America Skips School: Why We Talk so Much About Education and Do so Little

by Barber, Benjamin R.

On September 8, the day most of the nation's children were scheduled to return to school, the Department of Education Statistics issued a report, commissioned by Congress, on adult literacy and numeracy in the United States. The results? More than 90 million adult Americans lacked simple literacy. Fewer than 20 percent of those surveyed could compare two metaphors in a poem; not 4 percent could calculate the cost of carpeting at a given price for a room of a given size, using a calculator. As the DOE report was being issued, as if to echo its findings, two of the nation's largest school systems had delayed their openings: in New York, to remove asbestos from aging buildings; in Chicago, because of a battle over the budget.

Inspired by the report and the delays, pundits once again began chanting the familiar litany of the education crisis. We've heard it all many times before: 130,000 children bring guns along with their pencils and books to school each morning; juvenile arrests for murder increased by 85 percent from 1987 to 1991; more than 3,000 youngsters will drop out today and every day for the rest of the school year, until about 600,000 are lost by June—in many urban schools, perhaps half the enrollment. A lot of the dropouts will end up in prison, which is a surer bet for young black males than college: one in four will pass through the correctional system, and at least two out of three of those will be dropouts.

In quiet counterpoint to those staggering facts is another set of statistics: teachers make less than accountants, architects, doctors, lawyers, engineers, judges, health professionals, auditors, and surveyors. They can earn higher salaries teaching in Berlin, Tokyo, Ottawa, or Amsterdam than in New York or Chicago. American children are in school only about 180 days a year, as against 240 days or more for children in Europe or Japan. The richest school districts (school financing is local, not federal) spend twice as much per student as poorer ones do. The poorer ones seem almost beyond help: children with venereal disease or AIDS (2.5 million adolescents annually contract a sexually transmitted disease), gangs in the schoolyard, drugs in the class room, children doing babies instead of homework, playground firefights featuring Uzis and Glocks.

Clearly, the social contract that obliges adults to pay taxes so that children can be educated is in imminent danger of collapse. Yet for all the astonishing statistics, more astonishing still is that no one seems to be listening. The education crisis is kind of like violence on television: the worse it gets the more inert we become, and the more of it we require to rekindle our attention. We've

had a “crisis” every dozen years or so at least since the launch of Sputnik, in 1957, when American schools were accused of falling behind the world standard in science education. Just ten years ago, the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned that America’s pedagogical inattention was putting America “at risk.” What the commission called “a rising tide of mediocrity” was “imperiling our very future as a Nation and a people.” What was happening to education was an “act of war.”

Since then, countless reports have been issued decrying the condition of our educational system, the DOE report being only the most recent. They have come from every side, Republican as well as Democrat, from the private sector as well as the public. Yet for all the talk, little happens. At times, the schools look more like they are being dismantled than rebuilt. How can this be? If Americans over a broad political spectrum regard education as vital, why has nothing been done?

I have spent thirty years as a scholar examining the nature of democracy, and even more as a citizen optimistically celebrating its possibilities, but today I am increasingly persuaded that the reason for the country’s inaction is that Americans do not really care about education—the country has grown comfortable with the game of “let’s pretend we care.”

As America’s educational system crumbles, the pundits, instead of looking for solutions, search busily for scapegoats. Some assail the teachers—those “Profscam” pedagogues trained in the licentious Sixties who, as aging hippies, are supposedly still subverting the schools—for producing a dire illiteracy. Others turn on the kids themselves, so that at the same moment as we are transferring our responsibilities to the shoulders of the next generation, we are blaming them for our own generation’s most conspicuous failures. Allan Bloom was typical of the many recent critics who have condemned the young as vapid, lazy, selfish, complacent, self-seeking, materialistic, small-minded, apathetic, greedy, and, of course, illiterate. E. D. Hirsch in his Cultural Literacy and Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr. in their What Do Our Seventeen-Year-Olds Know? have lambasted the schools, the teachers, and the children for betraying the adult generation from which they were to inherit, the critics seemed confident, a precious cultural legacy.

How this captious literature reeks of hypocrisy! How sanctimonious all the hand-wringing over still another “education crisis” seems. Are we ourselves really so literate? Are our kids stupid or smart for ignoring what we preach and copying what we practice? The young, with their keen noses for hypocrisy, are in fact adept readers—but not of books. They are society-smart rather than school-smart, and what they read so acutely are the social signals emanating from the world in which they will have to make a living. Their teachers in that world, the nation’s true pedagogues, are television, advertising, movies, politics, and the celebrity domains they define. We prattle about deficient schools and the gullible youngsters they turn out, so vulnerable to the siren song of drugs, but think nothing of letting the advertisers into the classroom to fashion what an Advertising Age essay calls “brand and product loyalties through classroom-centered, peer-powered lifestyle patterning.”

Our kids spend 900 hours a year in school (the ones who go to school) and from 1,200 to 1,800 hours a year in front of the television set. From which are they likely to learn more? Critics such as Hirsch and Ravitch want to find out what our seventeen-year-olds know, but it’s really pretty simple; they know exactly what our forty-seven-year-olds know and teach them by example—on television, in the boardroom, around Washington, on Madison Avenue, in Hollywood. The very first lesson smart kids learn is that it is much more important to heed what society teaches implicitly by its deeds and reward structures than what school teaches explicitly in its lesson plans and civic sermons. Here is a test for adults that may help reveal what the kids see when they look at our world.
REAL WORLD CULTURAL LITERACY

1. According to television, having fun in America means
   a. going blond
   b. drinking Pepsi
   c. playing Nintendo
   d. wearing Air Jordans
   e. reading Mark Twain

2. A good way to prepare for a high-income career and to acquire status in our society is to
   a. win a slam-dunk contest
   b. take over a company and sell off its assets
   c. start a successful rock band
   d. earn a professional degree
   e. become a kindergarten teacher

3. Book publishers are financially rewarded today for publishing
   a. mega-cookbooks
   b. mega—cat books
   c. megabooks by Michael Crichton
   d. megabooks by John Grisham
   e. mini-books by Voltaire

4. A major California bank that advertised “no previous credit history required” in inviting Berkeley students to apply for Visa cards nonetheless turned down one group of applicants because
   a. their parents had poor credit histories
   b. they had never held jobs
   c. they had outstanding student loans
   d. they were “humanities majors”

5. Colleges and universities are financially rewarded today for
   a. supporting bowl-quality football teams
   b. forging research relationships with large corporations
   c. sustaining professional programs in law and business
   d. stroking wealthy alumni
   e. fostering outstanding philosophy departments

6. Familiarity with Henry IV, Part II is likely to be of vital importance in
   a. planning a corporate takeover
   b. evaluating budget cuts in the Department of Education
   c. initiating a medical-malpractice lawsuit
   d. writing an impressive job resume
   e. taking a test on what our seventeen-year-olds know

7. To help the young learn that “history is a living thing,” Scholastic, Inc., a publisher of school magazines and paperbacks, recently distributed to 40,000 junior and senior high school classrooms
   a. a complimentary video of the award-winning series The Civil War
   b. free copies of Plato’s Dialogues
   c. an abridgment of Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America
   d. a wall-size Periodic Table of the Elements
   e. gratis copies of Billy Joel’s hit single “We Didn’t Start the Fire” (which recounts history via a vaguely chronological list of warbled celebrity names)
My sample of forty-seven-year-olds scored very well on the test. Not surprisingly, so did their seventeen-year-old children. (For each question, either the last entry is correct or all responses are correct except the last one.) The results of the test reveal again the deep hypocrisy that runs through our lamentations about education. The illiteracy of the young turns out to be our own reflected back to us with embarrassing force. We honor ambition, we reward greed, we celebrate materialism, we worship acquisitiveness, we cherish success, and we commercialize the classroom—and then we bark at the young about the gentle arts of the spirit. We recommend history to the kids but rarely consult it ourselves. We make a fuss about ethics but are satisfied to see it taught as an “add on,” as in “ethics in medicine” or “ethics in business”—as if Sunday morning in church could compensate for uninterrupted sinning from Monday to Saturday.

The children are onto this game. They know that if we really valued schooling, we’d pay teachers what we pay stockbrokers; if we valued books, we’d spend a little something on the libraries so that adults could read, too; if we valued citizenship, we’d give national service and civic education more than pilot status; if we valued children, we wouldn’t let them be abused, manipulated, impoverished, and killed in their beds by gang-war cross fire and stray bullets. Schools can and should lead, but when they confront a society that in every instance tells a story exactly opposite to the one they are supposed to be teaching, their job becomes impossible. When the society undoes each workday what the school tries to do each school day, schooling can’t make much of a difference.

Inner-city children are not the only ones who are learning the wrong lessons. TV sends the same messages to everyone, and the success of Donald Trump, Pete Rose, Henry Kravis, or George Steinbrenner makes them potent role models, whatever their values. Teen dropouts are not blind; teen drug sellers are not deaf; teen college students who avoid the humanities in favor of pre-business or pre law are not stupid. Being apt pupils of reality, they learn their lessons well. If they see a man with a rubber arm and an empty head who can throw a ball at 95 miles per hour pulling down millions of dollars a year while a dedicated primary-school teacher is getting crumbs, they will avoid careers in teaching even if they can’t make the major leagues. If they observe their government spending up to $35,000 a year to keep a young black behind bars but a fraction of that to keep him in school, they will write off school (and probably write off blacks as well).

Our children’s illiteracy is merely our own, which they assume with commendable prowess. They know what we have taught them all too well: there is nothing in Homer or Virginia Woolf, in Shakespeare or Toni Morrison, that will advantage them in climbing to the top of the American heap. Academic credentials may still count, but schooling in and of itself is for losers. Bookworms. Nerds. Inner-city rappers and fraternity-house wise guys are in full agreement about that. The point is to start pulling down the big bucks. Some kids just go into business earlier than others. Dropping out is the national pastime, if by dropping out we mean giving up the precious things of the mind and the spirit in which America shows so little interest and for which it offers so little payback.

While the professors argue about whether to teach the ancient history of a putatively white Athens or the ancient history of a putatively black Egypt, the kids are watching televised political campaigns driven by mindless image mongering and inflammatory polemics that ignore history altogether. Why, then, are we so surprised when our students dismiss the debate over the origins of civilization, whether Eurocentric or Afrocentric, and concentrate on cash-and-carry careers? Isn’t the choice a tribute not to their ignorance but to their adaptive intelligence? Although we can hardly be proud of ourselves for what we are teaching them, we should at least be proud of them for how well they’ve learned our lessons.

Not all Americans have stopped caring about the schools, however. In the final irony of the educational endgame, cynical entrepreneurs like Chris Whittle are insinuating television into the classroom itself, bribing impoverished school boards by offering free TV sets on which they
can show advertising for children—sold to sponsors at premium rates. Whittle, the mergers and acquisitions mogul of education, is trying to get rich off the poverty of public schools and the fears of parents. Can he really believe advertising in the schools enhances education? Or is he helping to corrupt public schools in ways that will make parents even more anxious to use vouchers for private schools—which might one day be run by Whittle’s latest entrepreneurial venture, the Edison Project.

According to Lifetime Learning Systems, an educational-software company, “kids spend 40 percent of each day . . . where traditional advertising can’t reach them.” Not to worry, says Lifetime Learning in an Advertising Age promo: “Now, you can enter the classroom through custom-made reaming materials created with your specific marketing objectives in mind. Communicate with young spenders directly and, through them, their teachers and families as well.” If we redefine young learners as “young spenders,” are the young really to be blamed for acting like mindless consumers? Can they become young spenders and still become young critical thinkers, let alone informed citizens? If we are willing to give TV cartoons the government’s imprimatur as “educational television” (as we did a few years ago, until the FCC changed its mind), can we blame kids for educating themselves on television trash?

Everyone can agree that we should educate our children to be something more than young spenders molded by “lifestyle patterning.” But what should the goals of the classroom be? In recent years it has been fashionable to define the educational crisis in terms of global competition and minimal competence, as if schools were no more than vocational institutions. Although it has talked sensibly about education, the Clinton Administration has leaned toward this approach, under the tutelage of Secretary of Labor Robert Reich.

The classroom, however, should not be merely a trade school. The fundamental task of education in a democracy is what Tocqueville once called the apprenticeship of liberty: learning to be free. I wonder whether Americans still believe liberty has to be reamed and that its skills are worth learning. Or have they been deluded by two centuries of rhetoric into thinking that freedom is “natural” and can be taken for granted?

The claim that all men are born free, upon which America was founded, is at best a promising fiction. In real life, as every parent knows, children are born fragile, born needy, born ignorant, born unformed, born weak, born foolish, born dependent—born in chains. We acquire our freedom over time, if at all. Embedded in families, clans, communities, and nations, we must learn to be free. We may be natural consumers and born narcissists, but citizens have to be made. Liberal-arts education actually means education in the arts of liberty; the “servile arts” were the trades reamed by unfree men in the Middle Ages, the vocational education of their day. Perhaps this is why Thomas Jefferson preferred to memorialize his founding of the University of Virginia on his tombstone rather than his two terms as president; it is certainly why he viewed his Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge in Virginia as a centerpiece of his career (although it failed passage as legislation—times were perhaps not so different). John Adams, too, boasted regularly about Massachusetts’s high literacy rates and publicly funded education.

Jefferson and Adams both understood that the Bill of Rights offered little protection in a nation without informed citizens. Once educated, however, a people was safe from even the subtest tyrannies. Jefferson’s democratic propensities rested on his conviction that education could turn a people into a safe refuge—indeed “the only safe depository” for the ultimate powers of society. “Cherish therefore the spirit of our people,” he wrote to Edward Carrington in 1787, “and keep alive their attention. Do not be severe up on their errors, but reclaim them by enlightening them. If once they become inattentive to public affairs, you and I and Congress and Assemblies, judges and governors, shall all become wolves.”
The logic of democracy begins with public education, proceeds to informed citizenship, and comes to fruition in the securing of rights and liberties. We have been nominally democratic for so long that we presume it is our natural condition rather than the product of persistent effort and tenacious responsibility. We have decoupled rights from civic responsibilities and severed citizenship from education on the false assumption that citizens just happen. We have forgotten that the “public” in public schools means not just paid for by the public but procreative of the very idea of a public. Public schools are how a public—a citizenry—is forged and how young, selfish individuals turn into conscientious, community-minded citizens.

Among the several literacies that have attracted the anxious attention of commentators, civic literacy has been the least visible. Yet this is the fundamental literacy by which we live in a civil society. It encompasses the competence to participate in democratic communities, the ability to think critically and act with deliberation in a pluralistic world, and the empathy to identify sufficiently with others to live with them despite conflicts of interest and differences in character. At the most elementary level, what our children suffer from most, whether they’re hurling racial epithets from fraternity porches or shooting one another down in schoolyards, is the absence of civility. Security guards and metal detectors are poor surrogates for civility, and they make our schools look increasingly like prisons (though they may be less safe than prisons). Jefferson thought schools would produce free men: we prove him right by putting dropouts in jail.

Civility is a work of the imagination, for it is through the imagination that we render others sufficiently like ourselves for them to become subjects of tolerance and respect, if not always affection. Democracy is anything but a “natural” form of association. It is an extraordinary and rare contrivance of cultivated imagination. Give the uneducated the right to participate in making collective decisions, and what results is not democracy but, at best, mob rule: the government of private prejudice once known as the tyranny of opinion. For Jefferson, the difference between the democratic temperance he admired in agrarian America and the rule of the rabble he condemned when viewing the social unrest of Europe’s teeming cities was quite simply education. Madison had hoped to “filter” out popular passion through the device of representation. Jefferson saw in education a filter that could be in’ stalled within each individual, giving to each the capacity to rule prudently. Education creates a ruling aristocracy constrained by temperance and wisdom; when that education is public and universal, it is an aristocracy to which all can belong. At its best, the American dream of a free and equal society governed by judicious citizens has been this dream of an aristocracy of everyone.

To dream this dream of freedom is easy, but to secure it is difficult as well as expensive. Notwithstanding their lamentations, Americans do not appear ready to pay the price. There is no magic bullet for education. But I no longer can accept that the problem lies in the lack of consensus about remedies—in a dearth of solutions. There is no shortage of debate over how to repair our educational infrastructure. National standards or more local control?

Vouchers or better public schools? More parental involvement or more teacher autonomy? A greater federal presence (only 5 or 6 percent of the nation’s education budget is federally funded) or fairer local school taxes? More multicultural diversity or more emphasis on what Americans share in common? These are honest disputes. But I am convinced that the problem is simpler and more fundamental. Twenty years ago, writer and activist Frances Moore Lappe captured the essence of the world food crisis when she argued that starvation was caused not by a scarcity of food but by a global scarcity in democracy. The education crisis has the same genealogy. It stems from a dearth of democracy: an absence of democratic will and a consequent refusal to take our children, our schools, and our future seriously.

Most educators, even while they quarrel among themselves, will agree that a genuine commitment to any one of a number of different solutions could help enormously. Most agree that although
money can’t by itself solve problems, without money few problems can be solved. Money also can’t win wars or put men in space, but it is the crucial facilitator. It is also how America has traditionally announced, We are serious about this!

If we were serious, we would raise teachers’ salaries to levels that would attract the best young professionals in our society: starting lawyers get from $70,000 to $80,000 — why don’t starting kindergarten teachers get the same? Is their role in vouchsafing our future less significant? And although there is evidence suggesting that an increase in general educational expenditures doesn’t translate automatically into better schools, there is also evidence that an increase aimed specifically at instructional services does. Can we really take in earnest the chattering devotion to excellence of a country so wedded in practice to mediocrity, a nation so ready to relegate teachers — conservators of our common future — to the professional backwaters?

If we were serious, we would upgrade physical facilities so that every school met the minimum standards of our better suburban institutions. Good buildings do not equal good education, but can any education at all take place in leaky, broken-down habitats of the kind described by Jonathan Kozol in his Savage Inequalities? If money is not a critical factor, why are our most successful suburban school districts funded at nearly twice the level of our inner-city schools? Being even at the starting line cannot guarantee that the runners will win or even finish the race, but not being even pretty much assures failure. We would rectify the balance not by penalizing wealthier communities but by bringing poorer communities up to standard, perhaps by finding other sources of funding for our schools besides property taxes.

If we were serious, we’d extend the school year by a month or two so that learning could take place throughout the year. We’d reduce class size (which means more teachers) and nurture more cooperative learning so that kids could become actively responsible for their own education and that of their classmates. Perhaps most important; we’d raise standards and make teachers and students responsible for them. There are two ways to breed success: to lower standards so that everybody “passes” in a way that loses all meaning in the real world; and to raise standards and then meet them, so that school success translates into success beyond the classroom. From Confucian China to Imperial England, great nations have built their success in the world upon an education of excellence. The challenge in a democracy is to find a way to maintain excellence while extending educational opportunity to everyone.

Finally, if we were serious, parents, teachers, and students would be the real players while administrators, politicians, and experts would be secondary, at best advisers whose chief skill ought to be knowing when and how to facilitate the work of teachers and then get out of the way. If the Democrats can clean up federal government bureaucracy (the Gore plan), perhaps we can do the same for educational bureaucracy. In New York up to half of the city’s teachers occupy jobs outside the classroom. No other enterprise is run that way: Half the soldiers at company headquarters? Half the cops at stationhouse desks? Half the working force in the assistant manager’s office? Once the teachers are back in the classroom, they will need to be given more autonomy, more professional responsibility for the success or failure of their students. And parents will have to be drawn in not just because they have rights or because they are politically potent but because they have responsibilities and their children are unlikely to learn without parental engagement. How to define the parental role in the classroom would become serious business for educators.

Some Americans will say this is unrealistic. Times are tough, money’s short, and the public is fed up with almost all of its public institutions: the schools are just one more frustrating disappointment. With all the goodwill in the world, it is still hard to know how schools can cure the ills that stem from the failure of so many other institutions. Saying we want education to come first won’t put it first.
America, however, has historically been able to accomplish what it sets its mind to. When we wish it and will it, what we wish and will has happened. Our successes are willed; our failures seem to happen when will is absent. There are, of course, those who benefit from the bankruptcy of public education and the failure of democracy. But their blame is no greater than our own: in a world where doing nothing has such dire consequences, complacency has become a greater sin than malevolence.

In wartime, whenever we have known why we were fighting and believed in the cause, we have prevailed.

Because we believe in profits, we are consummate salespersons and efficacious entrepreneurs. Because we love sports, ours are the dream teams. Why can't a Chicago junior high school be as good as the Chicago Bulls? Because we cherish individuality and mobility, we have created a magnificent (if costly) car culture and the world's largest automotive consumer market. Even as our lower schools are among the worst in the Western world, our graduate institutions are among the very best—because professional training in medicine, law, and technology is vital to our ambitions and because corporate America backs up state and federal priorities in this crucial domain. Look at the things we do well and observe how very well we do them: those are the things that as a nation we have willed.

Then observe what we do badly and ask yourself, Is it because the challenge is too great? Or is it because, finally, we aren't really serious? Would we will an end to the carnage and do whatever it took—more cops, state militias, federal marshals, the Marines—if the dying children were white and middle class? Or is it a disdain for the young—white, brown, and black—that infuses us to the pain? Why are we so sensitive to the retirees whose future (however foreshortened) we are quick to guarantee—don't worry, no reduced cost-of-living allowances, no taxes on social security except for the well-off—and so callous to the young? Have you noticed how health care is on every politician's agenda and education on no one's?

To me, the conclusion is inescapable: we are not serious. We have given up on the public schools because we have given up on the kids; and we have given up on the kids because we have given up on the future—perhaps because it looks too multicolored or too dim or too hard. "Liberty," said Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "is a food easy to eat but hard to digest." America is suffering from a bad case of indigestion. Finally, in giving up on the future, we have given up on democracy. Certainly there will be no liberty, no equality, no social justice without democracy, and there will be no democracy without citizens and the schools that forge civic identity and democratic responsibility. If I am wrong (I'd like to be), my error will be easy to discern, for before the year is out we will put education first on the nation's agenda. We will put it ahead of the deficit, for if the future is finished before it starts, the deficit doesn't matter. Ahead of defense, for without democracy, what liberties will be left to defend? Ahead of all the other public issues and public goods, for without public education there can be no public and hence no truly public issues or public goods to advance. When the polemics are spent and we are through hyperventilating about the crisis in education, there is only one question worth asking: are we serious? If we are, we can begin by honoring that old folk homily and put our money where for much too long our common American mouth has been. Our kids, for once, might even be grateful.
A Nation Still at Risk
by Chester E. Finn

Six years ago, a blue-ribbon commission studying our education system declared us a "nation at risk." Our students were not studying the right subjects, were not working hard enough, were not learning enough. Their schools suffered from slack and uneven standards. Many of their teachers were ill-prepared. "If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the panel said, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war." And, it soberly warned, if the United States did not promptly set matters right, our social structure would crack, our culture erode, our economy totter, our national defenses weaken.

To be sure, panels of this sort practically always forecast dire consequences if drastic improvements are not speedily made. But the National Commission on Excellence in Education did not exaggerate. And its voice was not a lone one. An avalanche of studies and reports in the early 1980's drew the same conclusions. It was a time of searching appraisals of American education, and the verdicts were almost uniformly grim.

Nor did they go unheard. Largely thanks to the leadership of crusading "education governors," gutsy state legislators, worried business leaders, and other non-educators, we have had at least a half-decade of efforts to change the practices of the education system in the hope of strengthening its results. Many call this reform wave the "excellence movement." Actually, it is heir to the smaller "back-to-basics" movement of the late 70's, a time when, alarmed by evidence of illiterate high-school graduates, some states adopted "minimum-competency" laws and other measures designed to ensure that those getting diplomas from the public schools would possess at least rudimentary skills in the three R's.

This concern with the output of the education system has proved more durable than anyone expected, and some of the actions taken in its name have been imaginative, more than a few of them courageous. Such terms as "accountability" have gained currency. One state after another has enacted "comprehensive" education-reform legislation, adding to graduation requirements, installing a kindergarten level, shrinking the average class size, obliging teachers to take literacy exams, making students pass all manner of tests, rearranging the rules for teacher licensing, experimenting with "school site management," revamping administrative arrangements, and more.

Such changes cost money, and as a nation we have been paying generously. We have also been raising teacher salaries nearly everywhere. Though impoverished schools can be found here and there, and although occasionally a school levy is rejected, the average per-pupil expenditure in American public education this year is about $4,800, some $1,500 higher than when A Nation at Risk was

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released. Today we are spending roughly twice as much per student in real terms as in the mid-60's, and nearly three times the level of the mid-50's.

In early 1988, a half-decade after the appearance of A Nation at Risk, President Reagan asked then-Education Secretary William J. Bennett to prepare a progress report. It was in Bennett's interest to paint as rosy a picture as possible. He was, after all, summing up developments on his and Reagan's watch. Yet here is what he reported:

American education has made some undeniable progress in the last few years. . . . We are doing better than we were in 1983.

But we are certainly not doing well enough, and we are not doing well enough fast enough. We are still at risk. The absolute level at which our improvements are taking place is unacceptably low. Too many students do not graduate from our high schools, and too many of those who do graduate have been poorly educated. Our students know too little, and their command of essential skills is too slight. . . . And the entire project of American education—at every level—remains insufficiently accountable for the result that matters most: student learning.

The long and short of it is that when gauged in terms of student learning—the only outcome that ultimately counts, all else being means to that end—the results of the excellence movement to date have been scant. The average student continues to emerge from the typical school in possession of mediocre skills and skimpy knowledge.

To be sure, as Bennett suggested, all is not entirely bleak. We are not doing badly at the bottom end. Rudimentary skills are nearly universal. Among those who remain in school and graduate, few today are wholly illiterate. The gap between white youngsters' scores and those of black and Hispanic children has narrowed. We can thus take passing satisfaction from our progress in getting "back to the basics."

Moreover, as always in the vastness of American education with its 100,000 schools, 3,400 colleges, and 58 million students, there are many fine schools and high-achieving youngsters. When the results of the Westinghouse science-talent search come out each winter, a few high schools do wonderfully well. Of the 300 semi-finalists in 1989, Virginia's Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology accounted for 15; New York City schools claimed 105, mainly at the selective Bronx Science and Stuyvesant high schools.

But all this is the exception, and hardly constitutes a plateau to rest on. More typical are recent findings of the National Assessment of Educational Progress and similar barometers:

- Just 5 percent of seventeen-year-old high-school students can read well enough to understand and use information found in technical materials, literary essays, and historical documents.
- Barely 6 percent of them can solve multi-step math problems and use basic algebra. That means correctly answering questions at this level of difficulty: "Christine borrowed $850 for one year from the Friendly Finance Company. If she paid 12 percent simple interest on the loan, what was the total amount she repaid?"
- Only 7 percent are able to infer relationships and draw conclusions from detailed scientific knowledge. Sixty percent of eleventh-graders do not know why The Federalist papers were written; three-quarters cannot say when Lincoln was President; just one in five knows what "Reconstruction" was about. Most high-school students cannot explain what a "government budget deficit" is; two-thirds do not know what "profits" mean.

So how, it is fair to ask, are we doing? What have we to show for these sizable infusions of treasure, energy, and concern? Are we any less at risk?
Given a blank map of Europe and asked to identify particular countries, young American adults (ages eighteen to twenty-four) typically give the correct answer less than one time in four. Twenty-six percent spot Greece, 37 percent France, just 10 percent Yugoslavia. Asked to do the same thing with American states, fewer than half locate New York and only one in four properly labels Massachusetts.

Such examples are painfully familiar nowadays. We often encounter them in the morning papers and on the evening news. In fact, however, they are but the tip of an iceberg of ignorance. Note, too, that most of the reports from which they are drawn describe young people who have stayed in school and are soon to graduate, those commonly deemed to be “succeeding” in our education system. Excluded from the data is the quarter of the teenage population that drops out, slows down, or defers completion of high school.

Looking overseas for points of reference, we find even greater reason for dismay. Every year or so, we get the results of another international study. The most recent, reported by the Educational Testing Service in January, compares the performance of thirteen-year-olds in mathematics and science in six countries. In math, ours came in dead last. In science, American girls and boys were tied for last place (with Ireland’s provinces). Korea led in both subjects, and the United States was also bested in both by England, Spain, and three other Canadian provinces.

- The Southern Regional Education Board recently asked colleges and universities in its fifteen states how many of their entering freshmen were academically unready for higher education. Thirty percent of the institutions reported that this was the case with at least half their new students; on 60 percent of the campuses, remedial work was indicated for at least a third of the freshmen.

- New Jersey administers a basic-skills placement test to all students entering its state colleges and universities. In 1987, just 27 percent of them were found “proficient” in verbal skills, 31 percent in “computation,” and only 15 percent in elementary algebra. Even at Rutgers, the flagship, barely half the freshmen could handle elementary algebra and nearly two in five lacked verbal skills.

One might surmise that students unprepared for college at age eighteen will not have acquired a full-fledged “higher” education four years later. Though hard data are scarce, such information as we have suggests that this is indeed the case. Our campuses are conferring degrees on many people whose intellectual skills are still shaky. Reports the National Center for Education Statistics, after analyzing various forms of “literacy” among young adults in 1985:

Among the most highly educated young adults in the nation—those with a four-year college degree—one-half of white young adults and more than 8 out of 10 black young adults were unable to perform at the 350 level of the scales. Tasks characteristic of this level include stating in writing the argument made in a long newspaper column, using a bus schedule to select the bus for given departures and arrivals, and calculating a tip in a restaurant given the tip percentage and the bill.

Although my main focus here is on the elementary and secondary schools, the implications for higher education are profound. More than half of our secondary-school graduates enter college right away (and 70 percent commence some sort of post-secondary education within six years). In the population aged twenty-five to thirty-five, the United States now boasts many more college graduates than high-school dropouts, a demographic milestone reached in the 1970s. We award more than 1.8 million additional degrees each year. The scale of our higher-education system is staggering—and unprecedented in the world. But for how many of the young people who swarm into it does “participation in post-secondary education,” or even earning a degree, mean acquiring a real “higher” education? The evidence is not encouraging:
Finally, if students entering college are inadequately prepared, so are those young Americans who head into jobs rather than through university gates at the end of their secondary schooling. Many employers report acute difficulty hiring skilled and even semiskilled workers. New York Telephone Company, for example, has grown accustomed to a 20-percent pass rate on its test for telephone operators. Motorola has found about the same proportion succeeding on its seventh-grade-level English composition and fifth-grade math tests. By some estimates, companies are spending as much as $60 billion a year on employee training, a huge fraction of this not on specialized job-related techniques but on equipping workers with essential intellectual skills and knowledge, the kind they did not get in school.

Foreign visitors to American schools are often struck favorably by the geniality and helpfulness of the students they meet. Unfortunately, affability is not a sufficient outcome of formal education. To persist on our present course is to continue producing high-school graduates who are amiable but ignorant. It is to keep turning many colleges into remedial high schools, and to continue pouring into the job market millions of young people who do not have what it takes to handle the jobs available to them. And this, of course, means continuing as a nation to fall behind our European and Asian allies, enemies, and rivals.

Why are we not getting better results? Why have so many sincere efforts at reform yielded so little? It is not for lack of concern, not for lack of national self-reproach, and not for want of money. Instead, we have been foundering on three large obstacles, and are on the verge of colliding with a fourth that is the most formidable of all.

American parents are reasonably content, too. Harold W. Stevenson of the University of Michigan has spent years comparing the educational performance of elementary-school students in the U.S. with that of youngsters in Taiwan, Japan, and China. The American children lag way behind the others in reading and math. But one would never known this from their mothers’ attitudes and opinions. Here are some of Stevenson’s findings:

Not only did American mothers generally have the most favorable evaluations of their children, they also were the most satisfied with their children’s current academic performance. . . . Mothers also were asked to evaluate the effectiveness of the schools in educating their children. American mothers were very positive: 91 percent judge the schools as doing an “excellent” or “good” job. This was more than double the percentage of Chinese mothers (42 percent) and Japanese mothers (39 percent) who chose these categories.

Professional educators contribute to the general complacency. Beginning with a generalized “t’ain’t so” reaction to A Nation at Risk, the profession has spent a fair portion of its energy these past six years arguing that things are not really so bad—and citing data contrived to prove the point. As John J. Cannell has demonstrated, virtually every state and locality in the land that uses standardized tests (i.e., essentially all of them) has managed to find its own students “above average”—and improving. Immediately dubbed the “Lake Woebegon effect,” this statistical fantasy results from shrewd test selection, from not “renorming” on a regular basis, from slipshod test security, and perhaps from a bit of plain old cheating.

The first of the obstacles is widespread denial. Most Americans appear to agree that the nation as a whole is experiencing some sort of educational meltdown, but simultaneously persist in believing that they and their children are doing satisfactorily. One of the questions asked by the international math and science study cited above was whether the thirteen-year-olds who took the test considered themselves “good at mathematics.” The American youngsters, while trailing their agemates everywhere in terms of actual proficiency, led the pack when it came to self-regard. Sixty-eight percent answered this question affirmatively, as opposed to just 23 percent in high-scoring Korea.
When denial fails, educators sometimes resort to scapegoating. Thus, when Secretary Bennett issued his five-year appraisal in 1988, the National Education Association promptly termed it a “cover-up for the Reagan administration’s failure to help improve America’s schools.” Ernest Boyer of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching said Bennett’s “divisiveness” was “really sad, if not tragic.” Frank Newman of the Education Commission of the States dubbed the report a “major disservice.” Gordon Ambach of the Council of Chief State School Officers sniffed that it was a “reheated wall chart out front of the Secretary’s rehashed personal agenda.” “Did he expect that there was going to be some overnight miracle or something?” fumed Hartford’s school superintendent.

The public has thus been lulled for years into thinking that the schools are in pretty decent shape and getting better, if not in the country at large then certainly in their own community. This is surely why the Gallup poll annually shows people giving higher marks to their children’s school than to schools-in-general. What is more, the signals parents get from their local schools nearly always indicate that their own children are doing satisfactorily—passing grades on their report cards, regular promotion to the next grade. Little do parents know that the standards themselves are lax, that doing well in school is not necessarily the same as learning much, and that it is an article of faith among American educators that “retaining” children is evil.

In education, as in any enterprise that strives to turn one thing into another, the normal way to begin is by describing as clearly as possible the product one proposes to create. With specifications in hand, it then becomes possible to design a system that will yield the desired result. If we are clear about the skills, knowledge, habits, and attitudes a young person should possess upon emerging from school into adulthood, practically everything else can be fitted into place: the detailed curriculum, the allocation of resources, the choice of textbooks, the requisites for teaching, the amount of time (which will surely vary) individuals must spend in order to progress through the subordinate levels that accumulate into the eventual result.

A basic failing of education-reform efforts in recent years is that they have tried to work the other way around. We have tinkered endlessly with the production system—its resources, processes, organizational arrangements, and employees—without pausing to specify the product we want to emerge at the other end. The consequence has been a lot of wasted motion.

With goals, of course, must come standards and expectations, or the goals will never be achieved. Most young people learn pretty much what they are obliged to learn by parents and teachers—and in matters academic, not a great deal more. That is why educational norms are so important, especially for disadvantaged youngsters. And that is why uncommonly demanding teachers—like Jaime Escalante, recently portrayed in the movie Stand and Deliver and the book Escalante: The Best Teacher in America—succeed.

Obvious though this maxim sounds, we have not taken it to heart. A look at the transcripts of the high-school graduating class of 1987—the youngsters who entered high school in the autumn the nation was declared “at risk”—reveals that only 30 percent of them actually took four years of English and three years each of math, science, and social studies. And even this minimalist core was unevenly distributed, with more than half of Asian-American but fewer than a quarter of black and Hispanic youngsters toiling through it.

Second, our reform efforts to date have lacked any coherent sense of exactly what results we are seeking to achieve. Third, in the absence of clear goals, it has been easy to ignore the primordial finding both of educational research and of common sense: people tend to learn that which they study, and to learn it in rough proportion to the amount of time they spend at the task.
We know perfectly well that learning takes time and perspiration, yet in our high schools important academic subjects—history, chemistry, foreign languages—are commonly studied for just a single year, while in other countries they are part of every year’s curriculum. Moreover, our children have shorter school days and school years than their peers in most of the rest of the industrialized world; they spend far fewer hours doing homework; and big chunks of the typical American school day and class period are given over to nonacademic pursuits, ranging from assembly programs to the time spent passing out and collecting materials.

It is no mystery what needs doing. It is, rather, a matter of the will to do it. But here we come smack up against the fourth obstacle—the one now being rolled into place by the education profession itself.

It begins with the warning, trumpeted by professional educators and their advocates in every medium at their command, that “top-down” changes of the sort urged by commissions, designed by governors, and enacted by legislatures, cannot yield significant gains in student learning, and that such moves actually worsen matters by curbing the professional discretion of teachers and turning them into tightly controlled educational mechanics. Instead, we are instructed, the way to make progress is to “empower” teachers and principals to do pretty much as they see fit, school building by school building.

Accompanying these notions is—no real surprise—a demand for still more money for education. The additional outlays are to go mainly for higher salaries and for hiring more teachers, the latter proposal often justified by the desire to reduce class size, begin school at a younger age, and provide more “services,” especially for “children at risk.”

It is obvious why educators should warm to this set of suggestions—collectively termed the “second reform movement” by Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers—and why they have already become the conventional wisdom within the profession, filling the journals, the annual conventions, many union contract negotiations, and myriad faculty meetings at colleges of education. Less clear is why they have caught the eye of a number of elected officials, lay policy-makers, newspaper editorialists, and even business leaders. Perhaps these people have become disheartened by the slow pace of reform; or perhaps they are growing weary of policy combat with the professionals, and are disposed to step aside. In any event, if the new agenda is followed, it will assuredly lead to greater public expenditures on education, endless palaver, and myriad reports and studies. It will also serve to enlarge the professional education industry. But will it do any good for students? Will they actually learn more? No one has the faintest idea, though worthwhile experiments are under way in such places as Miami, San Diego, and Rochester that may eventually shed some light on this question.

Certainly, there is much to be said in principle for cutting back the stultifying central-office bureaucracies of school systems, for recognizing the individual school as the essential unit of educational activity (and accountability), for encouraging schools to distinguish themselves from one another, and for allowing families to choose those that will best serve their children. In these respects, the “second reform movement” contains ideas that ought not to be dismissed. But we dare not romanticize the capacity of the average school, turned loose on its own, rapidly to bring about marked gains in the

These three failings are grave. Unchanged, they will keep us from making significant educational gains. Setting them right will be arduous, maybe harder than we have the stomach for. But they are not beyond our capacities to resolve. We can, if we choose, accept the fact that it is our children, and the school down the street, that are “at risk.” We can become clear about what we desire the education system to produce, and settle upon a satisfactory minimum level of attainment. (Several states and a number of localities are already demonstrating what a core curriculum might look like, and so is the Thatcher government in England.) And we can become much more exacting about performance standards, and more generous with the amount of time and instruction devoted to meeting them.
skills and knowledge of its students. Neither is it prudent to dash off in hot pursuit of an unproven strategy until we have corrected the mistakes in our present plan of attack.

But the biggest reason we ought not to follow the advice of the education profession is that its ideas about the goals of schooling are mostly wrong.

Simply put, the underlying problem we confront as we set about to produce more knowledgeable citizens is that few of our educators have much use for knowledge. The same is true of those who prepare them for classroom teaching, and, by and large, it is also true of the intellectual elites now propounding their own notions of how to fix the schools. This is the condition most menacing to the hopes and prospects of school reform.

American education is dominated by the conviction that it is not really important to know anything in particular. Facts are out. What is in is exemplified by this recent episode:

A fourth grader is assigned by the teacher to write a report about the Navaho. The teacher’s instructions carefully set forth the aspects of Indian life that the students are to cover, such as dress, food, housing, rituals, and transportation.

The boy seeks assistance from his mother, who sensibly begins by asking what era the report is to describe. Spanning the entire history of the Navaho people over the millennia seems a bit much for the fourth grade; to the mother, it is plain that a report will differ enormously according to whether one is looking at the 15th century, the 19th century, or last month.

The boy does not know. The teacher has not said. So mother calls teacher to inquire about this elementary but—she thinks—fundamental feature of the class assignment. What historical period does the teacher have in mind?

The teacher, it emerges, not only has no answer, she does not think the question appropriate. The report, she says, is intended to be about Indians, not about any particular time period. “We teach the process method,” she explains.

This is what E.D. Hirsch, the author of last year’s best-selling Cultural Literacy, calls “educational formalism.” According to this way of viewing the learning enterprise, it is not the knowledge entering one’s head but the act of thinking that matters. So long as one can analyze, it is not important what is being analyzed. Knowing how to read is important, but what one reads is not. In general, it is not the role of educators to tell youngsters what they should know. It is their solemn obligation to help them “think critically.”

How to teach “higher-order cognitive skills” is the stuff of hundreds of education workshops and “in-service days” every month. Yet for all its trendiness, the notion is also of a piece with the long-prevailing philosophy of education schools and journals. This is the philosophy of progressive education, according to which the role of the teacher is not to dominate but to facilitate, and thinking creatively, being imaginative, and solving problems are preferable to following rules, internalizing traditions, and assimilating knowledge.

This emphasis on intellectual skills—“higher-order cognitive skills” is today’s term of art—eases all sorts of pedagogical dilemmas. “Thinking critically” avoids the relativist’s agony of having to designate “right” and “wrong” answers. It skirts those endless disputes about “canons” and about “what knowledge is of greatest value,” the kind of thing that can tie up a faculty committee for months. It sidesteps the clash between supporters of a common culture and partisans of cultural pluralism (while awarding sure victory to the pluralists, since no common culture consists wholly of “reasoning skills”). It helps educators deal with the thorny issue of “values”—a term which, when used by the education establishment, signifies something one examines and at times “clarifies” rather than something one absorbs from elders, spiritual leaders, or teachers.
This strand of thought has wound through American education for a good part of the century, and by now has assumed the status of an orthodoxy. As one might expect, it is not without an implicit and sometimes explicit political component. Consider, for example, the enraged response of the education community to Hirsch's Cultural Literacy, a deeply liberal treatise which argues that disadvantaged and minority youngsters, and those from tattered families and bad neighborhoods, are ill-served by schools which fail to equip all their students with the essential background information needed for success in modern society. This work has been dismissed as elitist, as culturally hidebound, as an arid "list of facts," as the ravings of a latter-day Gradgrind, as a handbook to the game of Trivial Pursuit, as a plea for "rote learning," and as a harsh rejection of individual differences and ethnic diversity. Hirsch also stands accused of the crime of nationalism—as in, "He perpetuates the nation-state as the world's most fundamental political unit" (Catherine R. Stimpson, dean of the graduate school at Rutgers).

Thus do contemporary politics enter the educational debate, often clad in progressive pedagogical garb. One might have supposed facts to be ideologically inert, elements that all might agree on even while battling furiously over explanations and interpretations. But that is not true of American education today. My colleague Diane Ravitch and I have often cited with concern the astonishing finding that only a third of the eleventh-grade students surveyed for our 1987 book What Do Our Seventeen-Year-Olds Know? could place the Civil War in the correct half-century. Yet here is how Professor Stimpson dismisses that concern: "We would be more literate if at least two-thirds of those kids could pin the tail of time more accurately on the donkey of war." And here is former Weatherman William Ayers—a professor of, needless to say, education—on our book:

They are not interested in teaching as an activity that empowers the young to ask their own questions and seek their own answers. They are not concerned with teaching for self-determination, teaching for invention, teaching for transformation. They are not interested in teaching as a dialectical interplay of content and experience, past and present.

We had no exams, no report cards, and no training in English grammar. We were taught to "write as we feel" and to write naturally. We had no specific history classes, but a sort of hodgepodge amalgam of sociology, civics, history combined. We concentrated on different periods of history, but never did achieve a consecutive chronology of events . . . all of which left me with only a vague notion of history.

Half a century ago, there was still a price to be paid for ignorance: the college my mother wanted to attend informed her she was inadequately prepared, and would first have to go somewhere else and accumulate "some grades they could examine." Today, it is unlikely that any college in the land would signal directly that one's prior education was flawed—and even less likely that a paucity of English grammar or historical chronology would be deemed evidence of a problem grave enough to inconvenience a student displaying it.

And where English and history have led the way, mathematics and science, once regarded as the soldest parts of the school curriculum, are today not far behind. Here, too, we are now being told, there are no right answers. Here, too, the role of educators is to help students seek their own path.

In math education, among today's avant-garde the rage is for "problem solving," usually with the help of electronic calculators. "Drill and practice" are deemed archaic, and computation—those long rows of fractions to multiply and six-digit numbers to divide—is thought tiresome, hence dispensable. Nor is precision highly valued: getting the "right answer" is less important than devising a "creative" strategy for attacking the problem.

The curricular effects of "teaching for invention, teaching for transformation" have not changed much over the decades. My mother, for instance, attended a progressive school on the campus of Ohio State University in the mid-1930's. Here is how she once described it in a letter:
This is the view of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, which in March laid before the nation a whole new approach to math education. It is a view shared by the National Academy of Sciences, which has just published its own glossy tome entitled “Everybody Counts: A Report to the Nation on the Future of Mathematics Education.” The panel that assembled it reads like a who’s who of American education. Financial support came from four private foundations and five federal agencies. Here is a representative passage:

Unfortunately, as children become socialized by school and society, they begin to view mathematics as a rigid system of externally dictated rules governed by standards of accuracy, speed, and memory. A mathematics curriculum that emphasizes computation and rules is like a writing curriculum that emphasizes grammar and spelling: both put the cart before the horse. Teachers . . . almost always present mathematics as an established doctrine to be learned just as it was taught. This “broadcast” metaphor for learning leads students to expect that mathematics is about right answers rather than about clear creative thinking.

One wonders how many of Jaime Escalante’s poor Hispanic students in East Los Angeles would pass Advanced Placement calculus if their teacher scorned “standards of accuracy, speed, and memory”—or how many middle-class adults could hope to balance their own checkbooks.

One difference is that boundaries between traditional subject-matter categories are softened and connections are emphasized. . . .

A second difference is that the amount of detail that students are expected to retain is considerably less than in traditional science, mathematics, and technology courses. Ideas and thinking skills are emphasized at the expense of specialized vocabulary and memorized procedures. . . .

And here are some of the classroom precepts for teachers as set forth in the AAAS report: “do not separate knowing from finding out”; “deemphasize the memorization of technical vocabulary”; “use a team approach”; “reward creativity”; “encourage a spirit of healthy questioning”; “avoid dogmatism”; “promote aesthetic responses”; “emphasize group learning”; “counteract learning anxieties.”

This is not advice for teaching cooking, or even sociology. Nor are these the words of an eccentric fringe. This broadside emanates from a panel co-chaired by the former head of Bell Labs and the dean of undergraduate instruction of MIT, and including, besides the ubiquitous Albert Shanker, the former editor of Scientific American and the distinguished Harvard statistician Frederick Mosteller. The advice of this elevated group would certainly have fallen on friendly ears in my mother’s progressive school of the 1930’s. That it is being proffered in 1989 as a solution to our educational problems is, to say the least, remarkable—so remarkable that even the editors of the Washington Post were compelled to ask a simple question:

It’s all very interesting, but will it do anything to address the much-documented inability of American students to answer international test questions on which way a plant will turn in the presence of sunlight? Not a thing. . . .

Indeed, nothing we have learned about education, past or present, at home or abroad, gives us any grounds for believing that the “process method,” however elegantly refined, will ever produce people who know anything. This may seem a minor defect to educators, for whom specific knowledge

As for science, millions of dollars are now being spent in a highly publicized effort by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and its allies to revamp the nation’s entire educational approach to the subject. The plan differs in two large ways from customary approaches. In the words of the panel:
is an unfashionable commodity. But it is also, finally, the reason why civilian control of education remains absolutely essential. We do not allow soldiers free rein with the “shooting method,” doctors with the “surgery method,” or bus drivers with the
“honking method.” Experts have their place. They also have their interests, and their severe limitations as shapers of policy. Left to follow their own norms, professional educators and their kindred organizations and think tanks will not just preserve the legacy of progressivism, they will enshrine the “process method” in larger, and emptier, cathedrals than ever before imagined.

Most Americans, when asked, say they want their children to know more than they do, and are appalled by the prospect that the next generation will know less. Yet so long as today’s professional norms and beliefs hold sway, so long as they shape what actually occurs in the classroom, that is precisely the future that awaits our children. Changing the culture of any large enterprise is far more difficult than altering the specific policies by which it operates. But that is the central task confronting us—and also, one might add, confronting the man who would be our “education President.”