

SOCIETY

Exaggerating the Schools' Woes

"Did the Education Commissions Say Anything?" by Paul E. Peterson, in *The Brookings Review* (Winter 1983), 1775 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Last year, President Reagan's National Commission on Excellence in Education warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" in the nation's schools. A host of other task forces soon echoed the dire news [see "Teaching in America," *WQ*, New Year's 1984]. But according to Peterson, a Brookings Institution political scientist, all the hoopla concealed the fact that the tide was already beginning to recede.

Much of the evidence used to document the public schools' tailspin bears re-examination, he says. While outlays per pupil dropped by eight percent between 1978 and 1983, this barely cut into the 45 percent increase that had occurred during the previous eight years. And although private school enrollment climbed from 9.8 percent of the nation's students in 1974 to 10.9 percent in 1981—an ill sign for the public schools—it came nowhere near the 13.5 percent level of 1960.

Such data, argues Peterson, reveal "little more than a pause in what has otherwise been a continuous upward spiral" in the quality of U.S. public education. Things are already beginning to look up for elementary and junior high schools, where students' test scores are rising.

How could all of those panels and commissions have been so wrong? Peterson believes that the flaw lies in the very nature of such groups. Because their only power comes from influencing the public through the news media, they have every incentive to exaggerate problems and little reason to make detailed recommendations.

As a result, Peterson argues, airy generalities (aim for "excellence" in education) tend to prevail. The commissions steer clear of controversial proposals (e.g., government education vouchers). When they do endorse ideas that might rock the boat (e.g., merit pay for teachers), they offer no advice on the most difficult question: how to pay for them.

Usually, blue-ribbon panels claim that they "mobilized public opinion." But Peterson thinks that Americans were already alert to the state of their schools. The commissions, he observes, merely ran to the head of the pack, "shouting loudly en route."

Explaining High Black Youth Unemployment

"The Paradox of Lessening Racial Inequality and Joblessness among Black Youth: Enrollment, Enlistment, and Employment, 1964-1981" by Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship, in *American Sociological Review* (Feb. 1984), 1722 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

By almost every measure, the socioeconomic gap between whites and blacks has narrowed since the 1960s. A notable exception is youth employment. In 1954, note Mare and Winship, sociologists at the University of Wisconsin and Northwestern University, respectively, 47