groups and bureaucratic rigidities made it ever harder to change public education. In other words, the Sputnik-inspired commitment to improving the education system had clearly lost priority—as had student achievement. SAT scores peaked in 1964 and declined thereafter, reaching their nadir about the time *A Nation at Risk* was unleashed.

Yet twenty years following the alarm sounded by *A Nation at Risk*, the commitment has not faded. Thanks to the report’s eloquence and

official standing in Washington, D.C., it reinforced and dramatized concerns expressed by a simultaneous outpouring of other reports, studies, and manifestos all pointing to the fact that American students were not learning enough and U.S. schools were not performing well enough to meet international competition. The Excellence Commission caught a wave of concern about education quality that was beginning to sweep the nation—and that has not yet receded. It effectively recast many people's thinking about education, from the focus on resources, services, and mindless innovation that had absorbed us during the sixties and seventies to the emphasis on achievement, performance, and excellence that remains central today. It redefined our principal challenge in education: where once it was to provide equal access, now it is to promote successful learning among students from all different backgrounds. And it laid bare the truths that equity without excellence is an empty achievement and quantity without quality is an unkept promise. But while its reverberations are still being felt, solid and conclusive reforms in American primary and secondary education remain elusive.

### **What the Excellence Commission Said**

The commission organized its findings within four broad topics: content, expectations, time, and teaching. Under these headings, *A Nation at Risk* issued a twenty-four-count indictment of American primary and secondary education as the members of the Excellence Commission found it in 1983. The spirit of these indictments can be sensed from the following excerpts:

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 course. . . .

The amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased

. . . and grades have risen as average student achievement has been declining.

In thirteen states, 50 percent or more of the units required for high school graduation may be electives chosen by the student. Given this freedom . . . many students opt for less demanding personal service courses, such as bachelor living.

A study of the school week in the United States found that some schools provided students only seventeen hours of academic instruction. . . . In . . . other industrialized countries, it is not unusual for academic high school students to spend eight hours a day at school, 220 days per year.

Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students. . . . Half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach those subjects. . . .

The Excellence Commission made four major recommendations and thirty-two “implementing recommendations.” Though these did not call for sweeping reform of the education system itself, they demanded higher standards of performance. These are the four major recommendations.

- High school graduation requirements should be strengthened so that all students acquire a solid foundation in five “new basics”: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science.
- Schools and colleges should adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance.
- The amount of time students devote to learning should be significantly increased.
- The teaching profession should be strengthened by raising standards for training, entry, and professional growth.

### The Response

It did not take long for *A Nation at Risk*'s analysis and central findings to win acceptance among the general public, editorial writers, business leaders, governors, and other elected officials at the national, state, and local levels. Ten years following its release, Excellence Commission member and Nobel Prize–winning chemist Glenn Seaborg wrote, “It is now apparent that the precollege educational crisis and the urgent need for educational reform are broadly perceived as being a top priority.” Today, twenty years after its release, nearly everyone in the United States who attends to such matters, save for a few Panglosses within the education profession, recognizes that *A Nation at Risk* accurately described our flagging academic performance, underperforming schools, and underachieving children and the insidious threat they posed to our national welfare, long-term economic strength, cultural vitality, and civic competence.

While *A Nation at Risk* arguments may have been widely embraced, that did not necessarily translate into positive action. In fact, many of the reforms that were implemented in the aftermath of *A Nation at Risk* did not even track the Excellence Commission's advice. In his 1993 reflection, Seaborg noted, “Overall, the lack of progress in implementing the recommendations of . . . *A Nation at Risk* has been discouraging.” Agreeing with the *A Nation at Risk* critique and finding the will to make the changes it called for were obviously two different animals.

Familiar strategies were tried first: new programs, more money, and tighter regulations. Among the changes were some the Excellence Commission had urged—such as stiffer high school graduation requirements—as well as many it had not. Yet these produced little in the way of improved outcomes. Test scores are at basically the same level today as in 1970. Students do no more homework today than they did twenty years ago. Remediation remains the fastest-growing activity on many college campuses. Graduation rates have actually

declined—less than three-fourths of our young people now earn high school diplomas, though this slippage is often masked by the suggestion that “equivalency certificates” amount to the same thing. Employers and professors remain dissatisfied with young people’s readiness for work and for higher education. And international assessment results reveal that American seventeen-year-olds know far less math and science than their peers in most other modern nations.

As it became clear in the late eighties that more of the same was not yielding acceptable gains even as anxiety about United States education performance deepened, energized governors and business leaders started to make the education-reform crusade their own. They launched bolder strategies, no doubt inspired by *A Nation at Risk* but often breaking new policy ground. By 1990, the country was setting national education goals, giving birth to novel school designs, breaking up big high schools, and revamping the National Assessment of Educational Progress to get better information. The first Bush administration briefly tried to create national academic standards but the effort to do this from Washington soon fizzled. Within a few years, however, prodded by the Clinton administration’s Goals 2000 program, almost every state was setting its own standards, establishing its own assessments, and devising its own accountability systems. By the mid-nineties, a number of innovations were also visible in the organization of the education delivery system itself: Charter schools were spreading, vouchers were being tried, and private firms were beginning to operate public schools on an outsourced basis.

### **Why Did *A Nation at Risk* Produce So Much Change and So Little Improvement?**

First, the Excellence Commission’s diagnosis was incomplete. It paid scant attention to the K–8 years, seeing them as providing a reasonably successful level of basic skills, when in fact many children were failing

to gain the fundamental knowledge they would need to continue learning in subsequent years.

Second, the Excellence Commission was either too obtuse or too naïve to take on the basic functioning and political control of the system itself. It seemingly believed that the public education system of the day, given higher standards, better trained teachers, and more time on task, would move the schools and their pupils toward loftier levels of performance. In a word, it trusted the system to do the right thing once that system was duly chastised and pointed in the right direction.

We now know that this was unrealistic, that the Excellence Commission failed to confront essential issues of power and control. It seemed not to realize that the system lacked meaningful accountability and tangible incentives to improve, that it exhibited the characteristic flaws of a command-and-control enterprise, that it enjoyed a virtual monopoly, and that the system itself would have to change at its core if it was to produce fundamentally different results. The Excellence Commission never penetrated to that core. It accepted the system as it was, with all the anachronisms inherent in a political mechanism created in the mid-nineteenth century.

We now know that powerful forces of inertia—three in particular—proved far stronger and more stubborn than the Excellence Commission could have foreseen in 1983.

1. *A Nation at Risk* underestimated the resistance to change from the organized adult interests of the K–12 public education system, centering upon the two big national teacher unions and their state and local affiliates as well as administrators, colleges of education, state bureaucracies, school boards, and many others. These groups see any changes beyond the most marginal as threats to their own jealously guarded power, influence, and monopoly. Moreover, they are permanent features on the education landscape, whereas the Excellence Commission detonated its report, then disappeared,

with no real heirs or successors to shepherd its recommendations through the political minefields.

2. *A Nation at Risk* underestimated the tenacity of the “thought-world” of the nation’s colleges of education, which see themselves as owners of the nation’s schools and the minds of educators, free to impose their ideas on future teachers and administrators regardless of evidence about their effectiveness. Some of the Excellence Commission’s own expert advisers were advocates of these ideas, in effect poisoning the report from within and leading to recommendations that worked against the very goals it set out to achieve.
3. *A Nation at Risk* also underestimated the large number of Americans, particularly in middle-class suburbs, who believe that their schools are basically sound and academically successful. This misapprehension arises mainly from the dearth of honest, standards-based information from objective outside sources concerning the true performance levels of our schools, an immense data void that the Excellence Commission failed to address.

In counterweight to these forces of inertia, the past two decades have also seen the development of powerful new forces for reform that should strengthen America’s ability to improve its schools as we head into the future. These include

- the public’s surprisingly durable belief that education reform is one of the most critical issues facing the nation—a belief heartily shared by impatient business leaders and elected officials. Although this sense of urgency seems inconsistent with the oft-reported complacency of parents about their own child’s school, satisfaction levels do not run deep. A majority of American parents believe that private schools are more effective than their children’s public schools and say they would move their children if they could.

- growing and sustained support for both standards-based and choice-based education reforms, which has the potential to leverage changes that are farther-reaching than those envisioned by *A Nation at Risk*, though both reform strategies face staunch resistance from established education interests.
- minority parents' increasing anger and disenchantment with failing inner-city school systems. These parents are less willing to listen to promises that things will get better if they continue to trust the system and drench it with resources.

### Findings of the Koret Task Force

The members of this task force have studied American education for many years. We come from several disciplines and have different interests. But we come together in unanimous support of the ten findings and three major recommendations that follow. These encompass the most important lessons we have learned about American K–12 education over the two decades since *A Nation at Risk*.

1. *U.S. education outcomes, measured in many ways, show little improvement since 1970.* The trends that alarmed the Excellence Commission have not been reversed. Though small gains can be seen in some areas (especially math), they amount to no more than a return to the achievement levels of thirty years ago. And while the United States runs in place, other nations are overtaking us. In the past, we could always boast that America educates a larger proportion of its school-age children than other lands, but this is no longer true. Many countries now match and exceed us in years of school attained by their youth, and they are surpassing us as well in what is actually learned during those years.
2. *The U.S. economy has fared well during the past two decades not because of the strong performance of its K–12 system, but because of a host of coping and compensating mechanisms.* These include

an endlessly forgiving (and generously remediating) higher education system; the presence within the United States of most of the world's top universities; huge efforts at research and development (leading, for example, to notable productivity gains that owe little to workers' skills); a hard-working populace and an adaptable immigration policy; a society that encourages second chances and invites new ideas; and the world's largest and best-functioning free market economy. Yet even as we have racked up successes in economic and foreign policy domains, we have also seen unmistakable evidence of civic erosion, cultural decline, and moral wavering.

3. *We've made progress in narrowing resource gaps between schools, communities, states, and groups, but the achievement gaps that vex us remain nearly as wide as ever.* This is because the problems that *A Nation at Risk* highlighted particularly affect schools that serve disadvantaged children, and these problems have not been successfully addressed. Minority youngsters are far less apt to complete school and college, and their average academic performance is markedly lower. On some measures, minority twelfth-graders score about the same as white eighth-graders, who themselves are not scoring well. The bottom line: America's primary-secondary education system not only remains mediocre, but its failure to reform also has strikingly inequitable consequences for poor and minority children.
4. *The preponderance of school reform efforts since A Nation at Risk has concentrated on augmenting the system's resources, widening its services, and tightening its regulation of school practices.* This has not proven to be a trustworthy path to improved educational performance.
5. *Higher-quality teachers are key to improving our schools, but the proper gauge to measure that quality has nothing to do with paper credentials or more resources and everything to do with classroom*

*effectiveness*. Across-the-board raises for all teachers, good and bad alike, do not strengthen pupil learning. And stricter regulation of teacher preparation and accreditation only creates shortages and bottlenecks that reduce the supply of capable new instructors for U.S. schools.

6. *Bold reform attempts have been implemented in limited and piecemeal fashion, despite their potential to improve student learning.* It has been demonstrated in several states that “accountability,” or standards-based, reform, when done persistently and carefully, can boost achievement, especially among minority and disadvantaged youngsters. And “choice-based” reform has shown promise and is in great demand, as witnessed by the growth of the charter school movement, the rise in home schooling, and parental and community support for scholarship and voucher programs.
7. *Standards-based reform has not achieved its full potential. Though promising, it is hard to get right.* States find it difficult to gain consensus on a coherent set of substantial and ambitious academic standards, to align their tests with those standards, and to get strong accountability systems working. Standards and tests are essential for parents and policy makers to identify faltering schools and gauge the effectiveness of different programs, but they do not themselves solve the problems that they illumine. Moreover, the steps taken so far in the name of accountability fall, for the most part, only upon children, not on the adults in the system.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act may help by mobilizing federal muscle to push states and districts in the right direction. But Washington has scant leverage over states and districts. NCLB has long, slow timelines—and few sanctions when states and districts do not meet those timelines. It imposes few real consequences on educators whose schools fail. It is likely, therefore, to make the biggest difference in places that share its goals and have the greatest capacity to attain them and to accomplish

least in those places—probably the neediest places—where officials may not much care or simply do not know how to go about achieving the goals.

8. *Choice-based reforms have not had a fair test.* Most evidence to date suggests that they can boost student learning and parental satisfaction, but constraints have kept them from being fully tried. Opponents have hamstrung school-choice programs at every turn: fighting voucher demonstrations in legislative chambers and courtrooms; limiting per-pupil funding so tightly that it's impractical for new schools to come into being; capping the number of charter schools; and regulating and harassing them into near-conformity with conventional schools.

These barriers have kept choice-based reforms from receiving the proper trials they deserve, which is significant on two counts: first, by ensuring that only half-baked versions have been adopted, opponents have made it easier to claim that the reforms were tried but they failed; second, profound changes in a system—the kind of changes that choice would bring to bear—cannot arise overnight. Market systems, in particular, take time to develop.

9. *Americans need better, more timely information about student performance, not only at the national and international levels, but also for individual schools, pupils, and teachers.* We need more and clearer data about what schools do, where they spend their money, and what results they're producing. Currently, the only audits of the system's performance are conducted by those running the system or by organizations that depend upon them for future business, including colleges of education and testing firms. As the country has recently and painfully observed in the business world, such audits are simply unsatisfactory from the standpoint of the system's stakeholders and clients.
10. *We need a thoroughgoing reform of elementary and middle schooling.* Though our high schools require attention, preschool and K–

8 education are far from what they need to be. These are the years when children gain fundamental knowledge about their country and their world, about science and literature, about art and civics. This calls for close attention to K–8 curricula as well as to the curricular aspects of prekindergarten education and for purposeful steps to help prepare all children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

### Our Recommendations

In the years since *A Nation at Risk*, the incremental changes that passed for reform have not improved school performance or student achievement. We conclude that fundamental changes are needed in the incentive structures and power relationships of schooling itself. Those changes are anchored to three core principles: *accountability, choice, and transparency*.

By *accountability*, we mean that every school or education provider—at least every one that accepts public dollars—subscribes to a coherent set of rigorous, statewide academic standards, statewide assessments of student and school performance, and statewide systems of incentives and interventions tied to academic results in relation to those standards.

- *Clear goals*. Every state needs a coherent set of challenging academic standards and curricular guidelines, subject by subject and grade by grade, standards that are not confined to basic skills and the three R's but that incorporate such other vital studies as history, science, geography, civics, and literature. Every state also needs a coherent and corresponding set of proficiency levels to be attained by all children in these subjects, levels that encompass essential knowledge as well as necessary skills.
- *Accurate measures*. Every state needs tests and other assessments that accurately gauge the performance of individual children,

schools, and school systems in relation to its standards. These assessments should form the basis for evaluating the educational value added by each school, and incentives should be linked to how much schools contribute to student learning. The National Assessment of Educational Progress functions as a fine external yardstick by which to gauge the rigor of a state's standards and the performance of its pupils—and could do the same at the district level if current statutory limits were eased.

- *Consequences.* Every state needs an accountability system in which the consequences—both welcome and dire—fall not just upon students but also upon responsible adults. Success should be rewarded. Failing schools should be closed, reconstituted, taken over by other authorities, outsourced to private operators, or their students given the right—and full funding—to leave for better schools. This does not mean just to other public schools in their own district—the limp compromise Congress wrote into No Child Left Behind—but the capacity to transfer to any school, anywhere. Taxpayers should no longer be forced to pay for ineffective schools.
- *Replacing failed schools.* Every state should include school and district takeover provisions in its accountability systems and should strive to reconstitute failing schools within the public system or contract out their management to alternative providers, both for-profit and not-for-profit. Takeovers and outsourcing provide states and districts with potential remedies and alternatives for their failed schools while stimulating competition among potential providers—all of whom must be held to account for their own results.

By *choice* we mean that parental decisions rather than bureaucratic regulation should drive the education enterprise. Open competition among ideas and methods, with people free to abandon weak schools for stronger ones, is the surest way to make major progress. The con-

cept that underlies charter schools—freedom of operation in return for evidence of satisfactory results—makes sense at every level of education. It is the central doctrine of modern management: Operators of a production unit enjoy sweeping autonomy to run their unit as they think best but are strictly held to account for the bottom line. In education, that bottom line is denominated primarily in terms of student learning and parental satisfaction. The education system's clients must be free to select other providers that teach their children more effectively and in accord with family and community priorities as well as core American values.

- *Charter schools.* Given that one aim of the charter-school movement is to improve the public education system, every state should allow charter schools a full and fair chance to show what they can do to provide high-quality education options to children and families. States should exempt charter schools from local district veto and numerical caps. They should provide charter schools with full per-pupil funding and capital funds to support facility costs. Charters should not be subject to teacher certification requirements or mandatory collective bargaining. In turn, schools that do not add substantial academic value to their pupils—and do not satisfy their clients—should lose their charters and close.
- *Voucher experiments.* Every state should explore additional forms of school choice, pushing far beyond the boundaries of within-district public school choice. More states should give vouchers a proper test in selected communities, in tandem with strenuous efforts to renew the public schools of those communities. These experiments should be rigorously and objectively evaluated—as should every education innovation. Sponsoring such experiments and evaluations is a key role for the federal government in primary-secondary education.
- *Full funding for high-risk students.* Children who pose difficult

challenges to schools should, under a choice regimen, command added resources to pay for their education. Disadvantaged, disabled, and limited-English-proficiency pupils should carry with them substantially larger amounts of funding than “regular” students, both to make them more attractive to schools and to assist schools with the added costs of teaching them well.

- *Teacher quality and incentives.* The principle of choice should extend to teachers and administrators as well. Training, recruitment, licensing, and compensation should be redesigned to offer wider opportunities for able, willing individuals. A person who is knowledgeable in a subject should be given the right to teach it, with actual classroom effectiveness then used as the primary gauge of competence. Performance in the classroom should be the chief determinant of whether teachers are retained and promoted. Effective teachers should be paid more than ineffective ones. Those who teach fields in which there is a scarcity of teachers should be paid more than those who teach fields oversupplied with teachers. And teachers and administrators who take on challenging assignments should be paid more than teachers who opt for easier situations.

By *transparency* we mean that those who seek complete information about a school or school system (excluding personal information about individuals) should readily be able to get it. This information should be provided in forms and formats that enable users to easily compare one school, system, or state with another.

- *Solid information.* Parents, teachers, and policy makers need to know exactly how their children and schools are performing and how their money is being spent. This requires for each school (1) a clear statement of standards and objectives, (2) a detailed curriculum, (3) the indicators it uses to track progress toward its

goals, (4) evidence of its progress to date, and (5) a budget presented in ways that link expenditures to programs and goals.

- *Reports on progress.* Academic achievement should be reported in *absolute* terms (how students are performing vis-à-vis the school's standards), in *value-added* terms (how much more they know at the end of the school year), and in *comparative* terms (in relation to district, state, or national standards or to the performance of other schools and students).
- *Ready access.* All this information should be available on a well-tended school or school system Web site where it can easily be accessed by staff, parents, and policy makers—and by journalists, researchers, taxpayers, and rival schools. Today's technologies make this far easier than in the past. Private firms and nonprofit organizations now offer high-quality systems where vital education data is clearly presented and can be carefully analyzed.
- *Nationwide reporting.* Though the primary burden of transparency rests on individual schools, school systems, and states, Washington also bears a responsibility. America is overdue for a thorough upgrading of federal education-data gathering and analysis, primarily housed at the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as for needed strengthening and expansion of—and enhanced independence for—the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Accountability, choice, and transparency are the essential trinity of principles by which to reconstruct America's schools. Each must be in place for the others to work. In combination, they transform the education system's priorities, power relationships, and incentive structures.

Accountability means that all of those in the education system—the child, the teacher, the school, and district leaders—know what

they must produce in the way of results, how they will be measured, and what will happen if they do or do not attain the desired results.

Choice brings freedom, diversity, and innovation to how education is provided, who provides it, and what options are available to families.

Transparency yields the information needed to assure both top-down accountability and a viable marketplace of methods and ideas.

Taken together, the result of these three will be a reinvigorated yet very different public education system, a new constitutional arrangement with power distributed where it belongs, checks and balances among those who wield that power, and incentives that pull toward—rather than away from—achievement, productivity, freedom, and accountability.

This new system will rekindle Americans' confidence in public education and this should lead to a greater public willingness—once people understand how and why additional resources will make a difference—to invest more in education. Such new investments, in turn, could lead to even greater gains, such as abler people entering and staying in the teaching field; better preschooling; better technology and textbooks; and better performance in the classroom.

The rebirth of this confidence, however, requires the radical overhaul we have outlined here.

### **Conclusion**

The National Commission on Excellence in Education concluded its historic 1983 report by noting that “Children born today can expect to graduate from high school in the year 2000. . . . We firmly believe that a movement of America's schools in the direction called for by our recommendations will prepare these children for far more effective lives in a far stronger America.”

But since those words were written, we have gained little by way of better education results. Twenty years of entering first-graders—

about eighty million children—have walked into schools where they have scant chance of learning much more than the youngsters whose plight troubled the Excellence Commission in 1983.

The Excellence Commission was alarmed by what it found. It used strong language. In its most often quoted passage, *A Nation at Risk* told us 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. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.”

Every word of that indictment is as true in 2003 as in 1983. The tide of mediocrity remains high. Other nations are surpassing our educational attainments. While our military strength remains unchallenged today, our continued strength as a nation depends on the educated intelligence of our people. As the world grows both more interconnected and at the same time more dangerous, the schools must do more to strengthen the foundations of citizenship and to ensure that young Americans understand the democratic values, ideals, and traditions of our society.

Our international economic competitiveness, while robust, is far shakier today than in many years, and the shrinking globe has made it vastly easier than in 1983 for investments and jobs to go anywhere on the planet that seems likeliest to succeed with them. Here, too, we must look to our schools to produce the highly educated citizenry on which America’s future economic vitality depends.

We have learned, painfully, that when it comes to education reform, wishing doesn’t make it happen. Trusting the system to change itself doesn’t work. Adding resources without requiring reform is a false hope.

Issuing new commands and setting new goals doesn’t make it

happen either, unless they are accompanied by a viable strategy for achieving them—a strategy built upon accountability, competition, and transparency. Education reform will only come about in the United States when the delivery system itself is reconstructed around clear principles, sound ideas, and learning-centered rules, incentives, and power relationships.

A nation that responded enthusiastically but irresolutely to the Excellence Commission’s thoughtful yet modest recommendations in 1983 must now find the resolve to carry out a bottom-to-top reconstruction of its system of schooling. Can we do it? The stakes are huge, the challenge historic. We must begin today, in 2003, to make the changes that will transform American public education so that it can deliver on the democratic ideal of equal educational opportunity for students in 2013 and 2023. This is a promise that our nation has made to its children. For their sake, and for the sake of our country’s future, it is a promise that we must keep.