Speculations on A Nation at Risk: ILLUSIONS AND REALITIES

Recollections of A Nation at Risk may be of the sound and fury, but as far as the schools’ curricula are concerned, Mr. Hewitt argues, the report signified very little.

BY THOMAS W. HEWITT

MAGICIANS present illusions. Commissioned reports and the writers who produce them sometimes do the same. Controversy continues to surround the findings of the Warren Commission report on the Kennedy assassination long after it was completed. And the same has been true of A Nation at Risk, ever since its publication in 1983. The two most controversial issues have been the report’s role in the development and establishment of a new and permanent federal influence in national education policy making and the degree to which the report’s recommendations set the direction for subsequent national education reform actions. Overall, the controversies feed into the perception that, at least since its publication, American education has been in a perpetual state of rolling crisis and reform. Are such claims real or illusionary?

THE REPORT TRADITION

The history of education shows the ebb and flow of ideas, grassroots movements, and special interests, often manifested through published reports issued by units of government, by established state or national organizations, and, more recently, by think tanks and nonprofit centers that unabashedly advocate for a variety of causes. These reports circulate information; summarize important views; describe contemporary situations, conditions, and practices; or advocate positions on educational matters. Some are familiar, such as the widely disseminated 19th-century annual reports issued by Horace Mann as secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education, which influenced thinking about the purposes, organization, funding, and curriculum of schools. Individual colleges have issued reports — Yale in 1828, Harvard in 1845 and 1945. Other well-known reports articulated college entrance requirements for secondary school students in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Issued under the auspices of the National Education Association, the most famous of these were the reports of the Committee of 10 in 1898 and the report of the Committee on the Reorganization of Secondary Education, the famous Cardinal Principles, in 1918.

A central theme in the history of report making is the improvement of curriculum — what students are to learn — viewed, according to particular constituencies, as preparation for college, knowledge for work,
and sometimes both. It is also interesting that the written structure of the reports has generally followed a familiar progression: a statement or charge to the committee, organization, or persons assigned the task; an introduction and rationale citing the reasons for commissioning the report; the report proper, consisting of the findings and recommendations; and the appendices, providing the minutes of hearings, commissioned studies, commentaries, data, and other documents that form the evidence for the recommendations. Taken as a whole, the “report as narrative” constitutes a knowledge base of record that is useful for scrutinizing its potential importance and appraising its eventual influence. Embedded in that body of knowledge is the ever-present curriculum imperative — attending to issues about what schools should teach — a matter as fundamental to education reports and reforms today as in the past.

THE POLITICS OF THE REPORT

Like any report, A Nation at Risk must be understood in the context of its creation. A central consideration is the role of the federal government in educational matters. As I’m sure readers are aware, there is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that explicitly creates a federal role in education. The U.S. government’s role and authority have evolved through interpretation of various clauses in the Constitution. For example, there was no central federal administrative presence until the formal establishment of the United States Office of Education in the 19th century, and it was not until the Carter Administration that a U.S. Department of Education was authorized. The establishment of the department was a flash point, and A Nation at Risk played an important role in the politics swirling around the department and its survival.

In 1980, the incoming Reagan Administration had campaigned on a promise to eliminate the department. The Democratic majority in Congress had likewise vowed to save it. In 1981, Terrel Bell, Reagan’s first secretary of education, despite White House staff pressure, created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Bell explained his effort in this way:

Clearly, he understood the politics, an acknowledgment that lends credence to claims the report is politically important in two ways: it confirmed the new federal involvement in education policy, and it was the first important document issued under the federal department’s auspices. From this perspective, the department’s survival can be attributed to an informal alliance of department advocates, such as the teacher unions that had campaigned for it; supporters among congressional Democrats; and a group of influential Republicans. The unions and the Democrats viewed the department as a culmination of the centralizing of federal policy that gathered most existing school funding programs under one authority. The Republicans and others understood the department’s potential for raising national awareness about specific causes they championed, such as charter schools, vouchers, and faith-based initiatives.

While they differed on the substance of federal policy, members of this odd coalition agreed on one thing: the power of a federal department to effect change through national policy. The reality was that schools, districts, and states were hooked on federal money, and where the money went, regulations were sure to follow. Thus A Nation at Risk, if it did nothing else, settled the question of the role of the federal government in educational matters.

Beyond that political accomplishment, it does not necessarily follow that the report itself would have standing or continued importance after 1983. Even critics like Gerald Bracey and David Gabbard, who contend that the report’s influence is overblown, acknowledge its political legacy. While they recognize the subsequent growth of federal influence on education policy and the importance of a federal department of education, they and others dismiss claims that the report’s foundational role as the impetus for subsequent reform movements down to the current No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

MATTERS OF JUDGMENT

Now, some 25 years later, the legacy of A Nation at Risk is still being debated. Educational reports clearly differ in purpose, and some are valued as important over time while others are not. But how do we judge? There are qualities that can be used to appraise any report and start a process of judging its value. These qualities are the report’s legitimacy, integrity, and power. I propose to use these qualities as a starting point for discussing A Nation at Risk and judging its significance.

A report that has legitimacy has crossed the thresh-
old of the historian’s scrutiny: its importance is confirmed by subsequent inclusion in histories of education and textbooks for teachers and others. Of course, such judgments are subject to change because historians do revise their views. But so far, the literature about *A Nation at Risk* suggests that it has a sustaining historical importance. A second aspect of a report’s legitimacy concerns its agency and has to do with what body issued the report and under what authority. Since a commission authorized and empowered by the U.S. Department of Education issued *A Nation at Risk*, it has obvious legitimacy with regard to agency.

The second quality, integrity, rests on establishing the credibility of the purposes, process of inquiry, and matters of evidence presented in a report. The purposes are the stated reasons for commissioning the report. These are usually found in the charge to the committee and in the opening statements that give the committee the scope and authority to do its defined work. *A Nation at Risk* presents eight charges establishing the National Commission’s purpose. The first five lay out the scope of the Commission’s work:

1. To review and synthesize the data and scholarly literature on the quality of learning and teaching in the nation’s schools, colleges, and universities, both public and private, with special concern for the educational experience of teen-age youth;
2. To examine and to compare and contrast the curricula, standards, and expectations of the educational systems of several advanced countries with those of the United States;
3. To study a representative sampling of university and college admission standards and lower division course requirements with particular reference to the impact upon the enhancement of quality and the promotion of excellence such standards may have on high school curricula and on expected levels of high school academic achievement;
4. To review and to describe educational programs that are recognized as preparing students who consistently attain higher than average scores in college entrance examinations and who meet with uncommon success the demands placed on them by the nation’s colleges and universities;
5. To review the major changes that have occurred in American education as well as events in society during the past quarter century that have significantly affected educational achievement.

The remaining three charges pertain to the Commission’s administrative authority to conduct hearings, compile information, and make recommendations. These are straightforward charges without any apparent relationship to subtle agendas that anticipate a desired result.

The report’s evidence-based findings offered in support of its recommendations further reflect its integrity. These are the statements about educational needs, problems, and solutions that emerged from the investigatory process created by the commission. The recommendations should be clearly related to the findings, and both should follow from one of the charges to the Commission. In *A Nation at Risk* there are findings and related recommendations in four areas: content, expectations, time in school, and teaching. There is also a fifth set of recommendations for what the report calls “Leadership and Fiscal Support.” The proceedings that detail the Commission’s work from its charges to its findings and recommendations provide a clear, unencumbered body of evidence reflecting the integrity of the Commission, the investigative process, and the report. After publication, various aspects of the report were challenged, but its integrity was not questioned. The primary criticism was that the report did not attend to appropriate educational issues.

The third quality by which we can judge a report is power, which refers to evidence that the report has become grounded in the knowledge base and that it has exerted influence on practice and policy making. A casual search on the Internet confirms the extensive citation of *A Nation at Risk*. Power is also evident in a report’s capacity to alert the public or affected leaders to problems and to compel immediate change, usually specific to the report’s findings, though sometimes extended to other areas. The power to force change is a function of a report’s legitimacy and integrity. In the case of *A Nation at Risk*, these three qualities explain why it was initially accepted and why it has retained an aura of importance for 25 years. Still to be addressed are the claims about its legacy, specifically whether the findings and recommendations in the report gave legs to the waves of reforms during the 1990s and to No Child Left Behind.

**THE REFORM QUESTION**

Reports proposing education reforms address multiple needs or issues, and this is true of *A Nation At Risk*. While its more general charge was to examine the state of American schooling and education, the report narrowed its focus to the four areas of content, expectations, time, and teaching. Appropriately, the first and primary consideration has to do with curriculum, what the schools should teach. As I noted above, that question is central to any education reform or proposal for change, and so I will use it selectively to appraise the way the report responds to specific fundamentals in curriculum thinking and practice.

A basic understanding of curriculum depends on
four fundamentals: scope, sequence, continuity, and balance. The scope of the curriculum refers to what is covered. We can determine this by looking at the state courses of study, the courses of study put forth by various professional organizations, and the textbooks used. The sequence of the curriculum refers to how it is ordered over the course of a school year, between grades, or within a given subject. Again, we can determine the sequence by referring to documents such as school, district, and state curriculum guides or those available from professional sources. Curriculum continuity means the flow of content that is to be learned. Thus algebra I precedes algebra II. This also implies a movement from simple, concrete, easily understood content to the more abstract and complex. Consider, for example, the introduction of science concepts in various grades of elementary school, their exposition in the middle school curriculum, and then the narrowing and in-depth treatment in high school. Balance in curriculum refers to the synchronic relationship of the other three elements and the compatibility of the learner and the curriculum.

This set of fundamental curriculum concepts is useful as a framework within which to appraise the integrity and power of A Nation at Risk. By narrowing the focus to the curriculum, we can concentrate, first, on the specifics of the relationship between the report’s curriculum findings and the evidence offered and, second, on the report’s impact on subsequent curricular reforms.

To arrive at specific findings with regard to curriculum, the Commission examined patterns of courses high school students took in 1964-69 and compared them with course patterns in 1976-81. From these analyses, the commissioners concluded that secondary school curricula had been “homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose.” The report used the term “cafeteria-style” to describe a secondary curriculum “in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses” (p. 18). The report also found that the proportion of students taking a general program of study had increased from 12% in 1964 to 42% in 1979.

The report argued that what it called a “curricular smorgasbord” explained a great deal about the situation in schools. Many intermediate and advanced courses were being offered, but only a small number of students were availing themselves of them. Intermediate algebra was taken by just 31% of high school graduates, and the percentages taking foreign languages or geography were smaller still. Just 6% of all students at that time took calculus, even though it was offered in 60% of schools. Moreover, 25% of the credits earned by students in the general track were in physical and health education, work experience outside the school, remedial English and mathematics, and personal service and development courses, such as training for adulthood and marriage.

Based on such findings the Commission recommended that high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the “Five New Basics”: four years of English, three years of mathematics, three years of science, three years of social studies, and one-half year of computer science. Two years of a foreign language were strongly recommended for the college-bound.

The Commission followed its recommendations with nine clarifications that suggest what a student ought to be able to do or demonstrate after engaging the curriculum. The first five elaborate on the “New Basics” curriculum in English, science, mathematics, and social studies. Three of the remaining four address the need for strong foreign language programs, an increased focus on fundamentals in the first eight grades, and the inclusion of arts and vocational education to complement the “New Basics.” (The ninth and final clarifying recommendation is a curious thank you to organizations and societies, such as the American Chemical Society, for their work in developing curriculum and materials.)

All of this is straightforward and similar to the way recommendations were offered in other reports. The curriculum recommendations in A Nation at Risk seem more an exhortation than a recipe, more a confirmation of existing curriculum scope and sequence than a revolution or even an evolutionary step, except perhaps for the addition of computer science. Put simply, the scope and sequence of the curriculum is not changed. The admonition to increase curricular vigor in the first eight grades doesn’t change much either. The emphasis on more study in the “New Basics” does require some thought about curricular scope and sequence between grades, and it is also a nod toward reconsidering the balance and continuity in the curriculum/learner relationship. Once again, textbooks, courses of study, policy statements, and other documents suggest that scope and sequence changes came about more as a result of interpretations publishers made for marketing purposes than as a consequence of the report.

The problem for our analysis is that the extent of adjustments, how detailed and widely based they were, is difficult to determine because there is a dearth of comparative studies of curriculum materials and products that confirm what content is actually engaged in class-
rooms and schools. Other factors further complicate our efforts to understand the interplay of curriculum changes and the report’s recommendations. One is the existence of 50 state curricula rather than a single national one. Unlike the centralized curriculum of the United Kingdom, there exists no national American curriculum with which to create a comparative context for a report like *A Nation at Risk*.

Another difficulty is finding a body of information about other curriculum reform efforts for comparison. The most recent reasonably documented period of significant curriculum change occurred from about 1950 through the mid-1960s. This was a period of significant changes in scope and sequence in textbooks, of vigorous focus on subject-matter accuracy, and of emphasis on the disciplinary approach to engaging learners with the curriculum. What all of this means is that claims related to curriculum reforms and *A Nation at Risk* are tenuous at best.

**REALITIES AND ILLUSIONS**

Where one chooses to stand on the significance of *A Nation at Risk* depends on the evidence one can marshal. From the perspective of the appraisal process I’ve suggested here, the evidence for the report’s legitimacy, integrity, and power, when viewed through the lens of the curriculum, does not substantiate its importance. Given the lack of historical studies at the level of curriculum implementation, little evidence exists to connect subsequent curriculum work directly with the report. The persistent claim of importance for *A Nation at Risk* is mainly attributable to the legitimacy conferred by the political use made of the report in the emergence of the U.S. Department of Education and the new role of the federal government as a partner in education policy making.

The other recommendations of the report — the ones that concern expectations, instruction, and teaching — are suggestive rather than definitive with regard to establishing its influence. For example, if we look through the literature on reforms since the report’s publication, we find articles about the cosmetics of reform — tinkering with length of days, increasing graduation requirements, etc. — but no evidence that those factors have a direct impact on curriculum fundamentals. Textbooks remain basically the same in content, scope, and sequence. The regular suggestions for more mathematics or more science or an emphasis on reading are not examples of a robust, detailed scope and sequence. Moreover, most of those suggestions have come from subject-matter specialists in the various disciplines, such as the sciences and mathematics.

The big aspects of recent reforms have targeted school organization, generating ideas such as schools-within-schools and schools based on gender. And, of course, there have been lawsuits over funding inequities and concerns about increases in state control over district initiatives, but these have no direct relationship to *A Nation at Risk*. Collectively, these activities have promoted a perception that reforms in the national context are largely benign until they affect something local. And that perception fails to confront the traditional concern in American education for avoiding top-down changes in curriculum. Of course, this was true before *No Child Left Behind* moved federal involvement to the local level. Indeed, the reality of federal dominion over education is at the heart of the debate over renewal of that law in the educational battleground.

So while it’s clear that *A Nation at Risk* had a major impact, at least in the continuing development of federal influence, the reality is that in terms of the curriculum, the report’s impact on schools and schooling is the illusion.

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