WHEN THE National Commission on Excellence in Education submitted *A Nation at Risk* to Secretary of Education Terrel Bell on 26 April 1983, there was little to suggest that this report would shine a spotlight on education that would last a quarter of a century. Indeed, not long after the release of this document, critics were already downplaying its recommendations. “The truth is,” wrote one, “that the public schools are doing the job well, the product is viable, and the public is receiving what they need from the schools.” It was only natural for educators to defend their practice and their profession. Since the shock of Sputnik in 1957, the education establishment had apparently rebounded and, in the view of many Americans, had responded appropriately.

Educators were clearly stung by many of the recommendations contained within *A Nation at Risk*. In addressing the recommendation that noneducators with subject-area expertise should be considered for teaching positions, one central office administrator responded, “Teachers know content. What they don’t know is how to be a psychologist, counselor, policeman, diplo-

---

**BY JOHN W. HUNT**

---

JOHN W. HUNT is an assistant professor of educational leadership at Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville.
mat, disciplinarian, referee, entertainer, and magician, all at the same time.” In the early and mid-1980s, few administrators realized that they would spend the next 25 years serving as apologists for their profession.

I was principal of a junior high school in 1983, and I retired as superintendent in 2005, well into the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). One constant in all those intervening years was the need to respond to criticism of the schools by legislators, business interests, and members of the general public. Here I wish to examine the years between 1983 and NCLB in an effort to determine whether school administrators really are experiencing “déjà vu all over again.”

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS

The common perception of the years before the era of reform attributed to A Nation at Risk is that most administrators were managers. School boards were happy with principals and superintendents who could build good schedules, discipline students, construct and manage budgets, and deal successfully with the community. It was widely believed that administrators came largely from the ranks of coaching or from the nation’s corps of band directors. Educators with such backgrounds were supposedly used to organizing, planning, and dealing with relatively large groups of people. Administrators were expected to recognize good teaching talent and then turn those teachers loose in the classroom to instruct the nation’s youths. Teachers were expected to be the instructional experts. Curriculum development was typically reduced to the process of selecting textbooks. Both building-level and district administrators were overwhelmingly male and were expected to be transmitters of the educational culture of the school district. If a school was orderly and the parents were happy, everything was copacetic.

With the release of A Nation at Risk, things began to change. The report seemed to have struck a chord with much of the American public, and a sleeping tiger had been awakened. Or to paraphrase one writer, the reform movement was a political cause in search of a theme, and A Nation at Risk became that theme.\(^3\) Unbeknownst to administrators at the time, their world was about to shift dramatically.

The document contained a recommendation addressing “Leadership and Fiscal Support.” The National Commission on Excellence in Education specifically targeted the difference between management and leadership in its first implementing recommendation, proclaiming, “The Commission stresses the distinction between leadership skills involving persuasion, setting goals and developing community consensus behind them, and managerial and supervisory skills. Although the latter are necessary, we believe that schools boards must consciously develop leadership skills at the school and district levels if the reforms we propose are to be achieved.”\(^4\) Reflecting on the magnitude of this recommendation 20 years after the report was published, a former school principal stressed the significance of this change in emphasis by declaring, “While management skills, the nerve to discipline, and political savvy are undoubtedly qualities principals still need, improved teaching and learning has become the school leader’s central concern, the essential benchmark for success.”\(^5\) While the typical administrator’s role began to change in the 1980s, there was no smooth progression along a linear path to the era of NCLB. Rather, the lives of most administrators during these years could better be characterized as a series of fits and starts.

REVOLUTION, PLANT CORN OR REVOLUTION, REVOLUTION, REVOLUTION

As a young administrator in the early 1980s, I heard one of my bosses say, “The usual pattern is revolution, plant corn, revolution, plant corn. Around here, it seems to be revolution, revolution, revolution.” The context of this statement was that we seemed to be continually implementing new ideas and programs. School leaders were moving on to the next new idea before the last one had a fair chance to take hold.

The excellence movement. Since the 1980s, administrators have found it necessary to deal with three distinct reform movements.\(^6\) The first of these was commonly called the excellence movement. The intent of the excellence movement was to increase standards for students, as well as for classroom teachers, by tinkering with the conditions of teaching. This was the era of increased graduation requirements, longer school days or years, and enhanced teacher certification requirements. More attention was paid to student assessment, in terms of both type and frequency.

Many of these excellence initiatives came from state legislatures and state departments of education. The movement was clearly perceived to be top-down. In my home state of Illinois, a major reform initiative was passed in 1985.\(^7\) When the compilation of Illinois reforms was sent to educators throughout the state, it came in the form of a thick document dressed up like a gift, complete with a bow on the cover. Some educators at that time grumbled that they would rather have received a stocking containing a lump of coal. Be-
tween 1983 and 1985, two dozen states passed reform packages. Many of these were in the South. The list of southern governors promoting educational change included a number of individuals who would subsequently play a political role on the national level. Among these governors were Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, Bill Clinton of Arkansas, and Richard Riley of South Carolina.

The excellence movement did promote the engagement of administrators in more leadership activities. However, as previously noted, many of these reforms dealt with time, calendars, and requirements. In other words, the target was the education system in general, rather than what was happening inside individual classrooms. This was also a time when business interests were able to exert a significant amount of influence on state legislatures and, by extension, on the public schools. Administrators were urged to read materials promoting the “business approach” to change. In a sense, this was a reversion to the management model, albeit a modern model of managing people. On the one hand, administrators were now being urged to become leaders; on the other hand, the business/management approach was held up as a model.

The restructuring movement. The next movement, the restructuring movement, began to evolve in the late 1980s. While some aspects of this movement found a voice in state policy, much of this reform took place at the district level. Unlike the excellence movement, the restructuring movement was encouraged and promoted by educators and their professional associations. This was the golden age of site-based management and the flattening of organizations. School boards and superintendents were urged to relinquish increasing amounts of control to the individual schools. The public spotlight increasingly focused on superintendents and principals during this period. Creativity and the ability to think on one’s feet became valuable attributes for building principals.

While principals were encouraged to be creative and open to new ideas, the same attributes were also prized among teachers. Encouraging teachers to try new approaches and techniques in the classroom required building-level administrators with skills different from the managerial skills that had previously been primary. First, this evolving approach assumed that building leaders had the skills, knowledge, and dispositions to help teachers improve their instruction. The types of professional growth for administrators shifted at this time toward a plethora of instructionally related approaches to improving classroom learning. There was a fair amount of discussion regarding how teachers could better “engage” students. Second, this emerging approach meant that administrators had to be comfortable giving up the sense of control and expertise that many had previously felt.

At the same time, many administrators felt that this was a very exciting phase in their careers. Some relished the challenge of coaxing and cajoling the teachers in their buildings and districts to experiment with new ideas and take on new challenges. This was also the “duck, duck” era for many teachers. A common sentiment in many districts was, “Our principal has just come back from a conference. Here comes a new idea for us to try. Duck!”

During the restructuring movement, there was also a growing willingness to loosen controls at the district level. Theoretically, in addition to control of curricular decisions, a truly site-based district would have turned over staffing and budgetary decisions to the individual schools as well. In fact, though, most “site-based” districts probably did a better job of giving up control of the curriculum than of the staffing and budget. As a superintendent, I was fond of saying, “I want to create a district where a good idea is as likely to come from a kindergarten teacher as from the superintendent.” While this kind of sentiment was a strongly held philosophical belief on the part of many administrators, the superintendent was the one individual whom the school board held to be ultimately responsible for the success or failure of the district.

Another aspect of the restructuring movement that affected administrators was the movement to “flatten” the organizational structure of school districts to put them in line with the current thinking in the business world. Essentially, the rationale behind this movement was to place the chief executive officer closer to the action. It was felt that the top individuals could develop a better understanding of their organizations, and so make better decisions, if there were fewer layers of management filtering information before it reached the top of the pyramid. Of course, in school districts, the bargaining units often felt that this change would translate into more money for the troops in the field. This effort to flatten organizations made intuitive sense when districts considered instituting site-based management. If the individual schools were given more responsibility to direct their own affairs, then it would seem logical that the central office could do with a smaller staff.

The restructuring movement was accompanied by attendant calls for more accountability. In exchange for increased flexibility on the part of school districts, legislators and constituents expected improved results. Many states mandated a public reporting of student achieve-
The third movement has been the standards movement. In some states, this led to head-to-head comparisons of school districts’ test scores in the local press. Some newspapers featured such data in prominent, pull-out sections, lovingly referred to as “centerfolds” by many educators. There is no doubt that the wide publication of test data increased the level of anxiety on the part of many administrators during the restructuring period.

In spite of the anxiety brought about by the new accountability pressures of the restructuring movement, many administrators still perceived the movement as a breath of fresh air. During those years, I moved from a position as director of instruction in a large midwestern district to a similar position in Colorado. The midwestern district was still very structured and still quite involved in the excellence mentality. The Colorado district was heavily engaged in restructuring efforts, and site-based management was the driving force among its employees. The midwestern district had insisted on standard textbooks and approaches for all 27 of its schools. In the Colorado district, not only was one unlikely to find the same textbook series from building to building, but there probably were different series in use in different grades within the buildings. It was even possible to find rooms where teachers had given up using textbooks altogether.

The daily job of being instructional director varied greatly between these two districts. In the midwestern district, a major part of the role was ensuring the schools’ compliance with the district’s adopted curriculum and materials. Curriculum development was a major activity, involving large teams of teachers and other staff members, and hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent for major adoptions. In the Colorado district, curriculum development took place at the building level, and purchases were made out of building budgets. Rather than relying on massive curriculum guides for direction, the individual schools in the Colorado district turned to two- or three-page position papers on mathematics education, middle-level education, and so on. Individual schools had a great deal of authority in such matters. The role of curriculum director in the Colorado district was primarily that of support person and roving “expert generalist.” Academic cheerleader would not be far from the mark.

The standards movement. The third movement with roots in A Nation at Risk has been the standards movement. Elements of this movement gained renewed vigor with the coming of NCLB. This movement has probably had the most profound impact on administrators. It has shifted public focus, sometimes with laser-like intensity, to the building level. It has redirected attention from the activities of teachers to the achievement of students. Rather than emphasizing the results of mandates such as course requirements and teacher certification standards, the movement has focused on how well individual students and groups of students are able to perform academically.

On the surface, the increased concern for individual student achievement seemed to be a positive development. Intuitively, this new thrust seemed logical, and it filled many with great hope. Many state departments of education and professional organizations did good work in the area of developing learning standards. One excellent example of this work was the Principles and Standards for School Mathematics, produced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Documents such as the NCTM standards trickled down into some school districts during this period. State standards, on the other hand, were widely and rapidly infused into the nation’s schools, increasingly accompanied by legislative mandates for implementation and assessment.

The standards movement soon caused administrators to become more personally involved in school improvement planning. While administrators had traditionally worked to improve their schools, this new phase targeted the improvement of student performance in specific subject areas. In addition to the learning standards produced by the national professional organizations and state departments of education, planning activities for school improvement were greatly enhanced by the signing of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act in 1994. This legislation called for all students to leave certain grade levels in school having demonstrated competency in English, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, the arts, history, and geography. The law was initially accompanied by over $100 million in federal funding for planning and staff development. Individual states were required to apply for these funds, and then individual school districts could apply for planning and implementation grants from their state departments of education. This was the first major infusion of planning dollars in many years, and large numbers of school districts applied for and received Goals 2000 grants.

Goals 2000 set off a flurry of activity among the ranks of administrators. Superintendents and central office staff members spent hours constructing and submitting grant proposals. Once the successful districts received their funds, building-level administrators engaged in hours of planning and implementation activities with their staff members.

There was a great push at the time to link school im-
improvement activities with subject-area standards. This caused many schools and districts to seriously examine learning standards for the first time. While the major thrust of Goals 2000 was in the areas of mathematics and science, it was possible to work in a wide range of subject areas. Among the exciting new developments at this time was an interest in creating performance-based assessments. While teachers and administrators struggled with the issues of time and the open-ended nature of performance assessments, many educators were convinced that such assessments were the wave of the future.

When President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act in January 2002, some administrators believed that NCLB had hijacked the promise held within Goals 2000 and the overall standards movement. Over the years since the passage of NCLB, school improvement efforts have narrowed significantly. Now, both school improvement and staff development in school districts are increasingly confined to those areas tested under NCLB for the purposes of determining whether schools are making adequate yearly progress (AYP). A recent study of school districts that failed to make AYP for two or more consecutive years showed that both school improvement efforts and staff development initiatives were being primarily restricted to language arts and mathematics. Perhaps even more telling was a major study released by the Center on Education Policy in March 2006, which showed that 71% of the elementary schools in the study had decreased the time devoted to subjects other than language arts and mathematics — or had even eliminated some of those subjects — in order to make more time for instruction in the tested subject areas. Today, AYP is primarily determined through the use of state-developed or commercially prepared tests, with few performance assessments possible.

In the current iteration of the standards movement, administrators at the building level are working with the teachers and other staff members in their buildings to address the academic performance of individual students. They are collaborating to develop instructional strategies for use in their school improvement plans. One of the reasons we have NCLB with us today is that we paid too little attention to the various subgroups of students in the past. Historically, when administrators reviewed state assessments or nationally standardized assessment data, they were generally pleased if students were scoring at or above state or national averages, and they often dug no further. In many instances, the averages masked the comparatively poor performance of students in specific subgroups. Now, with the disaggregation of data required under NCLB, administrators and teachers are focusing on the performance of individual students in all subgroups.

The high-stakes nature of NCLB, however, has created many logistical and ethical dilemmas for school administrators. Should we spread our English-language learners throughout the district, rather than educating them in a specialized program in a single building, in order to avoid creating a subgroup large enough to “count” in a single building? Should we still be willing to spend district dollars on staff development in the social studies and the arts? Or should we allocate all such funds to the AYP tested areas? And then there are the “bubble students” — those on the verge of making AYP. Some districts now “write off” those students they perceive as having little hope of making AYP and focus their efforts exclusively on the students with a real possibility of making AYP.

AN INTERESTING JOURNEY

While the 25 years since the release of A Nation at Risk have been filled with challenges for administrators, these years have been professionally fulfilling for many principals and superintendents. During this era, administrators have been forced to become lifelong learners in order to survive. However, many administrators like their jobs because of the daily challenges and view these challenges as opportunities.

There are certainly frustrations in both building-level and district administration. Administrators are continually called upon to defend the educational processes in their schools and districts. In recent years, a major challenge has been to bolster teacher morale in the face of NCLB. But this is not new. There were morale issues associated with the release of A Nation at Risk in 1983. The difference today seems to be that the attacks on the practice of our nation’s schools are more personalized.

The increasing focus on the individual learner over the past quarter century has been noteworthy, as has been our more recent interest in the performance of the various subgroups in the school population. NCLB came about for a reason, as did its predecessor, A Nation at Risk. Educators have learned a great deal about student learning over the past 2½ decades, spurred on in no small part by the impact of these reports. Administrators have been smack in the middle of this learning and activity, working in concert with teachers and other staff members to improve student learning.

The nature of both building- and district-level administration has clearly changed since the call for a shift
in emphasis from management to leadership that was contained in the 1983 report. And for the most part, we have made the move from paternalism to collegiality. Early in the restructuring era, the nation began to see a number of high-profile superintendents promoting their ideas and the progress of their districts on a national stage. In part, the activity of these individuals was a response to the national criticism of public education. While many of these leaders were able to accomplish positive change in their districts, their tenure was often relatively brief. Soon, they were off to the next new challenge in another district.

Around the beginning of the 21st century, educators began talking about another type of leadership. School boards began to look for superintendents and principals who were willing to commit to longer stays in their schools and districts. They began to look for what Jim Collins has termed “Level 5” leaders. These are leaders with less outward ego involvement than the high-profile leaders previously mentioned. Level 5 leaders get their enjoyment from working collegially with their administrative teams, teachers, and other staff members to move their districts forward toward a common vision.

So are administrators really experiencing “déjà vu all over again”? Is NCLB really the 21st-century version of A Nation at Risk? It has certainly caused a similar stir nationally and in the education community. Some would say that NCLB has brought about an even higher level of activity than its Reagan-era predecessor. Both A Nation at Risk and NCLB were calls for action. However, A Nation at Risk was a more general call to arms and left the manner of implementation of its recommendations to the education community. It was not prescriptive. NCLB, on the other hand, is highly targeted and has had the effect of narrowing the focus of public school educators. Critics of the public education system would say that the prescriptive nature of the legislation is necessary in order to bring about the legislated gains.

Over the years, administrators have seen a shift from the carrot to the stick. While A Nation at Risk did not come with funding, it was ultimately followed by some financial incentives from the federal government. The more recent NCLB is accompanied by some increased funding and a series of sanctions, but today’s administrators are driven more by the stick of sanctions than the carrot of the financial incentives.

I do not consider A Nation at Risk and NCLB to be mirror images of each other. Rather, I would argue that NCLB should be considered the most recent major event in an evolution initiated by the release of A Nation at Risk. These two landmark events are not the bookends of an era. But the change they sought to provoke will continue to be the driving force for administrators for the foreseeable future.

11. From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, 2006).