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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

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percent of black and 50 percent of white male 16-to-24-year-olds held jobs. In 1980, the rates were 41 and 62 percent, respectively.

The authors looked for explanations in U.S. Census Bureau data on 261,000 young men. Between 1964 and 1980, black males increased their school enrollment, while white enrollment dropped modestly. About 60 percent of black high school-age men were still in school in 1980, just topping the white enrollment rate. Students are less likely than non-students to hold jobs. By the authors' calculations, the new school enrollment rates account for 39 percent of the increase in the black-white employment differential.

Military enlistment patterns have also changed. Since the early 1970s, black enlistment rates have topped white rates, reversing the historic pattern. Nearly 15 percent of 20-to-23-year-old black men, but just over five percent of their white peers, were in uniform in 1981.

Because military personnel were not until recently counted as part of the U.S. work force, enlistment had no direct impact on employment statistics. But there are two indirect effects: The military gets the "cream" of black youths, leaving a pool of less employable job candidates. And veterans, because they lack civilian work experience, suffer abnormally high unemployment. Higher rates of school enrollment have the same effects, the authors add. By their reckoning, inexperience and "creaming" due to higher black enrollment and enlistment rates together account for another 16 percent of the increased employment gap.

That leaves nearly half of the 18 point increase in the black-white employment "gap" statistically unexplained. *Higher* employment among white youths and the decline of inner-city businesses that employ young blacks are among the probable causes. The authors doubt that racial discrimination has worsened. They think that their data reveal an employment disparity that was there all along, concealed only because the young blacks of the early 1960s were getting an unwanted "head start" in the work force over their white peers.

PRESS & TELEVISION

TV for Wimps?

"Where the Do-Gooders Went Wrong" by Walter Karp, in *Channels of Communications* (Mar.-Apr. 1984), Box 2001, Mahopac, N.Y. 10541.

To hear the critics of children's television tell it, Saturday mornings are as awash in animated violence and mayhem as ever. If only it were so, laments Karp, a *Channels* contributing editor.

He says that the networks have succumbed to pressure from groups like Action for Children's Television to "reform" kids' shows. *The*