When I graduated from high school brought a fundamental change in the way Americans think about public education. In April of 1983, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* was unveiled. Terrel Bell, President Reagan’s secretary of education, had been appointed to shut down the brand-new U.S. Department of Education, something he had little taste for. He felt he needed what he later called “a Sputnik-like occurrence.” Instead of closing the doors and moving programs to other federal departments, he empaneled the National Commission on Excellence in Education to study available research and data on public school students and make recommendations to the President.

When that report, *A Nation at Risk*, appeared, it did not do what President Reagan had hoped in terms of opening the door to prayer in school and school choice, but its fiery rhetoric did catch the attention of the national press, where it provoked a national discussion about the quality and purpose of public education. The debate that began with *A Nation at Risk* can be organized into the four categories it defined as problematic: content, expectations, time, and teaching. Although leadership and fiscal support were not among the primary categories listed, the National Commission made a number of recommendations on those fronts as well.

Some argue that *A Nation at Risk* began an ongoing effort to eliminate the arts and vocational education from the curriculum, but the document itself actually calls for students to participate in a range of courses. While John Slaughter, a former director of the National Science Foundation, is quoted as worrying about the “growing chasm between a small scientific and technological elite” and everybody else, the report notes that other experts were worried that schools may emphasize such rudiments as reading and computation at the expense of other essential skills such as comprehension, analysis, solving problems, and drawing conclusions. Still others are concerned that an over-emphasis on technical and occupational skills will leave little time for studying the arts and humanities that so enrich daily life.

**A Nation at Risk at 25**

To introduce this special section marking the 25th anniversary of the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, Ms. Borek, guest editor, contemplates the document’s lasting impact and refreshes readers’ memories about the problems it defined and the recommendations it offered.

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**BY JENNIFER BOREK**

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help maintain civility, and develop a sense of community. Knowledge of the humanities, they maintain, must be harnessed to science and technology if the latter are to remain creative and humane, just as the humanities need to be informed by science and technology if they are to remain relevant to the human condition.2

The Commission recommended four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and one-half a school year of computer science for high school students. While this may seem like a strict regimen, it is important to remember that it represents fewer than 14 credits out of a typical 21 that students take for high school graduation. That would seem to leave some room for foreign language, music, and physical education. The Commission also recommended that students work toward proficiency in a foreign language starting in the elementary grades. While this recommendation is nowhere near being realized, it did mark a first step in articulating our nation’s need for multicultural understanding if we are to remain competitive in the global economy.

STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS

In their discussion of standards and expectations, the commissioners expressed concern over the intellectual, moral, and spiritual health of the American people. They understood that a high level of shared education is required if our republic is to continue in any meaningful way. But they observed that, with the pervasive tendency toward minimum standards and expectations, that ideal would be difficult to attain. They called for more rigorous standards at all levels of schooling, and they made the now seemingly ubiquitous recommendations that four-year colleges raise admissions standards and that standardized tests of achievement be implemented at “major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from high school to college or work” (p. 28). This foreshadowed the high school graduation tests that are now required in almost every state.

It is worth noting that in the Commission’s section titled “The Learning Society” we find a significant amount of rhetoric regarding lifelong learning. The Commission urged citizens to see themselves as part of a society in which people develop their potential in school and continue to push their intellectual boundaries after formal education has ceased. In including this section, the Commission supported schools in another way: it called for an educated populace that would continue to engage with schools and the broader society throughout their lifetimes.

The commissioners charged that “the ideal of academic excellence as the primary goal of schooling” seemed to be “fading across the board in American education” (p. 14). Their recommendation for restoring what they took to be the pursuit of equity and excellence together was this:

Our goal must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities. (p. 13)

TIME

The Commission was not the first to recommend that we increase the school day to seven hours and increase the school year to 220 days. Much ink has been spilled on the matter of the length of the school day and year, as the U.S. has moved from a largely agrarian society, to an industrial society, and then to a postindustrial society (even though the origin of the 180-day school calendar is not actually agrarian). A Nation at Risk made a number of suggestions about what teachers and students should be doing with the additional time. The commissioners cautioned against spending the time on a “watered down” curriculum that they perceived to be pervasive in schools.

TEACHING

The commissioners’ primary recommendations about teaching were that salaries for teachers should be “professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based” and that teachers should be required to demonstrate “competence in an academic discipline” (p. 30). These are topics that have grown old with the report itself, and they are still current today. I do find it interesting, though, that the commissioners gave essentially no space to a discussion of how teachers might come to understand the methods by which they might teach that academic discipline.

In a different place the commissioners wrote of teachers’ ability to inspire or stifle learning. But their primary discussion about this matter was colored by the notion that teacher education programs focus on methods “at the expense of courses in subjects to be taught” (p. 22). Another issue they cited was that many teachers — and they did not quantify “many” — were being drawn from the bottom quarter of students. These two issues together suggest that the nation’s schools were staffed by
faculties not ready to teach the subjects needed for an intellectual community to thrive.

It would seem that today everybody is still concerned about having enough qualified teachers, but we do not always agree on the definition of “qualified.” And with the proliferation of alternative licensure programs with a wide range of requirements, we are no closer to consensus today.

**LEADERSHIP AND FISCAL SUPPORT**

The Commission indicated that the federal government has a role to play in helping meet the needs of key groups of students, such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority students, English-language learners, and special education students. Unfortunately, the federal government has consistently failed to perform this role effectively. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind are just the latest in a long list of federal laws that create educational mandates that have never been adequately funded.

One important concession the Commission made is that schools are frequently called upon to fix a multitude of social, personal, and political problems that sometimes conflict with and reduce time for their primary purpose of education. The Commission acknowledged that these necessary distractions come at an educational and fiscal cost.

It is important to get beyond the heated rhetoric of good and evil. Surely a quarter century is time enough for the heat to have cooled. *A Nation at Risk* pointed out some important truths that educators then and now must confront. It made a number of suggestions, some more helpful than others. The authors in the articles that follow confront the report on its 25th anniversary, and they do so from a range of points of view. What they have chosen to illuminate continues the series of important discussions that, in some ways, began on that spring day as I was looking forward to college.

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