
The ORIGINS of the COMMON CORE

How the Free Market Became
Public Education Policy

Deborah Duncan Owens

Foreword by Thomas J. Fiala



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EDUCATION POLICY

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FOREWORD

By Thomas J. Fiala, PhD

For a growing number of Americans, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and the educational ramifications of these standards, have become the most contentious education reform initiative in American history. For some, the creation of these standards reflects the ominous hand of the federal government that intends to dominate locally controlled public schools. For others, these standards are connected to a corporate assault on America's public school system. One thing is certain, however. There is a war now being fought over the very existence of America's public school system, a system that has played an essential role in helping make America become not only a preeminent world power, but that has also been a democratic means to increased individual improvement and opportunity, overall social betterment, and another reason why so many diverse groups have always come to the United States in order to help make their hopes and aspirations become reality.

There is, however, a nagging two-part question that is being asked by a vast number of Americans. How did the Common Core State Standards come to be, and how did America and its public schools become entangled in the plethora of educational initiatives that have made the public school system a feeding ground for profit. Until now, it seems that no single coherent in-depth analysis is available that begins to unpack the historically complex social, political, and ideological influences that are at the root of the CCSS phenomenon. Without this type of in-depth rigorous analysis, Americans will only continue to ask, "How did the CCSS come to be?" While there exist short, fragmented answers to this question that are partially correct, and there are many fine books that address this question in an indirect manner, no single well-researched narrative exists that begins to explain the long and complex origins of the CCSS and the current assault on America's public school system.

Stepping forward to take on this daunting challenge is Dr. Deborah Duncan Owens, without a doubt a defender of America's democratic system of public education. What the reader will discover in this book is a story that will fortify the beliefs of many Americans who cherish their locally controlled public schools, while also arming these public school supporters with the needed knowledge to understand, and then disarm, those who see the free market as the solution to solving the complex educational challenges confronting the United States. What Owens has been able to accomplish is an explanation of how, as the title of the book boldly states, the free market became public school policy. Most important, as Owens points out, within this process, America's public school system has once again become a scapegoat for all that ails American society, while heralding all the ramifications of free market systemic education reform as the means of saving the United States from its supposed enemy—the public school system writ large.

For those who see the numerous reform initiatives such as high-stakes testing, charter schools, vouchers, value-added measurement, student-data collecting, and the disempowerment of citizens in decision making when it comes to their public schools as the wrong approach to meeting the education challenges confronting the United States, this is an empowering book. By helping parents, teachers, and other stakeholders who support America's public school system to not only understand how these initiatives came to be, but also understand the weaknesses within these initiatives, this book has the potential to not only further unite supporters of the public school system in order to save this system, but also add clarity and validation to their efforts to maintain control over their public schools and guide future education policy making. For those who support current reform initiatives, the book has the potential to change some minds regarding these initiatives.

For those individuals on the political and ideological right or left who are militantly wedded to their ideas, however, this book will not provide safe haven. This is because, as the book makes clear, both political parties have found common ground in a unified allegiance to a free market approach to systemic education reform that has created an educational sea of profit at the expense of America's most important resource—its children. That being the case, the book is more than an academic exercise, although that in itself is obviously worthwhile. It is also a book that challenges fundamental beliefs and creates ideological dissonance, which can reenergize democratic discourse.

In the end, readers will gain important insight into the current state of education reform. They will get a better understanding of how and why the current state of education reform came to be, while also understanding that there is a good deal that needs to be done, particularly for those marginalized groups and individuals who need a better education. Very importantly, however, this book will challenge the notion that a free market approach to systemic education reform is the proper way to positively improve public schools. Clearly, Owens believes that it is a misguided attempt to destroy, and not merely reform, America's historically beneficial public school system. Perhaps after reading this book, others will agree as well.

CHAPTER 1



THE NATION WAS AT RISK AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS DID IT

It was “morning again in America” in 1984. The credibility of President Ronald Reagan’s economic policies had been bolstered during his first term in office by lower inflation rates, higher employment, and an increase in new home purchases. Indeed, many of the issues that had dampened prospects in America during the 1970s were over. The government turmoil associated with Watergate was history, the Vietnam War and the draft had ended, the Iranian hostage crisis was resolved, the oil embargo ended, and, in spite of the higher cost for gasoline, America seemed to be on the road to an economic recovery. The free market ideals that Reagan espoused seemed to be working, and, for many, his assertion that government was not the solution to the country’s problems, but that government was the problem, seemed to be correct.¹

During Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign, he affixed blame for the economic distress of the country on the big-government policies of Democratic President Jimmy Carter, vowing to shrink the size of an unwieldy, overly bureaucratic federal government.² One of the government entities targeted for elimination was the newly formed federal Department of Education (DOE), established by President Carter in 1979. When Jimmy Carter took office, the governance of federal education policies was primarily overseen by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). But with the creation of the DOE, education policy makers would gain credibility and power by making the secretary of the department a cabinet-level position with a seat at the table when all federal policies were being made.

THE CREATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Efforts to create a federal DOE date back to as early as the turn of the twentieth-century. Between the years 1908 and 1975, more than 130 bills to create a cabinet-level position for a separate federal DOE, which would provide power and autonomy for education policy makers, were unsuccessfully introduced. In 1972, the National Education Association (NEA) formed a political action committee, and, in 1975, they joined forces with eight other unions to form the Labor Coalition Clearinghouse (LCC) for the purpose of supporting and endorsing political candidates. Of the eight unions that coordinated their efforts through the LCC, all but three were members of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO). Missing from the list was the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), a teachers' union affiliated with the AFL-CIO. With the support of other members of the LCC, the NEA released the document, "Needed: A Cabinet Department of Education" in 1975. Additionally, for the first time in the history of the NEA, the organization endorsed a presidential candidate—the Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter.³

While campaigning for the Democratic nomination for president in 1976, Carter made a commitment to the creation of a federal department of education in an address before an NEA convention. However, he would not officially declare his position on this matter until he had secured his nomination by the Democratic Party. In spite of the fact that he had campaigned on a platform of streamlining the federal government, he would honor his promise to the NEA. Among his strongest supporters for the creation of the department was Senator Abraham Ribicoff, who had previously served as Secretary of HEW under President John Kennedy. After Carter was elected president, Ribicoff, along with four other Democratic senators, crafted the Department of Education Organization Act. The proposal to create a federal DOE was hotly debated through two sessions of Congress. Opposition to the department came from both the political right and the political left. It isn't surprising that many Republicans opposed the creation of another arm of the federal government, attempting to stall passage of the bill by adding amendments that would restrict school busing, affirmative action, abortion rights, and limits on school prayer. However, opposition also came from some of the more liberal allies of the Democratic Party. Generally, those concerns had to do with the transferring of smaller departments to the DOE, resulting in

the weakening of their influence. For example, the Children's Defense Fund lobbied in favor of maintaining its office within the Department of Health and Human Services, fearing that some of the components of the Head Start program, such as nutrition, health, and family participation, would be lost under the governance of a newly created DOE. Likewise, other program administrators argued against their program's proposed transfer to the DOE. The Department of Agriculture wanted to maintain control over school nutrition programs, and the Department of Interior wanted to maintain control of Indian schools.

The AFT, a competitor of the NEA, opposed the creation of the DOE because the union claimed that their affiliation with the AFL-CIO gave them powerful and influential allies on the House Education and Labor Committee, and a new department would actually weaken the influence of the union on education issues. A coalition of civil rights and education groups also opposed the creation of a separate DOE because they feared that the enforcement of civil rights laws would be weakened. Joseph Califano, who had been appointed by President Carter to serve as the secretary of HEW, actively lobbied against the creation of the DOE and was subsequently fired.

After two years of contentious debate and political wrangling, the bill was finally sent to the Congressional Conference Committee. All the issues had been resolved. Liberal concerns had been resolved, with programs such as Head Start, school nutrition programs, and Indian schooling remaining in their existing departments. All the amendments added by the conservatives had been removed by the Conference Committee and the bill passed with a narrow margin, making way for the creation of the DOE. President Carter signed the Department of Education Organization Act into law on October 17, 1979, thus creating the thirteenth Cabinet department.⁴

In President Carter's November 17, 1979, statement following the signing of the Department of Education Organization law, he provided his rationale for the creation of the DOE and reconciled the need for the department with his efforts to streamline federal government bureaucracy. Carter acknowledged that the primary responsibility for education should rest with the states, localities, and private institutions "that have made our Nation's educational system the best in the world." The federal government, however, had failed to effectively support education and had "confused its role of junior partner" with that of silent partner, providing only part-time support for America's schools while increasing added burdens to schools through regulations. The newly formed DOE would "allow the federal government

to meet its responsibilities in education more effectively, more efficiently, and more responsively.” The American people, stated Carter, “should receive a better return on their investment in education.”⁵

Carter explained the benefits of the DOE within the federal government: (1) the DOE would increase the nation’s attention in education, giving educational issues the top priority they deserve with a cabinet-level position; (2) federal education programs would become more accountable; (3) administration of aid-to-education programs would be more streamlined; (4) tax dollars would be saved through the elimination of bureaucratic layers; (5) federal education programs would be more responsive, giving the American people the ability to decide what “the government should and should not be doing in education.” Finally, and most important, Carter explained that the DOE would ensure that local communities would retain control of their schools and education programs. The DOE would prohibit the federal government from making decisions about education policies that are best made at the local level by those who are better able to make decisions about the students they serve.⁶

In 1979, President Carter appointed Shirley Hufstедler as the first secretary of education. Hufstедler, who had a distinguished legal career and had been appointed associate justice of the California Court of Appeals in 1966 by President Johnson, went to work quickly to establish the DOE’s agenda. Her first set of goals included the reduction of regulatory red tape associated with student aid to schools; a second set of goals supported the notion that the DOE would not supersede local control over schools through the imposition of regulations; and a third set of goals focused on educational equity. Hufstедler then committed herself to spending time traveling around the country to “elevate the consciousness of Americans about the good work classroom teachers do.”⁷

Hufstедler’s tenure as DOE secretary was short lived, however, when President Carter lost his bid for a second term in office and the newly elected President Ronald Reagan would pursue his educational goals of abolishing the DOE, returning control over education to states, providing vouchers and tax credits for students to attend private schools, and restricting limitations on school prayer. Reagan would learn, however, that abolishing a federal department and a cabinet-level position would not be a simple task.

In order to fulfill his campaign promise to abolish the DOE, Reagan would have to appoint a secretary of education to oversee the project. Terrel Bell, who had formerly served as commissioner of education within HEW under Presidents Nixon and Ford, was appointed

by Reagan to return to Washington to oversee the process.⁸ Interestingly, Bell had supported the creation of a DOE during the Carter administration and had even testified before a senate committee in support of the legislation.⁹ However, he understood the charge he was given by Reagan and he tried to resolve the disconnect between his own support of the department and the new administration's intention to abolish it. Early in his tenure as secretary of the DOE, Bell worked with Reagan's administration to draft a bill that would abolish his department and replace it with a foundation that would maintain authority and governance over public education at the federal level. In spite of his concern that such a move would eliminate the cabinet-level position the new department had created and reduce the power of education policy makers, Bell understood his tenuous role within a conservative administration intent on downsizing the federal government. He was surprised, however, when, one by one, conservative members of Congress who supported Reagan's conservative economic and social policies refused to support a bill to abolish the DOE.¹⁰ Bell, a conservative himself, was frustrated when trying to reconcile the factions that existed among conservatives in Washington in the early 1980s as right-wing conservatives working closely with the president used their power and influence to stifle the voices of more moderate conservatives.¹¹ Throughout his first two years at the DOE, Bell had to muster up all of his administrative skills to keep his department functional. It was clear to him as well that the conservative administration was sharply divided among themselves, and conservative members of Congress did not have the will to join the Reagan administration's efforts to abolish the DOE.

In spite of the internal wrangling taking place within the Reagan administration, Bell had to carry on the business of overseeing the DOE. In 1981, he proposed the formation of a presidentially appointed commission to study the current state of education in America and prepare a report for the government. His proposal was met with "diffidence and scorn" and summarily rejected by the White House.¹² Nevertheless, Bell steadfastly proceeded with his plan, circumventing the White House's approval and obtaining a federal charter through the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to establish the commission that would later be named the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE). According to Bell, the appointment of this commission was considered by some White House administrators and OMB staffers to be an act of insubordination.¹³ Bell imagined that the commission's report that would be produced by the NCEE could be the final task for the DOE.

Instead, however, the commission's report, later named *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform (ANAR)*, set off an educational firestorm that would radically change America's educational landscape, increasing the power and influence of the federal government over education in all 50 states while ensuring the department's continued existence.

THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

Terrel Bell called upon David Pierpont Gardner, president of the University of Utah and president-elect of the University of California, to chair the national commission. Seventeen other commission members would eventually be appointed from across the country, representing what Bell considered to be a balanced group of "liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats, males and females, minorities, educators and noneducators."¹⁴ Three of these appointees, like Gardner, served as presidents at institutions of higher education: Norman C. Francis, president of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans; A. Bartlett Giamatti, president of Yale University; and Shirley Gordon, president of Highline Community College. Three members of the commission were affiliated with school boards: the vice-chair of the commission, Yvonne W. Larsen, had served as the president of the school board for San Diego City Schools; Margaret S. Marston was currently serving as a member of Virginia's Board of Education; and Robert V. Haderlein was the past president of the National School Board Association. Anne Campbell was the former commissioner of education for the State of Nebraska. Two school principals served on the commission: Emeral A. Crosby, from a public school, Northern High School in Detroit, Michigan; and Richard Wallace, from a private school, Lutheran High School East in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. One superintendent of a public school district served on the commission: Francisco D. Sanchez, Jr., from Albuquerque Public Schools in New Mexico. The interests of the science community were served by Gerald Holton, a professor of physics and the history of science at Harvard University; and Glenn T. Seaborg, Nobel laureate and professor of chemistry at the University of California, Berkeley. Business interests, with a strong emphasis on science, were served by William O. Baker, former chairman of the board for Bell Telephone Laboratories in New Jersey. Also serving on the commission were Charles A. Foster, Jr., past president of the Foundation for Teaching Economics in San Francisco, and former governor of Minnesota, Albert H. Quie.

The only teacher on the commission was Jay Sommer, a foreign language teacher who had been honored as National Teacher of the Year for 1981–82.¹⁵

Possibly the most interesting appointment to the commission was Annette Y. Kirk. While her affiliation was simply listed as Kirk Associates of Mecosta, Michigan, she was the person who, as Gardner later explained, represented the views of parents. Kirk was the only person Reagan personally nominated for the commission.¹⁶ A onetime New York City schoolteacher, she was the wife of Russell Kirk, one of the founders of the modern conservative movement and a man who fundamentally opposed the institution of public schools. Russell Kirk has been called one of President Reagan's favorite philosophers.¹⁷ All 18 commission members shared the common perspective that public schools were failing to meet the needs of America's students, with three members, Yvonne Larsen, Albert Quie, and Annette Kirk, actively promoting one of Reagan's most controversial education reform proposals—tuition tax credits and vouchers.¹⁸

A NATION AT RISK: THE EVIDENCE

The NCEE asked Secretary Bell for, and was granted, full autonomy in their work analyzing the state of education in the country. He also pledged the full support and resources from the DOE and unlimited access to the department's data. The commission met for the first time October 9, 1981, and for the next 18 months held hearings across the country and considered evidence that would help them formulate an opinion about the status of education in America.¹⁹ The hearings held by the NCEE were hosted by various luminaries in education, such as the president of Stanford University, the State Commissioners of Education, and the president of the Exxon Education Foundation, on various topics such as "Education for a Productive Role in a Productive Society" and "Education for the Gifted and Talented." Information learned at these hearings provided evidence for the commission's findings.²⁰ However, the question is, what empirical data was used by the NCEE in their evaluation of schools in America? In the current era of data-driven decision making in education and a focus on testing data, this is a fair question to consider.

Since 1969, the state of public education has been measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).²¹ For many years, statistics derived from NAEP scores have been the source of numerous alarming headlines decrying the failure of public schools. Understanding the NAEP testing program is essential when

considering the data it provides as a means of assessing the state of schools in America and judging the validity of claims that the schools are failing.

The NAEP program began testing America's students in 1969. NAEP is not designed to be a high-stakes test, examine a particular curriculum, measure the adequacy of a particular school or district, or assess individual student success. Furthermore, NAEP is not administered to all students in America. It is administered to samples of students and, of the students sampled, no one takes the entire test. Students never receive a test score. As a matter of fact, children will most likely never take a NAEP test and, if they do take this test once, will probably never take it again. The test is designed to measure what a sampling of students from across the nation either know or don't know, not what is taught in school or to measure the effectiveness of teachers. Test items range in difficulty from easy to very difficult. It is expected that 90 percent of students will answer some of the questions correctly, 50 percent of students will answer other questions correctly, and some questions are so difficult that only 10 percent of students will answer them correctly.²² While NAEP procedures and reporting methods have changed over the years, NAEP does provide a way of examining trends across America over time.

At the time when the NCEE was conducting its extensive evaluation of America's schools, NAEP data had been available since 1969; therefore, it would seem that this data could provide important information when judging the health of American schools at that time. However, no mention of NAEP data appears in *ANAR*. According to Bell, NAEP data was inconsistent, with some states participating and others refusing. Of the states that participated, some left it up to local school districts to make decisions about participation in the national testing program.²³ Therefore, the NAEP testing program prior to 1983 did not provide the type of data that could be used to assess teachers or the state of public schools in America.

As a matter of fact, when NAEP was first proposed, its critics were concerned that it would lead to national standards and a national curriculum, undermine state and local control over schools, and impose large-scale federal control over education. The creators of NAEP, therefore, recognized the danger of "unwittingly establishing standards" and gave control of the testing program to the Education Commission of the States (ECS) instead of the federal government and purposefully did not design a test that would measure individual schools, districts, or states. The earliest NAEP tests measured a wide range of subjects like citizenship, writing, science, music, social studies,

math, art, career and occupational development, health awareness, consumer skills, basic life skills, and energy awareness and attitudes. NAEP was originally designed to be an innovative way to examine what people know and can do, favoring constructed-response items over multiple-choice answers, and was not designed merely to measure the knowledge of school children.²⁴ The nature of NAEP testing would dramatically change in 1983, however, as a result of the publication of *ANAR*. Administration for the national testing program would no longer be overseen by the ECS when Educational Testing Services (ETS) was awarded a federal grant to assume responsibility for administering the NAEP program. As a result, the test was revamped, paving the way for state accountability in the form of the "Nation's Report Card."²⁵

It is hard today to imagine a country in which standardized test scores of elementary and high school students were not the driving force behind education policy decisions. However, in the years prior to 1983, standardized testing was actually de-emphasized and certainly was not universal in its use across the country.²⁶ In his memoir, Bell described the lack of data for determining student achievement through test scores in 1983:

Putting together accurate assessments of each state's educational standing proved to be much more complex and controversial than I had anticipated. Gathering academic achievement test scores state by state turned out to be an utter impossibility.²⁷

Prior to 1983, and, in particular, during the years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, much of the impetus for reforming education had to do with addressing the disparities associated with racial segregation and unequal access to quality education.²⁸ Arguably, during the years of resistance to federal desegregation laws, there was little desire to administer standardized tests to all students across the country if the end result would be to demonstrate the vastly unequal educational experiences of white middle-class students and minority students. Beginning in 1967 with the book *Death at an Early Age*, Jonathan Kozol would provide an alarming chronicle for the next 30-plus years of the vast inequities in American public schools.²⁹

In 1983, there was longitudinal standardized statewide test data available from only two states, Iowa and Minnesota, that supported the assertion that test scores increased for elementary and high school students during the post-Sputnik years (1959–66), followed by a steady decline.³⁰ Both of these states had been administering

standardized tests to elementary and secondary students for a number of years and, therefore, trends in scores on those tests are well documented. While an analysis of the states' respective testing data could yield interesting information about their students' achievement over time, any comparison between states would be invalid because the states used different tests. Iowa administered the Iowa Test of Education Development and Minnesota administered the Minnesota Scholastic Aptitude Test.

In an analysis of student performance on the standardized tests administered by Iowa and Minnesota, L. A. Munday cites three possible explanations for the decline in test scores for these two states:

1. Testing was de-emphasized during this era. There were no high-stakes attached to the tests, and, therefore, students were not motivated to perform well.
2. The curriculum did not require students to know as much. (As will be discussed later in this chapter, there had been a curricular shift during the 1960s and 1970s as a result of efforts to retain more students in school through high school.)
3. Standardized tests were designed by psychometrists to be statistically sound over time and, therefore, were not intended to be closely aligned with the curriculum.³¹

Munday, however, provides an interesting caveat. During the years leading up to 1983, when standardized testing was not a routine part of schooling in America and testing data was not enshrined as the measure of school success, he argues that "no factual information was collected that showed what kind of schools, teachers, or instruction were most potent in bringing about the gains" during the post-Sputnik years.³² During the years when the test scores were reported to be in decline, educators were required to explain lagging test scores but in the absence of factual information about what actually produced the higher test scores earlier. This was a difficult question to answer. In reality, according to Munday, the academic achievement of elementary students in 1976 was greater than that of their parents 20 to 25 years earlier.³³

Without an adequate, reliable, and valid storehouse of data for public schools to use in their analysis of the state of education in 1983, the NCEE felt they had only one means of empirically examining student achievement. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was first administered to American students in 1926, and, therefore, the commission had a longitudinal set of data to use in their examination of

student achievement across decades. The SAT, however, was designed to be very different from the College Board Exams (CBE) that it would eventually replace. The CBE had been used to test content knowledge and, therefore, favored students who spent considerable time studying and preparing for the exam. For elite universities, this was seen as problematic as some ethnic groups, in particular some black and Jewish children in public schools, were scoring high enough on the CBE to attend exclusive universities. The SAT, therefore, was designed to be a psychological test of aptitude and qualities in much the same way as an IQ test. In an era in which eugenics was considered to be real science, this test was appealing because of supposed connections between ethnicity and intelligence. As a result, SATs could be used as a way to limit the admission of certain ethnic groups to elite universities.³⁴

The SAT was normed in 1941 and thus became a standardized test. An important point in the standardization of the SAT is that the population used to establish scoring ranges was 10,654 students from the northeastern region of the United States. These students were overwhelmingly white (98 percent), male (61 percent), and many attended private, college-preparatory high schools (41 percent). In other words, they were elite. In spite of the changing demographics of high school and college-bound students in the coming decades, the norm established by this elite group remained in place until 1996.³⁵

In the years prior to the NCEE's examination of public schools, there had been a consistent drop in SAT scores since 1963. Public school critics jumped on these reports to solidify their position that public schools were failing to meet the needs of America's school children. In 1975, the College Board established a panel to examine the decline in SAT scores and, after an exhaustive analysis, published their findings in 1977.³⁶ The panel concluded that declines in SAT scores were due to two different types of changes taking place in schools since 1963: compositional changes and pervasive changes. The compositional changes cited by the panel reflected: (1) a dramatic increase in the population of school-aged children in America as a result of the post-WW II baby boom; (2) increased efforts to reduce the dropout rate; and (3) judicial and legislative efforts to eliminate discrimination and provide educational equity for all Americans.

Between 1960 and 1970, the number of high school graduates in America had increased by a million and the number of students taking the SAT had tripled.³⁷ Furthermore, the increase in the number of students taking the SAT reflected a much broader array of students. In the 1950s, the panel reported that SAT takers had been

“students enroute to relatively prestigious and selective four-year, liberal arts colleges and universities.”³⁸ By the late 1960s, however, more women and minorities were taking the SAT and there was a precipitous increase in the number of SAT takers who were less economically privileged and planning to attend colleges and universities with less selective admission policies, two-year colleges, or vocational schools. These compositional changes in SAT takers, according to the panel, coincided with the beginning of declines in SAT scores. The panel further found that 25 years earlier, only one-half of all Americans remained in school through the twelfth grade. By 1970, however, three-fourths of all Americans were completing twelfth grade, with almost half of those students going on to college. The panel also suggested that the decline in SAT scores may reflect the nation’s “tardy legislative decision to attack previous discrimination based on race, sex, and family income.”³⁹ Very few minority students were taking the SAT in the early 1960s or attending college. According to the panel, in the early 1960s, an estimated one to 2 percent of all SAT takers were black and that was probably high. By 1970, that percentage had risen to approximately eight percent. The panel found:

Score differences between blacks and whites parallel closely with differences in averages between students from low- and high-income families and between those whose parents have differing levels of education. Beyond this, two centuries of racial bigotry have unquestionably left an educational system that serves blacks and other minority groups less well than whites, particularly when it comes to meeting traditionally accepted “majority” standards. The contributing cause of the score decline is not that more minority group members now take the SAT, but that despite statutory guarantees of equal opportunity the society has not yet developed either the educational means or mores that will bring children with different racial roots to a parity of aptitude.⁴⁰

Moreover, the panel found that although “women score lower than men on the mathematical sections of the SAT,” this “almost unquestionably reflects more than anything else the traditional stereotyping of career opportunities and expectations.”⁴¹ Most telling, the panel stated:

It would be pleasant to think that as increased percentages of vastly larger numbers of young people stay in school longer and go on to college, the college entrance examination averages achieved before by a favored fraction of students could be held constant. Yet any such expectation would be ruefully unrealistic. The major move toward equality of

opportunity in the 1960s will be judged unfairly unless it is recognized that an increasing school retention rate is bound to mean, at least at first, some drop in the average developed ability level.⁴²

Compositional changes, according to the panel's findings accounted for the decline in SAT scores between 1963 and 1970. The declines following 1970, however, were attributable to other factors that the panel identified as pervasive changes.⁴³ These pervasive changes were actually quite diverse and included both school-related and non-school-related factors. School-related changes included fewer basic courses and more electives; less emphasis on writing; more emphasis on objective, multiple-choice tests; grade inflation and lower standards; automatic promotion from one grade to the next; and increased absenteeism. Other factors were beyond the reach of schools, such as more time watching television, the decline of parental influence, and "a decade of distraction."⁴⁴ Additional factors, probably related to both in school and out of school responsibilities, were cited as well, such as less time doing homework and less motivation to learn.

Interestingly, the panel did not cite public school teachers, teacher quality, or administrators as a reason for the decline in SAT scores. A sharp increase in the demand for teachers because of the large influx of students during the 1960s and early 1970s resulted in a greater reliance on substitute teachers and less experienced teachers. Between 1961 and 1971, the average number of years of experience for elementary teachers dropped from 13.3 years to only 8 years. Public school teachers and administrators may have been guilty of tolerating excessive absenteeism, adopting less demanding textbooks, or not requiring enough reading and writing in the classroom. However, the panel conceded that these are issues that may not have been entirely within the power of teachers and administrators to control due to the vast compositional changes taking place in schools.⁴⁵

After the publication of *ANAR*, in 1985 William W. Turnbull, who served as president of the Educational Testing Services (the agency responsible for the administration of the SAT) from 1970 to 1981, completed his own analysis of the decline in SAT scores. According to Turnbull, the report by the panel was actually a negative report card on the nation, not on the schools, since "the SATs are neither specific nor sufficient measures of school effectiveness."⁴⁶ Turnbull further asserted:

The SAT was never intended to represent all of the important areas of understanding, knowledge, or skill—not to mention constructive attitudes, values, and other noncognitive characteristics—in which

schools aim to bring about student growth. Moreover, the scores are not affected only by formal schooling: they measure abilities that are developed both in and out of school.⁴⁷

Turnbull proposed what he called “the reciprocal score declines” hypothesis to explain the SAT score declines. This theory argues that both the compositional and pervasive changes, cited by the College Board panel as the causes of declining test scores, were a “reflection of the same phenomenon: the new composition of the upper high school students.”⁴⁸ According to Turnbull’s hypothesis, the new student body evolving in the 1960s required modified pedagogical strategies. These strategies were geared to the reality that there was an ever-increasing number of students who were finding the traditional program of study too difficult. In order to retain and give them some hopeful level of success, the curriculum was attenuated and expectations were lowered. Textbooks, too, were revised by publishers to meet the needs of the growing numbers of students less prepared for rigorous course content.

These changes in the curriculum and textbooks also impacted higher ability students. Not only were they bored and unchallenged, but they also knew less at the end of their high school years. Course offerings also changed during the 1960s. Watered-down elective courses designed to meet the future practical needs of students were made available to all students. The greater choices in classes made available to all high school students had a great deal of impact on SAT scores. If you were a student who chose to take courses such as “consumer education,” for example, your SAT scores would be much lower than those of students who took traditional academic courses. During the 1960s there was a movement in which high school students gravitated away from academic courses toward vocational nonacademic courses. Turnbull suggests that this shift might reflect “an increasingly pragmatic or materialistic attitude” among students during the 1970s.⁴⁹ Grade inflation also became rampant and the number of hours demanded for homework dropped considerably. This might have happened because of relaxed curricular demands or perhaps teachers were discouraged because homework assignments were often not done. All of this, according to Turnbull, resulted in a downward spiral in SAT scores.

Turnbull cites another of the College Board’s findings that is unrelated to compositional or pervasive changes as a cause of declining SAT scores: the decline in the number of high-scoring students taking the test. This point was not fully explored by the panel, according to

Turnbull, because it seemed “discordant with the compositional shift hypothesis.”⁵⁰ In a telling statement, the College Board asserted:

An inordinately extended analysis of the drop in the number of these “high scorers” indicates, however, that the decline probably results almost entirely from the reduction in the number of students taking the SAT and from the impact at the top of the same pervasive influences that have been affecting the scores of the test-takers as a whole.⁵¹

According to Turnbull, while the panel did not pursue the issue of high scorers further, “the decline in high scores has continued to and remains a source of concern.”⁵² Not mentioned by the College Board or Turnbull, however, is the fact that by 1977, a large number of states had turned to American College Testing Program (ACT, begun in 1959) as the test that would be used to indicate academic success and the gatekeeper for entrance into a university. This fact alone may have explained, at least in part, some of the decline in the SAT scores overall, as more students began taking the ACT and not the SAT.⁵³

With SAT scores as the only usable longitudinal test score data available to the NCEE in their analysis, the commission based their analysis on the following sources:

- Papers commissioned from experts on a variety of education issues;
- Opinions of administrators, teachers, students, representatives of professional and public groups, parents, business leaders, public officials, and scholars who testified at eight meetings of the full commission, six public hearings, two panel discussions, a symposium, and a series of meetings organized by the DOE’s Regional Offices;
- Existing analyses of problems in education;
- Letters from concerned parents, teachers, and administrators who volunteered extensive comments on problems and possibilities in American education; and
- Descriptions of notable programs and promising approaches in education.⁵⁴

The commission’s work took 18 months to complete. Every few weeks the NCEE would gather together to conduct their work at various locations. Seven of their meetings were held in Washington DC for two-day sessions. They held six one-day hearings across the country in the following locations: Stanford City (Bay Area), California; Houston, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Denver, Colorado; and Cambridge, Massachusetts. Commission members

attended two panel discussions: one at the University of Pennsylvania focusing on performance expectations in American education and the other at the University of Rhode Island focusing on issues related to the college curriculum. Two other gatherings of the NCEE were at San Diego State University in California for a symposium on the student's role in learning and in New York City for a meeting hosted by the Exxon Education Foundation.⁵⁵

While traveling to cities across the United States, commission members visited exemplary schools and programs. For example, while conducting the hearing in Houston in April 16, 1982, the commission visited two elementary schools, one middle school, and four high schools. In addition, they heard testimony from over 25 hearing participants representing different segments of the local and national education community. Attendees of the Houston event included teachers and administrators from area schools, representatives from various universities across the country, and representatives from national and state education associations.⁵⁶ In addition to the various meetings, hearings, panel discussions, and symposium, the NCEE commissioned forty different papers by respected researchers from a wide range of universities across the country, with topics ranging from "Educational Excellence—The Secondary School–College Connection and Other Matters: An Historical Assessment" to "Motivational Factors in School Achievement."⁵⁷

The analytical data that resulted from the NCEE's investigation was vast. The original draft of the report, therefore, was 225 pages in length. Some commission members were concerned that the lengthy report would be relegated to the fate of so many other governmental documents that end up being merely archived among the thousands of reports generated over the decades. Therefore, they were concerned that the American public would never know the conclusions they reached or be awakened to the crisis the commissioners perceived existed in education in 1983. The final report would be shortened to a mere 36 pages, plus appendices. It is important to bear in mind, however, that the many people who provided testimony at the hearings and wrote papers and analyses for the commission were evaluating the level of excellence in education in America, not the status of the United States as being "at risk." During the months of the commission's investigative process, the idea of attaching the work of teachers and schools to the economic health and security of the nation was not the subject of the hearings or papers. One has to wonder if the tone and substance of the testimony provided by the participants would have been different if they had known the conclusions of the

final report that would be presented to the president in April 1983. It is one thing for an educator to participate in a discussion about excellence in education and how to improve the educational system; it is quite another thing to provide evidence that what you are doing as a teacher is leading to the downfall of America and putting the nation at risk.

THE IMPERATIVE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM: THE NATION WAS AT RISK

The final report published by the NCEE packed a powerful punch, beginning with the following two paragraphs:

Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. This report is concerned with only one of the many causes and dimensions of the problem, but it is the one that undergirds American prosperity, security, and civility. We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

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. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves. We have even squandered the gains in student achievement made in the wake of the Sputnik challenge. Moreover, we have dismantled essential support systems which helped make those gains possible. We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.⁵⁸

If the commission's intention in revising their original report was to create a firestorm across the country, then they were certainly rewarded for their effort by the reaction of the press. Historians would debate the extreme alarmist tone of *A Nation at Risk*, however. Over the years, commission members would defend the language employed in the document as necessary.

In a 1998 interview, NCEE Chair David Gardner provided the rationale for the brevity of the document and the incendiary tone the commission employed. According to Gardner, the original 225 page

draft was boring. “It read like a Master’s thesis,” and put him immediately to sleep after the first few pages.⁵⁹ Several other commissioners had a similar reaction and the decision was made to radically change the entire character of the report. While the commission’s original charge was to write a report to the government, they decided that the impact of their work would be greater if they approached the project in a much different way. According to Gardner, he told NCEE members:

Look, we’re asked to make a report to the government. Well, we will do that. But let’s **pretend** [emphasis added] we’re making a report to government. What we really want to do is write an open letter to the American people because we need their understanding, we need their support, we need their involvement. And moreover it will change the whole character of the report. We’ll write it in plain English. It’ll be brief. It’ll be to the point.⁶⁰

While commissioner Glenn Seaborg agreed with Gardner’s approach in reformulating the report, he conceded in 1993 that the commission “went through a period of contentious argument” before agreeing on the dramatic language of the opening paragraphs of *ANAR*.⁶¹ In the end, however, the commission would agree to the inflammatory language of the report, citing the need for a “clarion call” to the public about the alarming state of education.

Perhaps the most contentious language used by the commission was the assertion that the educational performance of American students, as a result of the inferior education they were receiving, was tantamount to a declaration of war on the nation. This language would be defended over the years by commission members. In 2009, Norman Francis would acknowledge that the rhetoric used in *ANAR* was hyperbolic, but stated, “If somebody else had done this to us we would have declared an act of war to treat us like this [*sic*].”⁶² Albert Quie overtly defended the employment of a war metaphor, stating in 1998 at a summit marking the fifteenth anniversary of the publication of *ANAR*, “We did intend to start the war,” and Emeral Crosby reported, “We were trying to electrify the community. We used terms that were as negative as we could think of, so we used war.”⁶³ In 2009, Jay Sommer, the lone teacher on the commission, defended the use of the alarmist tone in the final report. He further asserted, however, that for the commission, the choice to use hyperbole was more important than the facts. According to Sommer, “In order to be more effective some alarming language had to be used. That was

immediately there, it was understood that we have to say things in an alarming kind of way—even to the point where the statistics may not have been quite correct.”⁶⁴

Nevertheless, Sommer would call into question the portrayal by the commission of all American schools as failures, stating:

We were talking about inner-city schools, . . . we left out the successes and that was deliberate. I mean there is no comparison between an inner city school anyplace, in Chicago and let’s say New Rochelle High School where I taught. So things were sort of obscured and covered up, but there were many schools that produced wonderful students and students who went on to colleges and careers. That too was an element of emphasizing things in such a way an element (of failure) would be created . . . mainly, America was not falling apart educationally, there was a segment of American student that was and that is almost a natural consequence of things.⁶⁵

Interestingly, as early as 1985, Sommer seemed to be having second thoughts about how *ANAR* was being promulgated to the nation. While the commission had discovered some very bad schools, it had also discovered many good schools; and even within these schools, there were sometimes both “effective” and “inferior” educational practices taking place. According to Sommer, “This posed a dilemma for the commission.” Most importantly, as Sommer explains, “The commission never intended its recommendations to be taken as dogma for every school or school system in America.”⁶⁶

Unfortunately, for the next thirty years, the report became an example of dogmatism on a national scale, leading to the notion that the American public school system was an utter failure. One thing was certain—the final version of the commission’s report was not boring. It did get the attention of the American public, even though, if Sommer’s assertion is correct, they were less than accurate in their use of empirical data.

“History is not kind to idlers,” the commission wrote in the sixth paragraph of their report.⁶⁷ America had become a nation of idlers, unable to compete in the world market. The Japanese were overtaking the American markets for automobiles, South Koreans were producing steel more efficiently, and the Germans were surpassing Americans in the production of machine tools. The commission included a quote from the controversial education critic, Paul Copperman: “For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not be equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.”⁶⁸