In 1983, *A Nation at Risk* misidentified what is wrong with our public schools and consequently set the nation on a school reform crusade that has done more harm than good.

The diagnosis of the National Commission on Excellence in Education was flawed in three respects: First, it wrongly concluded that student achievement was declining. Second, it placed the blame on schools for national economic problems over which schools have relatively little influence. Third, it ignored the responsibility of the nation’s other social and economic institutions for learning.

As to student achievement: *A Nation at Risk* based its analysis of declining student achievement entirely on average SAT scores which had dropped by about half a standard deviation from 1963 to 1980. But much of the decline had been due to the changing composition of SAT test takers — in the early 1960s, the preponderance of SAT test takers were high school students planning to apply to the most selective colleges. By 1983, the demographic composition of SAT test takers had mostly stabilized, and average SAT scores were again rising, not declining.[1]

Trend scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also show a more complex picture than *Risk* described. In elementary and middle school math, average scores rose for both black and white students, starting in the late 1970s. This trend might not yet have been fully understood by *Risk* commission members — they might have concluded that the upturn then barely detectable would be short-lived. But the rise has certainly continued subsequent to 1983. Indeed as the figure below shows, for black students, the improvement has been so dramatic that black fourth grade math scores today are now higher than white fourth grade scores in 1978. In other words, if white math achievement had been stagnant, the black-white achievement gap would have been entirely closed. The continued gap is due to substantial improvement in white scores as well.

![Graph showing NAEP trends in average mathematics scale scores and score gaps for White students and Black students, age 9: 1973-2004](image)

[1] Eighth grade math scores have also increased since 1978, although not by as much; for twelfth graders, white scores have been stagnant, while black scores had a big increase from 1982 to 1990, and have been stagnant since.
Reading scores are less positive. For whites, reading performance is not substantially better now than in 1978, at the fourth, eighth, or twelfth grade levels. But it is not worse either. For blacks, reading performance is better, but not nearly as much better as in math.

None of this, however, supports the decline thesis of *A Nation at Risk*.

Because of the report’s doomsday aura, policymakers have mostly failed since 1983 to investigate the causes of these improvements— the obvious, unasked, question is, what were we doing right from 1978 to 1990 (and since), so we can do more of it?

A belief in decline has led to irresponsibility in school reform. Policymakers who believed they could do no harm because American schools were already in a state of collapse have imposed radical reforms without careful consideration of possible unintended adverse consequences. Not thinking that President Reagan’s rule (“if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”) applied to what conservatives and liberals alike assumed was an already broken school system, this irresponsibility reached its zenith in the bipartisan No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law of 2002.

I do not suggest that American schools are adequate, that American students’ level of achievement in math and reading is where it should be, that American schools have been improving as rapidly as they should, or that the achievement gap is narrowing to the extent needed to give us any satisfaction. I only suggest that we should approach fixing a system differently if we believe its outcomes are slowly improving than if we believe it is collapsing. And we owe the latter, flawed assumption, to *A Nation at Risk*.

Perhaps the greatest damage has been done by narrowing the curriculum in an effort to boost math and reading test scores. The trend is most notable since the enactment of NCLB, as schools have diminished attention to history, civics, the sciences, art, music, physical education, character development, and social skills, to make more instructional time available for test preparation in math and reading. This distortion of the historical breadth of American public school goals has been most pronounced for minority and other disadvantaged children. These are the children who most need a broad curriculum, as well as further gains in math and reading.[2]

*Risk*, to its credit, worried that “schools may emphasize such rudiments as reading and computation at the expense of other essential skills such as comprehension, analysis, solving problems, and drawing conclusions,” and it asserted, “Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people. . . .”[3] But these caveats were buried beneath the report’s urgent calls to improve the reading and (especially) math skills that purportedly determined the nation’s economic health, and to increase the standardized testing that would spur such improvement.

From an irrational faith in the ability of standardized tests to inspire greater learning, and from an unwillingness to finance more expensive tests that would sample critical thinking as well as basic skills, we’ve again narrowed the curriculum to “minimum competency,” precisely the 1970s standard that *A Nation at Risk* denounced. From a belief that an alleged decline in student achievement must be attributable to a decline in teacher quality, at best, or to malfeasance (“low expectations”) of teachers, at worst, many districts have attempted to overcome this teacher incompetence by implementing scripted, or nearly so, curricula. We’ve attempted to focus teachers’ attention by a testing regime so rigid that it threatens to destroy teachers’ intrinsic motivation and their ability to address the full range of student difficulties that can only be diagnosed by creative teachers, student-by-student.

Again, this does not suggest that teachers are as well-trained as they should be, as well-motivated as we would like them to be, or as student-oriented as they must be. But it is hard to defend the proposition that teachers, especially those of minority and disadvantaged children, have been sitting around making excuses for poor performance when these children have gained a full standard deviation in test score improvement in a single generation.
As to schools’ responsibility for economic ills: A *Nation at Risk* claimed that increased market shares for Japanese automobiles, German machine tools, and Korean steel reflected the superior education of those nations’ workers:

Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . . The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation. . . .

The report claimed that a “long-term decline in educational achievement” was somehow connected to “a steady 15-year decline in industrial productivity, as one great American industry after another falls to world competition.”

*Risk* then stimulated a spate of similar reports through the late 1980s and early 1990s, all making similar claims that import penetration could be blamed on poor American education.

For example, in 1990, a group of prominent Democrats and Republicans calling themselves the National Center on Education and the Economy followed with another report, *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages*. It saw skills development as virtually the only policy lever for shaping the economy. It charged that inadequate skills attained at flawed schools had caused industrial productivity to “slow to a crawl” and would, without radical school reform, lead to permanently low wages for the bottom 70 percent of all Americans.

Leading public intellectuals such as Robert Reich focused attention on human capital solutions in a laissez-faire global system. His book *The Work of Nations* argued that international competition would be won by nations with the most (and best) “symbolic analysts,” not “routine” workers. Lester Thurow’s *Head to Head* forecast that Western Europe would come to dominate the United States and Japan economically because European schools were superior. Mainstream economists, both liberal and conservative, agreed that rising wage and income inequality were caused by an acceleration of “skill-biased technological change,” meaning that computerization and other advanced technologies were bidding up the relative value of education, leaving the less-skilled worse off.

Yet the response of American manufacturers to this allegedly education-driven import competition was curious. Automakers moved plants to Mexico, where worker education levels are considerably lower than those in the American Midwest. Meanwhile, Japanese manufacturers pressed their advantage by setting up non-union plants in places like Kentucky and Alabama, states not known for having the best-educated workers. High school graduates in those locations apparently had no difficulty working in teams and adapting to Japanese just-in-time manufacturing methods.

The ink was barely dry on the *America’s Choice* report when Americans’ ability to master technological change generated an extraordinary decade-long acceleration of productivity, beginning in the mid-1990s and exceeding that of other advanced countries. The productivity leap was accomplished by the very same workforce that the experts claimed imperiled our future. No presidential commissions announced that American schools must be superior to those of Western Europe and Japan, as evidenced by our more rapid productivity growth.

Again, the authors of *A Nation at Risk* cannot entirely be faulted for assuming that poor education had caused a productivity collapse. The big upturn in productivity growth began after *Risk* was issued. But it did begin, and productivity advances created new wealth with the potential to support a steady increase in the standards of living of all Americans.

And for a brief period, standards of living did indeed increase, because the fruits of productivity growth were broadly shared. As the chart shows, the late 1990s saw increasing wages for both high school and college graduates.
Even wages of high school dropouts climbed. But no presidential commissions praised American schools for producing widely shared prosperity.

The collapse of the stock bubble in 2000, the recession of the early 2000s, and the intensification of policies hostile to labor brought wage growth to a halt. Living standards again began to decline and inequality zoomed — at the same time that workforce productivity continued to climb. White-collar offshoring to India, China, and other low-wage countries signaled that globalization was now taking its toll on computer programmers and other symbolic analysts of the information age.

Today, however, a new cast of doomsayers has resuscitated an old storyline, picking up where A Nation at Risk left off. Forgetting how wrong such analyses were in the 1980s and ‘90s, the contemporary cliché is that however good schools may once have been, the 21st century makes them obsolete. Global competition requires all students to graduate from high school prepared either for academic college or for technical training requiring equivalent cognitive ability. We can only beat the Asians by being smarter and more creative than they are.

The argument got a boost from New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman’s 2005 book, The World is Flat, and has been repeated by the same National Center on Education and the Economy in Tough Choices, a sequel to its 1990 report. The argument has also garnered support from influential foundations such as the Gates Foundation, and its chairman, Bill Gates, and from education advocacy groups such as the American College Testing Program.

The Tough Choices report bemoans the fact that “Indian engineers make $7,500 a year against $45,000 for an American engineer with the same qualifications” and concludes from this that we can compete with the Indian economy only if our engineers are smarter than theirs. This is silly: No matter how good our schools, American engineers won’t be six times as smart as those in the rest of the world. Nonetheless, Marc Tucker, author of Tough Choices (and president of the group that produced the 1990 report as well), asserts, “The fact is that education holds the key to personal and national economic well-being, more now than at any time in our history.”

Administration officials blame workers’ education for middle-class income stagnation. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson contends that “market forces work to provide the greatest rewards to those with the needed skills in the growth areas. This means that those workers with less education and fewer skills will realize fewer rewards and have fewer opportunities to advance.” Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan frequently blamed schools for inequality: “We have not been able to keep up the average skill level in our workforce to match the required increases of increasing technology.”
But these 21st-century claims are as misguided as those of the last century. Of course, we should work to improve schools for the middle class. And we have an urgent need to help more students from disadvantaged families graduate from good high schools. If those students do so, our society can become more meritocratic, with children from low-income and minority families better able to compete for good jobs with children from more privileged homes. But the biggest threats to the next generation’s success come from social and economic policy failures, not schools. And enhancing opportunity requires much more than school improvement.

If *A Nation at Risk* commissioners could not have known that explosive economic growth was just around the corner, today’s education scolds have no such excuse. Workforce skills continue to generate rising productivity. In the last five years, wages of both high school- and college-educated workers have been stagnant, while productivity grew by a quite healthy 10.4 percent.

Rising workforce skills can indeed make American firms more competitive. But better skills, while essential, are not the only source of productivity growth. The honesty of our capital markets, the accountability of our corporations, our fiscal policy and currency management, our national investment in R&D and infrastructure, and the fair-play of the trading system (or its absence), also influence whether the U.S. economy reaps the gains of Americans’ diligence and ingenuity. The singular obsession with schools deflects political attention from policy failures in those other realms.

But while adequate skills are an essential component of productivity growth, workforce skills cannot determine how the wealth created by national productivity is distributed. That decision is made by policies over which schools have no influence – tax, regulatory, trade, monetary, technology, and labor market policies that modify the market forces affecting how much workers will be paid. Continually upgrading skills and education is essential for sustaining growth as well as for closing historic race and ethnic gaps. It does not, however, guarantee economic success without policies that also reconnect pay with productivity growth.

American middle-class living standards are threatened, not because workers lack competitive skills but because the richest among us have seized the fruits of productivity growth, denying what were historically considered fair shares to the working- and middle-class Americans, educated in American schools, who have created this new national wealth. Over the last few decades, wages of college graduates overall have increased, but some college graduates — managers, executives, white-collar sales workers — have commandeered disproportionate shares, with little left over for scientists, engineers, teachers, computer programmers, and others with high levels of skill. No amount of school reform can undo policies that redirect wealth generated by skilled workers to profits and executive bonuses.

*A Nation at Risk* gave renewed currency to the claim, now conventional, that the changing nature of work would require radical changes in education:

Computers and computer-controlled equipment are penetrating every aspect of our lives - homes, factories, and offices. . . . [B]y the turn of the century, millions of jobs will involve laser technology and robotics. Technology is rapidly transforming a host of other occupations. They include health care, medical science, energy production, food processing, construction, and the building, repair and maintenance of sophisticated scientific, educational, military, and industrial equipment.[8]

This description is literally true; indeed, it explains much of the dramatic rise in productivity we’ve experienced. But the conclusion that these changes would require radical changes in education was flawed. It ignored the obvious reality that technology de-skills many jobs. Retail clerks now routinely use laser technology to scan bar codes; these clerks no longer need basic arithmetic skills.

College graduates are, in fact, not in short supply. Indeed, some college graduates are now forced to take jobs requiring only high-school educations. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that, for the next decade, only 22 percent of job vacancies will require a college degree or more. Forty percent will require only one month or less
of on-the-job training, and could be filled by high school graduates or, in many cases, by dropouts — retail salespersons and waiters and waitresses, for example.[9]

In many high-school hallways nowadays, you can find a chart displaying the growing “returns to education” — the ratio of college to high-school graduates’ wages.[10]

The idea is to impress on youths the urgency of going to college and the calamity that will befall those who don’t. The data are real — college graduates do earn more than high-school graduates, and the gap is substantially greater than it was a few decades ago.

But it is too facile to conclude that this ratio proves a shortage of college graduates.

The denominator — the falling real wages of high-school graduates — has played a bigger part in boosting the college-to-high-school wage ratio than has the numerator — an unmet demand for college graduates. Important causes of this decline of high school graduates’ wages have been the weakening of labor market institutions, such as the minimum wage and unions, which once boosted the pay of high school-educated workers.

For the first time in a decade, the minimum wage was recently increased. The curious result will be a statistical decline in “returns to education.” But we should not conclude from a minimum-wage increase that we need fewer college graduates, any more than we should have concluded from falling wages for high-school graduates that college graduates are scarce and schools are failing.

Another too glib canard is that our education system used to be acceptable because students could graduate from high school (or even drop out) and still support families with good manufacturing jobs. Today, those jobs are vanishing, and with them the chance of middle-class incomes for those without good educations.

It’s true that many manufacturing jobs have disappeared. Replacements have mostly been equally unskilled or semiskilled jobs in service and retail sectors. There was never anything more inherently valuable about working in a factory assembly line than about changing bed linens in a hotel. What once made semiskilled manufacturing jobs desirable was that many (though not most) were protected by unions, provided pensions and health insurance, and compensated with decent wages. That today’s working class doesn’t get similar protections has nothing to do with the adequacy of its education, but everything to do with policy decisions stemming from the value we place on equality. Hotel jobs that pay $20 an hour, with health and pension benefits (rather than $10 an hour without benefits) typically do so because of union organization, not because maids earned bachelor’s degrees.

It is cynical to tell millions of Americans who work (and who will continue to be needed to work) in low-level administrative jobs and in janitorial, food-service, hospitality, transportation, and retail industries that their
wages have stagnated because their educations are inadequate for international competition. The quality of our
civic, cultural, community, and family lives demands school improvement, but barriers to unionization are a more
important cause of low wages than the quality of workers’ education.

Fortunately, the elite consensus on education as a cure-all seems now to be collapsing. Offshoring of high-tech
jobs has deeply undercut the Clinton-era metaphor of an education-fueled transition to the information age,
since it is all too apparent that college educations and computer skills do not insulate Americans from
globalization’s downsides. Former Clinton economic advisor (and Federal Reserve vice chairman) Alan Blinder has
emerged as an establishment voice calling attention to the potentially large-scale impact of continued offshoring.
Blinder stresses that the distinction between American jobs likely to be destroyed by international competition
and those likely to survive, is not one of workers’ skills or education. “It is unlikely that the services of either taxi
drivers or airline pilots will ever be delivered electronically over long distances. . . . Janitors and crane operators
are probably immune to foreign competition; accountants and computer programmers are not.”[11]

These are not problems that can be solved by vouchers, charter schools, teacher accountability, or any other
school intervention. A balanced human capital policy would involve schools, but would require tax, regulatory,
and labor market reforms as well.

As to the relative responsibility of schools: A Nation at Risk was issued in 1983, a decade after the nation’s
postwar narrowing of social and economic inequality had ended. By the time of the report, income was becoming
less evenly distributed. The real value of the minimum wage was falling and the share of the workforce with
union protection was declining. Progress towards integration had halted and, as William Julius Wilson noted in
The Truly Disadvantaged, published only half a dozen years later, the poorest black children were becoming
isolated in dysfunctional inner-city communities to an extent not previously seen in American social history.

Social and economic disadvantage contributes in important ways to poor student achievement. Children in poor
health attend quality schools less regularly. Those with inadequate housing change schools frequently, disrupting
not only their own educations but those of their classmates. Children whose parents are less literate and whose
homes have less rich intellectual environments enter school already so far behind that they rarely can catch up.
Parents under severe economic stress cannot provide the support children need to excel. And, as Wilson
described, children in neighborhoods without academically successful role models are less likely to develop
academic ambitions themselves.[12]

These nonschool influences on academic achievement were known to the commissioners who authored A Nation
at Risk. The Coleman Report of 1966, still a major document of recent research history, had concluded that
family background factors were more important influences on student achievement variation than school
quality.[13] In 1972 and 1979, Christopher Jencks and his colleagues had published two widely noticed
reassessments of Coleman, Inequality and Who Gets Ahead?, both of which confirmed the Coleman Report’s
central finding. Yet the National Commission on Excellence in Education, in preparation for its Nation at Risk
report, commissioned 40 research studies from the leading academic researchers in the nation, and not one of
these was primarily devoted to the social and economic factors that affect learning.

Most remarkably, A Nation at Risk concluded with a brief “Word to Parents and Students,” acknowledging that
schools alone could not reverse the alleged decline in academic performance. It urged parents to be a “living
example of what you expect your children to honor and emulate... You should encourage more diligent study and
discourage satisfaction with mediocrity. . . .”[14] This was the report’s only reference to nonschool factors that
influence learning.

A Nation at Risk therefore changed the national conversation about education from the Coleman-Jencks focus on
social and economic influences to an assumption that schools alone could raise and equalize student
achievement. The distorted focus culminated in the No Child Left Behind legislation of 2002, demanding that
school accountability alone for raising test scores should raise achievement to never-before-attained levels, and
equalize outcomes by race and social class as well.
A Nation at Risk was well-intentioned, but based on flawed analyses, at least some of which should have been known to the commission that authored it. The report burned into Americans' consciousness a conviction that, evidence notwithstanding, our schools are failures, and warped our view of the relationship between schools and economic well-being. It distracted education policymakers from insisting that our political, economic, and social institutions also have a responsibility to prepare children to be ready to learn when they attend school.

There are many reasons to improve American schools, but declining achievement and international competition are not good arguments for doing so. Asking schools to improve dramatically without support from other social and economic institutions is bound to fail, as a quarter century of experience since A Nation at Risk has demonstrated.

Notes


[4] This section was co-authored by Lawrence Mishel, and adapted in part from “Schools as Scapegoats” by Lawrence Mishel and Richard Rothstein in The American Prospect, October 2007.


[12] I have discussed these issues in Class and Schools (Teachers College Press, 2004).


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URLs in this post:
"Our Nation is at risk," the report stated. "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." Test scores were falling, schools were asking less and less of their students, and US schools increasingly were failing to stack up against their overseas counterparts, the report asserted. In many respects, "A Nation at Risk" fired a shot heard across the US. A state of emergency was declared. Many conservative thinkers in the years since have continued to focus on vouchers and school choice as the answer to what ails US schools. Thinkers on the left have instead tended to argue for more attention to questions of funding and equity in school financing. Today marks the 25th anniversary of "A Nation at Risk," the influential Reagan-era report by a blue-ribbon panel that alerted Americans to the weak performance of our education system. The report warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." That dire forecast set off a quarter century of education reform that's yielded worthy changes yet still not the achievement gains we need to turn back the tide of mediocrity. After decades of furthering A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform is the 1983 report of American President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education. Its publication is considered a landmark event in modern American educational history. Among other things, the report contributed to the ever-growing assertion that American schools were failing, and it touched off a wave of local, state, and federal reform efforts.