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### **Title**

“The Challenge of School Reform over the Next Decade,” issue paper for States Look to the Future meeting, The Council of State Governments, Orlando, Florida

### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9kt0k50h>

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### **Publication Date**

1986-12-01

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# The Challenge of School Reform Over the Next Decade

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by David P. Gardner

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In the more than three years since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, an unprecedented wave of educational reform has swept the nation. Most states have raised high school graduation requirements. Many have enacted comprehensive reform measures affecting teacher status and compensation, the content, scope, and sequence of curricula, the quality of textbooks, the special needs of gifted and disadvantaged students, and the length of the school day and year. Some 300 state and school district task forces have worked over the past three years to promote excellence in their schools.

The success has been remarkable, even astonishing. But five unfinished items of business remain on the agenda of school reform.

First, we must continue to stress the fact that our schools exist primarily to foster intellectual competence and informed citizenship in our free society. They do not exist to respond to every social, political or individual demand made of them by the plethora of single-issue interests that abound in this country. A central finding of *A Nation at Risk* was that the secondary school curriculum had, over time, largely lost its sense of focus and coherence, devoting a disproportionate share of time and effort to courses that were perhaps useful but not essential for the schools to teach: consumer education, driver education, sex education, family education. These and similar subjects, we found, were crowding out more essential studies such as English, mathematics, sciences and the like.

The educational reform movement has attempted to reverse this trend and to restore the necessary sense of purpose and coherence to our secondary curricula. It has underscored the fact that schools should concentrate on what they are uniquely qualified to do — foster the skills of citizenship and develop those intellectual skills and capacities indispensable to living productively and adaptively in a complex and changing world. This is no simple assignment in today's society, but it is nonetheless essential if lasting reform is to take hold in our schools.

Second, we need to continue strengthening the teaching profession. Despite welcome gains over the past three years, many states and school districts are still far behind in terms of realistic compensation for a demanding profession. And everywhere, even in those states and districts that pay the highest salaries, a significant gap exists between what teachers make and what other professionals can expect to earn for similar training and education.

This is all the more urgent in light of impending teacher shortages in science, mathematics and other critical disciplines. The National Science Teachers Association, for example, estimates that we will need 300,000 new mathematics and science teachers by 1995 — more than the total number of such teachers in the classroom today.

Third, we must continue the effort to inject more rigor into the high school curriculum, to raise our expectations of students, and to improve student performance. Critics of *A Nation at Risk* argued

that the Commission's insistence upon rigorous standards and high expectations would increase rather than decrease student failure. Better to lower standards for all, these critics argued, than to run the risk of failure for a few. We have until recently been doing just that: expecting less of our students. And they have been giving it to us. While they have been doing so, the drop-out rate has been rising rather than falling.

Raising standards, of course, means that we must pay more, not less attention to the diversity of students in our classrooms, and to the needs of each and every student as an individual, unique and special. A commitment to excellence need not be made at the expense of equitable treatment for all our students. A central characteristic of the reform movement has been a renewed dedication to high standards of performance for our students and our schools. That should remain a guiding principle for the future, whatever direction specific reforms may take.

Fourth, we need to develop ways to monitor and evaluate what has been accomplished so we can build on what has worked and winnow out what has not. Of the thousands of educational experiments underway throughout the country, which have proven most effective? What approaches to improving schooling have kindled the most interest and enthusiasm and generated the most

lasting results? And what indicators of educational progress can we use that will give us a sense of how far we have come and how far we have to go?

Some states are making efforts in this direction; so is the U.S. Department of Education. The Council of Chief State School Officers has mounted its own effort as well. Proposals for a "national report card" that would include measures of success besides objective test scores should also be encouraged. We are at a stage now where such an assessment, if sufficiently broad, could act as a spur and an incentive for further improvement.

Fifth and finally, the educational reform movement is at a point where initiatives from the federal government would have far more impact than they could have had even three years ago. This may seem paradoxical given that educational reform is the principal responsibility of the states and local jurisdictions, a division of responsibility reflected in the fact that 92 cents of every dollar spent for education in this country is spent at the state and local level.

But the national importance of education means that there is an urgent role for the federal government to play as well. Now that the states and local jurisdictions have acted, and it is clear that educational reform is a high priority nationally, this is the time for the states to urge the federal government to consider

programmatic initiatives that will complement and reinforce the educational reform movement as it has taken shape at the state and local levels. Expanding support for model teacher education programs, for example, or for the National Science Foundation's summer science institutes — and for similar institutes in other disciplinary areas as well — would give a welcome stimulus to state and local efforts. Federal initiatives taken now would remind the country that the federal government remains capable of seizing opportunities and making progress that both benefit the nation and sustain the vitality of our schools, and of doing so even when confronted with conflicting and competing budgetary priorities.

Three years ago, *A Nation at Risk* warned that the educational foundations of our society were being eroded by a "rising tide of mediocrity." That tide, in my view, has stopped rising and, in fact, has begun to ebb. The biggest challenge facing the states in the next decade is to maintain a persistent determination to improve our schools. The problems remain as urgent as they were three years ago — despite substantive progress in correcting them — because we will lose the gains we have made if we do not continue to build on them. The National Commission believed we needed a decade of improvement, and we are but a third of the way there.

*Dr. Gardner is president of the University of California.*