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THE REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION: A RETROSPECTIVE VIEW

Commonwealth Club

David Pierpont Gardner, President San Francisco, California
University of California April 6, 1984

Members of the Commonwealth Club of California:

It is a great pleasure to join you today. In doing so, I am following the example of a number of University of California presidents, one of whom--Benjamin Ide Wheeler--was among the five original founders of the Commonwealth Club. President Robert Gordon Sproul spoke here on the occasion of your fiftieth anniversary in 1953. My immediate predecessor, David Saxon, addressed you on your seventy-fifth birthday in 1978. I was beginning to worry that you might wait until your centennial--that would be 2003--to invite me, but fortunately you bent tradition and here I am. Even if my appearance in this distinguished forum doesn't coincide with a Commonwealth Club celebration--at least none of which I am aware--your invitation reflects the cordial and longstanding ties between our two organizations, and I'm both appreciative and delighted to be here.
April does mark an anniversary that is relevant to my topic, however. It was just a year ago this month that the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its report on the condition of American education. Our report was entitled, A Nation at Risk. Those of us who served on the Commission hoped, of course, that it would receive a fair share of public attention because we were deeply concerned about what we had learned. But we were completely unprepared for the response that followed. Within days of its 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 this report have been published. The quality and condition of American education--topics that had languished on the back pages of newspapers for nearly twenty years--were suddenly, and have remained, the subject of widespread national debate. What happened?

Obviously, much more than just our report. A number of other groups--the Education Commission of the States, the National Science Board, the Twentieth Century Fund, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, to mention just a few--were examining various aspects of American education at the same time; and their analyses raised similar questions, reflected common findings, offered similar--but not identical--recommendations, and stimulated further discussion. Public
interest in education had been growing for some time, of course, as educational performance, achievement, and aptitude test scores declined. So our report appeared at a time when the public was increasingly uneasy about the quality of American schooling and, therefore, prepared to listen to what we--and others--had to say.

Now, a year later, it seems reasonable to ask: Did the education commissions and studies really make a difference? Is the dramatic upsurge of public interest in education a transient phenomenon, or does it point to something more enduring?

Let me start by speaking briefly about the work of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, following which I will report on some of the changes that have taken place in our schools over the past twelve months.

First, the Commission itself. The National Commission on Excellence in Education was created in August of 1981 by Secretary of Education T. H. Bell. He appointed an independent, nonpartisan panel made up of leaders from elementary, secondary, and higher education, the corporate and foundation worlds, industry, and private life. We were asked to assess the quality of education in our nation's public and private schools and to make a report to him and to the American public
within eighteen months. We were also asked to pay special attention to the education of teenage youth.

During those months we heard from several hundred witnesses—parents and teachers, school administrators and board members, researchers and students, business and civic leaders. We gathered information by holding public hearings and symposia throughout the country, commissioning and reviewing research on all aspects of education and schooling in the United States—including comparisons with the educational systems of several advanced industrial countries—and meeting several times as a commission to consider this information, discuss its meaning, debate our options, and prepare our report.

Some findings:

* Some twenty-three million Americans are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing, and comprehension. About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may be as high as 40 percent.

* Many 17-year-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 courses. 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 has increased from 12 percent in 1964 to 42 percent in 1979.

- The amount of homework for high schools seniors has decreased (two-thirds report less than one hour a night) and grades have risen as average student achievement has been declining.

- Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago when Sputnik was launched.

- 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.

Our findings brought us to the conclusion that we have been expecting less from our students and they have been giving it to us. Thus, some recommendations:

- State and local high school graduation requirements should be strengthened and, at a minimum, students seeking a high school diploma should be required to complete during their four years of high school what we called the Five New Basics: a) four years of English; b) three years of mathematics; c) three years of science; d) three years of social studies; and e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, two years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier.

- Four-year colleges and universities should raise their requirements for admission.

- School districts and State legislatures should strongly consider seven-hour school days, as well as a 200- to 220-day school year.

- The burden on teachers for maintaining discipline should be reduced through the development of firm and fair codes
of student conduct that are enforced consistently, and by considering alternative classrooms, programs, and schools to meet the needs of continually disruptive students.

Salaries for the teaching profession should be increased and should be professionally competitive, market-sensitive, and performance-based. Salary, promotion, tenure, and retention decisions should be tied to an effective evaluation system that includes peer review so that superior teachers can be rewarded, average ones encouraged, and poor ones either improved or terminated.

Time prevents me from detailing more of our recommendations, but I believe you get the idea.

The threat to the quality of education in our schools is serious enough to constitute a threat to the nation itself. Much of what this country has been able to accomplish economically, socially, and culturally is due to the traditional excellence and availability of American education. The deterioration of our school system could well transform what has always been a strategic asset into a strategic liability.

Nevertheless, we concluded that our problems are not insoluble. The decline of educational achievement throughout our society stems more from weakness of purpose, confusion of values, underuse of talent, and lack of leadership than from conditions
beyond our control. Deciding how to share our findings and our recommendations was not easy.

The Commission's staff had prepared a lengthy report in draft form that spelled out the problems and our proposed solutions in scholarly language and considerable detail. It was a solid piece of work. But we worried that such a format, conventional in its approach, would, from the perspective of the average citizen, remain unread.

Thus, we decided to submit an unconventional report: It was to be brief (36 pages), written in everyday English, and presented in the form of an open letter to the American people. I trouble you with this detail because there is a point to be made here. We were of the opinion that if our open letter were to be widely read and generally reported it might just capture the interest and support of the average citizen. If it did, then change would surely take place where it counted most: within the 16,000 school districts in this country and within the fifty states where the fundamental decisions about schools are made.

We are not certain, of course, what influence our report had on public opinion compared with the other reports issued since. But we do know that major efforts are underway to reform and improve our schools. Some were already started before the various reports on education appeared last year,
especially in the areas of high school graduation requirements, college admission standards, teacher certification, and mathematics, science, and computer literacy programs. Others have been in response to last year's reports. Here is a sample of what has been happening in recent months:

- Forty-five states have legislative proposals to increase high school graduation requirements, and twenty-seven of those legislatures have already enacted them.

- Thirty-five states are in the process of raising college admission requirements; of that thirty-five, twenty--including California and Utah--have already done so.

- Twenty-eight states are experimenting with ways to find additional time for academic instruction. Seven have enacted a longer school day; five have instituted a longer school year; and thirteen are considering limiting extracurricular activities scheduled during the normal school day.

- Ten states have already enacted salary increases for teachers, and another twenty-two are considering such increases.

- Eighteen states are actively exploring merit pay proposals, and twenty-six are looking into master teacher
programs--programs designed to provide incentives for outstanding teachers to remain in the profession. Six states have already adopted such programs.

One hundred and sixty-five state level task forces have been established in the fifty states, including among their membership not just professional educators but also parents, legislators, employers, and other citizens concerned about the future of our schools. A gratifying number of local school districts have begun comprehensive planning efforts--reviewing the curriculum, studying the status of teaching, and improving school leadership.

A number of cities have "Adopt-a-School" programs in which a local company will assist a particular school. In one of the business-school partnerships in Houston, for example, chemists and physicists from a leading research and development firm teach science classes for the gifted. Here in California, the Business Roundtable has been active for several years in recommending public and private initiatives to raise educational standards, upgrade technical education, increase community involvement, and strengthen the teaching profession.

One of the most comprehensive efforts at school reform is embodied in California's Hughes-Hart Act of 1983, a bill that contains some eighty provisions for school improvement.
Besides providing for a mentor program for teachers and raising high school graduation requirements, as I've already mentioned, it includes funding to help improve the quality of instruction in our schools and encourages cooperative activity between the schools and California's colleges and universities. A bill currently pending in the Legislature would create additional school reform mechanisms, among them writing programs for students in elementary and secondary schools and funding for the California Science Project, a program to help current teachers improve instruction in science.

We are witnessing an interest in and a desire to improve schooling in the United States that is more intense and of larger scale than anything we have seen for twenty-five years. We will be well-advised to take advantage of it now, for such moments come only infrequently.

Did the education commissions and studies really make a difference? In my view, yes. Whether or not the public interest they helped stimulate will result in lasting change depends on us—each of us, working in our own communities with our own children and our schools. To make that point, the Commission concluded its report with two special messages, one to parents and one to students. To parents:

As surely as you are your child's first and most influential teacher, your child's ideas about education and its
significance begin with you. You must be a living example of what you expect your children to honor and to emulate. Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your child's education. You should encourage more diligent study and discourage satisfaction with mediocrity and the attitude that says "let it slide"; monitor your child's study; encourage good study habits; encourage your child to take more demanding rather than less demanding courses; nurture your child's curiosity, creativity, and confidence; and be an active participant in the work of the schools. Above all, exhibit a commitment to continued learning in your own life. Finally, help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment. Children will look to their parents and teachers as models of such virtues.

To students:

You forfeit your chance for life at its fullest when you withhold your best effort in learning. When you give only the minimum to learning, you receive only the minimum in return. Even with your parents' best example and your teachers' best efforts, in the end it is your work that determines how much and how well you learn. When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to
attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to create your future and control your destiny. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others. Take hold of your life, apply your gifts and talents, work with dedication and self-discipline. Have high expectations for yourself and convert every challenge into an opportunity.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Commonwealth Club, "It is the America of all of us," as our report concluded, "that is at risk; it is to each of us that this imperative is addressed. 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."