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Education Commissions and Their Visions: Charting the Way Forward

By Roger Wilson, GVSU Faculty

Introduction

In his 2016 State of the State address, Governor Snyder declared “we have a nineteenth century education system in the twenty-first century.”[1] And with that, he announced his intent to create the 21st Century Education Commission. Two months later, Snyder followed through by signing Executive Order 2016-06, which officially created the Commission.

Reports by education commissions have a long history in America. This article will briefly review a selection of key national commissions during the past century so as to provide the reader with a sense of the potential impact brought by these reports and to demonstrate how some have come to shape the curricular structures and practices of our schools today. Then the author will turn his attention briefly to Michigan's recent commission report and more specifically to one of its benchmarks for success.

Education of the young is important to Americans. Public schools serve a significant function and have attained considerable support along the way from the citizenry. And while they might not always agree on the primary purpose of schools, or what should be taught, and might even see others' schools elsewhere in the country as less effective than their own local schools,[2] the value of the institution remains strong. As the dominant and most influential socializing institution for the nation's young, public schools prepare students with the necessary knowledge, general skills, and socially relevant dispositions to become successful adults. They help shape the next generation as well as address wider societal concerns, both social and economic.

Given those roles, it probably comes as no surprise that a recurring theme across commission reports has been a tendency to envision a system out of sync with public expectations or societal needs. But then commissions are birthed from perceived problems, deficiencies or inequities, and their conclusions and recommendations were never intended to proclaim that the status quo was adequate.

Social Context of Earlier Commissions

After the earlier development of elementary common schools, the last half of the 19th century witnessed the expansion of high schools. Societally, America was contending with influxes of immigrants who needed integrat-

ing, while mechanization and industrialization were fueling rural migration to the cities. Amidst these changes, there were also increased expectations for the evolving world of work, and thus, those who would become members of the workforce. But the age of free high schools supported by taxpayers had yet to arrive. At the time, not only were fewer than 6 percent of the country's 14-17 year-olds enrolled in high school, but 32 percent of the total student population was attending private high schools.[3] It was

within this social context that the greater need for secondary education emerged, and with that came the push by social reformers to have it be free, like the earlier common (elementary) schools.

In Michigan in the late 1850s, Kalamazoo "used tax money to construct Kalamazoo Union High School and to fund both elementary and secondary studies." [4] A subsequent legal challenge in 1873 and its arrival at the Supreme

Court of Michigan led to that court's decision in favor of Kalamazoo. The far-reaching effects of that case should not be understated. By 1890, the number of Michigan high schools had more than doubled to 278.[5] And the Kalamazoo case was cited as other states sought similar public funding for their secondary schooling. But the purpose of high schools nationally, along with the focus of their curricular content, was not generally agreed upon. They suffered from "a disordered array of courses," often based upon social, economic, and ethnic backgrounds.[6] It was into this social, economic, and educational caldron that the National Education Association (NEA) stepped.

Committee of Ten

The perceived need for curricular order and standardization led the NEA to form the Committee on Secondary School Studies in 1892 (referred to as the Committee of Ten). Comprised primarily of leading college presidents of the day, its expansive membership, and its implied thoroughness and thus value, was noted in the final report. "[It] was officially contributed to by a larger number of

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persons than any other document of a similar character in the whole history of education.”[7] This might have been accurate given the additional membership of subject area sub-committees. Formed originally to address the conflicting roles of high schools in preparing students for either college or broader social and economic readiness (today’s college preparation versus a comprehensive curriculum), the committee was also concerned with ensuring coherence in high school curricula for college-bound students through a greater prescription of subjects and the identification of their content. In the end, the committee recommended that all students should pursue the same college-preparation curriculum (liberal arts education) irrespective of their background or their intent to graduate high school, or even their desire to pursue higher education.[8] The concept of electives that modern students take for granted also originated with this 1893 report, as did the importance of teaching the sciences (physics, chemistry, and astronomy).

The response in some quarters back then was reminiscent of responses more recently in Michigan (more than 100 years later) regarding curricular changes and their focus on college and career readiness standards.[9] Many critics viewed the Committee of Ten report as elitist—college was not for everyone and student capabilities were so varied that a common, largely academic curriculum oriented toward college admission was deemed inappropriate, having failed to address the diversity of abilities and desires. A decade later, one scholarly article that investigated the degree to which the recommendations had been implemented concluded that the results were mixed.[10] But clearly, some aspects have prevailed into the present.

Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education

Only a couple of decades passed before the NEA appointed another commission in 1918. The recommendations of that Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary

Education not only contrasted those of the Committee of Ten, it has been argued that their underlying assumptions about the academic abilities of high school students also contradicted those of the earlier committee. The 1918 Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education report was grounded in the belief that “most new high-school students were less intelligent than previous generations of students”[11] (a view likely influenced by the expansion of enrollment). Because of that belief and what was viewed

as associated demographic factors, it was deemed “counterproductive to demand that [all students] follow a college-preparatory program.”[12] In fact, it was claimed that the inevitable long-term outcome of those earlier recommendations would be educational inequality for a sizable segment of the student population. The answer in the new Cardinal Principles document was the development of the comprehensive high school with its breadth of

curricular choices. The critics of the Committee of Ten report finally appeared to have gained sway. And today, a century later, that varied curricular approach persists.

Many other educational policy activities were occurring during the timeframe encompassing these two national reports. Even Congress played its part in 1906 by chartering the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The foundation is well-known for its recommendation to measure the amount of time a student studied a subject and equate it to a corresponding concept of a “unit” of (high school) credit.[13] In fact, the Carnegie Foundation itself claims that its “time-based standard of student progress came to define the design and delivery of American education.”[14] This is a system still largely in use today, having become known as the “Carnegie Unit.”

Post-WWII Commissions

The next major federal commission on education, and again one driven by the societal circumstances of the day, was the 1946 President’s Commission on Higher Education. President Harry Truman appointed his commission

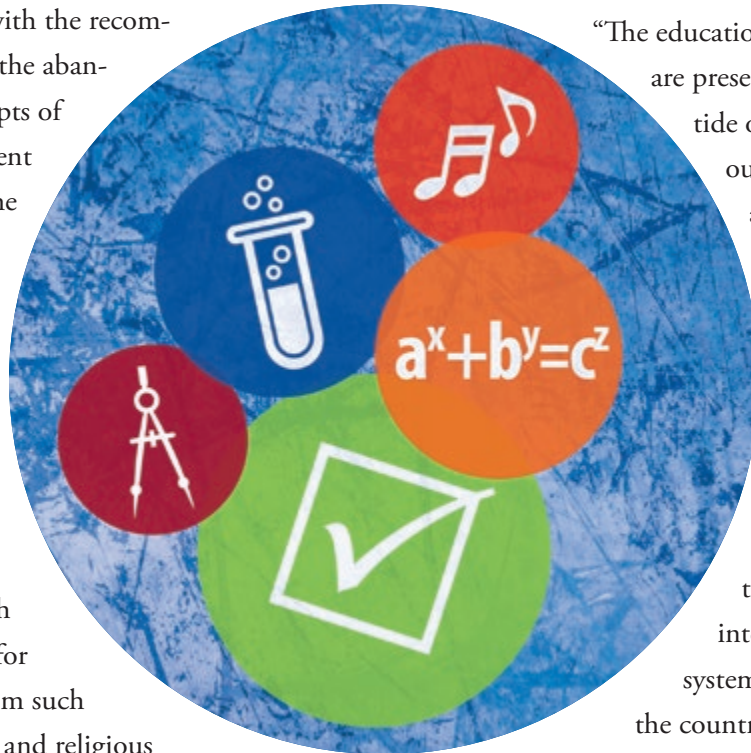
...the Carnegie Foundation itself claims that its “time-based standard of student progress came to define the design and delivery of American education.”

in a post-World War II environment with armed forces personnel being discharged, increasing numbers of veterans attending college, and birthrates expanding nationally with the first of the baby boomers. The purpose of the Truman Commission was to examine America's institutions of higher learning with an eye toward their role in strengthening the nation's democracy and deepening the country's understanding of other cultures.[15] As that broad mission materialized with the recommendation directed toward "the abandonment of European concepts of education and the development of a curriculum attuned to the needs of a democracy,"[16] its recommendations helped shape present-day U.S. higher education including: doubling college attendance by 1960; integrating vocational and liberal education; extending free public education through the first two years of college for all youth who can benefit from such education; eliminating racial and religious discrimination; revising the goals of graduate and professional school education to make them effective in training well-rounded persons, as well as research specialists and technicians; and expanding federal support for higher education through scholarships, fellowships, and general aid.[17]

The development of community colleges and the expansion of adult education were also part of the commission's suggestions.

Subsequent presidents also had committees, task forces, and commissions on education. In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had his Committee on Education Beyond the High School while President John F. Kennedy's Task Force on Education released its report in 1960. But their impacts, while important in their own right, were limited when compared with the 1983 report from President Ronald Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in

Education (NCEE). The report from Reagan's commission is probably the one with which readers are most familiar. Best known as "A Nation at Risk," it was released amidst an economic recession, the highest unemployment since the great depression (Michigan had the highest rate at 14.5 percent in 1982), and increased foreign economic competition. The report began with a hyperbolic and incendiary summary about the state of U.S. high school education:



"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....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."[18]

The NCEE report argued that failure to be attentive and intentional about the education system was doing a disservice to the country, that the education system had slipped into mediocrity as a consequence, and that such a state need not be tolerated.[19] Its central recommendations arose from those beliefs: that the curriculum needed scrutinizing to determine its currency; that the efficiency and effectiveness of instructional time required examination; that the value of teaching needed reorienting in the schools and in American society ("teaching is not an honored profession... and... it won't be until it can provide teachers with adequate status—meaning more money—less disruption from essential tasks, differentiated salaries, and some way to recognize outstanding performance"); and that the role of leadership in the school building and the district in executing the necessary reforms required development.[20]

"A Nation at Risk" became the impetus for the state of education today—curriculum (standards/CCSS), assessment (standardized testing), and choice—with help along the way from Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton,

George W. Bush, and Barack Obama. Each played their part in breathing further life into and extending their predecessors' directives, beginning with Goals 2000 under President George H. W. Bush and then President Clinton, as well as support for expansion of public charter schools by the latter.[21] This was followed by the No Child Left Behind legislation of President George W. Bush and President Obama's Race to the Top program and Every Student Succeeds Act. All represent testaments to the underlying premise that something was amiss in K-12 education.

Michigan's 21st Century Education Commission

Like many before it, Michigan's education commission also began by identifying the myriad issues confronting its K-12 system. In fairly stark terms, it delineated the academic weaknesses of the state's students. Also included wealthier middle class White students who, the report claimed, underperformed the significant majority of their counterparts elsewhere in the country, a fact presented forcefully in the introduction.

The pressing interest of the commission was to prepare Michigan's students for the 21st century world of work, thereby also affording greater numbers of them access to the American Dream. The means by which these system failings should be addressed focused on an overhaul of institutional education ranging from funding, teacher preparation, and instructional reform through to leadership development and parental/community partnership engagement. These are all worthy considerations supported by the research on best evidence-based policies and practices. To that end, the commission developed a substantive and meaningful report outlining the issues and identifying broad remedies for the governor to consider.

As well-intentioned as the commission's recommendations might have been, the near-term political and ideological realities of the state mitigate against many being consid-

ered, let alone financed. It would be a struggle to find a sufficient number of agreeable legislators in Lansing, let alone the public, to support the infusion of fiscal resources necessary to have these recommendations see the light of day and then be sustained in some meaningful fashion over the long term. It does not bode well for funding a comprehensive system-wide reform of education that the legislature took four years to find a remedy for funding the repair of the state's roads.[22]

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There are two items in the report to which the author wishes to quickly draw attention. The first was the commission's suggestion about infrastructure funding for public school academies (PSAs aka charter schools) from the public purse. This seems a rather curious item to include. Michigan has one of the higher per pupil funding regimes for charter school students in the nation while, at the same time, it has the nation's highest percentage

of for-profit charter schools. In light of the coexistence of these two facts, recommending more public tax dollars to offset infrastructure needs for PSAs while traditional public schools remain underfunded does read as a bit incongruous, especially given media reports about the lack of transparency of some major charter operators, as well as government accountability.[23]

The second item for attention is the use of the Canadian province of Ontario and its scores on the international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests as one benchmark for measuring Michigan's success with its reforms eight years hence. Massachusetts is typically seen as the top U.S. performer on PISA.[24] However, Ontario performed equally to Massachusetts in mathematics, outperformed that state in reading, but then underperformed it in science on the 2015 PISA.[25] The commissioners would certainly appear to be setting their bar exceedingly high.

Furthermore, the author is particularly familiar with Ontario and its school system. There are societal as well as

organizational and operational reasons why its education system performs as well as it does. Unfortunately, those factors are not going to be emulated in Michigan nor their effects realized in the foreseeable future, let alone the next eight years.

The citizens of this state reflect an inherently different society that views many aspects of life differently from Ontarians, including taxation and the role that government plays in their lives. This is not inconsequential. Amongst other things, Ontarians view their teachers with greater regard, even if that respect has diminished somewhat from years passed and pays them much better (discussion about improved wages in Michigan's report, unlike the President Reagan's NCEE report, was glaringly absent despite all the other heightened expectations). Also, teachers in Ontario are highly unionized, but more importantly, the unions have historically played an important role in the successful implementation of educational policy. The power of those unions also prevents phenomena like for-profit public charter schools with less teacher credentialing, lower wages and benefits, and higher staff turnover from ever being considered. Another difference between Michigan and Ontario is that schools and teacher preparation institutions are regulated and accredited not by third parties but by a body comprised of members from the teaching profession (a recommendation out of that province's 1994 commission on education).[26] Alternate forms of teacher certification are not permissible. In addition, Ontario's administrators require provincial certification based upon completion of prescribed programs and qualifications beyond possession of a master's degree.

While Michigan's population is 71 percent of Ontario's, comparatively, its spending on education is only 61 percent. Furthermore, Ontario's 2017-2018 budget calls for an additional \$6 billion infusion for education during the next three years, approximately 43 percent of

Michigan's annual K-12 budget. Not that the 21st Century Commission needed to call for that level of capital infusion in Michigan, it's just that that sort of fiscal initiative would not be entertained let alone advanced as a policy consideration.

Societally, high school graduation rates in Ontario currently surpass those in Michigan (86 percent versus 79.6 percent). In 2016, 68 percent of adults in Ontario had a postsecondary credential, higher than rates for any country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) [27] (in 2014, Michigan had 43.3 percent).[28] And, as most Americans have come to know, Canada and Ontario have a single payer universal healthcare system. All their children and youth get access to necessary medical treatment without healthcare markets or out-of-pocket expenses, and as of 2018, anyone under 24 in Ontario will also receive free prescription drugs (youth pharmacare).[29] Conversely, this fall, the United States Congress allowed the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), intended to assist children from low and moderate-income families, to expire. At the same time, federal attempts to undermine the Affordable Care Act (aka Obamacare) persist. Those of us who have worked in K-12 understand the correlation between socioeconomic status, health, and academic achievement.

All of Ontario's education policies come with a cost. Income tax rates are higher in Canada and Ontario than in Michigan, as are their sales tax and taxation on gasoline. They are a different society with a different set of values. All of these factors and many more contribute to their schools' performance. Transforming Michigan's education system in keeping with the commission's vision will require much more than an educational makeover. The dispositional and values shift amongst the state's legislators and citizenry constitutes a far greater obstacle.

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