

A Nation Still At Risk



In 1966, the famous Coleman Report alerted the American people to the unfolding tragedy of a dysfunctional educational system. Funded by the U.S. Department of Commerce in response to the concerns about educational inequality raised by the civil rights movement, the Coleman Report highlighted the alarming extent to which students from low-income minority groups were falling behind their more fortunate counterparts, creating a nation with two separate and radically unequal educational systems.

Seventeen years later, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its report on the declining quality of American schools in general. Titled *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, the report startled the nation with its warning of “a rising tide of mediocrity” in our schools and its grim declaration, “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

More than four decades have passed since the publication of the Coleman Report, and almost three decades since *A Nation*

At Risk—decades of debate, dissension, finger-pointing, and confusion. School systems around the country have made countless attempts to improve the overall quality of education, pursuing a wide variety of strategies. Families and communities have turned to private schools, charter schools, magnet schools, parochial schools, home-schooling, and a series of other attempted remedies. Major national efforts such as the No Child Left Behind legislation spearheaded by President George W. Bush and Senator Edward M. Kennedy have been mounted. Hundreds of billions of dollars have been thrown at the problem. Yet in the aggregate, the problems the Coleman Report and *A Nation At Risk* identified have not been alleviated. In fact, by most measures, they have only gotten worse.

Here are just some of the damning statistics that illustrate how serious the problems with American education have become—and suggest some of the causes:

- Eight years after the passage of No Child Left Behind, the United States has four years left to reach the act's goal of 100 percent proficiency in math and reading—but most states currently hover around 20 percent or 30 percent proficiency.
- Among thirty developed countries, the United States is ranked twenty-fifth in math and twenty-first in science. When the comparison is restricted to the top 5 percent of students, the United States is ranked last.
- Barely half of African-American and Latino students graduate from high school. African-American students graduate at 51 percent, Latinos at 55 percent, while their white counterparts graduate at (a still lower than optimal) 76 percent.

- The economic costs of failing schools are enormous. For example, in Pennsylvania, 68 percent of state prison inmates are high school dropouts. The state spends \$33,000 a year on each prisoner, and the total cost of the average prison term is \$132,000. By contrast, the average private school costs \$8,300 per student per year. So for the same amount, Pennsylvania could have sent a prison inmate to a private school from kindergarten through twelfth grade—and still had more than \$24,000 left for college.

- Fifty years ago, only 20 percent of high school graduates expected to go to college. Most of those who did would become doctors, lawyers, engineers, clergymen, and top corporate executives. The next 20 percent were expected to go straight into skilled jobs as accountants, managers, technicians, or bureaucrats, while the bottom 60 percent would become workers on farms and in factories, in an economy where those occupations generally paid wages sufficient to support a family. Based on these numbers, a system of tracking or grouping by ability emerged that served American school systems reasonably well. Today most middle-class high schools still track their students in this manner, even though the economy now requires a much higher percentage of college graduates. The gap between what we need and what we are producing is large, and growing. In fact, by the year 2020, 123 million American jobs will be in high-skill/high-pay occupations, from computer programming to bioengineering, but only 50 million Americans will be qualified to fill them.

- The average college graduate earns 73 percent more than the average high school graduate in a lifetime. Based on this relationship, The Alliance for Excellent Education has

estimated that the approximately 1.2 million students who should have graduated with the college class of 2008—but failed to do so—will cost the nation nearly \$319 billion in lost income over the course of their lives.

- High school graduates on average live up to seven years longer than high school dropouts.
- In 1970, the United States produced 30 percent of the world's college graduates. Today it produces only 15 percent.
- At America's top 150 colleges, 90 percent of incoming freshmen come from families in the top half of U.S. annual income statistics.
- Since 1971, education spending in the United States has more than doubled from \$4,300 per student to more than \$9,000 per student (adjusted for inflation). Yet in that same time period, reading and math scores have remained flat in the United States, even as they have risen in virtually every other developed country.
- Teachers' unions, originally formed in the mid-nineteenth century, began as leading voices in the national movement for women's rights and the rights of all working people. Today they are also major political forces. Taken together, the two biggest teachers' unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), are the nation's largest contributors to political campaigns. Over the past twenty years, they have given more than \$55 million to congressional candidates and their parties, more than the Teamsters, the National Rifle Association, the AARP, the National Chamber of Com-

merce, or any other organization. More than 90 percent of this money goes to Democrats.

- As a profession, teachers enjoy some of the strongest protections of any group of workers. For example, in Illinois, 1 in 57 doctors loses his or her medical license, and 1 in 97 attorneys loses his or her law license, but only 1 teacher in 2,500 has ever lost his or her credentials.
- In New York state, disciplinary hearings for teachers last eight times longer than the average U.S. criminal case. The cost to the State of New York of teachers awaiting these hearings is \$65 million a year.
- Recent research into teacher effectiveness demonstrates that the performance gap between the best teachers and the worst teachers is far greater than commonly supposed. On average, a teacher in the bottom quintile of effectiveness covers only 50 percent of the required curriculum in a school year, while a teacher in the top quintile covers 150 percent. Research reflects the cumulative impact of the difference on a group of students over multiple years: In Dallas, students who had three consecutive years of effective teachers improved their math test scores by 21 points, while students with three years of ineffective teachers fell 30 points behind.
- Teacher retention is a serious problem for many American school districts. By some estimates, approximately 40 percent of teachers leave the profession within five years of starting to teach, while 50 percent leave within six years. The problem is worst in the neediest school districts. Nationwide, 15.2 percent of teachers at high-poverty schools

leave their schools annually, compared to 10.5 percent in low-poverty settings.

- As a result of the teacher retention challenge, 20 percent of teachers in high-poverty schools are inexperienced, compared with 11 percent in low-poverty schools; the figures are 21 percent in high-minority schools and 10 percent in low-minority schools.

Of course, statistics alone don't tell the story, and numbers isolated from a social, economic, and political context can be misleading and subject to abuse.

For example, experts disagree about the significance of teacher retention statistics. On average, more-experienced teachers produce better student results—but only on average. There are teachers with many years in the classroom who are mediocre at best, and some newcomers to the profession who are deeply gifted and able to produce superb outcomes almost from their first days on the job. Identifying the high performers, weeding out the low performers, and improving the work of those in the middle ranks is the big challenge—and as you'll read in this book, much progress has been made in developing tools to make this possible.

Others, especially advocates for teachers' unions, point to high rates of teacher turnover as an important corrective to what they consider misleading statistics about the tiny numbers of teachers who are removed from their jobs for incompetence. That relatively large numbers of teachers quit the profession within a few years indicates, they say, an important self-policing mechanism at work, with those unsuited to teaching choosing voluntary departures. But what both sides of this particular debate increasingly agree upon is that teacher performance matters,

a lot; that the (relatively small) numbers of ineffective teachers should be moved out of the classroom; and that the many skilled and dedicated teachers already at work in our schools need the resources, training, rewards, and encouragement to continue and improve their efforts.

Statistics alone can tell us only so much. But almost thirty years after *A Nation At Risk*, it seems very clear that too many American schools are still failing. They are failing to prepare students adequately for higher education and for the challenging workplaces of the future; they are failing to produce the large numbers of high-skilled professionals our country will need to remain economically competitive; and they are, most egregiously, failing to provide students from ethnic and racial minorities, as well as the economically disadvantaged, with the intellectual tools they need to achieve their piece of the American dream. Our nation is already seriously stratified between haves and have-nots, the latter too often marked from birth and given little realistic chance of catching up. For the good of all Americans, that inequality must change—and education is the most obvious and natural place to make that change possible.

In their remarkable documentary *Waiting for "Superman,"* director Davis Guggenheim, producer Lesley Chilcott, and the talented team of artists and craftspeople who supported them have provided a moving, thoughtful, and inspiring contribution to the national debate that surrounds the issue of educational reform. This companion book, inspired by the film, attempts to offer its own contribution. Through the insights, experiences, and wisdom of many of America's leading experts on education, each with a unique and uniquely valuable perspective, we want to help inform the debate, clarify the issues, suggest how much has already been accomplished by today's most gifted school reformers, and illuminate the problems that continue to elude solution.

Perhaps most important, we hope to remind readers—whether they are students or teachers, parents or grandparents, policy makers or concerned citizens—that the cause of school reform is one that affects us all . . . and that redeeming the promise of a world-class education for *all* of our citizens is a cause worth working, and fighting, for.

PART I

THE FILM