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The Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education:

How the Nation Responded

American Academy of Periodontology

David P. Gardner, President  
University of California

September 11, 1985  
San Francisco

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I very much appreciate your invitation to speak today, even though, as you know, I will not be speaking about periodontology--a field whose value I appreciate more and more the older I get. I thought you might be interested in hearing about some of the developments that have taken place in the two years since the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, A Nation at Risk.

I have often been asked why the Commission's report had the impact it did on the American public. My answer involves two stories, one that happened at the outset of the Commission's work in 1981 and another that took place at the end.

When the appointment of the National Commission was announced, Secretary of Education Ted Bell--whose idea it was to establish the Commission--and I were asked why we thought the Commission's work would make a difference rather than merely resting on the shelf like so many other well-intentioned government reports. We replied that we didn't know whether it would make a difference or not--that while we hoped our report would be useful, we realized that there was absolutely no guarantee that it would be read or

acted upon or even noticed. We expressed the conviction, however, that if what we had to say made sense to people, then our report would indeed make a difference. On the other hand, if it appeared to be of little consequence to people, then it would surely end up having no significance for the future of our schools.

And so for eighteen months the Commission heard testimony, sifted through mountains of information, and argued over what needed to be done about schooling in America. When it came time to issue our report, we decided to cast it as an open letter to the American people rather than in the form of a report to government. The result was A Nation at Risk, written in everyday English and consisting of a mere 36 pages. During the press conference held to coincide with the report's release--and now I come to my second story--a reporter remarked that, in contrast to reports on education that had been issued following Sputnik in the late 1950s, which urged the establishment of Federal programs running into the millions of dollars, our report contained no such programmatic recommendations. Therefore, he concluded, it appeared to him that our report was not a particularly profound one.

I replied that whether one regarded the report as profound or not depended on how one thinks democracy works best in our society. A Nation at Risk reflected the Commission's belief that an open letter to the American people, rather than a report to

government, would engage the process of democracy in a more direct, immediate, and enduring fashion, especially given the decentralized character of American education. We recognized that education is the primary responsibility of the fifty states and the more than 16,000 school districts in our country. And while the Federal government has an important role to play, it is not at the heart of the enterprise but at the margin. We believed, therefore, that a letter to the American people might just capture their interest and their desire to improve their children's opportunities through education and the benefits it bestows, both on individuals and on society generally.

A Nation at Risk tested this proposition, and events proved it to be true. Within days of the report's appearance, educators, politicians, and members of the public alike were arguing over the report and its implications for our schools. Within two weeks three-fourths of the American people had heard of A Nation at Risk. Nearly six million reprints of the report have been published.

There is a message here for all of us: our society never works more effectively than when the people get interested in an issue and, as a result, decide to bring about change. Under such circumstances, government inevitably comes along. The reverse does not necessarily follow.

We were anxious to get our message to as wide an audience as possible because our eighteen months of study had convinced us that the problems in our schools were real enough, and serious enough, to put the nation at risk. A few of our findings will give you an idea of the dimensions of the problems we uncovered:

Some twenty-three million Americans are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension.

Many 17-years-olds do not possess the higher order intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay; only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.

Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main course. Students have migrated from vocational and college preparatory programs to general track courses in large numbers. The proportion of students taking a general program of study increased from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979. This is a telling statistic because a general program of study prepares students neither for college nor for work.

Half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach these subjects; fewer than one-third of U.S. high schools offer physics taught by qualified teachers.

Between 1975 and 1980, remedial mathematics offerings at our public, four-year colleges increased by 72 percent.

What this all added up to was a simple and sobering fact: we have been expecting less from our students and they have been giving it to us.

But we were also convinced that our problems were neither inevitable nor insurmountable. The decline of educational achievement throughout our society, we concluded, stems more from weakness of purpose, confusion of values, underuse of talent, and lack of leadership than from conditions beyond our control. And so we urged the American people--educators, legislators, local officials, school board members, parents, students, concerned citizens, all those who have a stake in the future of our schools--to undertake a thorough, considered, and fundamental reform of our system of education.

The response has been greater than we could have imagined. As of March 1985:

47 states and the District of Columbia have either approved raising high school graduation requirements or are considering such change.

34 states have approved or are considering strengthening college admission requirements to state colleges and universities.

21 states are considering or actively taking steps to improve the quality of textbooks used in the public schools.

24 states are considering or have adopted programs designed to recognize outstanding achievement on the part of students or schools.

29 states and the District of Columbia are considering or have adopted incentives to improve the teaching profession--master teacher programs, for example, or merit pay initiatives.

Some of these reforms were already underway by 1983, the year our report and a number of similar ones were published. But most of the impetus for reform has come during the past two years, as educators, state and local leaders, professional groups, and individual citizens have joined together to work for change.

You may have heard of Adopt-a-School programs, for example, in which a local company assists a local school--chemists and physicists from a research and development firm, for instance, volunteer their services to teach science to gifted students as a way of complementing the efforts of regular teachers. Many chambers of commerce, statewide business roundtables, and local businesses are working to promote corporate contributions to education, encouraging their employees to become involved with the schools, and supporting legislative and budget proposals for reform in education.

Professional organizations and similar groups are helping too. The National Endowment for the Humanities has in recent years focused more of its attention on improving the teaching of the humanities in the schools, a most creative and constructive step. The American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Society of Civil Engineers, the National Society of Professional Engineers--these and similar groups have made important contributions to improving science and mathematics education in the schools through projects designed to help students and motivate teachers. And many national education associations and organizations have responded enthusiastically by helping refine and expand proposals for educational reform or by developing alternatives.

One of the most encouraging developments of the past few years has been the effort to renew and strengthen the partnership



between higher education and the schools. A persistent theme in the testimony we heard on the National Commission was the deterioration of a once cordial relationship between the schools and higher education, and the need to do something about it. During the past two years a great deal of work has been done to reverse that deterioration--and not a moment too soon.

Nationally, efforts to forge partnerships between the various levels of education are burgeoning. Summer institutes for gifted students, projects to inform high schools of how their students are performing in college, on-campus summer programs for teachers wishing to enhance their skills or change their teaching emphasis--these and similar efforts are springing up all around the country.

At the University of California we are deeply involved in projects to assist the schools. During the first months of my administration, in the fall of 1983, I appointed two committees to advise me on how the talents and resources of the University as a whole can contribute to the current movement for educational reform in our state.

Both committees completed their work last fall, and we are still in the process of reviewing and implementing their more than forty recommendations. But there was remarkable agreement between the recommendations of the committees in several areas. Both agree, for example, that the University must seriously address its responsibilities for the education of teachers by

working harder to attract students of high caliber and exceptional promise to the teaching profession, and by contributing more to the needs of teachers both before and after they enter the profession. Both emphasize the need for greater faculty involvement in the state's schools and in research bearing upon the problems and opportunities of primary and secondary education. Both committees stress that a firm commitment to strengthening the ties between the University and California's schools is indispensable.

One way we are responding to the imperative for educational reform is through a request to the state of California for funding to support several programmatic initiatives designed to strengthen the partnership between the University and the schools. The important point is that we are making a serious and long term effort to shoulder our share of responsibility for creating an environment conducive to thriving, dynamic schools in California.

To return to the national scene: looking back over the past two years since the publication of A Nation at Risk, it seems to me that we have achieved significant progress nationally in a remarkably short time. For a variety of reasons, the country was ready for reform in our schools, and when the occasion presented itself there were many individuals and groups eager to make the most of the first real opportunity in a generation for change in the American system of elementary and secondary education. And

we have every reason to be proud of the solid and significant gains that have been made.

Looking ahead, I am optimistic about the possibility of lasting improvement in our schools. During the past several years we have gained by the many analyses of the schools' problems and by the many recommendations for constructive change. We have seen action where it really matters--in state legislatures, in local school districts, in individual schools. What this reflects, in my opinion, is the fact that the nation is committed to cause of educational reform, and that it is willing to invest the necessary resources and public support. But ultimately success will depend on the answer to several critical questions:

Can we reverse the fragmentation of the high school curriculum and thereby give all of our students--those bound for college and those who intend to enter the marketplace after high school--the kind of intellectual grounding that will permit them to go on learning over the course of a lifetime? John Gardner has argued that "The ultimate aim of education is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his own education." Can we deepen and strengthen the high school curriculum so that it meets this stringent--and critical--standard?

Can we restore the teaching profession so that it once again becomes a rewarding and respected life's work? The decline

of the teaching profession during the past twenty years has been one of the most alarming and distressing symptoms of the general decline in the quality of our schools. If we can't succeed in attracting the best and the brightest to this profession, then the future of educational reform will remain clouded. Fortunately, there are signs that improvement is at hand. But we will have to work hard to see that it is permanent, not temporary.

Can we make the renewed partnership between higher education and the schools a lasting characteristic of education in this country? Right now we are enjoying a renaissance of cooperative activities. But can we institutionalize them so that colleges and universities on the one hand, and schools on the other, have a long term mechanism for working cooperatively on mutual problems and issues of mutual interest?

Finally, and probably most important: Can we sustain the momentum for change that the education reports of the past few years have created? The educational reform movement in the United States is at a turning point. We have accomplished a great deal in the first flush of enthusiasm. What remains now is to incorporate reform as a lasting element in our school system, and that takes time, patience, and commitment. Can we summon the energy and interest to follow through on so many promising beginnings?

I think we can. But only if all of us--educators and concerned citizens alike--give this effort the attention and concern it deserves. And I would like to suggest that each of you, as a well-educated professional person, is in an excellent position to make a difference. We were fortunate to have a member of the dental profession on the National Commission, and his contributions were many and essential. Whether you decide to help by involving yourself in community activities aimed at improving schooling, by volunteering to teach a high school science class, or in some other way, you, too, can make a contribution--and I hope you will choose to do so.

In a very real sense, every society stands just one generation away from catastrophe: societies and civilizations can only endure by passing along to the next generation the knowledge, skills, and values that define their cultural and intellectual heritage. Formal schooling is the principal means for accomplishing that task in our large and heterogeneous society. That we succeed is absolutely essential to the functioning of our democracy, to our free society, and to our way of life.

Thank you.