

Why celebrate? Members of the high school class of '91 spent only 13 percent of their waking hours in a classroom, and test scores showed that it was not "quality time."

Why the Schools Still Don't Work

When the kids in the high school class of '91 started kindergarten more than a decade ago, Jimmy Carter was in the White House and back-to-basics advocates were clamoring for school reform. When they were in fourth grade, the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity." When they were sophomores, the nation elected "the education president." Yet little changed. As things now stand, there is not much reason to hope that the class of '03, entering kindergarten this fall, will emerge any better educated. Here, Chester E. Finn, Jr., explains why the excellence movement of the 1980s fell short, and Patrick Welsh offers a teacher's view of the schools' problems—and a major reform that he says won't cost a dime.

THE HO HUM REVOLUTION

by Chester E. Finn, Jr.

"Christine borrows \$850 for one year from the Friendly Finance Company. If she pays 12% simple interest on the loan, what will be the total amount that Christine repays?"

That is not the sort of question that ought to stump many people. Yet according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, in 1988 only six percent of the nation's 11th graders were able to solve mathematical problems at this moderate level of difficulty. Six out of 100. After more than a decade of efforts to reform the nation's schools, and eight years after the National Commission on Excellence in Education's famous alarm, *A Nation at Risk*, it would be nice to be able to take up the time-honored theme of "crisis and renewal." But as the insoluble question posed by the case of the Friendly Finance Company suggests, there has not yet been much of a renewal.

That is not because we have ignored our shortcomings. During the last decade, national leaders such as Secretary of Education William J. Bennett took to the bully pulpit to rouse the public. Americans were bombarded by alarming news stories and reports of gloomy studies on the nation's front pages and TV news broadcasts. An "excellence movement" was born, and it inspired many reform efforts around the country. Governors and legislators began to shake off the old taboo against "tampering" with the schools, pushing a variety of reforms long resisted by many education professionals. Dozens of communities

launched school innovations. But it wasn't enough. The system's vital signs, as measured by test scores and other indicators, remained flat. Things got no worse, but they didn't get better, either. Before venturing any new therapies, then, it would be prudent to take a full case history of the patient.

Among the therapies tried during the 1980s, for example, was more money, a truth that many professionals resist. In school-year 1979-80, ending a few weeks before Ronald Reagan first won his party's nomination for the presidency, the average expenditure per pupil in American public schools was \$2,491. Ten years later, during the first complete school year of the Bush administration, the average outlay per student was \$5,284—or about \$121,000 per classroom. That represents a 111 percent rise in current dollars, or, in constant (1988-89) dollars, a hefty 28.7 percent expansion. This came on the heels of real increases of 26.8 percent in the 1970s and 57.7 percent in the 1960s.

These increases were not uniform, to be sure—and a bit of the per pupil expenditure rise can be ascribed to a slight (3.3 percent) shrinkage in public school enrollments. Illinois boosted its spending for public education by just 49 percent between 1980 and 1989, not quite keeping pace with inflation, while Georgia expanded its school outlays by 166 percent. Localities were subject to even greater variation. For the nation as a whole, though, the 29 percent real dollar figure is accurate. Perhaps it was not enough. Conceivably it was too much. I know nobody, however,

who claims that the *output* of American public education rose by anything approaching 29 percent during the 1980s.

Most of the new money, of course, went into salaries of school employees, always the largest single item in education budgets. The salaries of public school teachers have been rising—another fact that many in the profession tend not to mention. When the 1980s opened, the typical U.S. public school teacher was paid \$15,970; when the decade closed, \$31,278. In few other fields did earnings double during this period. (The growth in real dollars was a significant 27 percent.) Again, one may feel that the rise was inadequate. Certainly it was unevenly spread around the map. But one cannot, it seems to me, credibly assert that the primary explanation for the weak results posted by the reforms of the 1980s is fiscal parsimony, budgetary retrenchment, or neglect of teachers. We pumped more money into education than ever before.

The 1980s also saw a dramatic shift in the apportionment of assignments between Washington and the states. Although the federal government plays a small and mostly peripheral role in American education, it had catalyzed many of the changes of the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Indeed, within the field the view was widely held that states and localities were responsible for operating the basic system but that Washington should instigate and pay for innovations and experiments. This changed dramatically in the 1980s. While the Excellence Commission was unmistakably a creature of the federal government, in its diagnosis and recommendations it barely alluded to Washington. This distinction is

crucial for purposes of understanding the reform efforts that followed (and in some cases anticipated) *A Nation at Risk*. The old assumptions were thoroughly entangled with the goals of improved access to schooling and greater equality that had propelled education reform for so long. Great progress had been made toward meeting these goals—today just about everybody can have just about as much education as they want. (For example, more than half of U.S. high school graduates go on to college, an astounding proportion by international standards.) It was not unimaginable that a major shift in priorities would be accompanied by different roles for the major actors.

State leaders had reasons of their own to take up the challenge. Public anxiety about education quality was visible by 1983 in one poll and survey after another. "By 1981, when I ran for governor, disillusionment with the schools was widespread," former New Jersey Governor (1981–89) Tom Kean recalls.

By the 1980s, education was the largest single item in the budget of every state government, a sponge soaking up vast sums of local revenue as well. By 1986–7, elementary-secondary education accounted for a quarter of all state and local spending. (Higher education absorbed an additional 9 percent.) It was reasonable to ask whether sufficient return was being earned on this immense public investment. Certainly it was *unreasonable* to forswear involvement in decisions about its uses.

Scholars will forever debate how strong the tie between the quality of schooling and the vitality of the economy really is, but Americans take the idea seriously. "Never," Kean wrote in 1988, "has the link between

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education and the economy been clearer or more compelling."

Better education held out the possibility not just of remedying shortcomings but also of gaining advantage, and not only for the whole country but perhaps even for one's region or state. This opportunity was first grasped by civic and business leaders in the Southeast. The Carolinas, Tennessee, Florida, Arkansas, and even Mississippi began to echo with talk of an economic renaissance built on improved education. Living in Nashville in the early 1980s, I could not count the number of times I heard Governor (now U.S. Secretary of Education) Lamar Alexander argue for education

reform by declaring, "Better schools mean better jobs for Tennesseans, young and old."

From the education profession, too, flowed a stream of books, studies, and reports by such well-regarded authors as TheodoreSizer, John Goodlad, Mortimer Adler, and Ernest Boyer. Though their explanations and recommendations varied, none disputed the basic message of the Excellence Commission: American youngsters were leaving school with insufficient skills and meager knowledge, the country was weakened by this situation, and setting matters right was going to require a number of basic alterations in long-established ideas and practices.

Meanwhile, the bleak data kept piling up. The annual release of college admissions test scores became a major media event—and the news was not getting



Back to basics: Joe Clark, a high school principal in Paterson, New Jersey, won national attention with his get-tough approach. But his students' academic achievement did not greatly improve.

brighter. Every two years, the federally sponsored National Assessment of Educational Progress added to the gloom by reporting elementary and secondary achievement scores. And so, the excellence movement of the 1980s gathered strength.

As it grew, it revealed several basic characteristics. Unlike school reformers of the past, those of the 1980s were not interested in more money and resources as ends in themselves but as means to a larger end, stronger cognitive learning. As a result, they were remarkably open-minded about means, willing to try almost anything that might work.

The movement was also state-centered. Dozens of local educators eventually embraced the goals of the excellence movement, and by decade's end some notable school reforms had been launched in communities as far-flung as Chicago, San Diego,

Miami, and Chelsea, Massachusetts. Yet historians will view the 1980s as a period in which American education became markedly less local in its policy direction and governance. The states had always held in reserve the authority to direct education; yet most had been cautious, bureaucratic, and incrementalist, leaving bold ideas and striking initiatives to the federal government and innovation-prone municipalities. Now the states came to the fore, prodding, pulling, tempting, pleading, and sometimes simply commanding local schools, teachers, principals, administrators, and children to change their ways.

A structural change at least as momentous was the shift of leadership and influence from the education profession and its specialized governance structures—the state and local school boards and committees, with their superintendents and other credentialed executives—to the laity, especially to elected political leaders. Believing that war is too important to be left solely to soldiers, Americans have ensured civilian control of the military. During the 1980s, the civilians sought control of the schools. It was clear that the traditional managers of the system had permitted mediocrity to spread. So long as they were insulated from political influence, they would likely continue marching to their own drummers—and mediocrity would persist as well.

One tactic for breaking that pattern was to strip away the insulation and make the system more directly subject to political guidance and public accountability. And as governors, legislators, and mayors started to delve into policy domains heretofore entrusted to experts, school boards, and other specialized bodies, they found that the idea that politicians ought not meddle with schools was not a sacred principle. No lightning bolts struck them down.

Governors (and, in some communities, mayors) evolved into *de facto* school su-

perintendents, and state legislatures behaved like giant boards of education. Though they still did not select principals or hire teachers, manage schools, or award diplomas, they injected themselves into matters of curriculum and school organization, the testing of students and teachers, the criteria by which school employees are compensated, and much more.

The excellence movement produced 10 classic types of school reform. To my knowledge, no jurisdiction attempted all of these, but I mention none that was not actually tried somewhere.

1. *Standards for students.* Inasmuch as boosting student learning was the supreme goal of reformers, it is no surprise that some sought the straightest path to that destination: explicitly requiring boys and girls to meet higher achievement norms. This was also the strategy with the most precedent, if one recalls the “minimum competency exams” adopted in the 1970s by many states.

Achievement tests that youngsters must pass as a condition for receiving their diplomas remained one popular version of this strategy. Another—echoing the Excellence Commission—was to enlarge the number of academic courses that high school students had to take before graduating. All but five states boosted their graduation requirements between 1980 and 1990. Still another approach was the construction of “promotional gates” imposing performance standards as a precondition for moving to the next grade level. Or something students prized was made to hinge upon meeting a certain standard. Thus several states and localities adopted “no pass, no play” rules, under which students could play on school athletic teams (and, sometimes, participate in other activities) only by maintaining a certain grade point average or not failing any courses. To reduce

the drop-out rate some states withheld driver's licenses from youngsters leaving school before turning 18.

2. *Standards for teachers.* Untalented and ill-prepared teachers were widely and plausibly deemed a barrier to educational excellence. If student standards could be raised via mandatory examinations, why not fashion a similar approach for their instructors? And so, where just 10 states had required teachers to take competency tests in 1980, by decade's end 44 of them obliged new teachers to pass written exams before being certified.

There was little resistance, save sometimes by colleges of education, to the idea, at least so long as the passing mark was not too high. The explosive issue was forcing veteran instructors to take a test—or to meet any other new standard. State teacher unions were adamantly opposed. There was no way they could go along with jeopardizing the tenured jobs that most of their members held. Besides, they and others asked, how much of what you really want to know about a teacher's skills can be determined by a paper-and-pencil exam? In the end, just three states (Georgia, Arkansas, Texas) obliged all teachers to take a written test. And this was accompanied by such acrimony—Texas governor Mark White lost his 1986 re-election bid in no small part because of furious opposition to his innovative teacher testing program—so many chances to retake the test and, finally, by passing scores pegged to such humble levels of actual attainment, that it is unlikely that this form of standard-setting will be widely used in the near future.

Observing the political cost of testing classroom veterans, other states and localities chose instead to adopt more complex evaluations that teachers may undergo en route to higher levels of rank, status, and pay. All teacher appraisal schemes are fraught with controversy, at least among ed-

ucators, but policymakers have been able to prevail with the voluntary kind so long as they lead not to grief for those who fail but only to benefits for those who pass.

3. *Changes in teacher recruitment, education, and licensure.* One enduring bit of folk wisdom about American education is that courses given by teacher education programs are near-worthless and consume so much of future teachers' college schedules that they leave little time for mastering the subjects they will one day be teaching. Few institutions are so widely despised as the teachers' college. "The willingness to endure four years in a typical school of education," asserts Boston University President John Silber, "often constitutes an effective negative intelligence test."

Reform strategies under this heading can be sorted into four types. First, efforts to attract able people, especially minority group members, into the teaching profession by creating high status programs, special scholarships, forgivable loans, and other inducements and concessions—all in addition to the general teacher salary escalation of the decade.

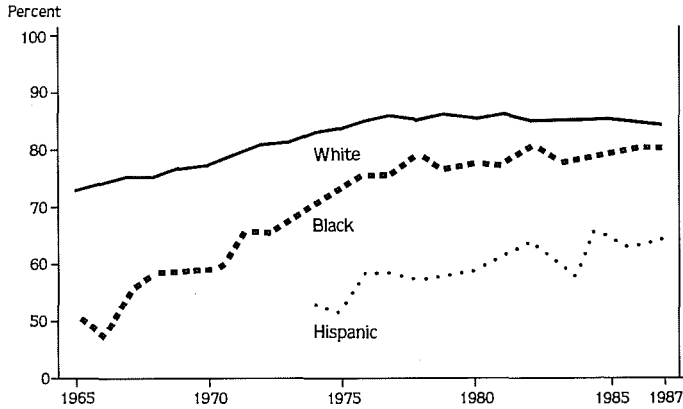
Second, efforts to lift the intellectual standards of teacher education programs by raising entrance (or graduation) criteria or by mandating changes in their curricula and practices.

Third, efforts to beef up the subject matter knowledge of future teachers by boosting liberal arts requirements or—an initiative taken by one group of institutions—shifting all "professional" courses to the graduate level, leaving the undergraduate years to the arts and sciences. (That makes teachers look more like other professionals by equipping them all with graduate degrees, but it also raises the cost of becoming a teacher.)

Fourth, and boldest, 48 states have opened alternate paths into teaching, such

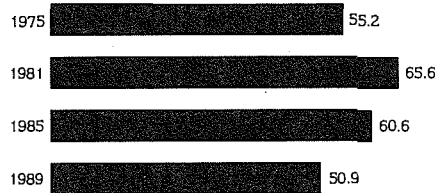
THE (SOMEWHAT) GOOD NEWS . . .

Finishing High School (25- to 29-year-olds with at least 12 years of school)

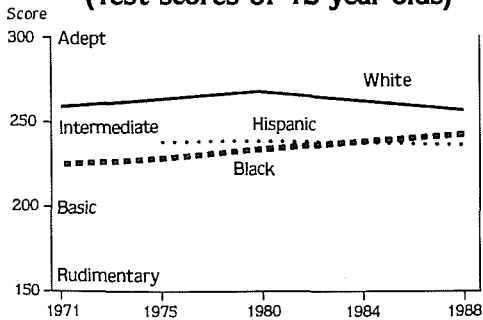


If the quality of U.S. education has not increased, at least the quantity has. As the chart above shows, more Americans (86 percent) complete high school than ever before. Surveys also show (at right) a decline in illegal drug use among students. And while overall reading test scores have remained flat (below), there has been a very slight improvement among minority students.

Getting Away From Drugs (High School Seniors Using Illegal Drugs)



Learning to Read (Test scores of 13-year-olds)

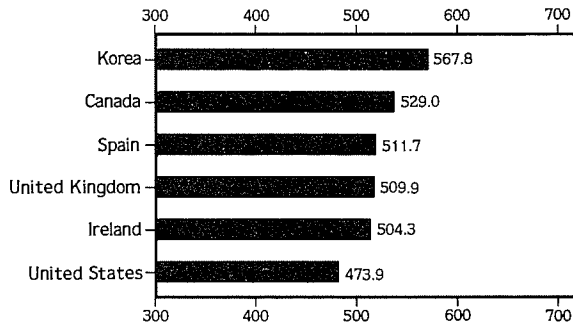


Source: *The Condition of Education 1990, Vol. 1, Elementary and Secondary Education*, published by the National Center for Education Statistics, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

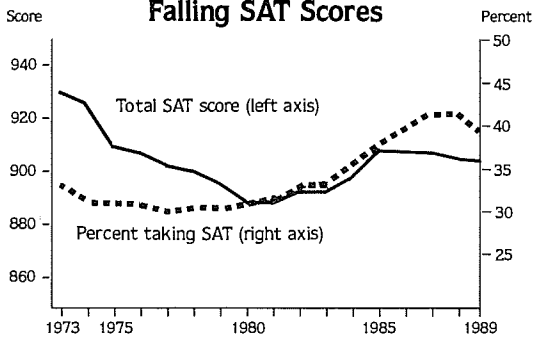
THE BAD NEWS

In international comparisons of academic achievement, American students are invariably near the bottom.

**Not Measuring Up Internationally
(Math scores of 13-year-olds)**

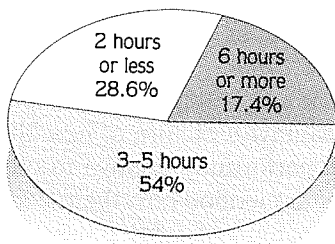


Falling SAT Scores

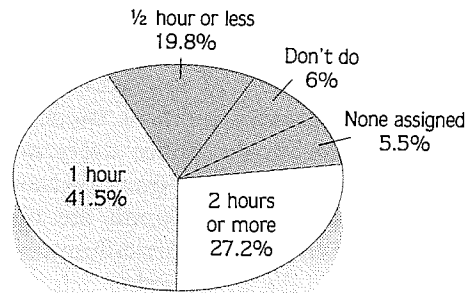


Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of the college-bound have dropped. Meanwhile, more and more students are taking the test. (The top score possible: 1,600.)

**Too Much TV
(Daily Viewing Time of 8th-graders)**



**Too Little Homework
(Daily Homework Done by 8th-Graders)**



Virtually all American children devote more time to television than to homework. The average eighth-grader spends 21 hours in front of the Idiot Box every week and perhaps five hours doing homework. Studies suggest that American youngsters do much less homework than their peers overseas.

that it is no longer essential for all prospective instructors to complete a university-based pre-service teacher training program. Such programs have particular appeal for mid-career people with liberal arts degrees who during their college days had not planned to become teachers.

4. *Curriculum change.* No aspect of American education is in greater disarray, yet no decision about education is more basic than what the children will study. If they are not learning enough history or geography, for example, why not overhaul the social studies curriculum to pay greater heed to those fields? This approach to education reform had many advocates during the 1980s, conspicuously including then-Education Secretary William Bennett and E. D. Hirsch, author of the best-selling book, *Cultural Literacy* (1987). They had logic and common sense on their side. Dry as it sounds, revising the curriculum means rethinking exactly what students should learn. When harmonized with textbook selections, teacher preparation, and student testing, this may well be the soundest approach to education reform. It is now being tried in a number of localities and states, with particular finesse in California, where Bill Honig, the dynamic state superintendent of public instruction, has chosen it as his primary reform strategy.

Curriculum revision may, however, also be the approach least suited to mandates by lay policymakers. It is complex, tedious, and technical. And few education issues generate greater political friction. Every tension within the polity, every argument about the culture, and every division in the population descends upon the operating room whenever the curriculum undergoes surgery. So do innumerable fads and fears. The textbook guidelines that Honig inherited in California, for example, banned pictures of children eating ice cream cones, a prohibition inserted at the behest of nutri-

tion advocacy groups. The businessman or legislator seized by a simple notion—"children in this state should learn more geography" (or science, literature, or whatever)—can scarcely imagine the fracas that will erupt as people seek to put flesh on the bones of his idea. Nor can he imagine how resented he will be by an education profession that dislikes lay "meddling" in curricular matters.

5. *Testing and assessment.* Testing comes under the broad heading of "accountability" mechanisms: ways of furnishing parents, policymakers, and educators with accurate information about the efficacy of their efforts. The American education system has an aversion to clear consumer information about results and outcomes; it is not too much to say that it has been engaged in a massive cover-up. While there is a surfeit of data about the schools, very little of it measures *results*. And data that are relevant nearly always suffer from two basic weaknesses. Either they report results only for the country as a whole—as the highly publicized National Assessment of Educational Progress tests have done (save a recent small experiment)—or they report results for youngsters in individual states and localities in ways that make it impossible to compare them with other jurisdictions, with national standards, or with international competitors. This is true even of the otherwise laudable assessment systems created by California, Connecticut, and several other states during the 1980s.

As a rule, it is impossible for parents to get a meaningful picture of how their children are performing relative to other children, not to mention how their local school is doing compared with other schools in the community, with state or national goals, or even with its own past performance. Indeed, in 1987, a West Virginia physician named John J. Cannell made the amazing

discovery that the six commercially prepared tests widely used in the nation's elementary schools, among them the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and the Metropolitan Achievement Test, were structured in such a way that no state's scores appeared to be below average! Ninety percent of local school districts and 70 percent of students tested, Cannell found in a study that has since been confirmed in its essentials, were told that they were performing above the national average.

6. *Incentives and Rewards.* Better data on results are not sufficient. People also have to be motivated. Accordingly, rewards for success—prizes, bonuses, or awards for students, teachers, principals, and entire schools—and interventions in response to failure proliferated during the 1980s. But with its entrenched ethos of equity and marked distaste for comparisons, the education system turns skittish when individuals or schools are singled out, even for re-

wards. Far greater anxiety is roused when unpleasant actions are triggered by failure. Hence the battle lines practically drew themselves during the 1980s as officials in several jurisdictions proposed "education bankruptcy" procedures empowering the state to intervene in the management of local school systems that produce poor results. Nine states have put such laws on their books, usually after fierce legislative tussles. In 1988, in the most dramatic exercise of this form of accountability, the state of New Jersey dismissed the Jersey City school board and superintendent and stepped in temporarily to manage that troubled urban system. We cannot be certain that state education agencies, themselves often sluggish and bureaucratized, will do a better job—though in situations like that in Jersey City it is hard to imagine them doing worse. The point, rather, is that local educators (and board members) now understand that they are no longer accountable only to



Resistance to reforms like competence tests cost teachers and their unions public respect.

themselves and their Creator.

7. *Business and university partnerships.* In 1988, the U.S. Department of Education tallied 140,000 school-business partnership projects in operation, typically consisting of corporations donating or loaning resources, both human and material, to the schools. As businessmen came to see more clearly by decade's end that their generosity induced gratitude but little real improvement in student learning, some of them inclined toward more direct action in the realm of politics and policy—and we also began to spot signs of a backlash among educators who welcomed corporate largesse but not “interference.”

8. *School restructuring.* By 1990, the term “restructuring” was as widely (and variously) used as “excellence” had been a few years earlier. It came in a hundred varieties: school-based management, teacher empowerment, learner-centered pedagogy, and so on. All, however, entail reallocating roles and responsibilities within individual schools and systems. The theoretical foundation of school restructuring (insofar as something this amorphous can be said to have one) closely resembles principles advocated by corporate management specialists. Typical strategies include devolution to the building level of decisions about resource allocation, scheduling, and other matters, and more collegial relationships among staff members.

Educational “perestroika” is notable because it has been the reform favored by change-minded educators themselves, the only one indigenous to their profession (even if key elements were borrowed from other fields), and the one entailing the least lay initiative and leadership.

9. *Making More Schools “Effective.”* Even before the excellence movement gained momentum, scholars such as Ronald Edmonds, Michael Rutter, Marshall Smith, and Stewart Purkey had sought to

answer the question of why some schools are more successful than others at imparting cognitive skills and knowledge to their students. While they found no patented formulas, they did spotlight some features commonly encountered in strong schools. These include a clear sense of institutional mission that is shared by teachers and principal; high expectations for all students; a well-developed team spirit in the school; a safe and orderly atmosphere congenial to learning; and adroit leadership of the instructional process, ordinarily by a principal who views himself as an educational executive rather than a building manager.

The research was solid and persuasive, at least with regard to elementary schools. It hewed to experience as well as common sense. And it provided a tempting agenda for reformers. There was only one big problem: The attributes that distinguish the very best schools tend to be home-grown, idiosyncratic, defiant of bureaucracy, and generally immune to efforts to mandate them into existence. Laws and regulations enacted far away cannot substitute for—nor themselves create—the commitment and shared values that must be embodied in the soul of the school itself. Nor can they guarantee the presence of extraordinary people in every school. If the principal is weak, if teachers work in virtual isolation from one another, if there is fundamental disagreement among the professional staff over goals and expectations, and if teachers and students stumble over each other racing for the door at 2:45 every afternoon, then that school is not likely to become more effective merely because state or local officials order it to change.

Yet tailoring such reforms to thousands of individual situations is too daunting an undertaking for even the most intrepid public officials. The result was a series of programs designed to put certain pieces of the “effective schools” research into com-

IS MEDIOCRITY THE AMERICAN WAY?

In Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning (1991), cultural historian Jacques Barzun questions whether Americans are truly committed to the pursuit of excellence.

Forget Education. Education is a result, a slow growth, and hard to judge. Let us talk rather about Teaching and Learning, a joint activity that can be provided for, though as a nation we have lost the knack of it. The blame falls on the public schools . . . but they deserve only half the blame. The other half belongs to the people at large, *us*—our attitudes, our choices, our thought-clichés.

Take one familiar fact: everybody keeps calling for Excellence—excellence not just in schooling, throughout society. But as soon as somebody or something stands out as Excellent, the other shout goes up: "Elitism!" And whatever produced that thing, whoever praises that result, is promptly put down. "Standing out" is undemocratic . . .

Why should children make an effort to shine in school when shining is a handicap? Shining, that is, in *schoolwork*. In athletics, it's another story. We do not cheer the duffers; there is no cry of elitism near the playing field. We pay large sums to get the best and to see that it is duly praised. Never mind

what the school superintendent is like, we need a first-class coach and a good band. The people who insist on all this and supervise it very efficiently are those ultimately in charge of the schools, the school-boards, and behind them are the general public who want to enjoy exciting games and have their town excel . . .

Given the public's muddled feelings about brainwork (which is what "excellence" refers to) and the parental indifference up to now about what their children are being taught, the school has a double fight on its hands: against ignorance inside the walls and against cultural prejudice outside, the prejudice lying so deep that those who harbor it do not even know they do. It none the less tells the young what is really important. The result for them is that learning, homework, teachers, tests, grades, standards, promotion form a great maze—mostly make-believe—that they have to stumble through in order to be let go at last and, thanks to a piece of paper, get a job.

mon practice. One example is the proliferation of "principals' academies" and "leadership institutes" designed to turn school principals into dynamic executives, in part by acquainting them with pertinent research findings. This is a sound plan so far as it goes. But there are about 83,000 public- (and 27,000 private-) school principals in the country, many of them rather set in their ways. And even when such projects have an immediate effect on participants, in terms of overall school effectiveness it is like supplying a single ingredient in a complex recipe. The frustration for reformers trying to turn effective schools research into policy and practice is that the recipe it yields is the sort that starts by saying, "First, you engage the services of a great chef, and then you renovate your kitchen." What policymakers want is something more like a muffin mix.

10. *Parent choice.* Empowering parents to select their child's school is an education improvement strategy in three ways: first, because proponents believe that youngsters learn more when enrolled in schools that they want to attend and that parents have some stake in; second, because we assume that individuals given the opportunity will flee bad learning environments and gravitate to better ones; and, third, because accountability through the "marketplace" is believed to have a salubrious effect on schools themselves. Good schools are rewarded with more students, esteem, and resources, while unpopular schools have potent incentives to change so as to attract more customers.

Counterarguments have been made to each of these claims, but during the 1980s the provision of choice within public education emerged as a significant school re-



School's out for summer! And kids aren't the only ones who rejoice. Extending the school year is an obvious way to increase learning, but parents have rebelled against such reforms.

form strategy. It appealed to some liberals because it offered poor and minority youngsters a route out of inferior, racially homogeneous inner-city schools—and perhaps a roundabout means of improving those schools as well. Many conservatives were drawn to its marketplace features and to its affirmation of parental primacy. Elected officials liked it because it was bold and sweeping, hugely popular (at least in concept) with the public, and able to be inaugurated with the stroke of a pen. A number of scholars found ample basis in research for making schools more responsive to their customers. And some practitioners welcomed this approach, too, both as a means of quality improvement and because it is compatible with—some would say inseparable from—school restructuring. They reasoned that as a decentralized, building-managed education system begins to supply more varied and distinctive offerings, it is only right that youngsters and schools should be matched on the basis of their individual strengths and preferences.

By 1990, nine states had enacted laws

providing, in effect, that children could attend public school anywhere in the state. In addition, magnet-school programs flourished in many cities and some suburbs. “Schools within schools” were appearing, as were “alternative” schools of many kinds. Some communities turned all of their schools into schools-of-choice. Academic specialty schools were operating, too, sometimes on a statewide basis, often for gifted students. Half a dozen states even established residential high schools for talented youngsters from throughout

the state, some with a heavy emphasis on math and science.

With only the rarest exceptions, however, these options were confined to public institutions. Parents who chose private schools got no aid or succor from public policy. Indeed, it was the discovery that an array of choices might be provided *within* public education, and that these were attractive to disadvantaged and minority families as well as to the prosperous and white, that broke the constitutional and political logjam in which most discussions of educational choice had previously been stuck.

That, in any case, was the situation during the 1980s. By 1990, it appeared to be undergoing a dramatic change—an important instance of the radicalization of education reform. This spring, for example, in presenting his America 2000 education strategy, President Bush insisted that choice policies include private as well as public school alternatives.

But choice is not a magic bullet that will solve all of our problems. One thing that we desperately need is a crackerjack sys-

tem of information feedback and accountability to remedy Americans' woeful ignorance about academic performance in their schools. The fact is that we—and that includes teachers and school administrators—don't really know what kinds of results our schools are achieving. Largely because of gaps in our testing systems, we are suffering from a kind of national split personality: People seem on the one hand to acknowledge that we have a very serious national education problem but also seem on the other hand to be reasonably content with their *own* and their children's education, and with their local schools. Last year, only 23 percent of parents polled by the Gallup Organization gave the nation's schools an "A" or "B," but 48 percent gave their community's public schools such high grades, and a remarkable 72 percent gave them to the school their eldest child attended!

Surveys show that teachers, principals, and superintendents hold equally rosy views; so it should come as no surprise that American students do not have a very realistic understanding of their own academic performance. The latest international comparison shows that American 13-year-olds rank at or near the bottom in various categories of math and science performance, but at the top in assessments of their own abilities. An amazing 68 percent of the American teenagers surveyed agreed with the statement, "I am good at mathematics." By contrast, only 23 percent of South Korean youngsters, the top performers in this test, dared to think themselves so accomplished.

Assessments must be linked to goals. The United States needs a set of clear educational goals that we expect every young American to achieve by the threshold of adulthood. Those adopted for the year 2000 by President Bush and the nation's governors in the aftermath of their 1989 educa-

tion summit in Charlottesville, Virginia are not perfect in anybody's eyes, but they will do.* A substantial core curriculum—perhaps a *national* core—seems an obvious complement to this approach. (And why not relate the term of compulsory school attendance to the achievement of minimum standards rather than merely an arbitrarily selected birthday?) National achievement tests to measure results and to allow realistic assessments of the performance of students, teachers, schools, and school districts are indispensable. And measurement must be accompanied by accountability: Good things must happen to teachers and schools when they succeed in meeting goals, less welcome things when they fail.

None of this is meant to imply that the nation's schools ought to march in lock-step. Far from it. Outside the core curriculum, there should be vast differences among schools, not only with regard to what is taught, but how, when, and under what circumstances it is taught. School-site management, rather than central administration, ought to be emphasized. In Chicago, for example, individual school governing councils, not the system's central administration, now have the power to hire and fire their principals. That is how the diversity and vitality discovered by the "effective schools" researchers can take root in more communities.

That kind of management, combined with choice and rigorous assessments of performance, ought to help stimulate more parental involvement. Who can dispute, in addition, the need for a longer school day and school year? Finally, the teachers and

*The six goals: 1) All children will start school ready to learn; 2) The high school graduation rate will increase to 90 percent; 3) Students leaving grades four, eight, and 12 will demonstrate competence in challenging subject matter including English, math, science, history, and geography; 4) U.S. students will be first in the world in science and math achievement; 5) Functional literacy for every adult American; 6) Every school will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning, free of drugs and violence.

principals of whom so much more will be asked deserve appropriate treatment. They should be sought in many quarters (not just in colleges of education), treated as professionals, and paid according to their skills, experience, and performance. They also need to be more involved in the development of curriculum and instructional materials. In the Asian schools I've visited, teachers work pretty much year-round (and teach large classes), but they teach only three or four hours a day and have time for class preparation, meetings with students, and other activities.

Some of the radical reforms that are needed to revive the schools have recently been put in place in scattered states and localities around the country. But they haven't yet been planted in many fields and they are not rooted very deeply. The roots of mediocrity, by contrast, run deep into our cultural subsoil. They have left us with entrenched institutional resistance to change and a pervasive reluctance to compare the performance of schools and students. That is what finally stymied the sincere and imaginative efforts of the last decade's excellence movement. Now we need to overhaul the whole system. The scattered efforts around the country give heart. The America 2000 strategy President Bush announced in April, with its voluntary national standards, achievement tests, and

school "report cards," along with its encouragement of choice, is sure to speed the pace of change.

But the president cannot do it alone, even with a talented and energetic Secretary of Education. Education is a national problem, to be sure, but not one amenable to solution at the hands of the federal government—a distinction that few in Washington can comprehend. The decisions that matter are made by states and communities, by parents around their kitchen tables, by teachers in millions of classrooms, by principals in thousands of schools, and perhaps above all by colleges and employers whose admissions and hiring decisions create the incentives that do or do not move students to work hard in schools.

Setting American education right will require something akin to a populist revolt against the status quo. This is not a system likely to turn itself around. Too many internal forces tend toward stasis. But it responds to political pressure, to popular discontent, and sometimes to adroit leadership. Devising a strategy to move it off dead center, to press it toward the laudable national education goals set by the president and governors, and finally to become accountable for its performance, may well be the highest-stakes challenge facing the United States in the 1990s.