

A Stagnant Nation:

Why American Students
Are *Still* at Risk



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A Stagnant Nation: Why American Students Are *Still* at Risk

Executive Summary

Twenty-five years ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* to thunderous publicity. While the national conversation about education would never be the same, stunningly few of the Commission's recommendations actually have been enacted.

Now is not the time for more educational research or reports or commissions. We have enough common-sense ideas, backed by decades of research, to significantly improve American schools. The missing ingredient isn't even *educational* at all. It's *political*. Too often, state and local leaders have tried to enact reforms of the kind recommended in *A Nation at Risk* only to be stymied by organized special interests and political inertia. Without vigorous national leadership to improve education, states and local school systems simply cannot overcome the obstacles to making the big changes necessary to significantly improve our nation's K-12 schools.



Key recommendations related to time, teaching, and standards have yet to be realized:

- **Time.** *A Nation at Risk* urged school districts and state legislatures to revamp the six-hour-a-day, 180-day-per-year school calendar and consider seven-hour school days and 200- to 220-day school years. Yet today only one state has a pilot program to help schools expand

Report Card on Selected Reforms Recommended by A Nation at Risk

Content:

Raise high school graduation requirements **A**

Standards:

Grades should be indicators
of actual learning **F**

System of nationwide tests that signal
readiness for the next stage of learning **C**

Time:

Significantly expand students'
learning time **F**

Teaching:

Make teaching salaries performance-based
and market-sensitive. **F**

* A more detailed explanation can be found on page 21.

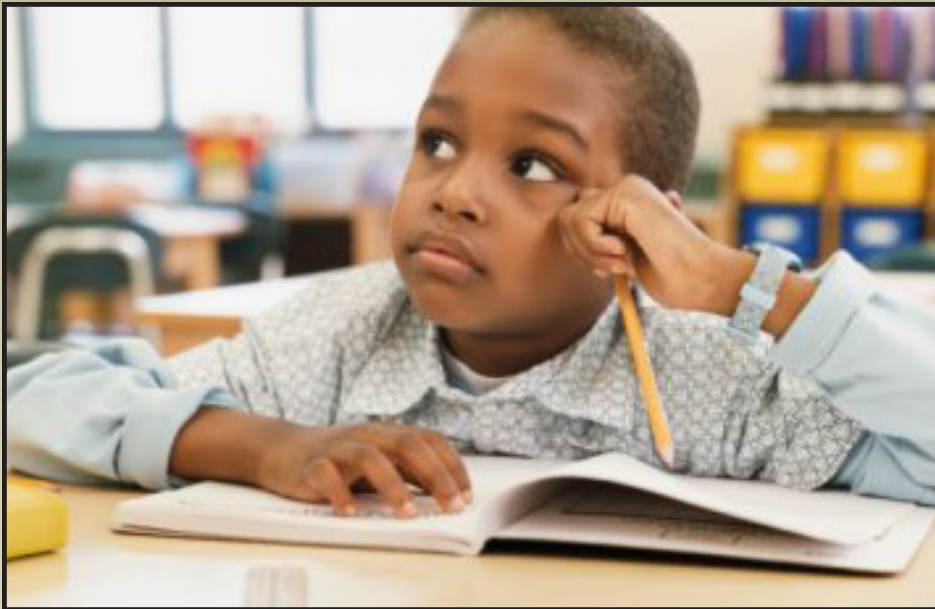
virtually unchanged since 1984. In 2004, only six percent of U.S. school districts could offer recruitment incentives in mathematics, despite the fact that nearly 30 percent of districts reported great difficulty hiring qualified math teachers to fill vacancies.

- **Standards and Expectations.** The Commission recommended that states and districts raise standards and expectations and said that classroom grades should reflect actual learning. Yet 12th grade test scores in reading and science actually *dropped* at the same time that average high school GPAs skyrocketed. Students are earning better grades in “tougher” courses, yet actual learning is either stagnant or in decline. At the same time, states have failed to set rigorous academic standards in the lower grades. One study found that out of 32 states, *none* had set performance benchmarks for 4th grade reading that were high enough to meet the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Twenty-four had set them so low they did not reach *even the most basic level*.

learning time that much. Nationwide, the amount of time elementary school students spend learning core academic subjects has increased by only approximately 36 minutes per week, amounting to fewer than 10 minutes per day.

- **Teaching.** The Commission urged policymakers to help recruit the best and brightest to teaching by making the profession more attractive. To that end, the Commission recommended making teacher compensation “professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based.” Yet today only five states have large-scale programs in place for individual performance pay or career-ladder incentives. Only approximately 8 percent of public school districts offer pay incentives to reward excellence in teaching—a figure that has remained





As a result, learning has not improved much, either. Elementary and middle school students have made some gains over the past quarter century, but high school achievement has declined or remained stagnant. Recent 12th grade assessment results reveal the same woeful level of preparation *A Nation at Risk* lamented in 1983. One in four high school seniors cannot glean basic information about subway fares by reading a Metrorail guide. Nearly half can't answer a simple multiple choice question about the function of a neuron, and three out of four can't describe wind and rain as two ways that rocks can be broken down by the weather. In math, two out of five high school seniors lack skills that are commonly taught in 7th or 8th grade and are necessary to learn trades that do not require a college degree.

Meanwhile, the United States has fallen even farther behind as other countries make concerted efforts to improve their education systems. America once had the best high school graduation rate, but it has now fallen to 21st among industrialized nations. Our college-attainment rate plummeted from second in 1995 to 14th just a decade later. America's 15-year-olds perform

below average in math, science, and problem-solving. Even our best students can no longer compete. In math, America has a below average proportion of top performers; our best math students rank 24th when compared with top performers in 29 other countries.

After 25 years, time is running out on America's opportunity to enact a robust national education reform agenda. We cannot afford to fail in our mission to provide students with a world-class education. We cannot afford to graduate millions of high school seniors who lack skills in reading and math that they should have learned in middle school. We especially cannot afford to continue slipping farther and farther behind the other nations of the world. Our students deserve better, and our nation's economic security is at greater risk now than ever before.

To protect our national interests and ensure our collective future, America's leadership must find a better balance between the word "United" and the word "States" when it comes to American education—one that empowers the federal government to energize and assist the states. That simply cannot and will not happen without bold leadership from the President of the United States. And because it will take time and energy for the next president to rally the nation behind serious education reform, he or she must begin that process well before taking office in January—and even before winning the election in November. There is not one moment to waste. ■



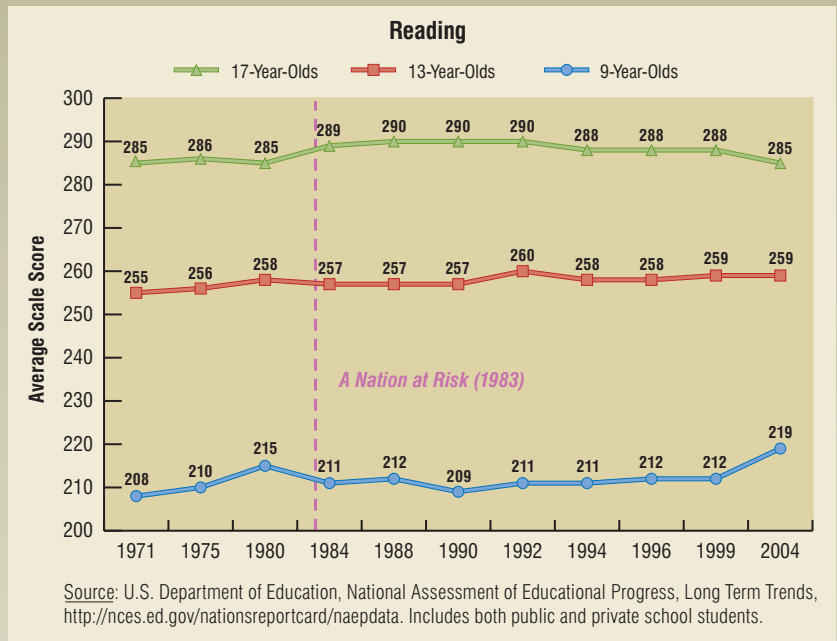
Introduction

Nearly 90 million schoolchildren have entered 1st grade since the National Commission on Excellence in Education released *A Nation at Risk* a quarter of a century ago. Our leaders have failed nearly all of those children. In fact, America's students have been doubly betrayed—first by the *educational* failure described in *A Nation at Risk* and then by the *political* failure to fix those problems.

When Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell appointed the Commission in 1981, it was amid media accounts of declining academic standards in American schools. The problem had taken root over the course of several decades. During the sixties and seventies, high schools had begun experimenting with new approaches like open classrooms and curricula relevant to students' concerns. Students began migrating to bland "general" coursework at alarming rates. From the mid-1960s through the 1970s, the proportion of students enrolled in the "general" course track more than tripled to 42 percent. A quarter of the credits earned by those students were in subjects like health and physical education, remedial math and English, outside work experiences, and personal development.¹

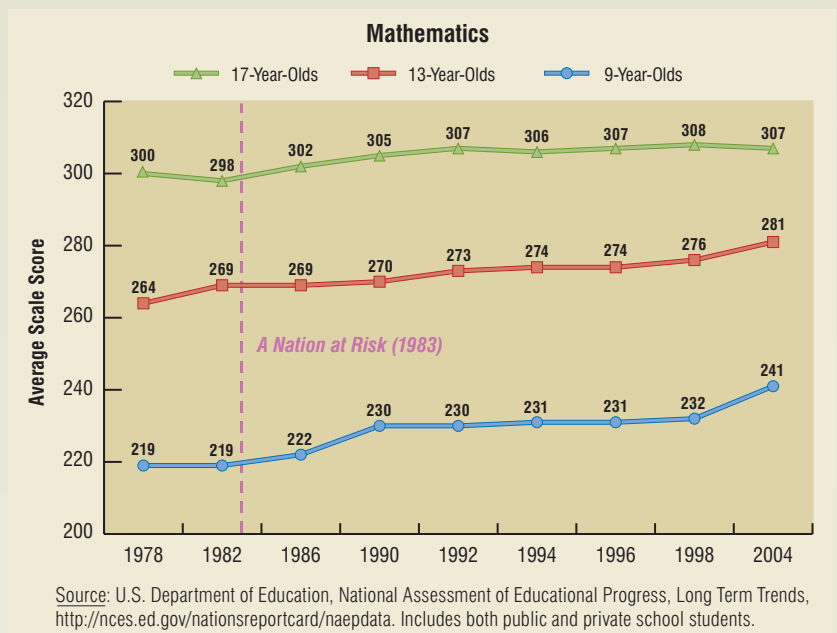
Based largely on those trends, the Commission famously warned of "a rising tide of mediocrity" in American education, one that ultimately would undermine the nation's economic security. But the Commission also looked beyond coursework, conducting a broad survey of American education that documented deeper problems in academic standards and expectations, time for learning, and the quality of teaching. It issued a set of recommendations for addressing those problems so that U.S. schools could provide students with an education that would enable them to compete with their peers worldwide.

No education report before or since has had a greater impact on the national debate about America's schools. *A Nation at Risk* generated tremendous publicity, ended the complacency that was fueling low educational expectations, and



launched the modern "school reform" movement. Yet today, as the world continues to change rapidly and demand for skilled workers accelerates, America's economic future remains gravely at risk because we have not implemented the Commission's full set of recommendations to provide students with a truly world-class education system.

Even the students who managed to graduate from our K-12 schools ready for college and work have been robbed. Stanford economist Eric Hanushek has calculated that, "had we undertaken policies after *A Nation at Risk* that truly reformed our schools, we could today be enjoying substantially higher national income. Indeed, direct estimates of the lost opportunities suggest we could today pay for the entire



budget for K-12 education from the dividends of effective reform.”²

The quality of America’s schools is an issue of great national urgency, one that affects every community and every citizen no matter where they live. Yet absent strong national leadership to improve American education, our students face another quarter century of stagnation and international decline.

Stalled Out: Little to No Progress on Educational Outcomes

A Nation at Risk decried the poor academic preparation of America’s high school students. But more than two decades later, the knowledge and skills of our high school students remain nearly the same or, in some cases, have become even worse.

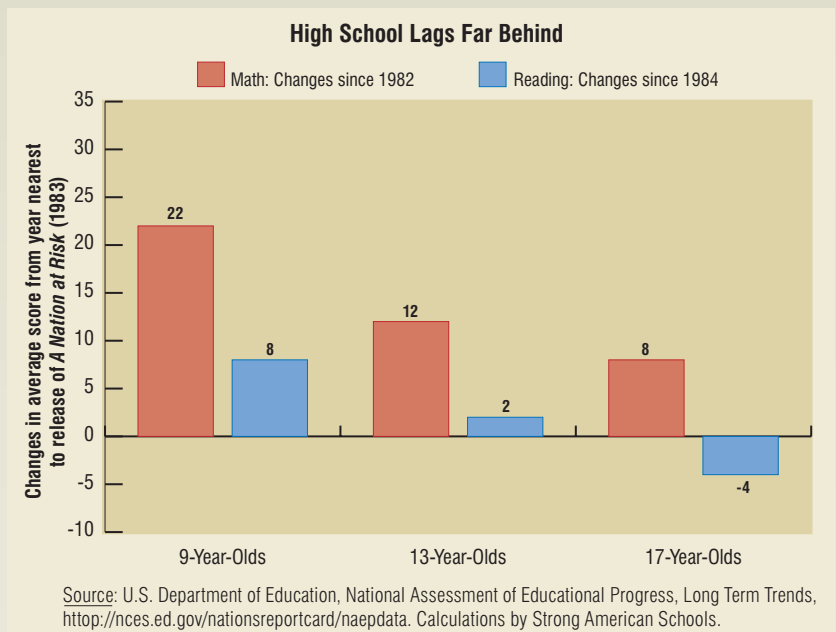
The U.S. Department of Education has tested the reading and math skills of America’s nine-year-olds, 13-year-olds, and 17-year-olds every few years since the 1970s. Since 1984, a year after *A Nation at Risk* was released, nine-year-olds have made modest gains in reading, but those gains have not translated into much higher achievement among 13-year-olds. Meanwhile, the reading skills of 17-year-olds actually have *declined* slightly since 1984. In fact, America’s 17-year-olds read no better than they did when the assessment was first given in 1971.³

Though gains have been larger across the board in mathematics, that general pattern—gains in the early grades dissipating as students grow older—remains the same. Since 1982, the year before *A Nation at Risk* was published, America’s nine-year-olds have improved 22 points in mathematics—one of the rare unequivocal bright spots in three decades of NAEP testing. But the math scores of 13-year-olds improved by only 12 points. And math achievement among our 17-year-olds has



crept upward only by single digits—just 8 points from 1982 until 2004, the last year the assessment was given.⁴

In the early 1990s, the Department of Education developed a parallel NAEP test in order to administer more “modern” assessments to complement the long-term test, which must remain unchanged to provide stable comparisons to the 1970s. The latest results for 12th graders on that newer NAEP assessment reveal a disturbing trend: Twelfth grade reading scores have *declined* significantly since the assessment was first given in 1992. Reading skills are declining for students from all backgrounds, including those with college-educated parents.⁵

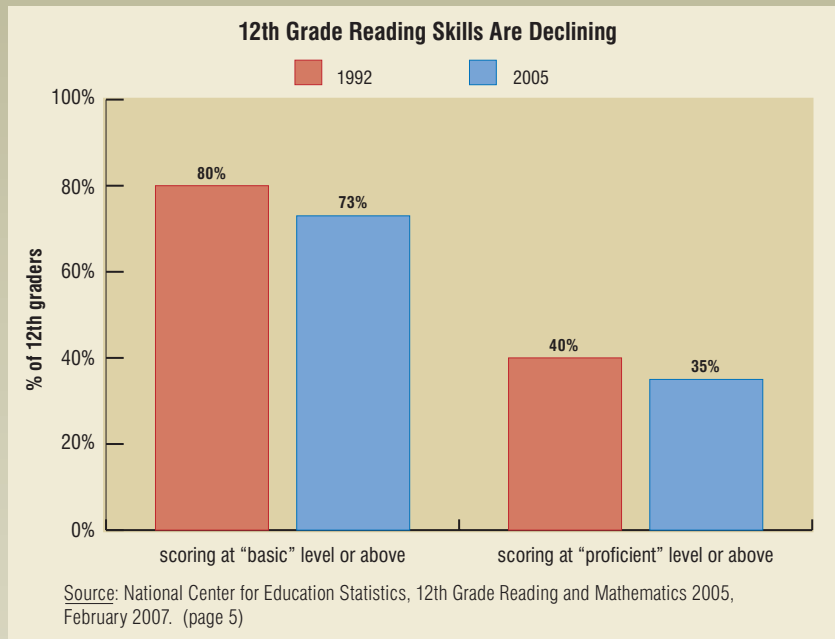


Overall, the proportion of 12th graders reading at a proficient level dropped from an already low 40 percent in 1992 to just 35 percent in 2005, and the percentage scoring at even the most basic level slipped from 80 to 73. By 2005, nearly one in four high school seniors

could not glean basic information about subway fares by reading a Metrorail guide.⁶

In 2005 the Department upgraded the 12th grade NAEP math assessment, so the latest results cannot be compared with earlier years. But the most recent scores are shocking simply in and of themselves. By the time they leave high school, American students are woefully lacking in the mathematical skills necessary to thrive in a complex, technological world. Only 23 percent of seniors can perform math at a proficient level. And only 61 percent reach even a “basic” level of math skills.⁷

That poor performance has devastating consequences for our young people and our economy. Students who score below the basic level struggle to do math they should have learned in middle school, such as using the Pythagorean Theorem to calculate the length of one side of a right triangle. In today’s world, that is not just “useless academic knowledge” to be learned and forgotten. Even so-called “blue collar” workers now need to know



and apply more advanced mathematics, including algebra and geometry. Pipe fitters, welders, industrial maintenance workers, and electricians all need to know how to use the Pythagorean Theorem.

Indeed, jobs that pay enough to support a family but don’t require a bachelor’s degree now demand the same level of preparation as college. The testing company ACT looked at the math and reading skills required of electricians, construction workers, upholsterers, and plumbers and concluded they match what’s necessary to do well in college courses.⁸ Local trade union apprenticeship programs are struggling to find qualified applicants. Jonathan Mitchell, training director at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 490 in Concord, New Hampshire, says as many as half of all applicants fail a required entry test in math and reading.⁹

What would the Commission members who wrote *A Nation at Risk* have thought if they could have foreseen that a quarter century later, two out of five high school seniors would lack math skills commonly taught in 7th or 8th grade and necessary to learn trades that do not require a college degree?

Even more distressing, reading is not the only subject in which our high school seniors are getting worse. The percentage of 12th graders scoring proficient in science dropped from 21 percent in 1996 to 18 percent in 2005. Scores are declining in all the sciences—earth, physical, and biological—precisely at a time when Americans

must confront urgent environmental problems and complex ethical questions related to new technologies. Nearly half of America's high school seniors could not answer a simple multiple choice question about the function of a neuron. Three out of four could not list wind and rain as two ways that rocks can be broken down by the weather.¹⁰

Slip Sliding Away: America Falls Behind Internationally

From the report's title to the examples it provided of advances in Asian and European industry, *A Nation at Risk* framed its urgent call to action in terms of our economic security. The very first sentences spelled out the core argument: "Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world."

Yet at the time the report was published, the U.S. still performed relatively well on a number of key measures. And the report noted as much in a section on strengths America could build on to improve its schools:

In the last 30 years, the schools have been a major vehicle for expanded social opportunity, and now graduate 75 percent of our young people from high school. Indeed, the proportion of Americans of college age enrolled in higher education is nearly twice that of Japan and far exceeds other nations such as France, West Germany, and the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, over the last quarter century even those advantages have all but evaporated. The problem is not that U.S. schools have gotten significantly worse. The problem is that other nations have steadily improved as ours has languished. For example, America's once preeminent standing in high school and college attainment has slipped precariously. According

Then and Now: How U.S. Education Has Slipped Internationally

1983: National Commission on Excellence in Education

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"Our institutions of higher education have provided the scientists and skilled technicians who helped us transcend the boundaries of our planet."

"When international comparisons were last made a decade ago, the top 9 percent of American students compared favorably in achievement with their peers in other countries."

2007: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

"While the U.S. had, well into the 1960s, the highest high school completion rates among OECD [Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation] countries, in 2005 it ranked, with a high school completion rate of 76%, 21st among the 27 OECD countries with available data, followed only by Spain, New Zealand, Portugal, Turkey and Mexico. Similar trends are visible in college education, where the U.S. slipped between 1995 and 2005 from the 2nd to the 14th rank, not because US college graduation rates declined, but because they rose so much faster in many OECD countries."

"Graduate output is particularly low in science, where the number of people with a college degree per 100,000 employed 25-to-34-year-olds was 1,100 compared with 1,295 on average across OECD countries and more than 2,000 in Australia, Finland, France and Korea."

"In mathematics, the U.S. has a below-average proportion of top-performers."

to the well-respected Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development:

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Average Mathematics Scores of 15-Year-Old Students by Country (2006)

Rank	Country	Score
1	Finland	548
2	Korea	547
3	Netherlands	531
4	Switzerland	530
5	Canada	527
6	Japan	523
7	New Zealand	522
8	Australia	520
9	Belgium	520
10	Denmark	520
11	Czech Republic	510
12	Iceland	506
13	Austria	505
14	Germany	504
15	Sweden	502
16	Ireland	501
17	France	496
18	Poland	495
19	United Kingdom	495
20	Slovak Republic	492
21	Hungary	491
22	Luxembourg	490
23	Norway	490
24	Spain	480
25	United States	474
26	Portugal	466
27	Italy	462
28	Greece	459
29	Turkey	424
30	Mexico	406

Source: OECD, *PISA 2006 Volume 2: Data*, December 2007. (Page 230, Table 6.2c)



A Nation at Risk also positively highlighted college and university contributions to the scientific talent pool, noting that “our institutions of higher education have provided the scientists and skilled technicians who helped us transcend the boundaries of our planet.” But that advantage has also been eroded. The OECD now warns that America’s college output is “particularly low in science,” noting that we fall well behind countries like Australia, Finland, France, and Korea.¹²

Of course, *A Nation at Risk* did lament America’s lagging performance on international assessments of learning, which famously lead off its litany of 13 “Indicators of Risk.” But the Commission also found a silver lining even when it came to student achievement: “When international comparisons were last made a decade ago, the top 9 percent of American students compared favorably in achievement with their peers in other countries.”

But once again, today that is no longer something America can brag about. An OECD report on the U.S. economy issued last year minced no words in describing the breadth of American failure: “Top U.S. students are outperformed just like average and struggling US students. [...] The United States does not just have more students performing badly—it also has many fewer students performing well.”¹³

That fact was born out again when new international assessment results were released in December. In 2006, America’s top performing 15-year-olds in mathematics (those at the 90th percentile) scored

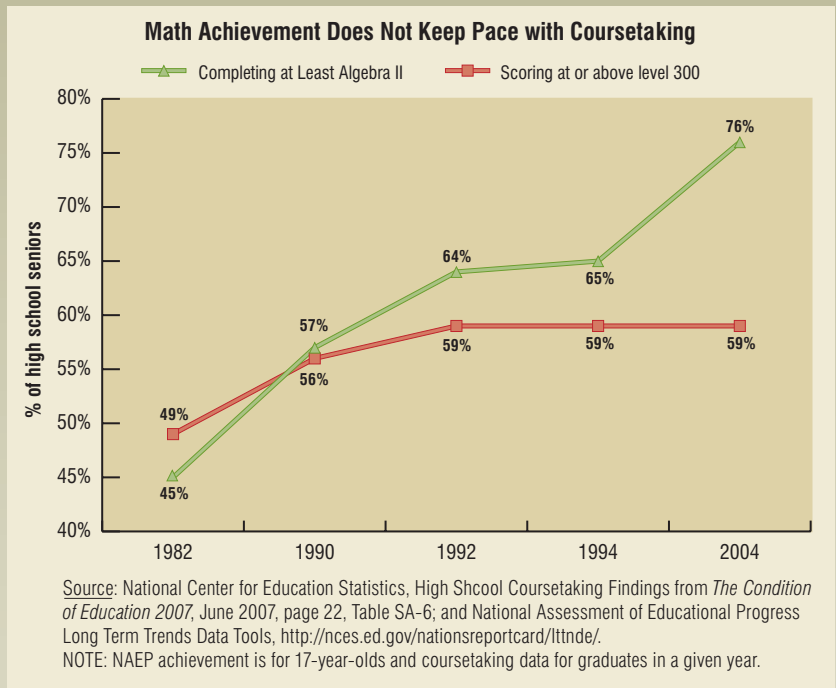
593, well below the average of 615 for top performers internationally. Our *top* math students ranked a lowly 24th out of 30 when compared with top performers across all of the OECD member nations.¹⁴ America's low performance is especially disappointing given that, on average, U.S. students enjoy a relatively high level of family affluence and greater spending on their schools.¹⁵

To make matters worse, the latest results offered alarming evidence that our relative standing is continuing to slip. Overall, America's ranking dropped from 24th to 25th in mathematics and from 18th to 21st in science between 2003 and 2006. Other countries are working harder to improve their education systems, and some, such as Korea and Poland, have made huge strides over a short period of time.

Paralysis: Why Achievement Is Stalled and Our Position Eroding

Why have we stood still while other countries advanced? After all, *A Nation at Risk* prompted a torrent of proposals, speeches, events, and papers at the state and local levels. In reality, however, all of that talk and activity ultimately amounted to very little real change in the way we operate our education system.

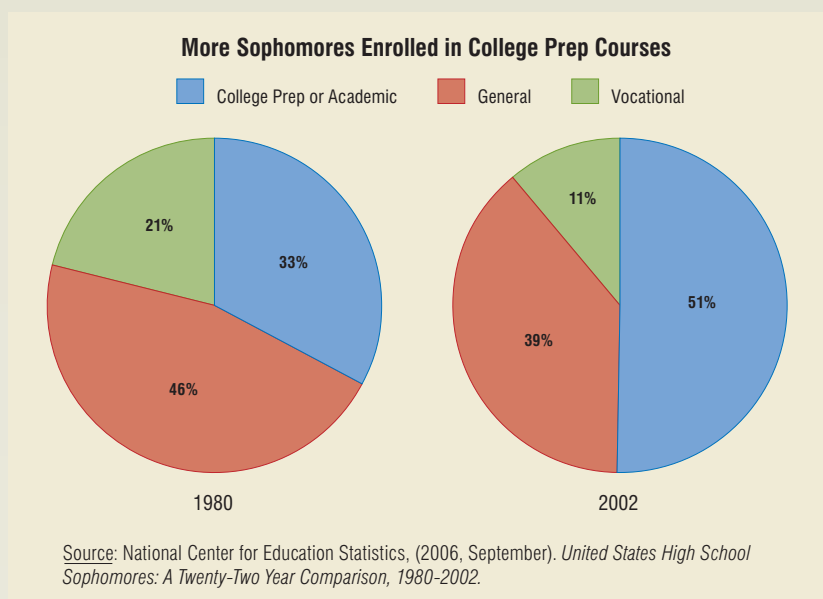
States and local school systems did address some of the Commission's recommendations. For example, states responded with alacrity to the call to require high



school students to take more academic courses—and all but five had raised graduation requirements by 1988. Consequently, the past 25 years have seen huge gains in the number of high school students taking more rigorous courses. More than half of our high school sophomores now take mainly “academic” or “college prep” courses, compared with only one-third who did so in 1980.¹⁶ Nearly all high school graduates now complete Algebra I, and the proportion of graduates completing Algebra II climbed from less than half in 1982 to more than three-quarters in 2005.¹⁷

Yet those big gains in coursetaking have not enhanced learning. For example, even as more students enrolled in advanced math courses, the math skills of our 17-year-olds remained nearly flat during the 1990s and into the first half of this decade. In 1990, 56 percent of 17-year-olds completed math through at least Algebra II and 57 percent scored at least 300 (average scale score of participating students) on NAEP's Long Term Trends assessment in mathematics. By 2004, 76 percent were completing Algebra II, but the proportion of 17-year-olds scoring 300 in math had climbed only a few percentage points, to 59 percent.¹⁸

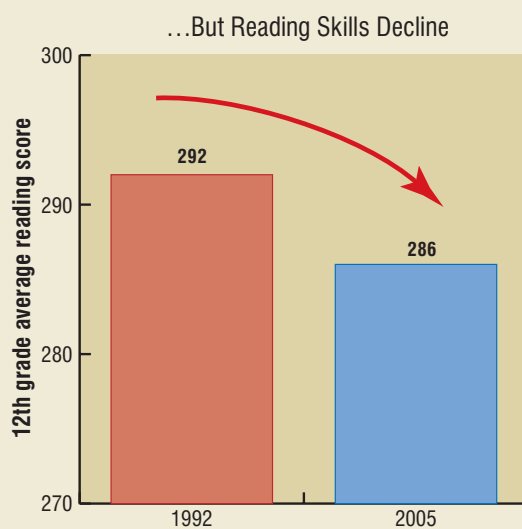
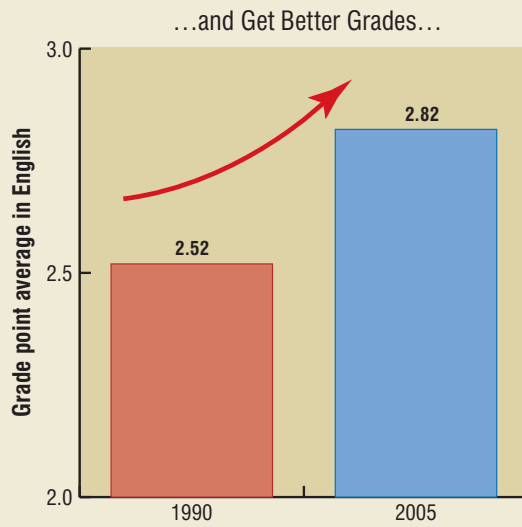
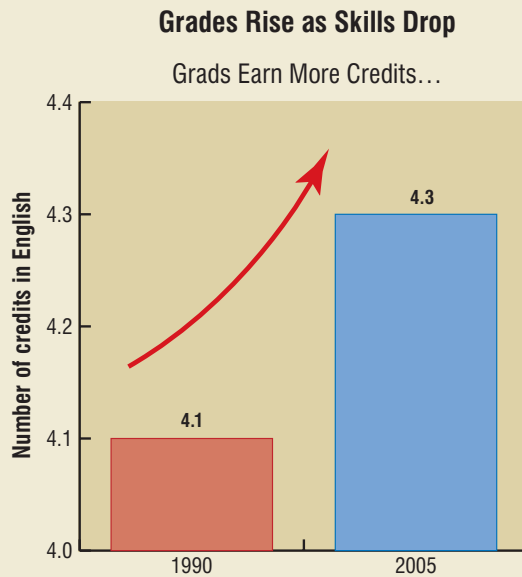
The same is true in English. In fact, last year the U.S. Department of Education released two reports showing a set of trends that are difficult to believe.



Students are completing more English courses by the end of high school, and they are getting better grades in those courses. Over a 15-year period between 1990 and 2005, the average grade point average in English jumped from 2.52 to 2.82—the difference between a middling C and a solid C+. Yet the reading skills of America’s 12th graders declined by six points over about the same period.¹⁹

A Nation at Risk recommended that “grades should be indicators of academic achievement so they can be relied on as evidence of a student’s readiness for further study.” Clearly, that recommendation has been largely ignored. And *that* is precisely the problem. By acting vigorously on one of the Commission’s recommendations and failing to act on most of the rest, policymakers and educators have undermined any real progress American students might have made over the past quarter century.

The Commission parsed its findings and recommendations into five key areas—Content, Standards and Expectations, Time, Teaching, and Leadership and Fiscal Support—with the call to raise graduation requirements as the main recommendation under the Content section. The Commission members sensibly recognized that simply asking high school students to take more



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *America’s High School Graduates*, February 2007; and National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP 12th Grade Reading and Mathematics 2005*, February 2007.

academic courses would not be enough. In order to master more advanced content, America’s students would need the benefit of higher expectations for learning, sound measurement of whether those expectations were being met, more time for instruction, and a better equipped teaching force.

Yet 25 years later, the Commission’s recommendations in those additional areas remain mostly unrealized. That is due mainly to the twin obstacles that present the biggest challenge to improving our nation’s schools: America’s historical obsession with local control of education and the dominating influence of organized special interest groups that wield tremendous power in states and local communities. A fear of federal involvement in curriculum has crippled efforts to create high academic standards and expectations across the nation, and special interests have opposed efforts to expand learning time and make teacher compensation more performance-based and market-driven.

Time

A Nation at Risk found that American students spent far too little time in school and engaged in learning, noting that “a study of the school week in the United States found that some schools provided students only 17 hours



of academic instruction during the week, and the average school provided about 22.” It also pointed a finger at policymakers for not providing enough educational time in the calendar: “In England and other industrialized countries, it is not unusual for academic high school students to spend 8 hours a day at school, 220 days per year. In the United States, by contrast, the typical school day lasts 6 hours and the school year is 180 days.”

In addition to urging school systems to assign more homework and manage time more efficiently, the Commission offered a seemingly straightforward solution: “School districts and State legislatures should strongly consider 7-hour school days, as well as a 200- to 220-day school year.”

Governors and legislators responded to the letter of that recommendation—by *considering* it. But no state ultimately acted on it. Policymakers balked at the expense, and special interest groups, including resort owners and industries that employ teenagers during the summer, opposed it. On the fifth anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*, U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett summed up the dismal lack of progress in expanding learning time:

American teachers prefer their current nine- or ten-month contracts, and their union leaders have opposed most legislative efforts to lengthen the school day or year. Since 1983, such proposals have been considered in 37 states. But a

longer school year has been adopted in only nine of them—and all of those states merely extended their unusually short calendars to the more common 180-day standard. Only five states have lengthened the school day—none to more than six-and-a-half hours.

Very little has changed in the ensuing 20 years despite repeated calls for expanded learning time. In 1990 the *Atlantic Monthly* published an 11,000-word article called “The Case for More School Days” that sparked a national debate about whether to expand time for learning. The following year, the U.S. Congress passed legislation to create a National Education Commission on Time and Learning, which issued a strongly worded report called *Prisoners of Time* in 1994. That report reiterated the call to significantly increase academic learning time for America’s students.

Yet so far only one state has managed to take concrete action to help K-12 schools *significantly* expand learning time—and it took a full decade. In 1993, Massachusetts created its own high-powered Commission on Time and Learning, which issued its final report in 1995. Among the well-publicized recommendations: “Move toward lengthening the school year to 200 days. [...] The Legislature and the Executive Branch should support an appropriation for incentive funding to realize this recommendation.” A decade later, state leaders finally launched a pilot program to provide some schools with incentive funds to expand learning time by 30 percent.

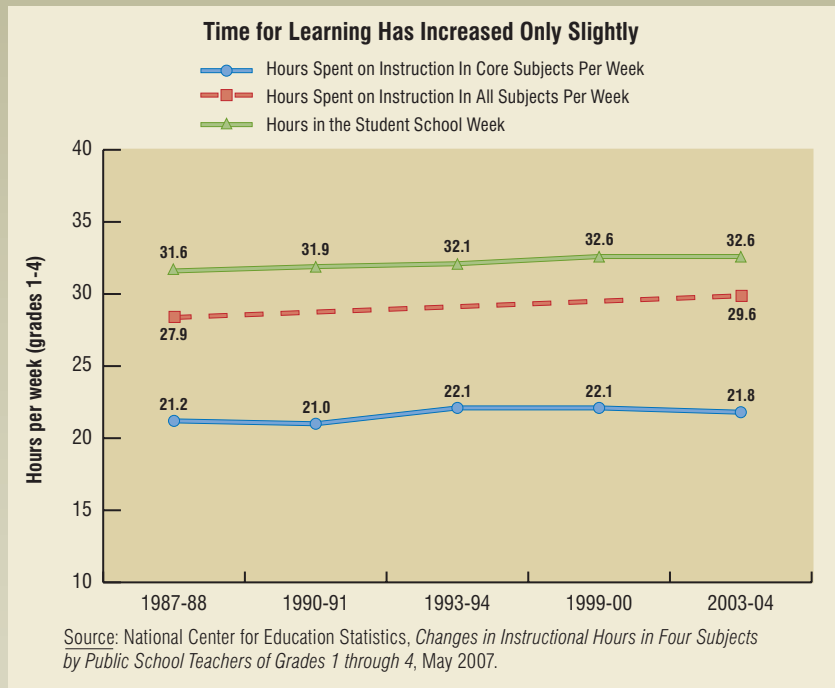
Despite very encouraging early results from that program, only 18 schools currently participate, even though the demand is actually greater. An evaluation by the state's Board of Education noted that, "Districts that were interested in [Extended Learning Time] but unable to garner union support could not proceed with planning and/or implementation."²⁰ And the Massachusetts effort has yet to spread elsewhere. In February the *Boston Globe* observed that, so far, "Massachusetts is the only state funding longer days in multiple districts."²¹

It should come as no surprise that the actual amount of learning time public schools provide American students has changed very little since the 1980s. A recent analysis by the U.S. Department of Education found that the school week increased by one hour for 1st through 4th grade between 1988 and 2004, and the amount of time teaching core academic subjects in those grades rose by about 36 minutes per week over the same period. Those 36 minutes per week amount to fewer than 10 minutes per school day and add up to only about 5 additional days of core academic instruction per year—not even close to what the Commission recommended in 1983.²²

Teaching

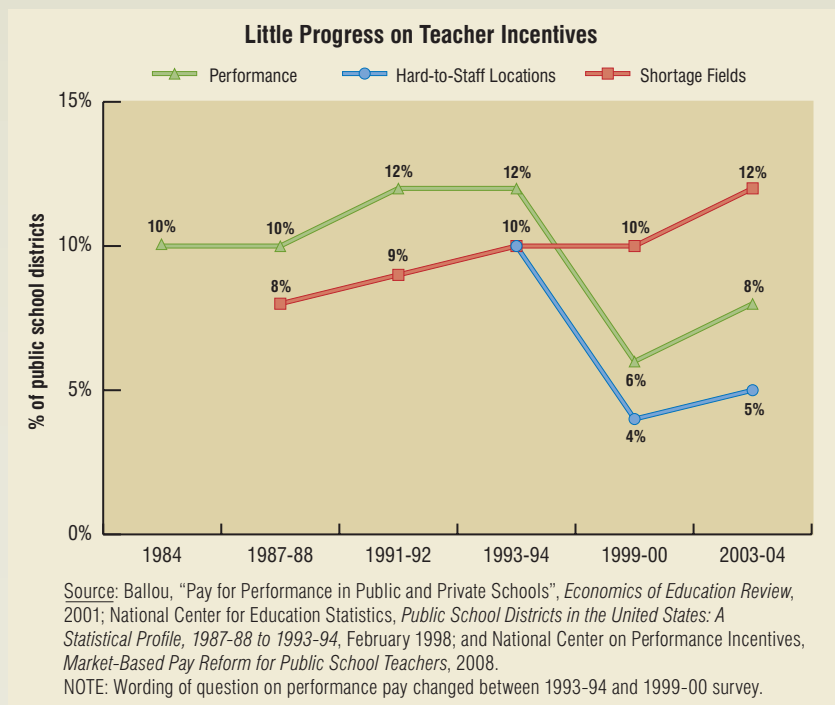
The Commission also recommended a broad range of actions to "make teaching a more rewarding and respected profession." Unfortunately, states and districts have failed to progress very far in this area, especially when it comes to bolder reforms like making teacher compensation—in the words of *A Nation at Risk*—"professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based."

The biggest obstacle to such reforms is no secret: Teacher unions oppose them, even on a voluntary basis and even when they would increase teacher pay overall. In fact, a study just published in the *Journal of Education Finance* found that districts with collective bargaining agreements are only half as likely to enact performance-based pay plans, even



though, all else being equal, teachers in districts with performance pay *earn higher average salaries*.²³

Teacher unions oppose performance pay just as vigorously at the state and national levels as they do at the local level. The federal government currently provides some voluntary grants under a relatively small, \$99 million program called the Teacher Incentive Fund. But the National Education Association has successfully blocked all legislative attempts to its funding. And when California Congressman George Miller, the Democratic chairman of the U.S. House



Education and Labor Committee, proposed a larger voluntary federal grant program as part of No Child Left Behind discussions last fall, the NEA called it “a deal-breaker” and lobbied strenuously against it. The NEA’s California affiliate went so far as to buy ads attacking Miller and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. The group’s vice president told a reporter, “We’re ready in California to go to war.”²⁴

Faced with such powerful resistance, few states have managed to sustain any kind of bold action to make teacher salaries more performance-based. According to the National Center for Performance Incentives, only five states have large-scale individual performance pay or career-ladder incentive programs currently in place.²⁵ At the rate of five additional statewide programs every 25 years, it would take another 225 years—until the 250th anniversary of *A Nation at Risk*—before every state had one.

Local school districts have been slow to take up the slack. The most recent federal survey of U.S. public school districts found that only about eight percent offered pay incentives to reward excellence in teaching—a figure that has remained virtually unchanged since 1984.²⁶ Although both major teacher unions now condone salary incentives to attract teachers to hard-to-staff schools, the NEA continues to oppose market-based pay to help recruit teachers in hard-to-fill subject areas. In 2004, only six percent of U.S. school districts could offer recruitment incentives



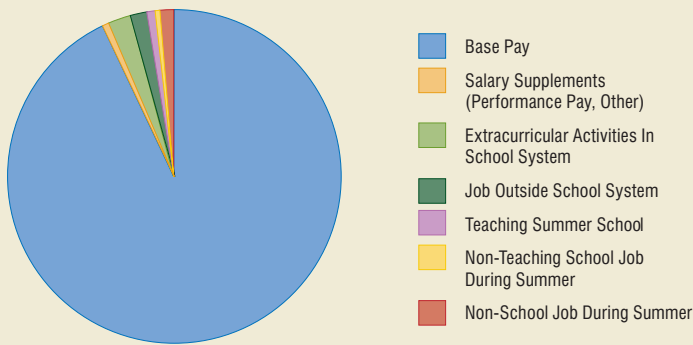
in mathematics despite nearly 30 percent of districts reporting great difficulty hiring qualified math teachers to fill vacancies.²⁷

As a result, the nation has utterly failed to remedy problems *A Nation at Risk* described a quarter century ago:

- In 1983, the Commission wrote that “too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students.” That remains true today. In fact, more detailed analyses have revealed that the problem is even worse than that. Not only does the teaching profession draw disproportionately from the bottom, it also loses more *highly* skilled adults at every point along the way. Academically talented young people are less likely to train to become teachers, less likely to take a teaching job, and less likely to stay in the classroom after a few years.²⁸ Teachers who earned SAT or ACT scores in the top quarter are *twice as likely* to leave the profession within four years as teachers who scored near the bottom.²⁹

- *A Nation at Risk* also warned of big teacher shortages in critical areas such as math and science and lamented that far too many teachers in such subjects lacked the knowledge needed to teach them well. That too remains an urgent problem today. More than one-third of math classes in U.S. middle and high schools are taught by someone who lacks even a college minor in a math-related field.

Less than 1 Percent of Teacher Pay Based on Performance or Other Salary Supplements



Source: Calculations by ED in '08 based on data from National Center for Education Statistics, *Characteristics of Schools, Districts, Teachers, Principals, and School Libraries in the United States 2003-04*, Tables 23 & 24. (March 2006)

The figure climbs to more than 70 percent in America's high-poverty and high-minority middle schools.³⁰ All told, more than 12 million American students in grades 7 to 12 are taught academic courses by teachers who have no college degree in the subject they're teaching.³¹

Recent studies suggest that our failure to modernize teacher compensation has had a direct and negative impact on our ability to improve the nation's teaching workforce. An analysis published in the *American Economic Review* estimated that more than three-quarters of the decline in academic ability among America's female teachers from 1964 to 2000 was caused by the compression of teacher salaries into uniform salary scales that only reward seniority and graduate degrees.³²

Not only do such salary schedules drive talent away from the teaching profession, they also do nothing to promote a focus on student achievement. One recent study found that teachers who earn master's degrees after they start teaching are, on average, *less effective* at improving student achievement than those who do not.³³ Last year the National Governors Association proclaimed that "the case for taking a different approach is overwhelming" and said the key is not know-how, but political will.³⁴ Even left-leaning groups like the Center for American Progress now support performance- and market-based pay for teachers.



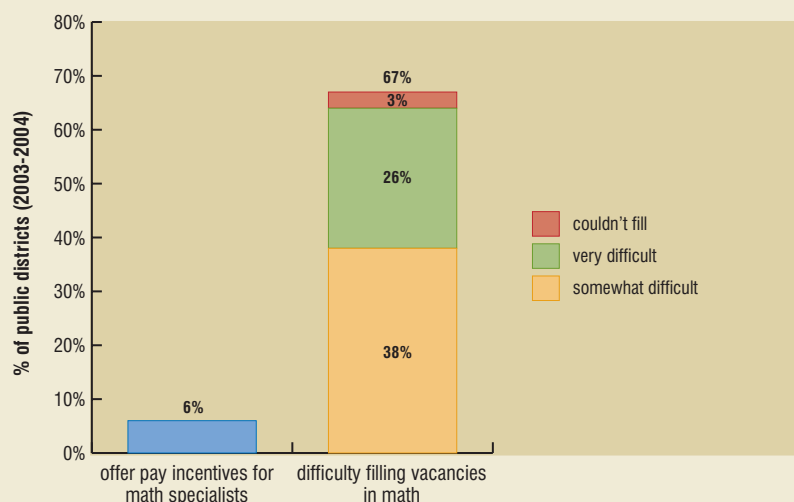
Enacting *A Nation at Risk's* recommendations is more urgent today than ever before. The U.S. will need to recruit 2.8 million new teachers over the next eight years due to baby-boomer retirement, staff turnover, and growing student enrollment.³⁵ Our leaders should make a commitment to turn that challenge into an opportunity to recruit America's best and brightest to teach in our nation's classrooms. But they cannot accomplish it without changing the ridiculously outdated way we compensate public school teachers.

The public agrees. Opinion polls consistently show big support for performance- and market-based teacher compensation to help tackle the teacher recruitment challenge. A survey by The Teaching Commission revealed that 76 percent of voters support funding additional pay for teaching in high-poverty schools and 72 percent support additional pay for teaching math and science.³⁶ In a Gallup poll conducted last year, 92 percent of American adults said providing performance-based financial incentives for teachers would be an effective way to attract and retain teachers.³⁷

Standards and Expectations

Perhaps because of great sensitivity to federal/state issues—the Reagan administration had proposed eliminating the federal Department of Education in 1981—the Excellence Commission took

Although Many Districts Have Difficulty Hiring Math Teachers, Few Can Offer Pay Incentives



Source: National Center on Performance Incentives, *Market-Based Pay Reform for Public School Teachers*, February 2008. Data are from the federal 2003-04 Schools and Staffing Survey.

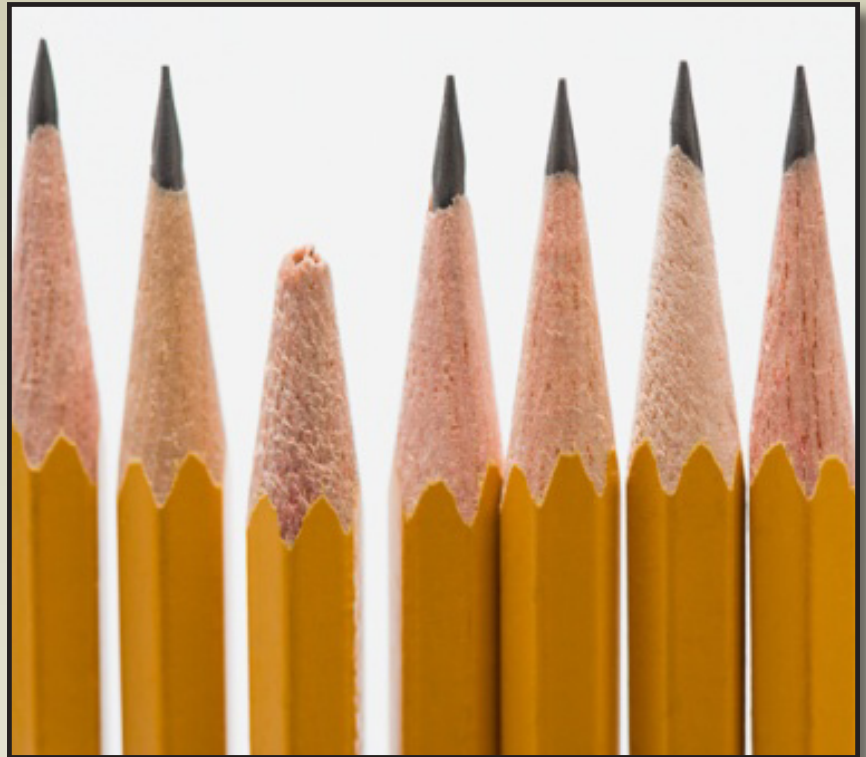
great pains to avoid framing any of its recommendations for raising standards in national terms:

- It recommended that “schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations, for academic performance.”
- It urged states and districts to adopt standardized testing at key transition points, but emphasized that those tests “should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests.”
- It challenged publishers to upgrade textbooks to include more rigorous content and states and districts to better evaluate instructional materials before adoption.
- It stated that “grades should be indicators of academic achievement so they can be relied on as evidence of a student’s readiness for further study.”

In fact, national leaders were left with little or no role to play in the effort to raise academic expectations. But it soon became clear that without some effort to ensure rigorous standards nationwide, the results would be hugely erratic. Riding the crest of enthusiasm for education reform initiated by *A Nation at Risk*, two successive presidents advocated voluntary national standards and tests—to no avail.

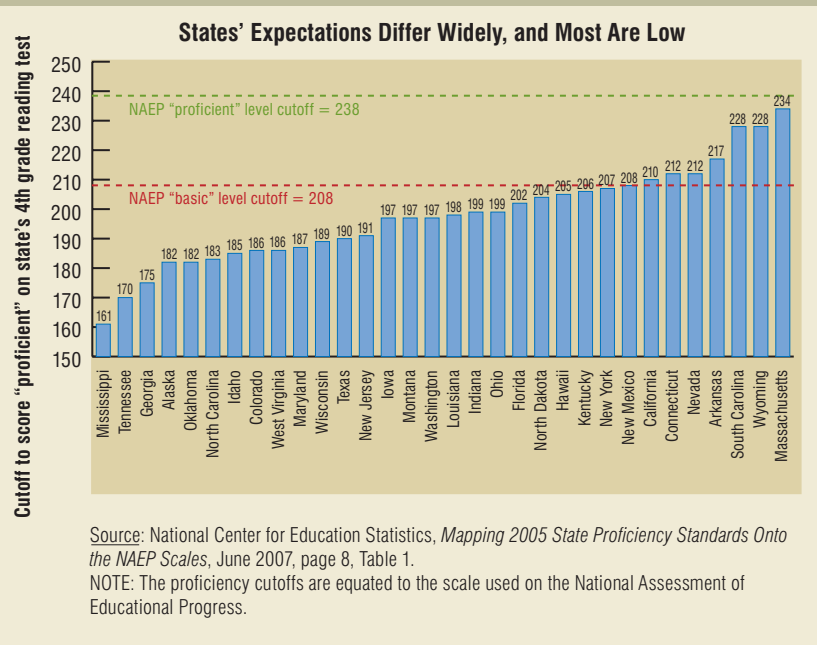
Two years after convening a major “education summit” in 1989, President Bush proposed the “AMERICA 2000” Act, calling for, among other things, voluntary “American Achievement Tests” pegged to world-class standards in five core subjects in grades 4, 8, and 12. But a coalition of several dozen education associations, civil rights groups, and researchers signed a statement urging the president and Congress not to “stampede” toward national tests that many students might fail. Liberal legislators proposed a controversial set of “opportunity to learn standards.” And conservatives expressed fear that national tests—even voluntary ones—would result in too much federal intrusion into curriculum. The bill was defeated in Congress.

In January 1992, a Congressionally-formed National Council on Education Standards and Testing once again urged the adoption of national standards and a national system of assessments. President Clinton, who had chaired the 1989 education summit, took up the cause, working with Congress to establish a National Education Standards and Improvement Council (NESIC) to certify national standards in various subjects. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Education had begun giving grants to national organizations to draft voluntary standards in a range of subjects.



But after Republicans gained control of Congress in 1994, conservatives expressed dissatisfaction with the federal role in education, and the Council’s members were never appointed. At the same time, the voluntary standards under development in some subjects proved controversial; the U.S. Senate even passed a resolution condemning a set of draft history standards by a vote of 99-1. The Clinton administration tried one more time, proposing voluntary national assessments in grades 4 and 8 based on the NAEP tests, but that plan also failed to get off the ground.

Until very recently, those false starts had frightened others away from proposing anything remotely resembling national standards, and the federal No Child Left Behind Act offered states little direction in deciding how well students should perform on tests of



Our lack of agreement on standards also makes it impossible to adopt the kind of focused and rigorous textbooks *A Nation at Risk* recommended. Last month, the National Mathematics Advisory Panel complained that American math textbooks are excessively long—often 700 to 1,000 pages—cramming between their covers far too much material for teachers to cover over the course of the year. Why? “Representatives of several publishing companies who testified before the Panel indicated that one substantial contributor to the length of the books was the demand of meeting varying state standards for what should be taught in each grade.”⁴¹

math and reading. But it has since become increasingly apparent that American students and their parents are incredibly ill-served by the current patchwork of state and local standards and tests unanchored to *any* common yardstick.

Last year alone, two separate, major research studies found that states have established wildly different expectations for passing state tests in reading and math.³⁸ In most cases states have set cutoff scores well below NAEP’s proficient level and in many cases even below the most basic level. For example, out of 32 states examined in one study, no state had set performance benchmarks for 4th grade reading high enough to meet the proficient level on NAEP, and 24 had set them so low they did not reach *even the most basic level*.³⁹ Both studies found that standards were much easier in 4th grade than 8th grade, setting up unprepared students to struggle or fail at the secondary level.⁴⁰

As a result, parents have no way of knowing how well their students are performing compared with students in other states or across the nation as a whole—let alone with students in other countries. And because most tests are not benchmarked to measure the skills students need to succeed in college and careers, students and their parents have little idea whether they are being adequately prepared for the real-life challenges they will face after high school.

The Panel recommended that states and districts strive for greater agreement on topics to be covered in each grade, and urged textbook publishers to focus on the topics that states agree should be taught in specific grades. While educationally sound, such a recommendation is naïve. There simply is no way a substantial number of states can agree on standards without vigorous national leadership to guide the way, either through voluntary national standards or a nationally directed program to help states work together to accomplish that goal.



This would not require federalizing education; instead it would leverage national leadership—including the governors—to create benchmarks for the states to align their standards to.

Currently, fourteen states are collaborating to develop common test items for Algebra II. But that is the exception that proves the rule: After 25 years of striving for higher academic expectations, a third of the states are working together on one course in one subject area and only at the high school level. That fact does not offer much hope that states can spontaneously come together and adopt common standards in multiple subjects across K-12 any time in the near future.

Meanwhile, recent opinion polls suggest that the general public is hungry for national standards and assessments. A survey conducted last year found that nearly three-quarters of American adults (73 percent) think there should be a single national standard and a single national test for all students rather than different standards and tests in different states.⁴² Yet so far this year, no presidential candidate has even broached the topic, let alone issued a detailed plan for finally accomplishing this critical goal.

Breaking the Paralysis

After 25 years, time is running out on America's opportunity to enact a robust national education reform agenda. We cannot afford to welcome another 90 million 1st graders into our nation's public schools without delivering on the promise of providing them with a world-class education. We cannot afford to graduate millions of high school seniors who lack basic skills in reading and math that they should have learned in middle school. We especially cannot afford to continue slipping farther and farther behind the other nations of the world. Our students deserve better, and our nation's economic security is at greater risk now than ever before.



America's educational paralysis is directly attributable to the biggest flaw in *A Nation at Risk*—the Commission's naïve optimism that fanfare for

improving education would pave the way for states and local school systems to enact bold reforms. In some cases, state and local leaders tried to take action, but they could not overcome the barriers imposed by complacency on the one hand and powerful interest groups on the other. As longtime education advocate Chester Finn observed on the 20th anniversary of the report, "After the Excellence Commission folded its tent, there was no organized force to do battle on its behalf. Yet plenty of organized forces stood ready to oppose such challenges."

The missing ingredient is not more educational ideas or research or reports or commissions. We have enough common-sense

ideas, backed by decades of research, to significantly improve American schools. The missing ingredient isn't even *educational* at all. It's *political*. While *A Nation at Risk* emphasized the responsibility of state and local officials to operate schools and called on them to enact its recommendations, the report did—briefly—mention the need for something more:

The Federal Government has *the primary responsibility* to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that interest. It must provide the national leadership to ensure that the Nation's public and private resources are marshaled to address the issues discussed in this report.

If the 25 years since *A Nation at Risk* have made one thing clear, it is this: Without that kind of vigorous national leadership to improve education, states and local school systems simply cannot overcome the obstacles to making the big changes necessary to significantly improve our nation's K-12 schools.

The solution is not to “federalize” American education. In fact, no one has ever seriously suggested that. But the education we provide our students and the skills they graduate with is an economic security issue of the first order, and as such it deserves serious and sustained national attention. Last year, the OECD issued a report on the U.S. economy that pegged our languishing educational outcomes as a major barrier to economic development: “A country’s ability to compete in an ever more integrated world economy depends crucially on a highly educated workforce. However, with many countries making more progress in this respect, the United States has lost its leading position.”⁴³

To protect our national interests and ensure our collective future, America’s leadership must find a better balance between the word “United” and the word “States” when it comes to American education—one that empowers the federal government to energize and assist the states. That simply cannot and will not happen without bold leadership from the President of the United States.

Nine months from now a new president-elect will stand in front of the U.S. Capitol Building to take the oath of office. The new president must leverage the bully pulpit to seize the nation’s attention and very frankly communicate the urgent need for educational improvement. He or she must rally broad support for bold reforms and buttress our collective political will to raise standards, expand learning time, and recruit top talent to teaching. He or she must work with Congress and the governors to strike a better balance between local control and national action. He or she must lend frequent voice to the concerns raised by *A Nation at Risk*—an indictment that is just as valid today, and even more pressing. And he or she must take direct action whenever necessary.



The nation’s governors must step up and show greater leadership, too. In December, the National Governors Association released a ringing endorsement for teacher performance pay, asserting that the case for taking a different approach to teacher compensation is “overwhelming.” The report concluded by urging governors to act: “The will to enact effective pay reforms is the most important factor. With it, any

governor can be a catalyst for better teaching by paying for contribution.”⁴⁴ Yet only a handful of governors even mentioned the issue in their 2008 state-of-the-state speeches.⁴⁵

Lacking that kind of farsighted leadership, we can easily predict how much progress the nation will make on this agenda over the next 25 years. Few students will attend school in states with

world-class standards and expectations, and parents will remain in the dark about how little students are actually learning. An additional state or two might finally decide to offer incentive grants for schools to expand learning time. A few more states and districts might decide to recruit and retain top talent by giving teachers the same opportunities for advancement and better pay that other professionals enjoy. And the price for such glacial progress will be paid by another 90 million American students as our nation slips even farther behind the rest of the world academically and economically.

It doesn’t have to be that way. The American public supports education reform, and there is nothing that cannot be accomplished with strong national leadership. In the words of *A Nation at Risk*, “America Can Do It”—but *only* if its next president rallies the nation at long last to meet this challenge. Because that will take time and energy, he or she must begin that process well before taking office in January and even before winning the election in November. The time to begin is now. There is not one moment to waste. ■

Report Card: Progress Enacting Selected Reforms Recommended by *A Nation at Risk*

Recommendation	Progress	Grade
CONTENT		
<p>“High school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their 4 years of high school: (a) 4 years of English; (b) 3 years of mathematics; (c) 3 years of science; (d) 3 years of social studies”</p> <p>“The curriculum in the crucial eight grades leading to the high school years should be specifically designed to provide a sound base for study in those and later years in such areas as English language development and writing, computational and problem solving skills, science, social studies [...]”</p>	<p>Within a few years of <i>A Nation at Risk</i>’s release, most states had raised graduation standards.</p> <p>Two recent studies found that expectations on state tests of reading and math are much lower in elementary grades than in secondary grades, and many middle school students still enter high school unprepared for rigorous coursework.</p>	<p>A</p> <p>F</p>
STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS		
<p>“Grades should be indicators of academic achievement so they can be relied on as evidence of a student’s readiness for further study.”</p> <p>“Standardized tests of achievement (not to be confused with aptitude tests) should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work. [...] The tests should be administered as part of a nationwide (but not Federal) system of State and local standardized tests.”</p>	<p>Average high school grades have risen significantly while 12th grade achievement has declined in several subjects.</p> <p>NCLB mandated that states administer tests in grades 3-8 and once during high school. But most current high school tests fall far short of measuring readiness for college or work. And there is nothing akin to a nationwide system of tests; in fact, the patchwork of random tests and expectations make it difficult to gauge whether students are actually learning or how they compare with those in other states, nationally, or internationally.</p>	<p>F</p> <p>C</p>
TIME		
<p>“School districts and State legislatures should strongly consider 7-hour school days, as well as a 200- to 220-day school year.”</p>	<p>No state has adopted even a 200-day minimum school year. Only one state provides incentive funds to multiple districts and schools to significantly expand learning time. Overall, the number of instructional hours in the week has increased, but by only a fraction of the amount recommended by <i>A Nation at Risk</i>.</p>	<p>F</p>
TEACHING		
<p>“Salaries for the teaching profession should be increased and should be professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based. [...] Develop career ladders for teachers that distinguish among the beginning instructor, the experienced teacher, and the master teacher. [...] Master teachers should be involved in designing teacher preparation programs and in supervising teachers during their probationary years.”</p>	<p>Salaries have increased, but not enough to keep up with competing professions such as nursing. Only a handful of states have adopted performance pay initiatives or career ladders that provide additional compensation based on more than college credentials and experience. At the district level, there has been very little progress making pay more market-sensitive and performance-based.</p>	<p>F</p>

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