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A Nation at Risk

The landmark—and still controversial—report that declared a “rising tide of mediocrity” in U.S. education posed a threat to America’s prosperity and status in the world.

A Nation at Risk was released April 26, 1983, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a body convened by the U.S. Department of Education under President Reagan’s first secretary of education, Terrel H. Bell.

The strongly worded report touched a nerve with a public weary of a lingering economic crisis and deeply worried by foreign competitors. It cited Japanese efficiency in auto making, a South Korean breakthrough in steel making, and the displacement of American machine tools by German products as signs of “a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe.”

The report fueled an already-emerging campaign for improving schools as a step to a brighter future for the United States.

Abecedarian Study

A rigorous scientific study of pre-K programs in North Carolina, the Abecedarian Study revealed students who attended high-quality early education programs experienced greater academic success and educational attainment. Fifty-seven infants were randomly assigned

to receive early interventions, and their outcomes were compared with a control group of fifty-four infants who did not receive such interventions. The children in the treatment group attended high-quality pre-K programs from infancy through age five.

Follow-up assessments at ages twelve and fifteen revealed that children from the treatment group had significantly higher scores in reading and mathematics, compared with the control group. Follow-up assessments with study participants at age twenty-one revealed that the students from the treatment group were more likely to have recently graduated from or be enrolled in college.

ability grouping

A common instructional practice of clustering students according to their academic skills. Ability grouping allows a teacher to provide the same level of instruction to the entire group, but debate over the fairness and effectiveness of ability grouping, also known as tracking, can be intense. The terms have been used to describe a wide array of practices, ranging from the segregation of black children at an early age, based on unfairly administered intelligence tests, to the placement of gifted and talented children from various backgrounds in advanced courses designed to challenge them.

Opponents of grouping by ability tend to use both terms pejoratively and interchangeably. But advocates for the gifted and talented and other supporters of homogeneous grouping say they, too, oppose “tracking”—by which they mean placing children at a certain academic level in most subjects at an early age and denying them an opportunity to move to a higher level. By comparison, they say, “ability grouping” is nothing more than the placement of children at certain tables or in certain classrooms where they will receive an appropriate level of instruction with classmates of similar ability. Such placements may vary from grade to grade and subject to subject. (See *tracking*.)

abstinence-only education

Education programs that focus exclusively on teaching children to abstain from sexual activity until marriage. Critics charge that failing to provide students with information about contraception is a dangerous lapse, but proponents say that comprehensive sex education encourages earlier sexual activity.

acceleration

The practice of moving students through the traditional curriculum at rates faster than the typical pace, sometimes used with students deemed “gifted.”

accelerated-learning options

Programs that permit students to earn college credit while still in high school.

Accelerated Schools Project

Developed in 1986 by Henry M. Levin, then an education and economics professor at Stanford University, the program is known best for its focus on providing accelerated instruction to all children, including those labeled “at risk.” The national program is now based in Storrs, Connecticut, and has satellite training centers throughout the country.

accommodations

Special provisions made for children with disabilities. A child with learning disabilities may require certain testing accommodations (such as more time to take a test or read-aloud exams) based on an individualized education program (IEP). (See *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.)

accountability

State or district policies related to holding districts, schools, teachers, or students responsible for performance. School and district accountability systems typically include efforts to assess and rate schools or districts based on student performance and other indicators, to publicly report on school or district performance, and to provide rewards and sanctions for schools or districts based on performance or improvement over time. Student accountability generally refers to efforts to hold students responsible for their own performance by requiring students to pass a test to be promoted from grade to grade or to graduate from high school. Teacher accountability provisions may include evaluating teachers on the basis of their students’ test scores. While many agree that accountability is a noble goal, there is widespread debate over the wisdom of certain accountability measures and the pressures and consequences they impose on students, teachers, and school systems.

accreditation

Accreditation is a broad term that refers to two separate processes in education—one involving schools and school districts and the other involving schools of education.

School accreditation, which predates and is separate from the system of performance targets and sanctions set up under the federal No Child

Left Behind Act, is a process that involves meeting a set of guidelines focused on school improvement and governance that are evaluated by outside professionals, not government officials. In addition to national and regional accrediting groups, some states still accredit schools on their own, although that process has largely become part of their accountability systems for education.

By contrast, a separate process exists by which an organization, usually the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, sanctions teacher-education programs. The council had given more than 630 such programs its seal of approval for quality as of May 2008. States also approve teacher-education programs by means of issuing teaching licenses to their graduates.

Achieve

A Washington-based organization led by governors and business leaders that promotes higher academic standards. Achieve is heavily involved in work on international standards benchmarking and is studying academic expectations in other countries. (See *American Diploma Project*.)

achievement gap

The troubling performance gaps between many African American and Hispanic students, at the lower end of the performance scale, and their Asian and non-Hispanic white peers at the upper end, and the similar academic disparity between students from low-income and well-off families. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates. It has become a focal point of education reform efforts.

ACT

The ACT exam is one of the nation's two major college-entrance exams, along with the SAT. The ACT is a standardized test designed to gauge students' knowledge of high school content; it includes an optional essay. Here is a sample question:

Which of the following is equivalent to $(x)(x)(x)(x)$, for all x ?

A. $4x$

B. x^4

C. $x + 4$

D. 4^x

E. $2x^2$

© 2008, ACT Inc. The correct answer is “B.”

ACT, Inc.

ACT, Inc. is the nonprofit testing organization that produces the ACT college-entrance exam, founded in 1959 as the American College Testing program. ACT, Inc. has conducted a series of studies looking at students’ preparedness for college, based on the relationship between their scores on the ACT subtests, the courses the students have taken in high school, and their grades in college-level courses. In “Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work,” released in 2004, the organization found that a majority of students who took the exam were far from ready for the academic rigors of college.

adaptive learning systems

Technology designed to reflect and respond to the learning styles of individual students. Instead of a one-size-fits-all package, these types of systems are intended to work with the needs of individual learners. (See *assistive technology*.)

adequate yearly progress

Adequate yearly progress (AYP) is the measure by which schools, districts, and states are held accountable for student performance under Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. AYP requires states to use a single accountability system for all public schools to determine whether students on average, as well as subgroups of students, are making progress toward meeting state academic content standards, with the goal of all students being proficient in reading and mathematics by 2014. (See *No Child Left Behind Act*.)

Adult Literacy Study

A test of real-world reading and quantitative literacy that is taken by sixteen- to sixty-five-year-olds around the globe.

Advanced Placement (AP)

A series of courses administered by the College Board that high school students can take to earn college credit. Students must master a generally higher level of coursework and pass an accompanying test to earn AP credits.

affirmative action

Refers broadly to policies that are focused on race, ethnicity, and gender. Examples include making an effort to hire minorities or setting aside a percentage of public contracts for minority firms. The term was first used in the 1960s, when President Johnson and President Nixon signed executive orders requiring businesses with federal contracts to establish goals and timetables for hiring minorities. Affirmative action has also been a flashpoint in college admissions because for years colleges and universities gave preferences to certain students based on their racial or ethnic background. In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the individual consideration of race as a factor in higher education admissions, but rejected the use of numerical point systems to promote racial and ethnic diversity. Lower federal courts and even state courts have issued conflicting rulings about the constitutionality of race-conscious policies in K–12 education in recent years. (See *desegregation*.)

alphabetics

Reading skills tied to decoding and word recognition. Alphabetics skills include phonemic awareness—recognizing that sounds in spoken language fit together to make words—and letter identification.

alternative assessment

Any form of measuring what students know and are able to do other than traditional standardized tests. Alternative forms of assessment include portfolios and performance-based assessments. (See *portfolio*.)

alternative credentials

Often called “modified diplomas” or “certificates of completion.” Many states today offer alternative credentials for students with disabilities or others who do not pass high school exit exams.

alternative preparation programs

See *alternative teacher certification*.

alternative schools

This term broadly refers to public schools that are set up by states or school districts to serve populations of students who are not succeeding in the traditional public school environment. Alternative schools offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities or behavioral problems an opportunity to achieve in a different setting. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools, they

are often characterized by their flexible schedules, low teacher-student ratios, and modified curricula.

alternative settings

Alternative educational placements for students with disabilities who cannot receive an adequate education in the public schools. School districts must pay for alternative placement if they cannot provide the accommodations required in a student's individualized education program. (See *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*.)

alternative teacher certification

Programs that certify teaching candidates who have not attended education schools, the traditional route for teacher preparation. The number of alternative programs that certify teachers skyrocketed from 12 in 1983 to 485 in 2006. Critics of alternative routes to teacher licensure describe them as shortcuts to teaching, fault them as lacking rigor, and say they do not provide enough clinical experience before putting teachers in classrooms. Proponents counter that such programs draw new and talented individuals to teaching.

America COMPETES Act

A federal law that seeks to bolster mathematics and science education through improved teacher recruitment and training and the promotion of successful classroom practices through federal grants for schools. America COMPETES is short for America Creating Opportunities to Meaningfully Promote Excellence in Technology, Education, and Science Act. The measure supports the Robert Noyce Scholarship Program, which provides grants of \$10,000 a year to college majors in math- and science-related subjects who agree to teach in high-need schools, by expanding recipients' years of eligibility for aid and giving them more time to finish teacher training. (See *(Robert) Noyce Teacher Scholarships*.)

American Diploma Project

A multistate effort to identify the knowledge and skills high school graduates need for success in college and the workforce. The project is run by Achieve, a Washington-based organization led by governors and business leaders that promotes higher academic standards.

American Federation of Teachers (AFT)

The second-largest teachers' union in the United States, with more than 1.3 million members—not all of them teachers, however. Of the AFT's

members, 200,000 work in New York City and another 350,000 work elsewhere in New York state.

American Sign Language (ASL)

A complex language of hand motions and other movements used by people with hearing impairments. ASL is the first language of many deaf North Americans.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Signed into law in 1990 by President George H.W. Bush, the ADA is a civil rights law mandating rights and protections for people with disabilities. Title II of the law covers state and local governmental entities, including schools. The law states that entities must make reasonable accommodations to enable people with disabilities to access their services.

AmeriCorps

A national service organization. Organizations may apply for AmeriCorps support to serve critical education needs, among other priorities.

annual measurable objective (AMO)

Achievement targets set by states based on students' scores on state assessments in reading and mathematics. States set AMOs to gauge their progress toward meeting the No Child Left Behind Act's goal of "adequate yearly progress." (See *adequate yearly progress* and *No Child Left Behind Act*.)

Arts Education Partnership

A Washington, D.C.-based group of one hundred education and arts organizations, foundations, businesses, and government agencies that works to ensure a place for the arts in state school reform efforts.

assessment

An exercise—such as a written test, portfolio, or experiment—that seeks to measure a student's skills or knowledge in a subject area. Assessments are a focal point of the standards and accountability movement.

assistive technology

Technology for people with disabilities. Assistive-technology devices include a range of aids, such as wheelchairs, communication devices,

and computer hardware. The federal Assistive Technology Act of 2004, overseen by the U.S. Department of Education, aims to provide more direct aid to individuals with disabilities. It also encourages states to invest in programs that have been shown to be most effective in providing assistive technology. (See *adaptive learning systems*.)

Asperger's syndrome

A disorder that falls on the autism spectrum. Students with Asperger's syndrome tend to excel in subjects that interest them, compiling amazing knowledge bases in their areas of obsession. But they require drilling in such day-to-day basics as how to make eye contact, or how to stand the appropriate distance from another child in line. The exact cause of both autism and Asperger's syndrome is unknown.

at risk

Describes students with socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty, that may place them at a disadvantage in achieving academic, social, or career goals. Such students are deemed at risk of failing, dropping out, or “falling through the cracks” at school.

ATLAS

Short for Authentic Teaching Learning and Assessment for All Students, ATLAS is a program for comprehensive, systemwide reform in schools. ATLAS focuses on five areas: teaching and learning, assessment, professional development, management and decision making, and family and community. Launched in 1992, ATLAS Communities is the brainchild of Yale University psychologist James P. Comer; Howard Gardner, a Harvard University psychology professor; Theodore R.Sizer, a Brown University professor emeritus; and Janet Whitla, a former president and chief executive officer of the Education Development Center, a research group based in Newton, Massachusetts.

attention deficit disorder (ADD)

The historical name for the disorder now known as AD/HD, which is characterized by the inability to concentrate and, in some cases, impulsiveness and hyperactivity. (The American Psychiatric Association changed the designation in 1994 to reflect new research.) Between 3 percent and 10 percent of the nation's school-age children are thought to have the disorder. The National Resource Center on AD/HD says that children labeled today as having ADD typically fall in the category of AD/HD-1, predominantly inattentive type. (See *attention deficit / hyperactivity disorder*.)

attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD)

Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) is a common neurobiological condition affecting 5–8 percent of school-age children with symptoms persisting into adulthood in as many as 60 percent of cases (that is, approximately 4 percent of adults). It is characterized by developmentally inappropriate levels of inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity, according to the National Resource Center on AD/HD. There are diagnostic categories within AD/HD: AD/HD predominantly inattentive type (AD/HD-I); AD/HD predominantly hyperactive-impulsive type: (AD/HD-HI); and AD/HD combined type: (AD/HD-C).

auditory processing disorder

A disorder in which an individual cannot process words or sounds (or both) in the traditional way. Previously known as CAPD—central auditory processing disorder.

autism

A complex neurological disorder that typically appears during the first three years of life. Children and adults with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. The disorder makes it difficult to communicate with others and to relate to the outside world. In 2007, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that nearly 6 of every 1,000 children in a federal study had an autism-spectrum disorder. The findings translated to 1 in every 150 children in the communities the CDC studied having disorders such as autism, pervasive developmental disorder (not otherwise specified), or Asperger’s syndrome. The study did not provide a national estimate for the prevalence of the disorders. Previous estimates had indicated that between 1 in 500 children and 1 in 166 have an autism-spectrum disorder, federal health officials said. Studies of people with autism have shown they have abnormalities in several regions of the brain.