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Three years ago tomorrow afternoon something quite unusual happened. Eighteen individuals from business and education, the corporate and foundation worlds, government and private life released an open letter to the American people about the alarming deterioration in their schools. We called our letter A Nation at Risk. Within days of its appearance, educators, government officials, journalists, and members of the public generally were arguing over the report and its implications for our schools and the country's future. Within two weeks, three-fourths of the American people had heard of A Nation at Risk; and during the following year, it was reprinted more than 6 million times. The quality and condition of American education--topics that had rested near the bottom of our domestic agenda for nearly a quarter of a century--were suddenly the subject of widespread national discussion and debate.

What happened?

Obviously, much more than just our letter. A number of other groups--the Education Commission of the States, the National Science Board, the Twentieth Century Fund, the Business-Higher Education Forum, the College Entrance Examination Board, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, to mention
just a few--were examining various aspects of American education. Their analyses raised like questions, reflected common findings, offered similar recommendations, and fostered further discussion.

In addition, people in 1983 were becoming increasingly aware that our nation's once unassailable position in the international marketplace was eroding, and that our economic supremacy was being successfully challenged by others. This realization, coming as it did on the heels of the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s, shocked our national self-esteem, fastened our attention on the causes of that decline, and provoked a deeply felt concern for the nation's future. People were also awakening to the realization, as we noted in our letter, that in modern times no democratic society can flourish that does not provide its citizens with a shared education and an appreciative understanding of their common culture. Public concern about the schools was also growing as student achievement and aptitude test scores declined, even as grades and other established modes of measuring student performance were rising. So our report, and others like it, appeared at a time when the public was increasingly restive about both the quality of American schooling and the economic future of the country. They were, therefore, prepared to listen to what we and others had to say about these matters.

And listen they did. The past three years have seen an unprecedented wave of educational reform sweep across the nation. Most
states have raised high school graduation requirements. Many have enacted comprehensive reform measures affecting teacher status and compensation, the content, scope, and sequence of curricula, the quality of textbooks, the special needs of gifted and disadvantaged students, and the length of the school day and year. Some three hundred state and school district task forces have worked over the past few years to promote excellence in their schools. The business community has enthusiastically contributed to school reform, and a new generation of school/business cooperation is the result. Colleges and universities across the country are not only building new partnerships with the schools, but also tightening up their own standards and giving a fresh look at their own offerings, especially at the undergraduate level. Even the long and precipitous decline in SAT scores appears to have been arrested, at least for the moment, and average scores appear to be climbing.

The remarkable strength and energy of the reform movement have confirmed the Commission's belief that an open letter, addressed more to the American people than to government, would bring the matter to life where it counted most: in the 50 states and 16,000 school districts across the country, where the primary responsibility for education lies. Governors and legislators responded enthusiastically to the call for reform; parents, teachers, administrators, professional associations, scholarly and scientific societies, foundations, students, school boards, concerned citizens, and the media have all played a central role
as well. The educational reform movement has enjoyed success principally because it has been a grassroots movement. It has reflected the conviction of the American people that something can and must be done about our schools and the character and quality of the education they offer. And what has occurred throughout the country during the past three years has demonstrated that change can take place; that individuals can make a difference.

I should like now to address five unfinished items of business on the agenda of school reform. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is one compiled in the context of what remains to be done, what is reasonably attainable, and what next steps can help maintain this movement for reform.

First of all, we must continue to stress the fact that our schools exist primarily to foster intellectual competence and informed citizenship in our free society. They do not exist to respond to every social, political, or individual demand made of them by the plethora of single-issue interests that abound in this country. A central finding of A Nation at Risk was that the secondary school curricula had, over time, largely lost its sense of focus and coherence. "In effect," we said in our report, "we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses." Thus, a disproportionate share of the curriculum was being devoted to courses that were useful, perhaps, but not essential for the
schools to teach or for which their sponsorship was essential. Courses in consumer education, driver education, sex education, family education, safety education, and bachelor living, for example, had been crowding out the more essential subjects such as English, mathematics, science, social studies, government, foreign languages, and the arts. One of the most telling statistics the Commission discovered was that the proportion of students completing high school who had taken a general program of study, rather than a vocational or a college preparatory program, had increased from 12 percent of those graduating in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979. A general program of study, of course, prepares students neither for work nor for further education. Indeed, it is not clear to me what a general course of high school study is intended to do.

The educational reform movement has attempted to reverse this trend and to restore the necessary sense of purpose and coherence to our secondary school curricula. It has underscored the fact that schools should concentrate on what they are uniquely able to do—fostering the skills of citizenship and developing in their students those intellectual skills and capacities indispensable to living productively and adaptively in a complex and changing world.

This is no simple assignment. The schools themselves influence society in important respects, but in others they merely mirror the larger world beyond their doors. And some aspects of today's
social environment make it harder, not easier, for the schools to do their job.

For example, in recent years there has been an alarming rise in the number of teenage pregnancies. The phenomenon of "children having children," as it has been described, is among the most worrisome problems of teenage youth today. It is a phenomenon that has grown steadily over the last decade. It is estimated that one in every ten girls aged 15 to 19 years old became pregnant last year. We are the only developed nation in the world whose teenage pregnancy rate is on the rise.

This is only one of the changes being wrought in the American family; and it affects our schools and their students in very direct ways. Another example is the increasing number of single-parent families and of families in which both parents work. The entry of unprecedented numbers of American women into the labor force since World War II is altering the traditional American family. It is altering it profoundly. In California alone, it is estimated that there are about 800,000 latchkey children between the ages of 5 and 13 who are left on their own after school until their parents--or parent--comes home. Who is caring for these children before and after school? And how will we see that they receive the attention and encouragement and help they need to succeed in school and in life?
We cannot, as we have too often done in the past, simply push these and similar social problems onto the schools as if they were somehow magically equipped to deal with them or had the resources to help even if they were able to do so. Our society tends unthinkingly to turn to the schools for answers or for help without also sensing that the solutions must be sought both within other institutions in our society and within each of us—in our individual willingness to accept some responsibility ourselves and to commit our own effort and time to the task, together with helping others to contribute as they can.

It would be hard to overstate the urgency of these problems. Whether we find solutions will exert a profound influence on the ability of the schools to educate the next generation.

Second, we need to continue to strengthen the teaching profession. This includes the raising of teachers' salaries. *A Nation at Risk* recommended that teacher salaries be generally increased and that salaries be professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based. Despite welcome gains over the past three years, the fact remains that many states and school districts are still far behind in terms of realistic compensation for a demanding profession. And everywhere, even in the states and districts that pay the highest salaries, a significant gap exists between what teachers make and what other professionals can expect to earn for similar training and education.
And, as many have pointed out, we need to improve the status of the teaching profession—an effort in which raising salaries is an important but not the only element. For some time now criticism of how teachers are selected and trained has been commonplace. Thirty-eight deans of leading schools of education—members of what is called the Holmes Group—recently proposed sweeping changes in the education of prospective teachers. Their report should be read and attention paid to it. We need to encourage experimentation with ways to attract the best and the brightest into the teaching profession; and this is all the more urgent in light of impending teacher shortages in science, mathematics, and other critical disciplines. The National Science Teachers Association, for example, estimates that we will need 300,000 new mathematics and science teachers by 1995—more than the total number of such teachers in the classroom today. In California, a recent commission on the teaching profession warned that the state will in all likelihood need about 85,000 additional teachers by the end of this decade, while if present trends persist, only 50,000 will be available.

The need to recruit more teachers presents us with a naturally occurring experiment—the opportunity to try alternate routes to the teaching profession. A Nation at Risk suggested, for example, that people with demonstrated competence in particular subjects be permitted to teach with only modest, in contrast to extensive, formal pedagogical training. We should not assume, of course, that this and other alternate paths to the teaching
profession are bound inevitably for either success or failure. But our uncertainty about the outcome should not render us unable or unwilling to try something new.

Third, we must continue the effort to inject more rigor into the high school curriculum, to raise our expectations of students, and to improve student performance. Critics of A Nation at Risk argued that the Commission's insistence upon rigorous standards and high expectations would increase rather than decrease student failure. Better to lower standards for all, these critics argued, than to run the risk of failure for a few. Well, we have until recently been doing just that. We have in general been expecting less of our students and they have been giving it to us; and while they have been doing so, the drop-out rate rather than falling has been rising.

Raising standards, of course, means that we must pay more, not less, attention to the diversity of students in our classrooms, and to the needs of each and every student as an individual, unique and special. And we were convinced that a commitment to excellence need not be made at the expense of equitable treatment of all of our students. Have we succeeded? It is too early for definitive assessments to be made, but the results so far have been encouraging. In South Carolina, for example, which has instituted what many believe to be the most comprehensive set of reforms in the country, student performance on standardized tests rose last year and school drop-out rates declined.
In any event, a central characteristic of the reform movement that began with *A Nation at Risk* has been a renewed commitment to high standards of performance for our students and our schools. That should remain a central and guiding principle for the future, whatever direction specific reforms may take.

Fourth, we need to develop ways to monitor and evaluate what has been accomplished so we can build on what has worked and winnow out what has not. Of the thousands of educational experiments now under way throughout the country, which have proven most effective? What approaches to improving schooling have kindled the most interest and enthusiasm and generated the most lasting results? And what indicators of educational progress can we use that will give us a sense of how far we have come and how far we need to go?

Some states are making efforts in this direction; so is the United States Department of Education. I was also pleased to learn that Governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee has organized various task forces to help governors identify strategies that work in a number of educational areas to improve the quality of education over the next five years. The Council of Chief State School Officers has mounted its own effort as well. Proposals for a "national report card" that would include measures of success besides objective test scores should also be encouraged. We are at a stage now where such an assessment, if sufficiently
broad, could act as a spur and an incentive for further improvement.

Fifth and finally, the educational reform movement is at a point where initiatives from the Federal government would have far more impact than they could have had even three years ago. It was leadership at the Federal level—from President Reagan and then-Secretary of Education Ted Bell—that launched the work of the National Commission. They recognized, of course, that educational reform is the principal responsibility of the states and local jurisdictions, a division of responsibility reflected in the fact that 92 cents of every dollar spent for education in this country is spent at the state and local level.

But the national importance of education means that there is an urgent role for the Federal government to play as well. A Nation at Risk envisioned the Federal role as helping states and districts meet the needs of gifted students (these students are, if I may express an opinion, a neglected national treasure), the socioeconomically disadvantaged, the handicapped, and minority and language minority students. We saw a critical place for the Federal government in protecting constitutional and civil rights for students and school personnel, for collecting data, statistics, and information about education generally; for supporting curriculum improvement and research on teaching, learning, and the management of schools; for supporting teacher training in areas of critical shortages or key national needs; and for
providing student financial assistance and research and graduate training. The Federal government, we concluded, has "the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education."

Now that the states and local jurisdictions have acted, and it is clear that educational reform is a high priority nationally, this is the time for the Federal government to consider programmatic initiatives that will complement and reinforce the educational reform movement as it has taken shape at the state and local levels. Expanding support for model teacher education programs, for example, or for the National Science Foundation's summer science institutes—and for similar institutes in other disciplinary areas as well—would give a welcome stimulus to state and local efforts. Federal initiatives taken now would remind the country that the Federal government remains capable of seizing opportunities and making progress that both benefit the nation and sustain the vitality of our schools, and of doing so even when confronted with conflicting and competing budgetary priorities. Congress and the President have a splendid opportunity to display leadership at this critical juncture and to build on what has already been accomplished throughout the nation.

All this does not diminish the fact that educational reform remains essentially a state and local responsibility. That is why, as I said at the outset, the educational reform movement has accomplished so much in such a remarkably short time. Our
success so far encourages us to believe that we can continue to work for constructive change and to see it happen. Our task at this conference is to consider the direction in which our next steps should be taken.

As we consider what those steps should be, it may prove helpful to keep in mind a larger purpose. Those who wrote *A Nation at Risk* believed that the ultimate goal of educational reform is the Learning Society. Such a society, in the words of the report,

affords all members the opportunity to stretch their minds to full capacity, from early childhood through adulthood, learning more as the world itself changes. Such a society has as a basic foundation the idea that education is important not only because of what it contributes to one's career goals but also because of the value it adds to the general quality of one's life.

When we talk about educational reform, we are talking about the "general quality of one's life" for millions of people who, without a common and determined effort by this country, will have to settle for diminished expectations, shrunken prospects, and broken dreams.

Three years ago *A Nation at Risk* warned that the educational foundations of our society were being eroded by "a rising tide of mediocrity." Many people have asked whether we still face that...
tide today. In my view, at least, it has stopped rising and, in fact, has begun to ebb. Whether it will continue to recede depends upon our persistent determination to improve our schools. The problems remain as urgent as they were three years ago--despite substantive progress in correcting them--because we will lose the gains we have made if we do not continue to build on them. The National Commission believed we needed a decade of improvement, and we are but a third of the way there.

We are clearly at a turning point. Can we summon the commitment to follow through on so many promising beginnings? The authors of *A Nation at Risk* thought so when we closed our letter to the American public with this ringing affirmation of confidence in the people of this country: "It is by our willingness to take up the challenge, and our resolve to see it through, that America's place in the world will be either secured or forfeited. Americans have succeeded before and so we shall again."