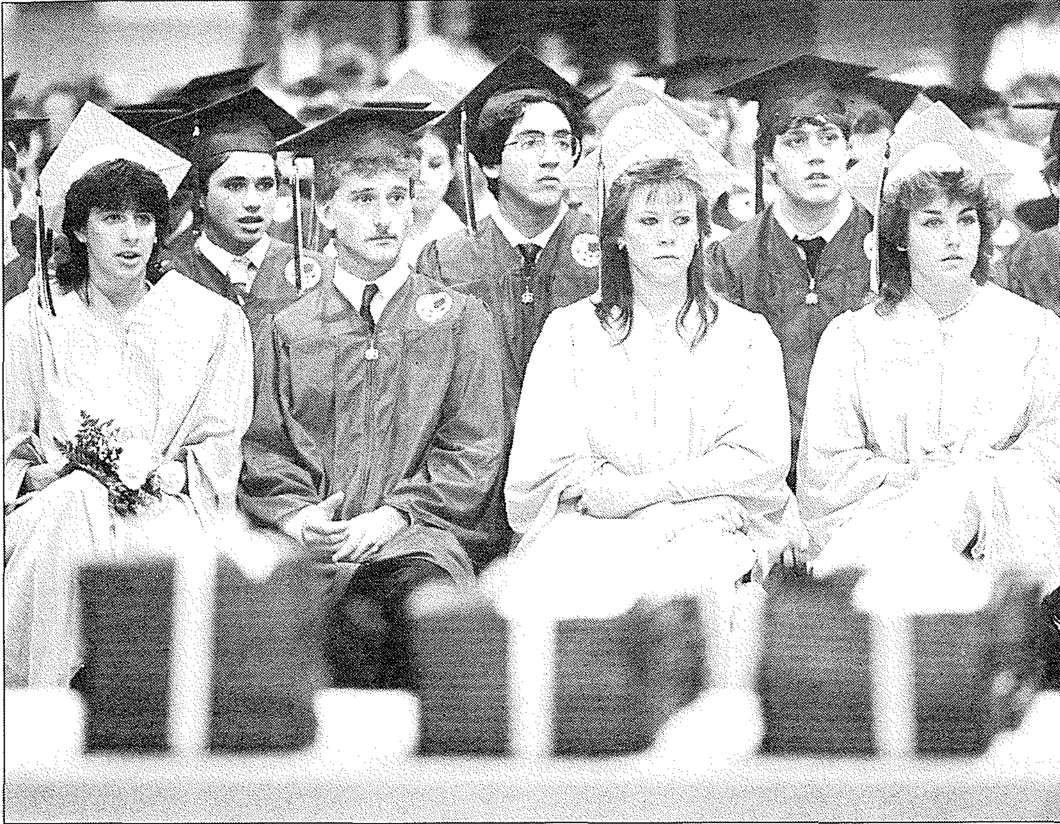

Why celebrate? Members of the high school class of '91 spent only 13 percent of their waking hours in a classroom, and test scores showed that it was not "quality time."

Why the Schools Still Don't Work

When the kids in the high school class of '91 started kindergarten more than a decade ago, Jimmy Carter was in the White House and back-to-basics advocates were clamoring for school reform. When they were in fourth grade, the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity." When they were sophomores, the nation elected "the education president." Yet little changed. As things now stand, there is not much reason to hope that the class of '03, entering kindergarten this fall, will emerge any better educated. Here, Chester E. Finn, Jr., explains why the excellence movement of the 1980s fell short, and Patrick Welsh offers a teacher's view of the schools' problems—and a major reform that he says won't cost a dime.

THE HO HUM REVOLUTION

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

"Christine borrows $850 for one year from the Friendly Finance Company. If she pays 12% simple interest on the loan, what will be the total amount that Christine repays?"

That is not the sort of question that ought to stump many people. Yet according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in 1988 only *six percent* of the nation's 11th graders were able to solve mathematical problems at this moderate level of difficulty. Six out of 100. After more than a decade of efforts to reform the nation's schools, and eight years after the National Commission on Excellence in Education's famous alarm, *A Nation at Risk*, it would be nice to be able to take up the time-honored theme of "crisis and renewal." But as the insoluble question posed by the case of the Friendly Finance Company suggests, there has not yet been much of a renewal.

That is not because we have ignored our shortcomings. During the last decade, national leaders such as Secretary of Education William J. Bennett took to the bully pulpit to rouse the public. Americans were bombarded by alarming news stories and reports of gloomy studies on the nation's front pages and TV news broadcasts. An "excellence movement" was born, and it inspired many reform efforts around the country. Governors and legislators began to shake off the old taboo against "tampering" with the schools, pushing a variety of reforms long resisted by many education professionals. Dozens of communities launched school innovations. But it wasn't enough. The system's vital signs, as measured by test scores and other indicators, remained flat. Things got no worse, but they didn't get better, either. Before venturing any new therapies, then, it would be prudent to take a full case history of the patient.

Among the therapies tried during the 1980s, for example, was more money, a truth that many professionals resist. In school-year 1979–80, ending a few weeks before Ronald Reagan first won his party's nomination for the presidency, the average expenditure per pupil in American public schools was $2,491. Ten years later, during the first complete school year of the Bush administration, the average outlay per student was $5,284—or about $121,000 per classroom. That represents a 111 percent rise in current dollars, or, in constant (1988–89) dollars, a hefty 28.7 percent expansion. This came on the heels of real increases of 26.8 percent in the 1970s and 57.7 percent in the 1960s.

These increases were not uniform, to be sure—and a bit of the per pupil expenditure rise can be ascribed to a slight (3.3 percent) shrinkage in public school enrollments. Illinois boosted its spending for public education by just 49 percent between 1980 and 1989, not quite keeping pace with inflation, while Georgia expanded its school outlays by 166 percent. Localities were subject to even greater variation. For the nation as a whole, though, the 29 percent real dollar figure is accurate. Perhaps it was not enough. Conceivably it was too much. I know nobody, however,

who claims that the *output* of American public education rose by anything approaching 29 percent during the 1980s.

Most of the new money, of course, went into salaries of school employees, always the largest single item in education budgets. The salaries of public school teachers have been rising—another fact that many in the profession tend not to mention. When the 1980s opened, the typical U.S. public school teacher was paid $15,970; when the decade closed, $31,278. In few other fields did earnings double during this period. (The growth in real dollars was a significant 27 percent.) Again, one may feel that the rise was inadequate. Certainly it was unevenly spread around the map. But one cannot, it seems to me, credibly assert that the primary explanation for the weak results posted by the reforms of the 1980s is fiscal parsimony, budgetary retrenchment, or neglect of teachers. We pumped more money into education than ever before.

The 1980s also saw a dramatic shift in the apportionment of assignments between Washington and the states. Although the federal government plays a small and mostly peripheral role in American education, it had catalyzed many of the changes of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Indeed, within the field the view was widely held that states and localities were responsible for operating the basic system but that Washington should instigate and pay for innovations and experiments. This changed dramatically in the 1980s. While the Excellence Commission was unmistakably a creature of the federal government, in its diagnosis and recommendations it barely alluded to Washington. This distinction is crucial for purposes of understanding the reform efforts that followed (and in some cases anticipated) *A Nation at Risk.* The old assumptions were thoroughly entangled with the goals of improved access to schooling and greater equality that had propelled education reform for so long. Great progress had been made toward meeting these goals—today just about everybody can have just about as much education as they want. (For example, more than half of U.S. high school graduates go on to college, an astounding proportion by international standards.) It was not unimaginable that a major shift in priorities would be accompanied by different roles for the major actors.

State leaders had reasons of their own to take up the challenge. Public anxiety about education quality was visible by 1983 in one poll and survey after another. "By 1981, when I ran for governor, disillusionment with the schools was widespread," former New Jersey Governor (1981–89) Tom Kean recalls.

By the 1980s, education was the largest single item in the budget of every state government, a sponge soaking up vast sums of local revenue as well. By 1986–7, elementary-secondary education accounted for a quarter of all state and local spending. (Higher education absorbed an additional 9 percent.) It was reasonable to ask whether sufficient return was being earned on this immense public investment. Certainly it was *unreasonable* to forswear involvement in decisions about its uses.

Scholars will forever debate how strong the tie between the quality of schooling and the vitality of the economy really is, but Americans take the idea seriously. "Never," Kean wrote in 1988, "has the link between

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education and the economy been clearer or more compelling."

Better education held out the possibility not just of remedying shortcomings but also of gaining advantage, and not only for the whole country but perhaps even for one's region or state. This opportunity was first grasped by civic and business leaders in the Southeast. The Carolinas, Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas, and even Mississippi began to echo with talk of an economic renaissance built on improved education. Living in Nashville in the early 1980s, I could not count the number of times I heard Governor (now U.S. Secretary of Education) Lamar Alexander argue for education reform by declaring, "Better schools mean better jobs for Tennesseans, young and old."

Back to basics: Joe Clark, a high school principal in Paterson, New Jersey, won national attention with his get-tough approach. But his students' academic achievement did not greatly improve.

From the education profession, too, flowed a stream of books, studies, and reports by such well-regarded authors as Theodore Sizer, John Goodlad, Mortimer Adler, and Ernest Boyer. Though their explanations and recommendations varied, none disputed the basic message of the Excellence Commission: American youngsters were leaving school with insufficient skills and meager knowledge, the country was weakened by this situation, and setting matters right was going to require a number of basic alterations in long-established ideas and practices.

Meanwhile, the bleak data kept piling up. The annual release of college admissions test scores became a major media event—and the news was not getting brighter. Every two years, the federally sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress added to the gloom by reporting elementary and secondary achievement scores. And so, the excellence movement of the 1980s gathered strength.

As it grew, it revealed several basic characteristics. Unlike school reformers of the past, those of the 1980s were not interested in more money and resources as ends in themselves but as means to a larger end, stronger cognitive learning. As a result, they were remarkably open-minded about means, willing to try almost anything that might work.

The movement was also state-centered. Dozens of local educators eventually embraced the goals of the excellence movement, and by decade's end some notable school reforms had been launched in communities as far-flung as Chicago, San Diego,

Miami, and Chelsea, Massachusetts. Yet historians will view the 1980s as a period in which American education became markedly less local in its policy direction and governance. The states had always held in reserve the authority to direct education; yet most had been cautious, bureaucratic, and incrementalist, leaving bold ideas and striking initiatives to the federal government and innovation-prone municipalities. Now the states came to the fore, prodding, pulling, tempting, pleading, and sometimes simply commanding local schools, teachers, principals, administrators, and children to change their ways.

A structural change at least as momentous was the shift of leadership and influence from the education profession and its specialized governance structures—the state and local school boards and committees, with their superintendents and other credentialed executives—to the laity, especially to elected political leaders. Believing that war is too important to be left solely to soldiers, Americans have ensured civilian control of the military. During the 1980s, the civilians sought control of the schools. It was clear that the traditional managers of the system had permitted mediocrity to spread. So long as they were insulated from political influence, they would likely continue marching to their own drummers—and mediocrity would persist as well.

One tactic for breaking that pattern was to strip away the insulation and make the system more directly subject to political guidance and public accountability. And as governors, legislators, and mayors started to delve into policy domains heretofore entrusted to experts, school boards, and other specialized bodies, they found that the idea that politicians ought not meddle with schools was not a sacred principle. No lightning bolts struck them down.

Governors (and, in some communities, mayors) evolved into *de facto* school superintendents, and state legislatures behaved like giant boards of education. Though they still did not select principals or hire teachers, manage schools, or award diplomas, they injected themselves into matters of curriculum and school organization, the testing of students and teachers, the criteria by which school employees are compensated, and much more.

The excellence movement produced 10 classic types of school reform. To my knowledge, no jurisdiction attempted all of these, but I mention none that was not actually tried somewhere.

1. *Standards for students.* Inasmuch as boosting student learning was the supreme goal of reformers, it is no surprise that some sought the straightest path to that destination: explicitly requiring boys and girls to meet higher achievement norms. This was also the strategy with the most precedent, if one recalls the "minimum competency exams" adopted in the 1970s by many states.

Achievement tests that youngsters must pass as a condition for receiving their diplomas remained one popular version of this strategy. Another—echoing the Excellence Commission—was to enlarge the number of academic courses that high school students had to take before graduating. All but five states boosted their graduation requirements between 1980 and 1990. Still another approach was the construction of "promotional gates" imposing performance standards as a precondition for moving to the next grade level. Or something students prized was made to hinge upon meeting a certain standard. Thus several states and localities adopted "no pass, no play" rules, under which students could play on school athletic teams (and, sometimes, participate in other activities) only by maintaining a certain grade point average or not failing any courses. To reduce

the drop-out rate some states withheld driver's licenses from youngsters leaving school before turning 18.

2. *Standards for teachers.* Untalented and ill-prepared teachers were widely and plausibly deemed a barrier to educational excellence. If student standards could be raised via mandatory examinations, why not fashion a similar approach for their instructors? And so, where just 10 states had required teachers to take competency tests in 1980, by decade's end 44 of them obliged new teachers to pass written exams before being certified.

There was little resistance, save sometimes by colleges of education, to the idea, at least so long as the passing mark was not too high. The explosive issue was forcing veteran instructors to take a test—or to meet any other new standard. State teacher unions were adamantly opposed. There was no way they could go along with jeopardizing the tenured jobs that most of their members held. Besides, they and others asked, how much of what you really want to know about a teacher's skills can be determined by a paper-and-pencil exam? In the end, just three states (Georgia, Arkansas, Texas) obliged all teachers to take a written test. And this was accompanied by such acrimony—Texas governor Mark White lost his 1986 re-election bid in no small part because of furious opposition to his innovative teacher testing program—so many chances to retake the test and, finally, by passing scores pegged to such humble levels of actual attainment, that it is unlikely that this form of standard-setting will be widely used in the near future.

Observing the political cost of testing classroom veterans, other states and localities chose instead to adopt more complex evaluations that teachers may undergo en route to higher levels of rank, status, and pay. All teacher appraisal schemes are fraught with controversy, at least among educators, but policymakers have been able to prevail with the voluntary kind so long as they lead not to grief for those who fail but only to benefits for those who pass.

3. *Changes in teacher recruitment, education, and licensure.* One enduring bit of folk wisdom about American education is that courses given by teacher education programs are near-worthless and consume so much of future teachers' college schedules that they leave little time for mastering the subjects they will one day be teaching. Few institutions are so widely despised as the teachers' college. "The willingness to endure four years in a typical school of education," asserts Boston University President John Silber, "often constitutes an effective negative intelligence test."

Reform strategies under this heading can be sorted into four types. First, efforts to attract able people, especially minority group members, into the teaching profession by creating high status programs, special scholarships, forgivable loans, and other inducements and concessions—all in addition to the general teacher salary escalation of the decade.

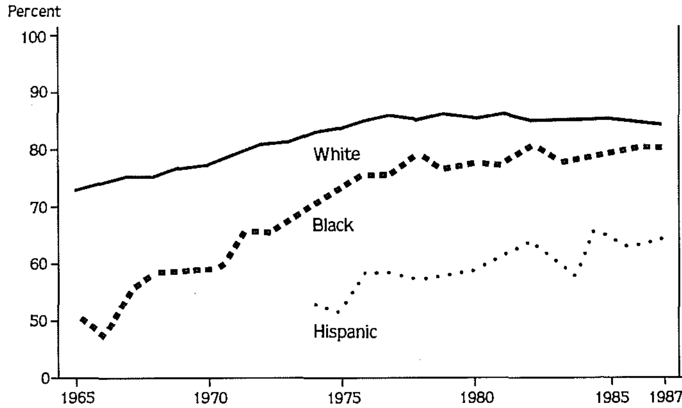
Second, efforts to lift the intellectual standards of teacher education programs by raising entrance (or graduation) criteria or by mandating changes in their curricula and practices.

Third, efforts to beef up the subject matter knowledge of future teachers by boosting liberal arts requirements or—an initiative taken by one group of institutions—shifting all "professional" courses to the graduate level, leaving the undergraduate years to the arts and sciences. (That makes teachers look more like other professionals by equipping them all with graduate degrees, but it also raises the cost of becoming a teacher.)

Fourth, and boldest, 48 states have opened alternate paths into teaching, such

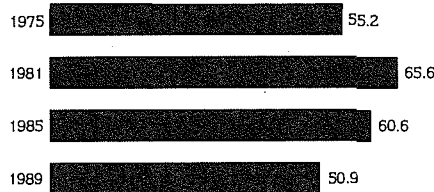
THE (SOMEWHAT) GOOD NEWS...

Finishing High School
(25- to 29-year-olds with at least 12 years of school)

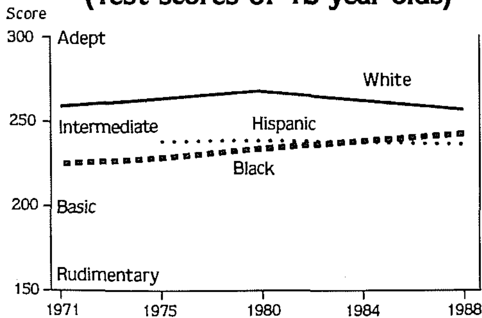


If the quality of U.S. education has not increased, at least the quantity has. As the chart above shows, more Americans (86 percent) complete high school than ever before. Surveys also show (at right) a decline in illegal drug use among students. And while overall reading test scores have remained flat (below), there has been a very slight improvement among minority students.

Getting Away From Drugs
(High School Seniors Using Illegal Drugs)



Learning to Read
(Test scores of 13-year-olds)

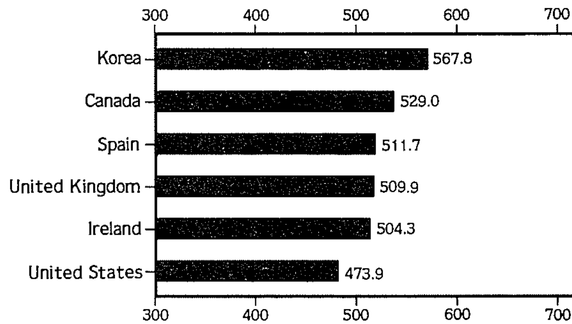


Source: *The Condition of Education 1990, Vol. 1, Elementary and Secondary Education*, published by the National Center for Education Statistics, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

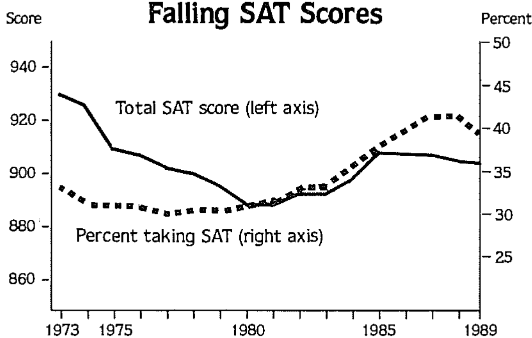
THE BAD NEWS

Not Measuring Up Internationally (Math scores of 13-year-olds)

In international comparisons of academic achievement, American students are invariably near the bottom.

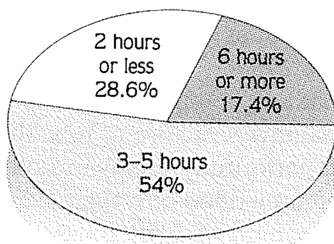


Falling SAT Scores

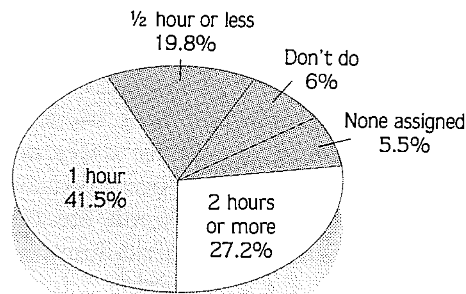


Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of the college-bound have dropped. Meanwhile, more and more students are taking the test. (The top score possible: 1,600.)

Too Much TV (Daily Viewing Time of 8th-graders)



Too Little Homework (Daily Homework Done by 8th-Graders)



Virtually all American children devote more time to television than to homework. The average eighth-grader spends 21 hours in front of the Idiot Box every week and perhaps five hours doing homework. Studies suggest that American youngsters do much less homework than their peers overseas.

that it is no longer essential for all prospective instructors to complete a university-based pre-service teacher training program. Such programs have particular appeal for mid-career people with liberal arts degrees who during their college days had not planned to become teachers.

4. *Curriculum change.* No aspect of American education is in greater disarray, yet no decision about education is more basic than what the children will study. If they are not learning enough history or geography, for example, why not overhaul the social studies curriculum to pay greater heed to those fields? This approach to education reform had many advocates during the 1980s, conspicuously including then-Education Secretary William Bennett and E. D. Hirsch, author of the best-selling book, *Cultural Literacy* (1987). They had logic and common sense on their side. Dry as it sounds, revising the curriculum means rethinking exactly what students should learn. When harmonized with textbook selections, teacher preparation, and student testing, this may well be the soundest approach to education reform. It is now being tried in a number of localities and states, with particular finesse in California, where Bill Honig, the dynamic state superintendent of public instruction, has chosen it as his primary reform strategy.

Curriculum revision may, however, also be the approach least suited to mandates by lay policymakers. It is complex, tedious, and technical. And few education issues generate greater political friction. Every tension within the polity, every argument about the culture, and every division in the population descends upon the operating room whenever the curriculum undergoes surgery. So do innumerable fads and fears. The textbook guidelines that Honig inherited in California, for example, banned pictures of children eating ice cream cones, a prohibition inserted at the behest of nutrition advocacy groups. The businessman or legislator seized by a simple notion—"children in this state should learn more geography" (or science, literature, or whatever)—can scarcely imagine the fracas that will erupt as people seek to put flesh on the bones of his idea. Nor can he imagine how resented he will be by an education profession that dislikes lay "meddling" in curricular matters.

5. *Testing and assessment.* Testing comes under the broad heading of "accountability" mechanisms: ways of furnishing parents, policymakers, and educators with accurate information about the efficacy of their efforts. The American education system has an aversion to clear consumer information about results and outcomes; it is not too much to say that it has been engaged in a massive cover-up. While there is a surfeit of data about the schools, very little of it measures *results.* And data that are relevant nearly always suffer from two basic weaknesses. Either they report results only for the country as a whole—as the highly publicized National Assessment of Educational Progress tests have done (save a recent small experiment)—or they report results for youngsters in individual states and localities in ways that make it impossible to compare them with other jurisdictions, with national standards, or with international competitors. This is true even of the otherwise laudable assessment systems created by California, Connecticut, and several other states during the 1980s.

As a rule, it is impossible for parents to get a meaningful picture of how their children are performing relative to other children, not to mention how their local school is doing compared with other schools in the community, with state or national goals, or even with its own past performance. Indeed, in 1987, a West Virginia physician named John J. Cannell made the amazing

discovery that the six commercially prepared tests widely used in the nation's elementary schools, among them the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Metropolitan Achievement Test, were structured in such a way that no state's scores appeared to be below average! Ninety percent of local school districts and 70 percent of students tested, Cannell found in a study that has since been confirmed in its essentials, were told that they were performing above the national average.

6. *Incentives and Rewards.* Better data on results are not sufficient. People also have to be motivated. Accordingly, rewards for success—prizes, bonuses, or awards for students, teachers, principals, and entire schools—and interventions in response to failure proliferated during the 1980s. But with its entrenched ethos of equity and marked distaste for comparisons, the education system turns skittish when individuals or schools are singled out, even for rewards. Far greater anxiety is roused when unpleasant actions are triggered by failure. Hence the battle lines practically drew themselves during the 1980s as officials in several jurisdictions proposed "education bankruptcy" procedures empowering the state to intervene in the management of local school systems that produce poor results. Nine states have put such laws on their books, usually after fierce legislative tussles. In 1988, in the most dramatic exercise of this form of accountability, the state of New Jersey dismissed the Jersey City school board and superintendent and stepped in temporarily to manage that troubled urban system. We cannot be certain that state education agencies, themselves often sluggish and bureaucratized, will do a better job—though in situations like that in Jersey City it is hard to imagine them doing worse. The point, rather, is that local educators (and board members) now understand that they are no longer accountable only to

Resistance to reforms like competence tests cost teachers and their unions public respect.

themselves and their Creator.

7. *Business and university partnerships.* In 1988, the U.S. Department of Education tallied 140,000 school-business partnership projects in operation, typically consisting of corporations donating or loaning resources, both human and material, to the schools. As businessmen came to see more clearly by decade's end that their generosity induced gratitude but little real improvement in student learning, some of them inclined toward more direct action in the realm of politics and policy—and we also began to spot signs of a backlash among educators who welcomed corporate largesse but not "interference."

8. *School restructuring.* By 1990, the term "restructuring" was as widely (and variously) used as "excellence" had been a few years earlier. It came in a hundred varieties: school-based management, teacher empowerment, learner-centered pedagogy, and so on. All, however, entail reallocating roles and responsibilities within individual schools and systems. The theoretical foundation of school restructuring (insofar as something this amorphous can be said to have one) closely resembles principles advocated by corporate management specialists. Typical strategies include devolution to the building level of decisions about resource allocation, scheduling, and other matters, and more collegial relationships among staff members.

Educational "perestroika" is notable because it has been the reform favored by change-minded educators themselves, the only one indigenous to their profession (even if key elements were borrowed from other fields), and the one entailing the least lay initiative and leadership.

9. *Making More Schools "Effective."* Even before the excellence movement gained momentum, scholars such as Ronald Edmonds, Michael Rutter, Marshall Smith, and Stewart Purkey had sought to answer the question of why some schools are more successful than others at imparting cognitive skills and knowledge to their students. While they found no patented formulas, they did spotlight some features commonly encountered in strong schools. These include a clear sense of institutional mission that is shared by teachers and principal; high expectations for all students; a well-developed team spirit in the school; a safe and orderly atmosphere congenial to learning; and adroit leadership of the instructional process, ordinarily by a principal who views himself as an educational executive rather than a building manager.

The research was solid and persuasive, at least with regard to elementary schools. It hewed to experience as well as common sense. And it provided a tempting agenda for reformers. There was only one big problem: The attributes that distinguish the very best schools tend to be home-grown, idiosyncratic, defiant of bureaucracy, and generally immune to efforts to mandate them into existence. Laws and regulations enacted far away cannot substitute for—nor themselves create—the commitment and shared values that must be embodied in the soul of the school itself. Nor can they guarantee the presence of extraordinary people in every school. If the principal is weak, if teachers work in virtual isolation from one another, if there is fundamental disagreement among the professional staff over goals and expectations, and if teachers and students stumble over each other racing for the door at 2:45 every afternoon, then that school is not likely to become more effective merely because state or local officials order it to change.

Yet tailoring such reforms to thousands of individual situations is too daunting an undertaking for even the most intrepid public officials. The result was a series of programs designed to put certain pieces of the "effective schools" research into com-

IS MEDIOCRITY THE AMERICAN WAY?

In Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning *(1991), cultural historian Jacques Barzun questions whether Americans are truly committed to the pursuit of excellence.*

Forget Education. Education is a result, a slow growth, and hard to judge. Let us talk rather about Teaching and Learning, a joint activity that can be provided for, though as a nation we have lost the knack of it. The blame falls on the public schools . . . but they deserve only half the blame. The other half belongs to the people at large, *us*—our attitudes, our choices, our thought-clichés.

Take one familiar fact: everybody keeps calling for Excellence—excellence not just in schooling, throughout society. But as soon as somebody or something stands out as Excellent, the other shout goes up: "Elitism!" And whatever produced that thing, whoever praises that result, is promptly put down. "Standing out" is undemocratic . . . .

Why should children make an effort to shine in school when shining is a handicap? Shining, that is, in school*work*. In athletics, it's another story. We do not cheer the duffers; there is no cry of elitism near the playing field. We pay large sums to get the best and to see that it is duly praised. Never mind what the school superintendent is like, we need a first-class coach and a good band. The people who insist on all this and supervise it very efficiently are those ultimately in charge of the schools, the school-boards, and behind them are the general public who want to enjoy exciting games and have their town excel . . . .

Given the public's muddled feelings about brainwork (which is what "excellence" refers to) and the parental indifference up to now about what their children are being taught, the school has a double fight on its hands: against ignorance inside the walls and against cultural prejudice outside, the prejudice lying so deep that those who harbor it do not even know they do. It none the less tells the young what is really important. The result for them is that learning, homework, teachers, tests, grades, standards, promotion form a great maze—mostly make-believe—that they have to stumble through in order to be let go at last and, thanks to a piece of paper, get a job.

mon practice. One example is the proliferation of "principals' academies" and "leadership institutes" designed to turn school principals into dynamic executives, in part by acquainting them with pertinent research findings. This is a sound plan so far as it goes. But there are about 83,000 public- (and 27,000 private-) school principals in the country, many of them rather set in their ways. And even when such projects have an immediate effect on participants, in terms of overall school effectiveness it is like supplying a single ingredient in a complex recipe. The frustration for reformers trying to turn effective schools research into policy and practice is that the recipe it yields is the sort that starts by saying, "First, you engage the services of a great chef, and then you renovate your kitchen." What policymakers want is something more like a muffin mix.

10. *Parent choice.* Empowering parents to select their child's school is an education improvement strategy in three ways: first, because proponents believe that youngsters learn more when enrolled in schools that they want to attend and that parents have some stake in; second, because we assume that individuals given the opportunity will flee bad learning environments and gravitate to better ones; and, third, because accountability through the "marketplace" is believed to have a salubrious effect on schools themselves. Good schools are rewarded with more students, esteem, and resources, while unpopular schools have potent incentives to change so as to attract more customers.

Counterarguments have been made to each of these claims, but during the 1980s the provision of choice within public education emerged as a significant school re-

School's out for summer! And kids aren't the only ones who rejoice. Extending the school year is an obvious way to increase learning, but parents have rebelled against such reforms.

form strategy. It appealed to some liberals because it offered poor and minority youngsters a route out of inferior, racially homogeneous inner-city schools—and perhaps a roundabout means of improving those schools as well. Many conservatives were drawn to its marketplace features and to its affirmation of parental primacy. Elected officials liked it because it was bold and sweeping, hugely popular (at least in concept) with the public, and able to be inaugurated with the stroke of a pen. A number of scholars found ample basis in research for making schools more responsive to their customers. And some practitioners welcomed this approach, too, both as a means of quality improvement and because it is compatible with—some would say inseparable from—school restructuring. They reasoned that as a decentralized, building-managed education system begins to supply more varied and distinctive offerings, it is only right that youngsters and schools should be matched on the basis of their individual strengths and preferences.

By 1990, nine states had enacted laws providing, in effect, that children could attend public school anywhere in the state. In addition, magnet-school programs flourished in many cities and some suburbs. "Schools within schools" were appearing, as were "alternative" schools of many kinds. Some communities turned all of their schools into schools-of-choice. Academic specialty schools were operating, too, sometimes on a statewide basis, often for gifted students. Half a dozen states even established residential high schools for talented youngsters from throughout the state, some with a heavy emphasis on math and science.

With only the rarest exceptions, however, these options were confined to public institutions. Parents who chose private schools got no aid or succor from public policy. Indeed, it was the discovery that an array of choices might be provided *within* public education, and that these were attractive to disadvantaged and minority families as well as to the prosperous and white, that broke the constitutional and political logjam in which most discussions of educational choice had previously been stuck.

That, in any case, was the situation during the 1980s. By 1990, it appeared to be undergoing a dramatic change—an important instance of the radicalization of education reform. This spring, for example, in presenting his America 2000 education strategy, President Bush insisted that choice policies include private as well as public school alternatives.

But choice is not a magic bullet that will solve all of our problems. One thing that we desperately need is a crackerjack sys-

tem of information feedback and accountability to remedy Americans' woeful ignorance about academic performance in their schools. The fact is that we—and that includes teachers and school administrators—don't really know what kinds of results our schools are achieving. Largely because of gaps in our testing systems, we are suffering from a kind of national split personality: People seem on the one hand to acknowledge that we have a very serious national education problem but also seem on the other hand to be reasonably content with their *own* and their children's education, and with their local schools. Last year, only 23 percent of parents polled by the Gallup Organization gave the nation's schools an "A" or "B," but 48 percent gave their community's public schools such high grades, and a remarkable 72 percent gave them to the school their eldest child attended!

Surveys show that teachers, principals, and superintendents hold equally rosy views; so it should come as no surprise that American students do not have a very realistic understanding of their own academic performance. The latest international comparison shows that American 13-year-olds rank at or near the bottom in various categories of math and science performance, but at the top in assessments of their own abilities. An amazing 68 percent of the American teenagers surveyed agreed with the statement, "I am good at mathematics." By contrast, only 23 percent of South Korean youngsters, the top performers in this test, dared to think themselves so accomplished.

Assessments must be linked to goals. The United States needs a set of clear educational goals that we expect every young American to achieve by the threshold of adulthood. Those adopted for the year 2000 by President Bush and the nation's governors in the aftermath of their 1989 education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia are not perfect in anybody's eyes, but they will do.* A substantial core curriculum—perhaps a *national* core—seems an obvious complement to this approach. (And why not relate the term of compulsory school attendance to the achievement of minimum standards rather than merely an arbitrarily selected birthday?) National achievement tests to measure results and to allow realistic assessments of the performance of students, teachers, schools, and school districts are indispensable. And measurement must be accompanied by accountability: Good things must happen to teachers and schools when they succeed in meeting goals, less welcome things when they fail.

None of this is meant to imply that the nation's schools ought to march in lockstep. Far from it. Outside the core curriculum, there should be vast differences among schools, not only with regard to what is taught, but how, when, and under what circumstances it is taught. School-site management, rather than central administration, ought to be emphasized. In Chicago, for example, individual school governing councils, not the system's central administration, now have the power to hire and fire their principals. That is how the diversity and vitality discovered by the "effective schools" researchers can take root in more communities.

That kind of management, combined with choice and rigorous assessments of performance, ought to help stimulate more parental involvement. Who can dispute, in addition, the need for a longer school day and school year? Finally, the teachers and

*The six goals: 1) All children will start school ready to learn; 2) The high school graduation rate will increase to 90 percent; 3) Students leaving grades four, eight, and 12 will demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter including English, math, science, history, and geography; 4) U.S. students will be first in the world in science and math achievement; 5) Functional literacy for every adult American; 6) Every school will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning, free of drugs and violence.

principals of whom so much more will be asked deserve appropriate treatment. They should be sought in many quarters (not just in colleges of education), treated as professionals, and paid according to their skills, experience, and performance. They also need to be more involved in the development of curriculum and instructional materials. In the Asian schools I've visited, teachers work pretty much year-round (and teach large classes), but they teach only three or four hours a day and have time for class preparation, meetings with students, and other activities.

Some of the radical reforms that are needed to revive the schools have recently been put in place in scattered states and localities around the country. But they haven't yet been planted in many fields and they are not rooted very deeply. The roots of mediocrity, by contrast, run deep into our cultural subsoil. They have left us with entrenched institutional resistance to change and a pervasive reluctance to compare the performance of schools and students. That is what finally stymied the sincere and imaginative efforts of the last decade's excellence movement. Now we need to overhaul the whole system. The scattered efforts around the country give heart. The America 2000 strategy President Bush announced in April, with its voluntary national standards, achievement tests, and school "report cards," along with its encouragement of choice, is sure to speed the pace of change.

But the president cannot do it alone, even with a talented and energetic Secretary of Education. Education is a national problem, to be sure, but not one amenable to solution at the hands of the federal government—a distinction that few in Washington can comprehend. The decisions that matter are made by states and communities, by parents around their kitchen tables, by teachers in millions of classrooms, by principals in thousands of schools, and perhaps above all by colleges and employers whose admissions and hiring decisions create the incentives that do or do not move students to work hard in schools.

Setting American education right will require something akin to a populist revolt against the status quo. This is not a system likely to turn itself around. Too many internal forces tend toward stasis. But it responds to political pressure, to popular discontent, and sometimes to adroit leadership. Devising a strategy to move it off dead center, to press it toward the laudable national education goals set by the president and governors, and finally to become accountable for its performance, may well be the highest-stakes challenge facing the United States in the 1990s.

A Teacher's View

by Patrick Welsh

On the front lawn of Alexandria, Virginia's T.C. Williams High School, where I have been teaching English for the past 20 years, there is a large sign from the U.S. Department of Education proclaiming us "one of the outstanding high schools in America." The sign has been there since 1984, when then-Secretary of Education Terrell Bell drove across the Potomac River to present us with one of the Reagan administration's first Excellence in Education awards.

Nine months earlier, Bell had issued the now famous *A Nation at Risk* report proclaiming that America was in big trouble because of its deteriorating schools. But on this day the Secretary was extolling T.C. Williams as an example to the nation. He praised it as a school that was able to "meet the needs of all its students" in spite of the diversity of its student body. We were one of 88 schools nationwide receiving the first excellence awards. Yet if the list had been cut to a mere 10, Bell assured us, "T.C. Williams would still be there."

"Meeting the needs of all our students" is the espoused goal not only of T.C. Williams but also of most public and private high schools across the country. The concept owes much of its popularity to former Harvard President James B. Conant's 1959 report, *The American High School Today.* Conant extolled the comprehensive high school "whose programs correspond to the educational needs of all youth in the community." Such an institution would have something for everyone. It would "meet the needs" of the budding young scientist and the promising dramatist. It would have vocational education for this kid and Latin for that one. And students would be grouped by ability, so that each was challenged on a proper level.

Certainly T.C. Williams has a lot of needs to meet. In our hallways the sons and daughters of the prominent and well-to-do brush shoulders with kids on welfare, and handsome young Afghan and Hispanic guys neck with blond-haired redneck girls. We offer hundreds of courses, from Heating and Air Conditioning Repair to Russian III and Organic Chemistry. Our extracurricular activities run the gamut from women's crew and basketball to Frisbee and a ski club. Yet the truth is that T.C. Williams, like most other American high schools, is nowhere near "meeting the educational needs of all youth in the community."

Why did Conant's sensible vision fail to become reality? One answer, I suspect, is that the America Conant wrote about vanished during the years after his report was published. It was swept away by demographic, cultural, economic, and technological changes that Conant did not foresee, and that American high schools and families are only beginning to recognize.

One of the major problems in discussing education reform is that everyone—from parents to politicians—considers himself an expert by virtue of having been to school. But many of the "experts" are caught in a time warp, imagining that schools today are just like schools when they were students, and that what would work in the 1940s or '50s will work today.

Even I who spend so much of my life with students have to remind myself constantly that the public school where I teach is not the small Catholic high school I attended decades ago.

When I came home in the afternoon from Notre Dame High School in Batavia, New York in the late 1950s, I'd practice my jump shot and do my homework. My mother was there and my neighbors kept an eye on me. My TV viewing consisted of the Wednesday night fights and an occasional Sid Caesar show. I didn't face pressure to try drugs or alcohol. But in the ensuing years the world I grew up in disappeared. TV and the electronic media began to rival and then to far exceed the influence of the classroom teacher. In 1960, surveys showed that parents, and teachers were the leading influence on 13- to 19-year-olds. By 1980, teachers had slipped to fourth place, behind peers, parents and media (TV, radio, and records). By then, a seductive, independent youth culture, with its own music, drugs, and sexual mores was challenging the traditional values of school and family. At the same time, as a result of economic pressures and the women's movement, mothers of even young children were being drawn out of the home and into the workplace by the millions. The family structure that I and most of today's education reformers grew up in during the 1940s and '50s was coming undone. In the 1950s, only four percent of all children were born into fatherless homes—two percent of white children and 18 percent of black children. Today, one-quarter of all children are born to single mothers—17 percent of white and 62 percent of black children. Almost 60 percent of all children born in the early 1980s will live with only one parent at some time before reaching the age of 18. These kids are bringing so much emotional baggage to school that they often seem to need psychologists, social workers, and counselors more than they need teachers.

In some ways, the unchanging routines of high school provide a sense of reassuring continuity. An American high school in the 1990s looks and feels pretty much like it did in the 1950s. The bell still rings every 50 minutes. The senior prom and the fortunes of the football team are still staples of school life. Every September, the new senior class officers promise that "this year is going to be different." And the difference usually comes down to the bigger and better hotel selected for the prom. The motivational posters in the classrooms of earnest young teachers say such things as "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" and "You can make a difference!"—just as they always did.

And yet these familiar images are misleading. In the 1990s, cheerleaders take the pill, the band does drugs, and the classroom has become peripheral in the lives of many of our "students." Nearly one out of two of them lives with only one natural parent; for the blacks among them it's closer to two out of three. T.C. Williams and other schools are doing more parenting on behalf of families than would have been imaginable a few decades ago. "We do a lot of mopping up here," says Jim McClure, T.C.'s director of guidance. "I see too many parents who want a quick fix for their kids. It's the fast-paced society we live in, with both parents often working and coming home exhausted. I can talk to a mother of a troubled kid in the morning and to the father in the afternoon, and you'd have no idea it was the same kid we are discussing. So many parents who are the picture of confidence and success when it comes to their

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LIFE IN HELL

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SCHOOLISHELL
THE CARTOON WITH IDENTIFIABLE PERCEPTUAL COMMUNICATIVE DISORDERS

LESSON 12: HIGH SCHOOL— THE 2ND DEEPEST PIT IN HELL

3 USELESS THINGS
STUDY HALL
TEXTBOOKS (HISTORY FOR 16-YEAR-OLDS)
GUIDANCE COUNSELORS

WELCOME TO HIGH SCHOOL
FOR YEARS WE'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU, GRADING YOU, TESTING YOU, KEEPING SECRET FILES ON YOU-- AND YOU'LL BE GLAD TO KNOW YOU'RE NORMAL! THERE'S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT.
YOU'RE UNSPECIAL, UNREMARKABLE, AND THOROUGHLY AVERAGE. YOU PROBABLY DON'T EVEN REALIZE IT, BUT WE'VE DEVELOPED A SERIES OF UNDEMANDING CLASSES TAUGHT BY TEACHERS WHO WERE ONCE JUST LIKE YOU.
YOUR JOB IS TO SHOW UP, NOT WRECK ANYTHING, AND STAY JUST THE WAY YOU ARE. AS A REWARD, WE'LL GIVE YOU A DIPLOMA. WE KNOW YOU CAN DO IT.

TIPS FOR TEENS
WHY NOT GET A JOB AT NIGHT AND LEARN THE WONDERS OF DEEP FRYING, SECRET SAUCE, MINIMUM WAGE, AND SLEEPING IN SCHOOL?

CONTEMPORARY EXCUSES FOR NOT HAVING DONE YOUR HOMEWORK
THE PRINTER BROKE!
THE FLOPPY DISK WAS DEFECTIVE!
I PUSHED THE WRONG BUTTON AND DELETED EVERYTHING!

HOW HARD DO YOU WANT TO STUDY?

TYPE OF COURSE	DEGREE OF HAPPINESS	DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY	BEST SUITED FOR KIDS WHO ARE:
HONORS		KINDA EASY	WHIZZY, CRAZY
COLLEGE PREP		FAIRLY EASY	DIZZY, BUSY
GENERAL		REAL EASY	BREEZY, LAZY
BASIC		BEYOND EASY	CHEESY, SLEAZY

DID YOU KNOW?
SHOPPING MALLS ARE ACTUALLY KIND OF BORING AFTER AWHILE.

WARNING!
DO NOT TALK TO TEACHERS IN THE SAME TONE OF VOICE THEY USE TALKING TO YOU.
YOU WILL BE SUSPENDED FOR INSOLENCE.

THINGS TO WORRY ABOUT IN HIGH SCHOOL
STATUS
SEX
CLOTHES
GRADES
DRINKING CAPACITY
KILLING YOURSELF
GRADUATION
YOUR FACE

THINGS NOT TO WORRY ABOUT IN HIGH SCHOOL
SCHOOL SPIRIT

TIPS FOR TEENS
IF SOMEONE DROPS HIS OR HER STUFF IN THE RUSH BETWEEN CLASSES, BE SURE TO STOMP ON IT. AN ENTIRE YEAR'S WORK CAN BE TRAMPLED, RIPPED, AND DESTROYED IN A MATTER OF SECONDS IF EVERYONE COOPERATES.

DID YOU KNOW?
The best work is that which is done at the last minute.

TIPS FOR TEENS
REMEMBER! MOST TEACHERS ARE EAGER TO PLAY THE GAME "I WON'T MESS WITH YOU IF YOU DON'T BUG ME."

High school, viewed from the bottom up.

jobs are desperate when it comes to their own children."

Today, after-school jobs and weekend parties take precedence over education. In my day the fast girl was the one who put her hand on the back of your neck during slow dances. Kids are more precocious now. While many middle-class parents like to feel that teen sex is pretty much limited to the low-income minority kids who are having babies in record numbers, the fact is that middle- and upper-income teens are far more sexually active than their parents would care to know. "I could count the

number of virgins in my high school peer group on the fingers of both hands. And most of those were on a rampage to lose their virginity during senior year because they thought that being a virgin in college was unacceptable," says T.C. Williams valedictorian Jim Dawes, now at the University of Pennsylvania. Kyra Cook, a former student of mine now at the College of William and Mary, says that "In eighth grade, if a couple was sleeping together, it was big news. But it's no big deal in high school. If a couple is dating for a few months, everyone just assumes they are having sex. There's no stigma at all to it. Girls no longer try to hide it. In my class the majority of girls were sleeping with guys but only two or three had 'bad reputations' and they slept with everyone."

The Alan Guttmacher Institute reported recently that the proportion of sexually active women ages 15–17 is 18 percent higher than it was in 1982, with most of the increase occurring among white teenagers and those in high-income families. Seventy percent of young people 19 and under are said to be sexually active.

There is the same parental naiveté about teen use of alcohol and other drugs as there is about teen sex. "It's especially hard to convince parents of their kids' alcohol or drug abuse when the kids are academically and socially successful. 'What the hell are you talking about! How could he have a problem?' is the usual response when you confront parents with excessive use, even dependency," says Richard Ryan, who runs nationwide drug education programs based in Boston and Colorado. Jen Cheavens, who just graduated from West Springfield High School in Fairfax County, Virginia, confirms Ryan's view. "As long as you are doing well in school, hanging around the right friends and appearing to have things in control, many parents don't ask questions about what you do on the weekends," says Cheavens. I've had kids in my honors classes apologize for turning in papers that were rendered incoherent by months of steady abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

All these changes have affected the ability of schools and teachers to do their jobs. Members of our experienced science department attest to a decline in the willingness of the majority of students to do homework on a nightly basis or to put in the consistent effort that science has always required. The science department has been viewed as "unreasonably tough," but science teachers insist that they are really demanding less than they were 15 years ago. "Let's face it, there is not an academic work ethic in this country," says Anthea Maton, a British physics teacher with the National Science Teachers Association who travels around the country training physics teachers. "In America, kids are told that school should be fun. School should be their job. But cars, nice clothes, and sports come first."

No one sees the reluctance of American students to work hard more clearly than the foreign-born kids in our high schools. Hoang-An Nguyen came to this country with other Vietnamese refugees in 1981. He ran circles around his American friends in the classroom—even in English courses—and was a semifinalist in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search. Says Nguyen: "Many American students are lazy and wasteful. They have so many opportunities and just don't seem to care. They say Orientals are smarter but that is not so. We just spend more time working at our studies. I want to pay back my family for all they have done for me." Edgar Campos came from El Salvador five years ago speaking no English. By the time he was in my senior English class he was reading Faulkner and Shakespeare with

more understanding than most of his American classmates. Now an engineering student at Cornell University, Campos says that "many Americans whine and complain about their grades but aren't willing to do the work to get the grades. They are too comfortable with their money and cars. They seem to feel that they are going to get success without work."

If American schools really have deteriorated as much as the "experts" say they have, how can kids like Campos and Nguyen come to them knowing hardly any English and flourish academically? The fact is the system works for kids who come from families with a strong work ethic.

Lara Miles, now a sophomore at the University of Virginia, remembers many kids just "blowing off high school. They think that because their parents have it made that their lives are set for them."

Some of my students seem to be looking for the same stimulation and entertainment in class that they find in television. As one of them remarked, "Young people have a TV attitude toward school, like it is there to give you a good program and all you have to do is watch, complain, and turn the channel now and then." Kids talk in class, another girl explained to me, the way they talk at home during a TV commercial, ignoring the teacher as if he or she had no more feelings than a Sony Trinitron.

As an English teacher it is particularly disturbing to see fewer and fewer of even the brightest students reading, except when a grade is involved. The new term for these nonreaders is "aliterate." There was a time when many young people would curl up with a good book when they were bored. Today, they are more likely to rent a movie at a video store, or turn on their Nintendo or Sega home video games, or simply pick up the remote control of their TV and "slum around" its dozens of cable channels until they find something that distracts them. This past spring I had kids sneak their pocket-sized Nintendo video games into class; others were wired with special Walkmans that are very hard to detect. Several girls told me that before they leave for school in the morning they set their VCRs to record the soaps from 12:30 to 4:00. Said one: "When I get home from my after-school job around five, I go to my room and start watching my regular programs like 'Laverne and Shirley.' I'll grab a quick dinner and then pick up my night shows like 'Cosby' until about 9:30. Then comes the best part. I turn on the VCR and get caught up in my soaps. At about midnight I fall asleep." Stories like that, chilling though they are to a teacher, are not uncommon, especially with low-income kids who are already behind in their skills.

At the same time that television, the youth culture, and other social and economic forces were changing the world of young people, schools were experiencing the impact of two momentous occurrences in American society. One was the largest influx of immigrants since the 19th century; the other was school desegregation. When Conant wrote his report, the student bodies of most American high schools were fairly homogeneous. Nowadays, as a result of busing, the breakdown of old discriminatory housing patterns, and liberal immigration policies, high schools made up predominantly of a single racial or ethnic group are becoming the exception. T.C. Williams is typical of thousands of American high schools struggling to educate increasingly diverse student bodies. At present our student body is 42 percent black, 37 percent white, and 21 percent foreign-born. When students pour off the buses in the morning we look like an ideal of integration. But once the bells ring, kids go off to classes that often look as if they were selected on the basis of race and so-

cial status. Honors and advanced placement courses are full of white middle-class kids, with a sprinkling of blacks and Orientals. Many call these classes our private-school-within-a-public-school. They are supposed to be for the brightest and most motivated students, and certainly those types are there. But those classes also have a good number of lazy, burned-out kids whose affluent parents insisted they be placed in honors courses. On the other end, remedial and vocational courses are mostly filled with low-income blacks and recently arrived foreign students.

Black activists in the community see these programs as a racist remnant of segregation. Many whites say that they are only an attempt save the schools from lowering academic standards and facing the "white flight" that would inevitably follow. Presented with the conflicting priorities of retaining white middle-class loyalties while desegregating, schools evolved a system of sorting in which the bright were separated from the average and the average from the slow early in their education.

What we see in my school—and I believe in most schools—is a rigid system of class stratification. In previous generations, schools were the great equalizers, as education helped the poor rise in social and economic standing. This was especially true of the children of immigrants in the early part of the century. My grandfather came here as a 16-year-old, illiterate Irish farm worker. His lack of education and money did not prevent his son, my father, from graduating from Georgetown Medical School. Today, if a child is born into the kind of poverty my dad was, chances are far slimmer that our schools will help him rise out of it. A number of the kids in our school who grew up in the dire poverty of the public housing projects have ended up selling drugs; some have lost their lives in the process. Most of these young men are not drug users; they are entrepreneurs who saw selling drugs as a way out of the poverty they knew all their lives. Twelve years of education—including vocational courses in our state-of-the-art career wing—failed to give them the skills or the hope they needed to change their lives.

The story of several 17-year-olds I talked to while they were being held in the Alexandria jail as adults sounded all too familiar. "For me it was just being out there, the fame and the glory. I still had a vision of going legitimate and setting myself up in a career, but when you are in the game for a while, the money becomes an addiction and you can't give it up. You make $150 a week at Roy Rogers, but $150 a minute on the street," said one young man who professed to making several thousand dollars a week in the drug trade.

"When you see a friend grow—bust out and buy a new car—you just want to do it. I always had this feeling of missing something: I got desperate to have cars, clothes, and guns," said another who was recently sentenced to 20 years.

Far sadder than the small group of young men who are selling drugs are the many honest kids from poor homes whom the schools have not reached. By the time many of these kids get to high school they are woefully behind their middle-class peers in reading and math skills. "Nobody wants to say it, but everyone knows that these kids are just marking time here, hanging around till they get their meaningless diploma," says Otha Myers, a black counselor who has worked in the Alexandria and Fairfax County schools.

Vocational-education instructors themselves are not all that happy with the situation. They complain that many of their students don't have the basic skills for success in voc. ed. any more than in English or math. "We've become a dumping ground," says one voc. ed. teacher. "Students with low verbal and math ability simply cannot

grasp the concepts or master the skills necessary for this type of work," says Charlie Adams, who teaches auto mechanics. Like other teachers, those in voc. ed. have trouble reaching and motivating kids who lack basic skills and a desire to learn.

But educators don't like to talk much about the kids in voc. ed. Our failure with so many of them makes us feel guilty, and they are certainly not the kind of public relations material that is going to help us in our competition with private schools. We'd rather talk about the kids in our honors and advanced placement courses. On the surface, it looks like we are meeting the needs of these kids. Every year we brandish our National Merit Scholarships, Ivy League acceptances, and science prizes to convince anxious middle-class parents that their children can get as good an education at the local public high school as at the expensive, mostly white, private schools. The word in the community is that T.C. Williams is an excellent place for the bright, motivated student. Few private schools can match our well-equipped science laboratories, our array of college-level advanced placement courses, or our extensive sports and extracurricular programs. This past year when six of our seniors got into Princeton and large numbers were accepted at other highly selective colleges and universities, there was a lot of dismay among local parents who had chosen to send their kids to expensive private schools but didn't see the same results.

Still, even among the brightest and most accomplished students, there is a lot to be desired. In the last 10 years there has been an ever growing hysteria among these kids and their parents about grades and Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. It's as if high school has become nothing more than an arena in which to build résumés for the next step—college. And not just any college but the most prestigious. Canon Charles Martin, former headmaster of the prestigious St. Alban's School in Washington, D.C., used to gather parents in the school chapel to convince them that their sons' success and happiness in life did not hinge on acceptance to one of New England's ivied nirvanas. "We are not preparing your boys for the kingdom of Harvard or the kingdom of Yale, but for the kingdom of God," Martin would say, often to no avail. He recalls that there wasn't much need for his speech until recent decades.

"We have kids and parents frantic about

The ideal student of yore seems more anachronistic with every passing year. He knew nothing (or little) of television, MTV, video games, alcohol, drugs, or sex.

college," says John Keating, director of guidance at prestigious Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda, Maryland, another suburb of Washington. "Many parents have more riding on the letter of acceptance than the child has. It's gotten to be some kind of merit badge or medal—a test of their genes or the job they have done as parents."

"Some of the independent schools are cauldrons," says Fred Wetzel of the New England office of the College Board. They are not healthy places to work or study. They have the most volatile elements: affluent kids of widely varying ability and pushy parents who have paid all this money so their kids are entitled to get into the best colleges," says Wetzel.

Kids seem so worried about building résumés for college that they have little time to think about what they want to do with their lives once college is over. "In high school, we were told that college was the next step, the place where we would get focused and our careers would find us," says University of Virginia junior Theresa Kennedy. "Then when you don't find out in college you go on to grad school and spend another couple years to find out what you are supposed to be doing. There are a lot of people just walking around the campus aimlessly. It's hard not having any finish line, any goal to work for. In high school you worked for grades to get into college. In college, if you don't have anything planned out there is no motivating force," says Kennedy.

"Not too many college students are in a rush to get into the working world," says Brown University junior Jennifer Seltz. "College is this cushy life where you go to class a few hours a day and then spend the rest of the time hanging out with your friends. It's this luxurious period that allows you to be completely self-centered. All you have to worry about is your next paper or your next little activist stance. There are awareness weeks for everything from Body Image to Classism," says Seltz, who during one semester last year had a total of 10 hours and 40 minutes of class time per week. On Monday her first and only class went from 11:00 a.m. to noon. Her only class on Thursdays was from 1:00 to 2:20 p.m. "If you put all the class time and study time together," she says, "you'd barely come up with a 40-hour week—except for those in engineering or science."

I don't want to paint too bleak a picture of today's high schools. Yes, a lot of our better students are more into résumé-building than learning for learning's sake. But many of them are also taking more challenging courses than their successful parents ever dreamed of taking in high school—courses like Russian, physics with calculus, and organic chemistry. When we look at the plight of many of our low-income minority kids, we must remember that many of them are the first in their family to graduate high school, and others are the first to go on to college. The effects of centuries of poverty and discrimination cannot be eradicated in a few decades.

But before we start talking about reforming schools, we would do well to remember what sociologist Christopher Jencks said 18 years ago in his controversial book *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America.* Jencks came to the surprising (and still much disputed) conclusion that schools actually have rather little impact on the IQ or the later occupational status, job satisfaction, or economic position of their students. If all high schools were equally effective, Jencks concluded, the academic inequalities among 12th graders would not change much, and disparities in their subsequent attainment would change less than one percent. Family background, condi-

tions in the home, the neighborhood, genetic attributes, and other factors all seemed to Jencks to be more important in determining what happened to individuals in life than schooling.

Jencks's conclusions outraged many, but like it or not, his theories seem to be borne out by American education. Most schools are no better or worse in terms of academic results than the students they serve. Year after year, high schools like New Trier in Winnetka, Illinois, Stuyvesant in New York City, and Walt Whitman in Bethesda turn out a large number of National Merit Scholars and garner many Ivy League acceptances. Everybody talks about how good these schools are. But, of course, what is really perceived as good about them has more to do with the abilities of their students, children, for the most part, of intelligent, highly educated parents. Three years ago my own school had the highest number of National Merit Scholars of any high school, public or private, in the state of Virginia. And we got all the publicity we could out of those students. But graduating with them that year also were a few hundred kids—mostly black and poor, and many of them already parents themselves—who read several years below grade level and whom 12 years of schooling had barely reached.

My own school tried almost every "reform" measure that came along in the 1980s: peer coaching, teacher empowerment, strategic planning, curriculum mapping, and minority achievement among them. Like those on the national level, none of the reforms at my school have had a real effect on student performance. The kids who do well, whether they be rich or poor, have one thing in common: parents or some other adult in their lives who have put a premium on education and have pushed them.

I am not saying that everything depends on the home environment and that we should forget about reforming schools. But some of the major reforms being proposed seem to me terribly misguided. Take parental choice, a favorite of U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander. Proponents of choice seem to be forgetting that the biggest problems in our schools are those kids who have no advocates at home, whose parents do not care or are not tuned into how schools work. As I see it, choice will mean that parents in the know will move their kids into what they see as the better schools, while the kids whose parents are not active will be left behind in schools that—bereft of the kind of parents that demand quality—will deteriorate.

And as Philip Schlechty, president of the Center for Leadership in School Reform points out, "Anyone who believes that some parents will not exercise choice on grounds other than those that have to do with high quality democratic education misunderstands why the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision was necessary in the first place. Anyone who believes that academic quality is the basis of choice in all or nearly all instances does not understand the power of basketball and football in the life of schools and communities."

The fact is that we already have choice at work within most schools. Aggressive parents in the know see to it that their kids get the best teachers and the most stimulating courses—gifted and talented, advanced placement, or whatever the label. Administrators then fill the classes of the incompetent or marginal teachers they are afraid to get rid of with kids who have the least vocal parents, usually the children of the poor.

Of course some reforms can make some difference. One that has been tried but not tried enough is Headstart. Children living in poverty with single mothers come into

school so far behind their middle-class peers that most of them never catch up. Despite research showing that Headstart can make a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children, only 20 percent of those eligible nationwide are actually enrolled in programs. In the city of Alexandria, there are enough children for 12 centers, but only two centers are in operation. Ideally, we would be able to stop the soaring rate of out-of-wedlock births among impoverished teenage girls. But until we do, programs like Headstart must intervene to assure that the children born to such young women get the preparation for school that most middle-class kids come by naturally.

In the schools, cooperative learning, where students work in groups of four or five, not only stimulates kids to take ownership of their learning but helps people of various backgrounds get used to the kind of group problem-solving that is so important in the real world. School-based management can allow talented teachers and principals to address the unique needs of their own school without having to worry about officious central-office bureaucrats. Peer coaching can break up the deadly isolation in which most teachers work and allow them to share ideas and strategies for reaching kids. And the 535 new experimental schools that President Bush has proposed to create during the next five years as part of his America 2000 education strategy will be a giant step toward reinventing a school system that hasn't really changed that much since the turn of the century.

But even the most enlightened reforms will not make much of a difference until American education deals with the basic philosophical bind in which it is trapped—namely, how do we insist that everyone is entitled to a public education and still uphold the moral and academic standards that are essential if schools are going to work? The reformers talk a great deal about standards, but most high schools and colleges back off when it comes to the crunch. We are obsessed about the drop-out rate in our high schools but refuse to admit, in spite of mounting evidence everywhere, that the kick-out rate must go up if our schools are going to be serious institutions rather than "the place I go to be with my friends," as so many kids now see them.

In my own school, we have had "students" arrested on drug and weapons charges at night only to be allowed back in school the next morning. One fellow, an All-Metropolitan football star, made headlines for five arrests in the course of four months. He became so infamous that the Washington magazine *Regardie's* sponsored a contest awarding a dinner for two to the person who could correctly predict the date of his next encounter with the police. After each arrest—several of them drug related—he was back at school, a hero to many of his peers.

But the real criminals aren't as big a problem as the just plain disruptive kids, usually from totally dysfunctional families. These kids often make teaching impossible. They poison the atmosphere and frustrate their classmates and teachers. Principals and other administrators walk the halls with walkie-talkies, acting more like cops or wardens than educators. It's time to let high schools be for learning, and let some other public institution be responsible for warehousing chronically disruptive kids.

There must not only be higher standards of conduct—off and on the high school campus—but higher academic standards. Yet high schools alone cannot accomplish this. Columnist Robert Samuelson, writing in the *Washington Post* last year, put the problem very clearly. "College leaders see themselves as the victims of poor high schools. This rationalization is at least half backward," wrote Samuelson. "Lax high school and college academic

standards feed on each other. In our society, the badge of successfully completing high school is not just a degree but the ability to go to college—and almost anyone can go to college."

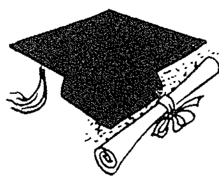
In the last 10 years I have been amazed to see the kinds of students that colleges have been accepting. Affluent white kids who have been kicked out of several private schools before landing in my school, who barely have a C average, and who have been addicted to alcohol and other drugs have been getting into what I once thought were respectable schools. Minority kids who are barely literate have been waltzing into "higher" education. And then there are the just plain lazy kids who have drifted through high school. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that if you are medically alive and your parents write a check, you can get into college today. And the point is the kids know it. They see their do-nothing older buddies getting in and they realize that they don't have to work. University of Chicago freshman Sarah Drucker put it this way: "There might be better ways to teach, but that is not the real problem. I've had so many good teachers. I hear kids saying, 'All my teachers suck—that's why I'm not getting A's.' They are just making excuses for not working. It's our culture—the American way—not to push yourself if it is not going to have some immediate reward. Most kids don't care if they learn as long as they get the A's and get into name schools."

"Adolescents are like adults," writes Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers. "They do as much as they have to in order to get what they want. The young people who want to go to elite schools must meet high standards, and they work hard. But the rest of high school students know they can get into some college no matter how poorly they do."

Because so many colleges today are concerned with survival, they "subtly lower academic standards to ensure the flow of students," continues Robert Samuelson. He suggests that "states could shut down 10 to 20 percent of their colleges and universities, so schools wouldn't have to continually scrounge for students. States could also sharply raise their tuition and couple the increases with big boosts in scholarships. But to keep scholarships, students would have to keep a C average."

Samuelson's ideas aren't going to make college bureaucrats happy. But he is right on the mark when he says that these measures "would instantly improve high schools." Instead of adopting such procedures, however, "we prefer to maintain poor schools—high schools and colleges—that everyone can attend, rather than have good schools that might benefit most students. We prefer to complain about 'underinvestment' in education rather than face the harder question of why our massive investment in education produces such poor results . . . . No matter how worthy, 'reforms' can't succeed unless students work harder."

And making students work harder won't cost any money!



WHY THE SCHOOLS STILL DON'T WORK

For all the nation's earnest intentions and policy gyrations during the last decade, the United States has barely budged out of its deep scholastic hole.

Just wait, the optimists say. Wait for standardized tests to reflect reforms already in place. Or wait for new reforms. Or wait for Washington and the rest of the country to get really serious (i.e. to pile even more billions upon the billions already added to American education). To which remarkably few skeptics respond: What makes anyone believe that things will improve much any time soon, no matter how much more money we spend or how many ways we manipulate school policy? What makes anyone believe, for example, that learning will improve much as long as so many children grow up in fatherless households, or as long as so many Americans have such a weak understanding of the tie between hard work and scholastic success?

Some of the most sobering evidence is often delivered inadvertently by the optimists. Lisbeth B. Schorr, in **Within Our Reach: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage and Despair** (Doubleday, 1988), refers to broader social policy, not just education, when she writes that help for children growing up in persistent poverty "may be ineffective as provided by prevailing, rigidly circumscribed programs. But where programs are especially attuned to the distinct needs of high-risk families, these children are being helped from the outside."

She is right—relatively good programs are possible, but their rarity is no accident. The programs she discusses, aimed at reducing teenage pregnancies and other problems, do well only when they are "intensive, comprehensive, and flexible." Their "climate" also must be shaped by "skilled, committed professionals who establish respectful and trusting relationships and respond to the individual needs of those they serve." The problem is, as she concedes, that these clash with the "traditional requirements of professionalism and bureaucracy." Meaning, large organizations—especially public ones—can't make these programs work.

But even "successful" reforms usually fall short. Recall, for example, one of the most heralded education triumphs of the 1970s and '80s, the remarkable rise in reading scores in East Harlem's District No. 4. Led by deputy superintendent Sy Fliegel, teachers created more than a score of alternative schools, employing a variety of curricular and pedagogical approaches, and allowed parents to choose where to send their children. It was a great achievement, and Fliegel describes it well in **Public Schools By Choice**, edited by Joe Nathan (Meyer Stone Books, 1989). But is a reform that lifts a district only to the middle of the pack in a disastrous school system really that heartening?

Stewart C. Purkey and Marshall S. Smith make the essential point in "Effective Schools: A Review," in the *Elementary School Journal* (March 1983). They write: "An unusually 'effective' school serving predominantly low-income and minority students may actually have considerably lower achievement than a middle-class white suburban school." Two reasons, they say, are the "pervasive influences of social class on achievement and the possibility that even the 'typical' suburban school has some significant and important advantages over the relatively effective inner-city school." And, lest we forget, even most "good" suburban schools produce mediocre results.

American schools are perfect reflections of American dilemmas and disasters. (For lucid histories, see Diane Ravitch's **Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-80** [Basic, 1983]; and Lawrence A. Cremin's **American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980** [Harper, 1988]) Yet, rarely is educational policy more delusional than when it comes to questions of equality and race—and poverty and fatherless families. Left and Right routinely accuse each other of racist and racialist sins, with both sides overstating the power of secular institutions such as public schools to compensate for the influence of social class,

and to overcome problems that are deeply cultural, behavioral and, in a real sense, spiritual.

There is, for example, much talk about the "feminization of poverty," a problem that sounds like it might be amenable to a checkbook cure. But in an absolutely on-target literature review, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe" in *Policy Review*, (Winter 1990), Nicholas Davidson writes: "[P]overty is probably the least destructive aspect of father absence. More serious and longer-lasting, both for the individual and society as a whole, is the role of father absence in producing educational and cognitive deficits, mental illness, drug use, and crime." One example Davidson cites is a 1968 study which compared American College Entrance Examination scores of 295 students from homes without fathers with those of 760 students from two-parent families. The absence of a father had a "dramatic" negative effect on scores, which could not be explained by differences in income. A better term for what afflicts these youngsters is philosopher Michael Novak's: the "masculinization of irresponsibility."

The education debate often excludes the important and dwells on that which is less so. Like money. "There is no strong or systematic relationship between school expenditures and student performance," writes the University of Rochester's Eric A. Hanushek in a review of decades of research, "The Impact of Differential Expenditures on School Performance" in *Educational Researcher* (May 1989).

How often do educational and political leaders face the paralyzing fact that black children frequently do poorly in school because they fear "acting white," as Signithia Fordham and John U. Ogbu argued in "Black Students' School Success: Coping with the "Burden of 'Acting White'"" in the *Urban Review* (Vol. 18, No. 3)? Who faces up to the work of psychologist Harold Stevenson of the University of Michigan, who finds that many Americans just don't have the attitudes needed for educational progress? In studies such as **Contexts of Achievement: A Study of American, Chinese, and Japanese Children** (Society of Child Development, 1990), with Shin-ying Lee, et al., Japanese and Chinese mothers (the latter in Taiwan) stress the "importance of hard work to a greater degree than American mothers," who tend to believe that innate ability largely determines academic success. As a result, American parents tend not to encourage their children to do homework, attend after-school classes, and seek out tutoring. In turn, even the best American students and schools tend to perform no better than their weakest Asian counterparts. But never mind. President Bush and the nation's governors have vowed that American kids will lead the world in math and science only nine years from now.

Still, it is true that several of the most influential studies of the last decade provide some grounds for optimism. Nothing necessarily prevents public schools from stressing curricular basics, holding students to high standards, maintaining discipline, or working closely with parents—the factors that sociologist James Coleman cites in **High School Achievement: Public, Catholic, and Private Schools Compared** (Basic, 1982) to explain the superiority of Catholic and private schools. Likewise, in the most important education book of 1990, **Politics, Markets, and American Schools** (Brookings, 1990), choice advocates John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe argue persuasively that schools can improve—if and only if they are shaped and governed by market, not political forces. And in this year's most important book, **We Must Take Charge: Our Schools and Our Future** (Free Press, 1991), Chester E. Finn, Jr., holds out hope that the curricular and pedagogical flaccidity he has so cogently criticized for a decade can be countered.

But even when these three sagacious works are piled high atop all that is sugary and ordinary, a central burden of proof remains on the optimists. We have yet to demonstrate that real school reform—not just political and bureaucratic reshuffling, but cultural change—is in us as a nation.

—Mitchell B. Pearlstein

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