STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND HUMAN RESOURCES
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee:

It is a pleasure to appear before you, on behalf of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, to discuss the Commission's recent report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. These hearings on the quality of American education come at a time of unusually intense debate about the purpose and performance of our schools. Many different groups—including the Education Commission of the States, the Twentieth Century Fund, the College Entrance Examination Board, the National Science Board, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching—have contributed to the discussion of where we are in terms of education and where we need to be. Your interest is a welcome sign that the highest legislative body in the nation will be giving this topic the attention it demands and surely deserves.

Today I would like to tell you briefly about the membership and activities of the Commission, touch on the central messages contained in the report, and say something about the Commission's views on the differing responsibilities of the Federal government, the states, and local jurisdictions for improving education.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education was created by Secretary of Education T. H. Bell, who set out to appoint an independent, bipartisan 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. During those months we heard from several hundred witnesses--parents and teachers, administrators from schools, districts, and states, researchers and students, business and civic leaders--and we gathered information by holding several public hearings and symposia throughout the country, reviewing research on educational issues, and visiting schools and other education and training programs.

The Commission saw its purpose as helping to define the problems afflicting American education and to provide practical recommendations for reform. As we progressed in our deliberations, two things became impossible to ignore: We face serious problems and we must attend to them. We did not try to blame any particular group or constituency because it was also obvious that we all share responsibility for the troubled state of American education. Instead, we cast the report in the form of an urgent letter to the American people, a letter that crystallized our understanding of what we had heard from our fellow citizens over the course of eighteen months.

The Commission's staff has sent you copies of A Nation at Risk, so with your permission I will not try to summarize the report, although I hope you will find the opportunity to read it if you
have not already done so. But I do want to underscore the three essential messages it conveys.

A Nation at Risk

The first message is reflected in the title we chose for our report: A Nation at Risk. The report acknowledges that this risk has many dimensions and many causes, and that education is only one aspect of the problem. Yet it is a fundamentally important aspect. Education can be a strategic asset or a strategic liability. In the United States it has traditionally been an asset for two reasons: because we have made the opportunity for education widely available and because the education we have provided our young people has been of generally high quality. The excellence and availability of American education have been responsible for much of what this country has accomplished economically, socially, and culturally, and they have given us a strategic advantage over most of the world. Today, ironically enough, this crucial relationship between education and national well-being seems better understood elsewhere than it is here. How else can we explain the recent deterioration in our economic and technological leadership and the gains made by our international competitors?

Thus, it is no exaggeration to describe a threat to the quality of education in our nation's public and private schools as a threat to the nation itself. Certainly the Commission viewed it
this way. And the evidence is, in my opinion, overwhelming. For instance:

- Twenty-five percent of recent naval recruits can read only at the ninth grade level, the minimum now necessary simply to follow safety instructions.

- Thirteen percent of our seventeen-year-olds can be described as functionally illiterate on the simplest tests of everyday reading and writing--and perhaps as many as forty-two percent of our minority youth are in this category.

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

- Scholastic Aptitude test scores between 1963 and 1980 demonstrated an almost unbroken decline while, at the same time, the number and proportion of high-scoring students fell substantially.

- Many seventeen-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly forty 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.
There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of American seventeen-year-olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973, and 1977.

Besides these declines against our own historic standards, we have distressing evidence from international studies of student performance as well. International comparisons of student achievement a decade ago indicate that on nineteen academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times. Although the top nine percent of our students matched those from abroad, the disparity overall is too great to be ignored or dismissed.

Mediocrity

Although it is clear that a number of economic, social, and other trends have contributed to the deterioration of American education, the Commission concluded that one factor was of overriding importance in bringing us to our current malaise. We are expecting less from our students and schools and we have been getting it. So much less, in fact, that—in the Commission's words—"the educational foundations of our society are presently
being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.¹

We pointed to several indicators of this tolerance for mediocre performance:

* A smorgasbord curriculum in which the appetizers and the desserts can readily be mistaken for the main course. The proportion of high school students taking a general program of study has increased from twelve percent in 1964 to forty-two percent in 1979. This is a telling statistic because a general program of study prepares students neither for college nor for work.

* High school graduation requirements in two-thirds of our states that permit students to complete their secondary school studies with only one year of mathematics and one year of science.

* The limited amount of time that American students spend in school compared to students in other lands, along with the large amount of available time that is not used effectively.

* The lack of rigorous standards and expectations not only for high school graduation but also for college admission.

* The low status of the teaching profession, reflected in poor working conditions, inadequate pay, and insufficient incentives for superior performance.

Our discussions with hundreds of people involved with education in one way or another convinced us that beneath the statistics and the data lies a tension between hope and frustration that is characteristic of attitudes about education at every level. The hope resides in the commitment to education of high quality we encountered everywhere; the frustration was evident in the growing impatience with the shoddiness apparent in many aspects of American life and the complaint that this shoddiness has spilled over into our schools and colleges.

**We Can Do Better**

The Commission's third essential message grows inevitably out of the first two: we can and must do better. We must reverse the decline of educational achievement throughout our society, a decline that stems more from weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, underuse of talent, and lack of leadership than from conditions beyond our control.
I share with other members of the Commission the conviction that the problems we discerned in American education can be understood and corrected if we care enough and are courageous enough to do what is required. American education has met many challenges in the past and, we are convinced, is equal to the challenge it is facing now.

The Commission recognized that the nation's 17,000 school districts are under local control, and so our recommendations for change were framed in terms general enough so that they can be adapted to the needs and requirements of individual schools and districts. We concentrated on five areas where we felt reform was needed most: the content to which students are exposed; the standards and expectations to which they are held; the amount of time spent on learning; the improvement of teaching; and the importance of leadership and the role of government.

First, high school curricula. The Commission recommended that high school curricula be strengthened by including, as a minimum, what we called 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. It was the Commission's strongly held view that these subjects are the foundation for success in later life and are therefore important for all students to take, whether headed for college or work. In the words of the report: "A high level of shared education in these Basics, together with work in the fine and performing arts
and foreign languages, constitutes the mind and spirit of our culture."\(^2\)

I want to clarify a point about this recommendation that has occasionally been misunderstood. Although the Commission believed it was essential for all students to have a solid background in the Five New Basics, we recognized that the needs of vocationally oriented and college-bound students differ and that the content of the courses they study should in some respects differ as well. In the area of mathematics, for example, the Commission recommended that, besides the traditional sequence of studies available for students planning on college, new and equally demanding mathematics curricula need to be formulated for those who do not intend to continue their formal education immediately after high school. The same is true for science and English. What we want to emphasize, however, is that the Five New Basics constitute an area of learning that, at a minimum, students must be familiar with if they are going to lead productive and rewarding lives in our demanding, pluralistic, and technologically sophisticated society.

Second, standards and expectations. The Commission urged schools, colleges, and universities to adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations for academic performance and

\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 24-25.
student conduct. We also urged four-year colleges and universities to raise their admission requirements. One beneficial result of such a move would be to lessen the need for remedial programs at the college level.

Third, the Commission recommended that significantly more time be devoted to learning in high school, requiring more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, and/or a longer school year. Let me emphasize that we are not recommending just more of the same—we are recommending that students spend more time learning the course of study we outlined as the Five New Basics.

Fourth, the Commission made a number of recommendations aimed at improving the attractiveness and standing of the teaching profession. Among those suggestions were—and I quote directly from the report—that "Persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards, to demonstrate an aptitude for teaching, and to demonstrate competence in an academic discipline. . . . 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." These and related recommendations are aimed directly at making teaching a more rewarding and respected profession. That is absolutely essential if we are serious about making a difference in the quality of our schools.

Finally, the Commission recommended that the citizens of this country hold educators and elected officials responsible for giving us the leadership we need to incorporate these reforms into our school system. In making this recommendation, the Commission recognized that responsibility for implementing the reforms we propose rests primarily with State and local governments and local school boards in our highly decentralized school system, a division of labor that is reflected in the fact that, of every dollar spent on education in the United States, ninety-two cents come from non-Federal sources. But the Federal government has important responsibilities and a fundamental role to play nonetheless. The language describing that role was drawn with special care, and agreed to by people whose views and perspectives were often strikingly different, which is why I would like to read a few portions of the report to you verbatim:

The Federal Government has the primary responsibility to identify the national interest in education. It should also help fund and support efforts to protect and promote that

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Ibid., p. 30.
interest. It must provide the national leadership to ensure that the Nation's public and private resources are marshalled to address the issues discussed in this report.\(^4\)

In addition, the Commission spelled out some specific tasks within the Federal purview:

The Federal Government, in cooperation with States and localities, should help meet the needs of key groups of students such as the gifted and talented, the socioeconomically disadvantaged, minority and language minority students, and the handicapped. . . In addition, we believe the Federal Government's role includes several functions of national consequence that States and localities alone are unlikely to be able to meet: protecting constitutional and civil rights for students and school personnel ... supporting curriculum improvement and research on teaching, learning, and the management of schools; supporting teacher training in areas of critical shortage or key national needs; and providing student financial assistance and research and graduate training. We believe the assistance of the Federal Government should be provided with a minimum of administrative burden and intrusiveness.\(^5\)

\(^4\)Ibid., p. 33.
\(^5\)Ibid., pp. 32-33.
The Federal Government, in sum, should carry out its traditional role of setting broad national priorities, supporting and encouraging quality, compiling and disseminating information, and safeguarding the interests and rights of those who might not otherwise receive protection. Within this framework, I urge you to do everything in your power to advance this essential Federal contribution, to pursue the goal of excellence in education with all the vigor, energy, and dedication that I know is available at the Federal level.

A word about costs. There has been much discussion about the financial aspects of bringing about real educational reform, and much debate about whether anything effective can be done without incurring staggering costs. What tends to be forgotten is that much can be accomplished without massive investments of funds, although excellence assuredly will cost more than mediocrity. Some of the Commission's recommendations will require us to spend more--increasing teachers' salaries, for example, or increasing the length of the school day or year, but others will not. Our recommendations for strengthening the curriculum, for instance, do not necessarily involve greater costs; it costs as much to offer a course in bachelor living as it does to provide a course in English.

Making more effective use of the time students spend in school--such as devoting more class periods to academic and vocational subjects and fewer to drivers' education--doesn't mean greater
expenditures either. And raising standards and expectations is far more a question of commitment to excellence than it is a question of financing, although there will be cases where extra funds will be required to make it possible.

What it comes down to, in the end, is a sense of priorities. The core curriculum—the Five New Basics I discussed earlier—should have first call on the educational dollar and should come first when funding matters are under consideration. Our decisions about funding should reflect our sense of priorities about the central educational mission of the schools, a mission that has become obscured in the pursuit of activities that are desirable, perhaps, but not central to the education of our young people.

All this is not to say that reform of the schools will cost little or nothing. It will cost a great deal, and I want to be clear about the Commission's conviction that State, local, and Federal governments have the responsibility to find ways of providing the considerable sums that will be required. But it is sometimes easy to forget how much can be accomplished by a sense of vision and the willingness to put that vision first, however demanding or difficult that may be.

The Commission also recognized that learning, despite its public aspects and its central importance to the public good, is essentially a private activity. All the good teachers and good programs and good intentions in the world can't make a student
learn if he or she receives no encouragement at home, no stimulation to think and reflect, no direction about the importance of self-cultivation and discipline. So the Commission included a special message to parents, urging them to assume their proper responsibilities for helping their children. And we also addressed the students of this country, recognizing that ultimately they must assume responsibility for their own learning. Parents, teachers, school boards, legislators can help. They can't make learning happen. Only students can do that.

Fortunately, there are encouraging signs that the current ferment of debate and discussion is helping people around the country to do something about the schools. An article in the September 19th issue of Newsweek announced, "School is going to be different this year," and indeed it is. As of late September, nineteen states had taken action to raise high school graduation requirements; similar actions are under review in twenty-one other states. Local projects around the country are experimenting with lengthening the school day and year. State and local task forces have been established across the nation to review the recommendations in recent reports and to consider how to respond. Different approaches have been proposed for developing career ladders for teachers and for establishing teacher salaries that are professionally competitive.

There is every reason to be optimistic about the prospects for turning our schools around, for making them as excellent as they
are accessible. The United States is engaged in the great experiment of seeing if it is possible to educate broadly and to educate well. It is up to us to ensure that this experiment succeeds. I look forward to working with you, and with everyone who cares about our schools, on this important and indeed essential task.

I appreciate this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Commission and will be pleased to answer your questions.