Issue Brief

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EDUCATION IN AMERICA: REPORTS ON ITS CONDITION, RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

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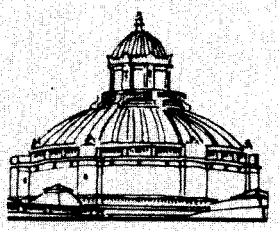

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ISSUE DEFINITION

The quality of education in our schools, particularly our high schools, and appropriate Federal actions to improve educational quality have become a major political issue. A number of reports on education with recommendations for change have been issued, among them A Nation At Risk by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. These reports are critical of how our schools are functioning and call for improvement in areas such as teaching, curriculum, and standards for student performance and behavior. Some issues raised by these reports are whether these changes are needed, how these changes might be implemented, and what might be the roles of different levels of government in this process.

BACKGROUND AND POLICY ANALYSIS

Introduction

For more than two years, reports critical of the condition of American education, particularly at the high school level, have been issued periodically by a diverse mix of national commissions, task forces, and academic groups. These reports come at a time of concern about American economic productivity, international competition, and the impact of new technology on the workforce. Debate is currently underway over the performance, goals and needed changes in American education, and, particularly, over what the Federal role should be.

This issue brief considers the role of reform reports focused on the high school, provides brief summaries of ten of the reports and explores the possible answers to a series of questions that arise from the reports. These questions are:

(1) What is the condition of schooling in this country?
(2) What are the causes of educational problems in our schools?
(3) Are the recommended changes appropriate?
(4) What has been happening in the States in response to the recent reports?
(5) What are the possible Federal responses to the problems highlighted by the recent reports?

It should be noted that many of the most recent reports on American educational performance are focused on higher education. These reports are not considered in this issue brief (e.g., "Involvement In Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education", report of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education, sponsored by the National Institute of Education; or "To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education", by William J. Bennett, National Endowment for the Humanities).

Role of Reform Reports

Reporting on how well or how poorly our secondary schools are functioning is not a new activity. High schools have been the subject of such reports since their emergence as widely accepted institutions in the late 19th century. What is evident from a review of previous high school "reform" reports is that such reports embraced widely different images of the high school. In some instances, the high school was viewed principally as a means of preparing academically talented youth for college. Other reports saw the high school as preparing American youth for the wide variety of social and career paths they would follow. Still others have viewed the high school as an engine for social change or as a means of harmonizing a diverse population within a democratic society.

In the view of some observers, school "reform" reports reflect the educational and political climates in which they are written. In "conservative" periods, they claim, the reports stress international competition, the development of basic skills and the strengthening of the academic curriculum. In more "liberal" times, according to the thesis, educational change is focused on "disadvantaged" students and the broader functions of schooling for the society. This perspective may be used to challenge the validity of these "reform" reports and argue against their calls for change.

In contrast, others might contend that it is an oversimplification to categorize .historical periods as "conservative" or "liberal" and to characterize all of the school "reform" reports produced in any time period with a single label. Some have asserted that the reports often do gauge how well schools are functioning, and provide necessary balance to previous educational changes.

Summaries of Recent Reports

The ten reports summarized below, which are among the most significant released to date, are from:

(1) the National Commission on Excellence in Education (A Nation At Risk),
(2) the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force (Making the Grade),
(3) the National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth (Action for Excellence),
(4) the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (High School),
(5) A Study of High Schools (Horace's Compromise),
(6) A Study of Schooling (A Place Called School),
(7) the National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology (Educating Americans for the 21st Century),
(8) the Paideia Group (The Paideia Proposal), and
(9) the Educational EQuality Project (Academic Preparation for College).
(10) The National Coalition of Advocates for Students (Barriers to Excellence).

The first four of these reports are those that probably have received the most attention from the public, the media, government, and the education community.

Most, but not all of these reports, focus almost exclusively on the conditions in the Nation's secondary schools. The educational performance of schools, according to these reports, is not good; indeed, for some of the reports (such as that from the National Commission on Excellence in Education), the criticisms apparently so outweigh any of the positive aspects of these institutions that schools earn close to a failing grade. Most of the reports decry lax academic and behavioral standards exhibited by the schools. Most address with particular emphasis the professional lives of teachers, concluding that changes in the way teachers are trained, their patterns of compensation, and their working conditions are essential.

Although there are general areas of agreement among the various reports (such as poor academic performance by students, serious teaching deficiencies, and a need for reform), it is the diversity of the suggested reforms that may be among the most startling features of the reports. As the summaries below suggest, this diversity stems in part from different perceptions of the goals and ends of schooling. Some of these reports, much more than others, are concerned with the process of education that occurs in the classroom (for example, the reports from the Carnegie Foundation, A Study of Schooling and A Study of High Schools). As a result, the suggested reforms from these reports (ranging from creating smaller schooling units within schools, to creating larger blocks of instructional time, to integrating the educational and work environments outside of the school into the school curriculum) are more structural than are those from some of the other reports (e.g., increasing high school graduation and college admissions requirements). Finally, some of the reports are more likely than others to consider that schools, particularly high schools, are directly influenced by social, demographic, and educational changes (among others), affecting who goes to school and how they interact with the existing educational system (the report from the National Coalition of Advocates for children, for example).

What follows are brief summaries of these ten reports, highlighting their assessment of the appropriate Federal role in the effort to improve academic performance.

National Commission on Excellence in Education

On Apr. 26, 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education, chartered by Secretary of Education Bell in 1981 with the task of examining the quality of American education, issued A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. The Commission concludes 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." The Commission posits that quality education for all members of the society is essential for maintaining the country's competitive edge in international economic markets, and for success in the so-called "information age."

Focusing on secondary education, the Commission asserts that the high school curriculum is too diffuse and lacks a central purpose; that high school students are excessively found in general track programs and not academic track programs; that students spend time ineffectively and inefficiently, particularly in comparison with their counterparts in other

countries; and that teaching is attracting too few academically able persons and offers a professional life that is "on the whole unacceptable."

The Commission recommends that a high school diploma be granted only to students who take, at a minimum, 4 years of English, 3 years of math, 3 years of science, 3 years of social studies, and a half year of computer science. Two years of foreign language is recommended for those students intending to go to college. The Commission calls for more effective use of time as well as an increase in the amount of in-school time. The Commission also recommends more homework, a rigorously enforced conduct code, and an end to student promotion based on age. A 7-part recommendation is made concerning teaching, calling for higher salaries sensitive to the market and teacher performance, and career ladders for teachers.

The Commission concludes that States and localities are primarily responsible for financing and governing schools. The Federal role, according to the Commission, is to identify and support the national interest in education, and, also, to address the needs of special groups of children -- gifted, socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority, limited English speaking, and handicapped children.

Twentieth Century Fund Task Force

The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy issued its report, Making The Grade, shortly after that of the National Commission. The Twentieth Century Fund is an independent research foundation.

The Task Force asserts that the "Nations public schools are in trouble." They are failing to educate and motivate students and are characterized by low test scores, high drop out rates, violence, and inadequate teaching. Schools, according to the Task Force, must impart a common core of knowledge to all students, consisting of reading, writing, calculating, "technical capacity in computers," science, foreign languages, and civics.

The Task Force recommends a federally funded Master Teacher program to provide the country's best teachers with 5-year financial awards ($40,000 a year is suggested). The Federal Government, it is recommended, should establish English language literacy as the principal goal for elementary and secondary education; and Federal bilingual education funds should be used only to teach English to non-English speaking children. The Task Force posits that every public school child should have an opportunitity to learn a second language. The Task Force recommends certain incentives to increase the number of math, science, and foreign language teachers. Federal categorical grant programs for economically disadvantaged children and the handicapped should be continued, and the "impact aid" program should be used to aid school districts with substantial numbers of immigrant children. Federal research efforts, according to the Task Force, should be continued and directed at collecting data on educational performance and the evaluation of Federal program.

The Task Force states that "educating the young is a compelling national interest, and that action by the Federal Government can be as appropriate as action by State and local governments." The Federal role is to continue assisting the disadvantaged as well as to take a primary position in meeting the need for educational quality.

National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth

On June 22, 1983, the National Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, established by the Education Commission of the States in December 1982, released a report entitled Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve Our Nation's Schools.

The Task Force highlights what it labels deficiencies in public elementary and secondary schools. Despite gains in basic skills achievement recorded by black students and other disadvantaged children, the Task Force finds a decline in higher order skills, such as problem solving. Teaching positions in some areas, such as math, are filled by individuals uncertified to teach those subjects; and little time is spent weekly on science and math in the typical elementary school. Principals, identified as important leaders in the quest for educational quality, are unduly diverted from their appropriate tasks.

The Task Force asserts that improved education and training are essential for economic growth, the national defense, and social stability.

Focusing primarily on the roles that States and business might play in addressing educational deficiencies, the Task Force calls upon each Governor to adopt an "action" plan for improving public education. Business and school partnerships are advocated. It is recommended that States and local school boards improve the ways teachers are recruited, trained, and compensated; and that salary schedules should be made competitive, with financial incentives provided for good performance. The Task Force calls for more effective use of time in school and that consideration be given to lengthening that time. In addition, requirements for discipline, attendance, homework, and grading should be strengthened. Finally, the Task Force recommends special education efforts for different groups of students, including women and minority students, gifted students, dropouts, and the handicapped.

The Task Force believes that the Federal role in education is significant, reflecting that education is a national priority. The Federal responsibilities include assistance to the disadvantaged, financial aid for postsecondary students, research and development support, and efforts to meet the country's labor needs.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

On Sept. 15, 1983, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issued a study entitled High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America, based on over 2 years of observations at 15 high schools. The report was principally authored by Ernest L. Boyer, president of the Foundation.

The Carnegie report concludes that high schools "lack a clear and vital mission." Many students fail to master the English language; teachers work under conditions precluding effective or sustained teaching; principals are poorly prepared to lead.

The report says that high schools should teach students how to think critically and communicate effectively; should teach students about

themselves, their heritage, and other cultures and nations; should prepare students for work and further education; and should help students meet their social and civic obligations.

The report provides "an agenda for action" that begins with each high school clarifying its goals. Mastery of the English language is the next priority after goal-setting, with each high school student completing a year-long basic English course and a semester-long speech course. These courses would be part of a single track core curriculum in which all students would take 1 year of literature, a semester of arts, 2 years of foreign languages, 2-1/2 years of history, 1 year of civics, 2 years of science, 2 years of math, semester-long courses in technology and health, a seminar on work and a senior independent project. All students would complete a new service unit of volunteer work in their schools or communities.

For teachers, the report calls for reduction in teaching loads, a 25% increase in current compensation over the next 3 years, rewards for teaching excellence, and a new career path with three stages. Full tuition scholarships should be offered by colleges to the top 5% of their juniors who plan to teach in public schools; and the Federal Government should establish a National Teacher Service offering scholarships to those graduating in the top one-third of their high school class.

The report calls for flexibility in structuring high schools, including larger blocks of instructional time and smaller within-school units. The report cautions against unplanned purchases of computer hardware.

With regard to governmental roles in education, the report admonishes States "to establish general standards and provide fiscal support, but not to meddle." The Federal Government is to be a partner in renewing educational excellence. Three broad purposes for Federal action in education are identified -- providing information on the condition of education, assisting disadvantaged and handicapped students, and working to meet emergency national needs.

A Study of High Schools

Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the America High School, by Theodore R. Sizer, is the first report from A Study of High Schols, a 5-year study sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the Commission on Educational Issues of the National Association of Independent Schools.

This first report posits that high schools are not serving the country well for many reasons. High schools fail to use appropriately adolescents' desires for a high school diploma and respect; they have an outdated and unduly comprehensive set of educational and social gooals; they attempt to convey information, rather than instill the skills needed to use information; they fail to grant teachers the independence they need to teach effectively; and they pay teachers too little and fail to reward excellence. Educational policymakers, according to the report, confuse standardization with standards, thereby making the educational system unduly structured and inflexible.

The report advocates that, once students have mastered literacy, numeracy, and an understanding of civic responsibilities (the task of junior high school and lower levels), they should not be compelled to attend school.

High school attendance, as result, would be voluntary. High schools, according to the report, should have three objectives: development of intellectual skills (taught by "coaching"), acquisition of knowledge (taught by "telling"), and understanding of ideas and values (taught by "questioning"). The report suggests that high schools focus on four subject areas: inquiry and expression, mathematics and science, literature and arts, and philosophy and history.

Improvement of teachers' working conditions is the solution to improving high school education, according to the report. It recommends, among other things, that teachers be given more autonomy; be held accountable for their students' performance; be responsible for fewer students; have steeper salary schedules; and have a safe place to work.

The report calls for teachers and principals to be given greater authority. Smaller units are necessary, according to the report, so that teachers can come to know their students and develop the teaching strategies necessary for each.

The Paideia Group

The Paideia Proposal: An Educational Manifesto, written by Mortimer J. Adler on behalf of the Paideia Group, was published in 1982. The Proposal calls for an extensive reform in the structure, content, and methods of schooling. All students would be in a single track with no electives save for the choice of foreign language. Schools would have three goals: to provide students with a base of organized knowledge in areas such as language, mathematics, and science (the teaching method would be lecturing); to develop students' intellectual skills in the use of tools such as reading, writing, speaking, and problem-solving (the teaching methods would include coaching, exercises, and supervised practice); and to enlarge students' understanding of ideas and values (the teaching methods would be "Socratic" questioning and active participation in discussions of books and performances of artistic works).

The College Entrance Examination Board

The College Board has undertaken a 10-year project called the Educational EQuality Project to improve secondary education and ensure equal opportunity for postsecondary education. One product of this effort, "Academic Preparation for College: What Students Need to Know and Be Able to Do," released in 1983, identifies six "basic academic competencies" -- reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, reasoning, and studying. An "emerging" competency is knowledge about computers. The "basic academic subjects" are English, the arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign languages. For each subject and competency, the report defines what a student needs to know in preparation for college entrance.

National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology

On Sept. 13, 1983, the Commission issued its report to the Board entitled "Educating Americans for the 21st Century." The Commission concludes that the U.S. "is failing to provide its own children with the intellectual tools needed for the 21st century." To build a "national commitment" to

educational excellence, the Commission recommends that the President form a National Educational Council. Recommended efforts in a 5-year program to upgrade teaching include higher standards for new teachers and Federal support for State teacher training programs. It is also recommended that highly qualified math, science, and technology teachers receive competitive salaries. The report calls for more time in school on math and science, beginning at the kindergarten level. It is recommended that all high school graduates should take 3 years each of math and science, and that colleges should raise admissions standards to require 4 years each of math and science. To increase instruction time on these subjects, the Commission recommends increasing the school day, week, or year. The National Science Foundation is called upon to take a lead role in assessing educational technology. The Commission recommends that the President establish a Council on Educational Financing to determine the costs of its recommendations and what levels of government should provide funding. The Commission estimates that its recommendations for Federal action will cost $1.51 billion in the first year of implementation of this 12-year plan.

A Study of Schooling

The multi-year project called A Study of Schooling was directed by John I. Goodlad. That project has resulted in many products, the most recent being a book entitled A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future. Among the book's findings are the following: although very high and very broad goals are often set for schools, what goes on in classrooms is often at odds with those goals; schools on average give priority to reading, writing, and basic math skills; vocational education occupies a large space in the junior high curriculum and a larger space in the senior high curriculum; uneven attention is given to sciences and social studies in the curriculum and relatively little is given to foreign languages and arts; and resources (teachers and time) are inconsistently given to specific subject areas across schools. The research apparently shows that schools concentrate on basic skills, failing to develop higher intellectual skills and interests. It was found that teachers rely almost exclusively on lecturing; students remain largely passive in the schooling process. Reports from the project have suggested that certain changes are needed, such as: improvements in the instructional modes now in use; better selection procedures for, and better preparation of, principals; improved teacher education programs; a single track curriculum; and some restructuring of schools to create small within-school units with a group of teachers responsible for not more than 100 students for 4-year periods.

National Coalition of Advocates for Students

In January 1985, the National Coalition of Advocates for Students issued a report entitled "Barriers to Excellence: Our Children at Risk." In this report, the Coalition, whose member organizations are child advocacy groups, concluded that "The creation of learning communities requires basic changes in the curriculum, teaching practices, organization, and structure of our schools. Yet, current proposals for reform assume that it is doses of old-fashioned medicines involving only minor changes in the policies and structure of schools which will realize the goal of educational excellence."

The primary concern for the Coalition is the child "at risk" and his or her diversity with regard to class, race, ethnicity, culture, sex, and handicapping condition. The Coalition found that much of elementary and

secondary schooling for "at risk" children is characterized by: subtle discrimination; barriers to improvement (such as inflexible scheduling and curriculum, tracking, rigid ability grouping, standardized testing misuses, curriculum and teaching that are insensitive to the diversity of students,and a lack of support services for children and youth); and declining economic support for schools, students, and their families reflected in or accompanied by inequitable and insufficient financing for schools, and an absence of middle income jobs.

The report calls for, among other things: greater responsibility accorded to local school officials and staff for educational outcomes; greater involvement of parents in the educational process; an end to tracking and fixed grouping; inservice training for teachers to enable them to address the needs of their students; and high expectations for the performance of all participants in the educational process (from parents to administrators). Among the Federal actions advocated by the Coalition are: support for and expansion of Chapter 1 (Education Consolidation and Improvement Act) services; protection of students' civil rights; provision of adequate funds for Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (desegregation training and advisory services to education); expansion of requirements for parental involvement in Federal education programs; and support for comprehensive school-to-work transition programs serving all school districts.

Selected Questions Prompted by the Reports

The following selected questions arise from a consideration of the various "reform" reports. Examples are offered of the issues involved in answering these questions.

1. What is the condition of schooling in this country?

The various reports emerging now find our schools to be inadequately preparing students for their futures. The indicators of that poor performance include declining test scores; the extent to which institutions that receive our high school graduates (colleges and businesses) have to implement remedial education and training programs; the high degree of functional illiteracy in the population; and the Nation's poor showing in international comparisons of student achievement.

This is not an uncontested reading of how well our schools are functioning. Some would contend that our schools are succeeding in meeting certain challenges posed by the preceding several decades. A far larger portion of our youth, they assert, receive a full 12 years of schooling than did in the not so distant past in this country, and than do at present in some industrialized countries. Access to high school has been expanded to many minority groups and to the economically disadvantaged. Indeed, some of these observers would argue, the problems identified today are the result of that very success in expanding access to secondary education. Still others acknowledge the inadequacies of our schools but believe minority and economically disadvantaged students, among others, to be the primary victims of these shortcomings.

The question of gauging how well a school system is functioning may pose serious technical problems. The indicators cited above are not unambiguous in the information they provide. To some, the statistics purporting to measure performance in schools are often suspect. They would posit that the

decline in Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores, frequently cited as an indication of educational failure, reflects the expansion of high school and college education to embrace many of the socioeconomically disadvantaged children in our country. It is not the same group of children, they would argue, taking the test today as a decade and a half ago. In addition, it is argued that the SAT scores and others reflect other societal changes outside of the schools. Significantly, the SAT scores have stabilized and even risen in recent years. As an indicator of progress rather than decline, some cite improvement in the performance of socioeconomically disadvantaged children in the elementary schools over the past decade as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Further, it is posited that using test scores to compare national education systems often results in inappropriately comparing dissimilar systems, particularly given the greater retention of school-aged youth in schools in the United States. Average scores of student samples reportedly reflect how open a system is, not how well it educates its academic elite.

In contrast, others argue that the sheer weight of the number of negative indicators clearly indicts the performance of our schools. With regard to specific measures, they assert, ambiguity may be in the eye of the beholder, reflecting a predetermined position. Although a portion of the decline in SAT scores over the past decade and a half can be attributed to changes in the characteristics of the group taking the tests, SAT results reportedly show an absolute decline in the number of high performers on the tests. Further, it is argued that the improvements in the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores are largely limited to the lowest grades, age groups, and achievement quartiles; decline continues to be the watchword for secondary school students. Indeed, critics point to a decline in the higher order cognitive skills, even as some basic skills improve. Finally, they counter the position described above with regard to international comparisons by pointing to the mediocre position attained by the United States even when scores are adjusted to reflect retention in school systems.

2. What are the causes of educational problems in our schools?

Most of the recent reports largely restrict their consideration of educational problems to the outcomes of our schools -- low test scores, remedial courses increasingly offered in colleges, inadequately prepared labor force entrants, etc. In turn, they largely restrict their consideration of causes to what reportedly goes on within the school -- teachers do not teach and have no incentive to do so, standards are lax, the curriculum is diluted with non-academic electives, homework is not assigned frequently enough, etc.

To critics, such reports subordinate the role that forces in the general society play in influencing the way schools function. Educational changes, according to this perspective, must consider the significant changes that have occurred in the American family, the educational impact of television (both actual and potential), and the changes in the nature and availability of work.

Recommended educational changes that ignore these various forces, some argue, would be inadequate to their task or, indeed, counterproductive. For example, what impact might a rigorous, mandated core curriculum have on school retention rates in light of the heterogeneous school population affected by these various changes? For example, the National Commission on Secondary Schooling for Hispanics in its report "Make Something Happen" draws

attention to the "devastating effect" of high Hispanic dropout rates.

In response, it might be argued that focusing on the schools recognizes the central role they play in molding the society in general. To direct recommendations for change beyond the schools might lessen the chances of implementation for any particular package of recommendations; and also might divert attention from the real problems within the schools that are susceptible to change. It might be asserted that the schools are one of the social institutions in which change might be fruitfully sought. Indeed, the various reports do recognize the influence of society on the schools, particularly as other institutions reportedly abdicate their traditional responsibilities and thrust them upon the schools. It might be argued that educational change within the schools is a healthy step toward restoring the sense of responsibility in those other societal institutions and restricting the schools to the roles they were intended to, and are able to, play.

3. Are the recommended changes appropriate?

There are two facets to this question -- the effectiveness of specific proposals and the kinds of compromises their implementation might require.

Debate over some of the specific recommended changes in these reports is already underway, at the same time that many States and localities have implemented or are considering implementation of similar recommendations. The debate focuses on whether the proposed changes would accomplish their objectives. Consider, for example, the proposal of merit pay for teachers, offered as one solution to the teaching problems identified by these reports. On the one hand, information on merit pay as it has been used in various fields suggests to critics that it does not necessarily function as intended. The process reportedly can be subject to biases and favoritism. Objective determination of which teacher competencies should be assessed and development of objective ways to assess them would pose, according to this argument, serious technical and cost barriers to successful implementation. It has been argued that unless the increase in pay for meritorious teaching is substantial, the incentive involved will be minimal. On the other hand, advocates of merit pay contend that it need not fall victim to past implementation problems. As responses to past problems, some have suggested involving those who will be evaluated in the process of structuring the assessment system, and drawing evaluators from outside the school or district where teachers under evaluation are currently working.

The other facet to the question of the appropriateness of the "reform" proposals -- the compromises that might be required -- is best illustrated by the tensions that may exist in our schools between excellence and equity, or as it is sometimes phrased, between educational quality and equality of educational opportunity. Consider, for example, the important curriculum changes being recommended by the Educational EQuality Project of the College Entrance Examination Board, and by The Paideia Group. The first of these focuses on the preparation of secondary school students for college, specifying the basic academic competencies that should be attained in high school and the courses that would provide these competencies. The second advocated in The Paideia Proposal by Mortimer J. Adler identifies the acquisition of basic factual knowledge, the development of intellectual skills, and the improvement of understanding about ideas and values as the appropriate objectives of our schools. The Paideia curriculum would be academically oriented; it would not contain a vocational component.

The adaptation of these curricular changes, it has been argued, might require a redirection of a substantial portion of the school curriculum, primarily away from general and vocational education programs. Critics argue that the academic role of schooling would be enhanced at the expense of other important roles -- job training among them. Given the heterogeneity of our school population, it is asserted, such a redirection in curriculum denies educational equity to many students; ignores the fact that all students do not learn the same subjects in the same way. They ask, Can all of the many needs of our diverse student population be served through a rigorous and required academic curriculum?

In response, advocates of these changes argue that the denial of educational equity occurs when educators assume that excellence and rigorous academic education are not appropriate for all youth. Indeed, they posit, the mastering of intellectual skills is more valuable for future work than training aimed at a specific kind of job. Others contend that past educational efforts have been focused on the non-academic responsibilities of our schools and that it is now time to address the academic needs of our students in a more coherent fashion. The setting of high standards and expectations, they contend, is likely to improve the quality of all schooling activities, to the benefit of all students.

4. What has been happening in the States in response to recent reports?

At the outset, it should be observed that the National Commission's report of April 1983 and the other reports discussed above did not initiate a school reform movement. They may have broadened awareness of the educational problems that many States and localities had already recognized in the mid to late 1970s. They may also have helped change the focus of some of those ongoing efforts. Topics such as merit pay for teachers, career ladders for teachers and the curricular requirements for high school graduation appear to be joining some of the earlier reform focuses, such as basic skills testing requirements for high school graduation and grade promotion.

The extent of State and local activity predating the 1983 reports is clear in view of survey data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) showing that, between 1979 and 1981, 69% of all local educational agencies took action to increase daily attendance and 53% increased the number of credits required in core subject areas. At the State level, other NCES data reveal that, between 1977 and 1982, approximately 20 States put in place competency-based teacher certification requirements; by 1982, 17 States had approved minimum competency testing requirements for high school graduation and 13 had approved statewide testing for remediation purposes.

The effects of the reports are reflected in surveys of State-level reform efforts. Among these surveys is that of the Department of Education (The Nation Responds) showing that 35 States recently changed their high school graduation requirements, 29 established academic enrichment programs, 29 changed their student evaluation/testing procedures, and 28 modified their teacher preparation/ certification procedures. In addition to the Department's survey, Education Week published results from a survey in its Dec. 7, 1983, and Feb. 6, 1985, issues; the National Conference of State Legislatures released a survey of action to improve education in selected States in November 1983; and the Education Commission of the States issued "Action in the States" in July 1984. Care should be taken with any of these surveys because at times they are cryptic in their descriptions, fail to note whether the particular action occurred prior to release of the reform

reports, omit some initiative, or become quickly outdated.

Among the issues raised by State and local responses to the reports are the following:

-- will the interest and action continue?

-- how will these reforms be financed?

-- will the effects be uneven across the States?

-- how will special populations (such as the disadvantaged or handicapped) be affected?

-- how can the results of these actions be best measured?

-- how do the State efforts affect possible Federal responses?

5. What are the possible Federal responses to the problems highlighted by the recent reports?

As the preceding descriptions of the reports show, the primary areas of concern are teaching and the curriculum, areas which have traditionally been the province of States and localities. Indeed, States are acting to address these concerns. Any major Federal initiatives in these areas might entail marked shifts in the traditional roles played by the different levels of government in education. Nevertheless, Federal action in response to the problems being identified by the reports may be sought for a variety of reasons. Some observers assert that the inexpensive steps to improve education have already been taken, and that, despite concern about Federal budget deficits, Federal assistance to meet the high price tag of remaining improvements may be necessary. In addition, action at the national level may be sought because the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and 16,000 local school districts are very unlikely to achieve consistent results in their quest for educational quality. Finally, the resources at the Federal level may be needed for gathering and disseminating the data necessary to inform the on-going reform process, for developing certain instructional materials, and for continuing to direct widespread attention to the problems. Despite these reasons favoring Federal action, the activity by States and localities in the past several years may limit the extent to which Federal steps need to be taken.

In general, there are at least six broad categories of possible Federal responses to the reports -- funding and mandates, incentives, research and models, dialogue and consensus building, continuation of the current role, and reduction in the current role.

At one end of the spectrum of responses would be a new major Federal involvement, either in terms of the amount of funding devoted to the problems or the amount of Federal direction imposed on school systems, or both. A major involvement need not require new Federal spending. For example, new mandates could be added as a condition of the receipt of existing Federal education assistance, such as the education block grant. The implications of this kind of response for the Federal role in education are important, given the traditional limits on that role, and would reverse a trend toward increased State and local flexibility in the case of Federal aid, as

exemplified by the 1981 Education Consolidation and Improvement Act.

A second kind of response might be on a modest scale, involving incentives for action, or limited conditions (such as needs assessment or planning) for the receipt of Federal funding that might, in turn, serve to encourage more significant changes. The determination of the problems and the selection of responses could remain at the State and local levels.

A third kind of response, decidedly more limited than those above, would focus on generating and disseminating information relevant to educational improvement. The Federal Government might support research on topics related to academic excellence, or fund some models showing how certain reform recommendations could be implemented.

Another kind of response might be limited still further to that of drawing attention to the problems in education and encouraging debate on possible solutions. One goal might be that of building a consensus about the appropriate strategies to be pursued at each level of government.

Federal education programs and responsibilities might remain directed, as they are generally at present, to particular groups of students with special needs -- primarily the educationally and economically disadvantaged, the handicapped, ethnic minorities, and women. As educational changes are considered and made in States and localities, the Federal role could be to ensure that those changes were equitable for all students.

Finally, the President and others have attributed the educational problems in part to the current level of Federal involvement. They posit that the appropriate Federal response is to reduce that involvement. It should be noted that none of the reports reviewed in this brief calls for a reduced Federal role in education.

Since the release of A Nation at Risk by the National Commission, Federal action in both the executive and legislative branches has consisted of drawing attention to the problems in education and to certain of the recommended changes, and initiating relatively small incentive programs.

The Department of Education sponsored a series of regional conferences on the Commission's report that culminated in a "National Forum on Excellence in Education" at the beginning of December 1983. The Secretary of Education has awarded some of his discretionary funds to a number of projects for work related to the Commission's various recommendations. The Secretary has also sponsored efforts to identify outstanding secondary schools, in part to acknowledge their achievements and also to encourage other schools to follow their lead.

In January 1984 and December 1984, the Secretary issued charts comparing the States on a number of educationally related factors (change in college entrance test scores, graduation rates, teachers' salaries, current expenditures for education per pupil, etc.). The Department also issued "Indicators of Education Status and Trends" in January 1985 intended to describe the "health" of American education. It provides data on educational outcomes (test scores, graduation rates, activities of graduates during the first year after high school, etc.), resources (expenditures per pupil, a fiscal effort index by State, class sizes, verbal SAT scores of teachers, etc.), and context (public opinion, a need index for students by State, State-required Carnegie units in certain subjects, etc.).

The President has endorsed the concept of merit pay for teachers as an appropriate response to some of the nation's educational difficulties and has drawn attention to the possible impact of student discipline problems on academic excellence.

The 98th Congress took a number of actions with regard to this current reform effort. It approved legislation authorizing the following: math and science instruction aid (Education for Economic Security Act, P.L. 98-377), an Excellence in Education program (P.L. 98-377) providing funds to local educational agencies for reform activities, higher education scholarships with a teaching service requirement for outstanding high school graduates (Carl D. Perkins Scholarship program, Human Services Reauthorization Act, P.L. 98-558), one-time financial awards to exceptionally able high school graduates attending postsecondary education (Federal Merit Scholarship program, P.L. 98-558), fellowships to outstanding teachers (National Talented Teacher Fellowship program, P.L. 98-558), a program to enhance the leadership skills of elementary and secondary school administrators (Leadership in Education Administration Development Act of 1984, as authorized in P.L. 98-558), and the convening of a conference on education (National Summit Conference on Education Act of 1984, as authorized in P.L. 98-524). Before its adjournment, the 98th Congress had only appropriated funds for math and science aid ($100 million) and funds for an Excellence in Education program ($5 million). (It should be noted that the FY86 budget proposes the rescinding of these funds because, according to the Administration, they duplicate other ongoing Federal education programs.) Several sets of hearings by House and Senate committees and subcommittees on the question of educational excellence also have been held. In addition, the House Education and Labor Committee's Merit Pay Task Force released a report recommending experiments in merit pay programs for teachers along with increases in all teachers' base salaries.

LEGISLATION

The bills listed below are among those introduced in the 99th Congress to establish or continue programs addressing elementary and secondary school reform.

H.R. 650 (Hawkins)

American Defense Education Act. Authorizes funding for local educational agencies to undertake an assessment of instruction and student achievement, and to carry out plans to improve instruction and achievement in math, science, communication skills, foreign languages, technology, and, where necessary, guidance and counseling. Local agencies would be eligible for Federal payments based on a formula using the Statewide average per pupil expenditure. Authorizes grants to institutions of higher education for activities to improve science and math education. Among the approved activities would be summer institutes and workshops in math and science for teachers and supervisors from local educational agencies, projects to increase the capacity to address the professional needs of new and practicing teachers, and assistance for exemplary projects to attract, retain, and motivate teachers to pursue careers in precollege math and science education. Authorizes surveys and a joint report by the Secretaries of Defense and Education concerning educational needs to meet military manpower requirements. Introduced Jan. 24, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor.

H.R. 747 (Hawkins)

Effective Schools Development in Education Act of 1985. Amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act by inserting a new title authorizing funding for State and local educational agencies to support effective schools programs. Applicants for these 1- to 3-year grants must have an effective schools improvement program in operation, and must meet at least half the cost of any activity conducted with Federal funds. In selecting applicants for funding, the Secretary of Education is to consider the extent to which funds would be used to improve schools in districts with the greatest numbers or highest percentage of educationally deprived children. An effective schools program is defined as a program to promote school-level planning, instructional improvement and staff development; and to increase academic achievement of educationally deprived children through early children education programs and the use of factors distinguishing effective from ineffective schools. These factors are defined as strong and effective leadership; emphasis on basic and higher order skills; safe and orderly environment; belief that virtually all children can learn; and continuous assessment of students and programs. Authorizes $100 million for FY86, $110 million for FY87, $120 million for FY88, and such sums as may be necessary for FY89 and FY90. Introduced Jan. 28, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor. [Similar bill: S. 1237 (see below).]

H.R. 901 (Williams et al.)

Secondary School Basic Skills Act. Authorizes grants to local educational agencies with especially high concentrations of low-income youth for more effective instruction in basic skills for economically disadvantaged secondary school students. Secondary schools are eligible for funding if 20% or more of their students are considered low-income under provisions of Title I (compensatory education for disadvantaged students) of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or are eligible for a free lunch under the National School Lunch Act. If, after two years of funding, the recipient does not demonstrate improved academic performance by the targeted secondary school students or meaningfully decrease its drop out rate, no additional funds can be granted. A one-year waiver is possible. Authorizes $900 million annually for FY86 through FY91. Introduced Jan. 31, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor.

H.R. 937 (Wyden)

Teacher Warranty Act of 1985. Amends the Higher Education Act to provide that institutions participating in the Title IV student assistance programs authorized by the Higher Education Act must retrain any graduate of their education schools who receives an unsatisfactory evaluation in his or her first or second year of teaching. The graduate will be required to pay only the amount by which such retraining costs exceed the amount of Title IV assistance the graduate received while in attendance at the institution. Introduced Feb. 4, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor.

H.R. 1352 (William Ford)

Professional Development Resource Center Act of 1985. Authorizes grants to local educational agencies or consortia of such agencies to assist in the planning, establishing, and operating of professional development resource centers for teachers. Such centers are to improve teaching skills through activities such as developing and disseminating curricula, training teachers, and disseminating information. The Secretary of Education can grant 10% of the funding to institutions of higher education to operate such centers. The Secretary is to ensure that at least one center in each State will be funded each year. Such sums as may be necessary are authorized for FY86 and the

succeeding four years. Introduced Feb. 28, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor.

H.R. 2364 (Rahall)

Amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 by inserting in Title IX a new Part A entitled Gifted and Talented Children's Education Act. Although similar to S. 452 (see below), the bill does differ in some important respects. For example, its annual authorization level is lower, $40 million for each year in the FY86-FY90 period. Introduced May 6, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor.

H.R. 2535 (Goodling)

Even Start Act. Authorizes support for model adult basic education programs that include activities enhancing parents' ability to prepare their children for school and to provide an educationally supportive home environment. To fund these programs, the Secretary of Education is to reserve annually $1 million from the Adult Education Act and $2 million from Chapter 1 (compensatory education for disadvantaged children) of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 for the period FY87 through FY91. Grantees must provide 25% of program costs in the third year of any program, 50% in the fourth year and continue to operate any effective program thereafter. Introduced May 16, 1985; referred to the Committee on Education and Labor.

H.R. 2557 (Dymally)

Adds a new title to the Higher Education Act to foster school year and summertime partnership between higher education institutions and secondary schools serving low-income students. Among the kinds of activities such partnerships can undertake are programs in which college students tutor high school students in basic skills; programs to improve specific subject matter understanding by high school students; and programs to enhance the opportunity of high school students to continue their education after graduation or to secure post-graduation employment. The bill authorizes $40 million for FY86 and such sums as may be necessary for FY87 through FY90. Federal funds can meet only a portion of any program costs (70% in first year, 60% in second, 50% in the third and subsequent years). Introduced May 21, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor. [Similar bill: S. 1237 (see below).]

H.R. 2840 (Hawkins)

School Excellence and Reform Act. Authorizes general improvement and excellence payments and reform and equity payments to State and local educational agencies under specified allocation formulas. General improvement and excellence payments are to be used for attaining educational excellence and for improving math, science, communication, foreign language and technology instruction. Reform and equity payments are to be used for early childhood education, day care, in-service teacher training, dropout prevention, effective schools and improvement of secondary school basic skills instruction. Authorized funding level for FY87 is $2 billion to be divided evenly between the two kinds of payments. Such sums as may be necessary are authorized for the following four fiscal years. Introduced June 21, 1985; referred to Committee on Education and Labor.

S. 177 (Hart et al.)

American Defense Education Act. Similar to H.R. 650. Introduced Jan. 3, 1985; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

S. 204 (Bumpers et al.)

Humanities Excellence and Teacher Training Act of 1985. Authorizes grants to institutions of higher education for summer institutes to enhance the subject matter skills of private and public elementary and secondary school humanities teachers. The humanities are defined as modern and classical languages, literature, history, and philosophy. Language arts and social studies are included for elementary school instruction. An approved applicant is to receive an amount equal to not more than $3,000, multiplied by the number of teachers (up to 200) enrolled at such institute. Stipends are to be paid by each institute to participating teachers. There is to be at least one institute in each State. Introduced Jan. 21, 1985; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

S. 452 (Bradley et al.)

Amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 by inserting in Title IX a Part A entitled Jacob J. Javits Gifted and Talented Children's Education Act. This part authorizes funding to State educational agencies for planning, developing, operating, and improving educational programs for gifted and talented children. A portion of the annual appropriation is to be used by the Secretary for discretionary programs. For most projects, the Federal share of costs is to be 90%. The annual authorized appropriation for the period FY86-FY90 is $50 million. Introduced Feb. 7, 1985; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources. [Similar bill: H.R. 2364 (see above).]

S. 508 (Bradley et al.)

Secondary School Basic Skills Act. Similar to H.R. 901. Primary differences are the authorized funding level ($100 million a year for FY86 and FY87, $800 million a year for FY88-FY92); the determination of secondary school eligibility (at least 10 poverty-level children aged 14 to 17 as defined under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act); and kinds of grants authorized (planning, demonstration, and formula grants). Introduced Feb. 26, 1985; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

S. 553 (Domenici)

Education for Economic Security Reauthorization Act. Extends the funding authority for the Education for Economic Security Act (enacted by 98th Congress to improve math and science education at the elementary and secondary school level) through FY88. Introduced Feb. 28, 1985; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

S. 1022 (Levin et al.)

Intergenerational Education Volunteer Network Act of 1985. Authorizes assistance to programs using senior citizens as volunteers in schools to improve students' basic skills, to improve communication between schools and families with educationally disadvantaged children, and to increase those families' participation in their children's education. The bill authorizes $6 million for FY86. The annual authorization rises in stages until it reaches $10 million in FY90. Introduced Apr. 26, 1985; referred to Committee on Labor and Human Resources.

S. 1237 (Dodd)

Children's Survival Act. Authorizes programs for children, adolescents, and families in areas such as child care, health, education, nutrition, family support, and youth employment. Title IV of the Act expands the authorized funding levels for a number of programs including Chapter 1 (conpensatory education for disadvantaged children) of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 and for the Bilingual Education Act. Title IV also authorizes a series of new programs including early

childhood incentive grants; the Dropout Prevention and Recovery Act of 1985 (establishes a nationwide system to report dropout information to State educational agencies and the Secretary of Education); the Effective School Development in Education Act of 1984 (similar to H.R. 747, see above); and a program to support university-high school partnerships (similar to H.R. 2557, see above). Introduced June 4, 1985; referred to Committee on Finance.

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