TWENTY YEARS AGO, the National Commission on Excellence in Education delivered a thunderbolt in the form of a report called *A Nation at Risk*. Risk awakened millions of Americans to a crisis in the nation’s system of primary and secondary education. That system did not suddenly crash in the early 1980s. The declines and shortcomings so starkly set forth in *A Nation at Risk* had been accumulating for many years. But until the commission documented and framed them as a grave problem in urgent need of attention, many Americans—especially those within the field of education—had supposed that the schools were doing an adequate job.

The commission called an abrupt halt to this smug contentment. It admonished the nation in forceful, martial language that America faced a threat to its national security and economic vitality. Not since the late 1950s, when Sputnik raised the possibility that the Soviet Union was surpassing us in science and mathematics, had there been such alarm over the weakness of U.S. schools.

By the 1960s, however, that sense of urgency had faded and the focus of reform had turned away from academic performance. Well-intended efforts to address racial segregation, meet the needs of handicapped youngsters, compensate for disadvantage, and provide bilingual schooling for immigrants eclipsed concern about student achievement. They also produced much red tape, litigiousness, and contentious battles over means and ends. Teacher organizations, at the same time, asserted their right to bargain collectively and to strike, which brought them unprecedented power over schools and school systems. The Sputnik-inspired commitment to education quality, in other words, had clearly lost priority. SAT scores peaked in 1964 and declined thereafter, reaching their nadir about the time *Risk* was unleashed.

Twenty years following the alarm sounded by Risk, by contrast, the commitment to solve the problems that it documented remains keen. The commission has effectively recast many people’s thinking about education from a focus on resources, services, and mindless innovation that absorbed us during the 1960s and 1970s to an emphasis on achievement that remains central today. It has laid bare the truths that equity without excellence is an empty achievement, quantity without quality an unkept promise. But while its reverberations are still being felt, solid and conclusive reforms in American primary and secondary education remain elusive.

**What the Commission Said**

The excellence commission organized its findings within four broad topics: content, expectations, time, and teaching. Under these headings, *Risk* issued a 24-count indictment of American primary-secondary education as the commissioners found it in 1983. The spirit of these indictments can be sensed from the following excerpts:

- “Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main course.”

- “The amount of homework for high school seniors has decreased . . . and grades have risen as average student achievement has been declining.”

- “In 13 States, 50 percent or more of the units required for high school graduation may be electives chosen by the student. Given this freedom . . . many students opt for less demanding personal service courses, such as bachelor living.”

- “A study of the school week in the United States found that some schools provided students only 17 hours of academic instruction. [In] other industrialized countries, it is not unusual for academic high school students to spend 8 hours a day at school, 220 days per year.”

*Students do no more homework today than they did 20 years ago, despite the recommendations of A Nation at Risk.*
“Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students... Half of the newly employed mathematics, science, and English teachers are not qualified to teach those subjects...”

The commission’s four major recommendations did not call for sweeping reform of the education system itself, but they demanded higher standards of performance. The commission said:

- High-school graduation requirements should be strengthened so that all students acquire a solid foundation in five “new basics”: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science.
- Schools and colleges should adopt higher and measurable standards for academic performance.
- The amount of time students devote to learning should be significantly increased.
- The teaching profession should be strengthened by raising standards for training, entry, and professional growth.

The Response

It did not take long for Risk’s analysis and central findings to win acceptance among the general public, editorial writers, business leaders, governors, and other elected officials at the national, state, and local levels. Ten years following its release, commission member and Nobel Prize–winning chemist Glenn Seaborg wrote, “It is now apparent that the pre-college educational crisis and the urgent need for educational reform are broadly perceived as being a top priority.” Today, 20 years after its release, nearly everyone in the United States who attends to such matters, save for a few Panglosses within the education profession, now recognizes that the commission accurately described our flagging academic performance and the insidious threat it posed to our long-term economic strength, cultural vitality, and civic competence.

But what has actually taken place in the years since Risk to ease the crisis? In the end, agreeing with Risk’s critique and finding the will to make the changes it called for turned out to be two different animals.

Familiar strategies were tried first: new programs, more money, and tighter regulations. Among the additions were some things the commission had urged, such as stiffer high-school graduation requirements, as well as many it had not—yet these add-ons produced little by way of improved educational outcomes. Test scores have remained essentially flat since 1970. Students do no more homework today than they did 20 years ago. Remediation remains the fastest-growing activity on many college campuses. Graduation rates have actually declined—less than three fourths of our young people now earn high-school diplomas, though this slippage is often masked by the suggestion that “equivalency certificates” amount to the same thing. Employers and professors remain dissatisfied with young people’s readiness for work and higher education. And international assessments reveal that American 17-year-olds know far less math and science than their peers in most other modern nations.

As it became clear in the late 1980s that “more of the same” was not yielding acceptable gains, energized governors and business leaders started to make the education-reform crusade their own. They launched bolder strategies, no doubt inspired by Risk but often breaking new policy ground. By 1990, the country was setting national education goals, giving birth to novel school designs, breaking up big high schools, and revamping the National Assessment of Educational Progress to get better information. The first Bush administration briefly tried to create national academic standards, but the effort to do this from Washington soon fizzled. Within a few years, however, prodded by the Clinton administration’s Goals 2000 program, almost every state was devising its own accountability system. By the mid-1990s, a number of innovations were also visible in the delivery of education: charter schools were spreading, vouchers were being tried, and private firms were beginning to operate public schools on an outsourced basis.

Why So Much Change Yet So Little Improvement?

First of all, the commission’s diagnosis was incomplete. It paid scant attention to the K–8 years, seeing them as providing a reasonable level of basic skills, when in fact many children were failing to gain the fundamental knowledge they would need to continue learning in subsequent years.

Second, the commission was either too obtuse or too naïve to take on the basic functioning and political control of the system itself. It seemingly believed that the public education system of the day, given higher standards, better-trained teachers, and more time on task, would move the schools and their pupils toward loftier levels of performance. It trusted the system to do the right thing once that system was duly chastised and pointed in the right direction.

We now know that this was unrealistic, that the commission failed to confront essential issues of power and control. It seemed not to realize that the system lacked meaningful accountability and tangible incentives to improve, that it exhibited the characteristic flaws of a command-and-control enterprise. The commission accepted the system as it was, with all the anachronisms inherent in a polit-
The No Child Left Behind Act has long, slow timelines and imposes few real consequences on educators whose schools fail.

We now know that powerful forces—three in particular—proved far stronger and more stubborn than the commission could have foreseen in 1983:

• **Risk** underestimated the resistance to change from the organized interests of the K–12 public education system, at the center of which were the two big teacher unions as well as school administrators, colleges of education, state bureaucracies, school boards, and many others. These groups see any changes beyond the most marginal as threats to their own jealously guarded power. Moreover, they are permanent features on the education landscape, whereas the excellence commission detonated its report and then disappeared, with no real successors to shepherd its recommendations through the political minefields.

• **Risk** underestimated the tenacity of the “thought-world” of the nation’s colleges of education, which see themselves as owners of the nation’s schools and the minds of educators, free to impose their ideas on future teachers and administrators regardless of evidence about their effectiveness. Some of the commission’s own expert advisors were advocates of these ideas, in effect poisoning the report from within.

• **Risk** also underestimated the large number of Americans, particularly in middle-class suburbs, who believe that their schools are basically sound and academically successful. This misapprehension arises mainly from the dearth of honest, standards-based information from objective outside sources concerning the true performance levels of our schools, an immense data void that the commission failed to address.

In counterweight to these forces of inertia, the past two decades have also seen the development of powerful new forces for reform that should strengthen America’s ability to improve its schools as we head into the future. These include:

• The public’s surprisingly durable belief that education reform is one of the most critical issues facing the nation—a belief heartily shared by impatient business leaders and elected officials. Although this sense of urgency seems inconsistent with the oft-reported complacency of parents about their own child’s school, satisfaction levels do not run deep. A majority of American parents believe that private schools are more effective than their children’s public schools and say they would move their children if they could.

• Growing and sustained support for both standards-based and choice-based education reforms has the potential to leverage changes that are farther reaching than those the commission envisioned, though both reform strategies face staunch resistance from established education interests.

• Minority parents are increasingly angry and disenchanted with failing inner-city school systems and are less willing to listen to promises that things will get better if they continue to trust the system and drench it with resources.

**Our Findings**

The members of this task force have studied American education for many years. We come from several disciplines and have different interests. But we come together in unanimous support of the findings and recommendations that follow. These encompass the most important lessons we have learned about American K–12 education over the two decades since *A Nation at Risk*.

1) **U.S. education outcomes, measured in many ways, show little improvement since 1970.** The trends that alarmed the excellence commission have not been reversed. Though small gains can be seen in some areas (especially math), they amount to no more than a return to the achievement levels of 30 years ago. And while the U.S. runs in place, other nations are passing us by. In the past, we could always boast that America educates a larger proportion of its school-age children than other lands, but this is no longer true.

2) **The U.S. economy has fared well during the past two decades not because of the strong performance of its K–12 system, but thanks to a host of coping and compensating mechanisms.** These include an endlessly forgiving higher education system; the presence within the U.S. of most of the world’s top universities; huge efforts at research and development; a hard-working populace and an adaptable immigration policy; a society that encourages second chances and invites new ideas; and the world’s largest and best-functioning free-market economy.

3) **We’ve made progress in narrowing resource gaps between schools, but the achievement gaps that vex us remain nearly as wide as ever.** This is because the problems that *Risk* highlighted particularly affect schools that serve disadvantaged children. These problems have not been successfully addressed. Minority youngsters are far less apt to complete school and college, and their average academic performance is markedly lower. On some measures, minority 12th graders score about the same as white 8th graders, who themselves are not scoring well.
4) The preponderance of school reform efforts since Risk has concentrated on augmenting the system’s resources, widening its services, and tightening its regulation of school practices. This has not proven to be a trustworthy path to improved educational performance.

5) Higher-quality teachers are key to improving our schools, but the proper gauge of quality is classroom effectiveness. Across-the-board raises for all teachers, good and bad alike, do not strengthen pupil learning. And stricter regulation of teacher preparation and accreditation only creates shortages and bottlenecks that reduce the supply of capable new instructors for U.S. schools.

6) Standards-based reforms have not achieved their full potential. Though promising, they are hard to get right. “Accountability” has shown in several states that, when done persistently and carefully, it can boost achievement, especially among minority and disadvantaged youngsters. But states find it difficult to gain consensus on a coherent set of substantial and ambitious academic standards, to align their tests with those standards, and to get strong accountability systems working. Standards and tests are essential for parents and policymakers to identify faltering schools and gauge the effectiveness of different programs, but they do not themselves solve the problems that they illuminate. Moreover, the steps taken so far in the name of “accountability” fall, for the most part, only on children, not on the adults in the system.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) may help by mobilizing federal muscle to push states and districts in the right direction. But Washington has scant leverage over states and districts. NCLB has long, slow timelines and few sanctions when states and districts do not meet them. It imposes few real consequences on educators whose schools fail. It is likely, therefore, to make the biggest difference in places that share its goals and have the greatest capacity to attain them and to accomplish least in those places—probably the neediest places—where officials may not much care or simply do not know how.

7) Choice-based reforms have not had a fair test. Most evidence to date suggests that they can boost student learning and parental satisfaction, but constraints have kept them from being tried in full. Opponents have hamstrung school-choice programs at every turn: fighting voucher programs in legislative chambers and courtrooms; limiting per-pupil funding so tightly that it’s impractical for new schools to come into being; capping the number of charter schools; and regulating and harassing them into near conformity with conventional schools.

These barriers have kept choice-based reforms from receiving the proper trials they deserve, which is significant on two counts: first, by ensuring that only half-baked versions have been adopted, opponents have made it easier to claim that the reforms were tried but they failed; second, profound changes in a system—the kind of changes that choice would bring to bear—cannot arise overnight. Market systems, in particular, take time to develop.

8) Americans need better, more timely information about student performance. Currently, the only audits of the system’s performance are conducted by those running the system or by organizations that depend on them for future business, including colleges of education and testing firms. As the country has recently and painfully observed in the business world, that’s simply unsatisfactory.

9) We need a thorough reform of elementary and middle schooling. Though U.S. high schools demand attention, too, preschool and K–8 education are far from what they need to be. These are the years when children gain fundamental knowledge about their country and their world, about science and literature, about art and civics. This calls for close attention to the K–8 curriculum, as well as the curricular aspects of pre-K education, and for purposeful steps to help prepare all children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

Our Recommendations
In the years since A Nation at Risk, the incremental changes
Fundamental changes are needed in education, changes anchored to three core principles: accountability, choice, and transparency.

that passed for “reform” have not improved schools’ performance or students’ achievement. We conclude that fundamental changes are needed in the incentive structures and power relationships of schooling itself. Those changes are anchored to three core principles: accountability, choice, and transparency.

By accountability, we mean that every school or education provider—at least every one that accepts public dollars—should subscribe to a coherent set of rigorous, statewide academic standards, statewide assessments of student and school performance, and a statewide system of incentives and interventions tied to results. The components include:

1) Clear goals. Every state needs a coherent set of challenging academic standards and curricular guidelines, subject by subject and grade by grade, standards that are not confined to basic skills and the “3 Rs” but that incorporate such other vital studies as history, science, geography, civics, and literature. Every state also needs a coherent and corresponding set of “proficiency” levels to be attained by all children in these subjects, levels that encompass essential knowledge as well as necessary skills.

2) Accurate measures. Every state needs tests and other assessments that accurately gauge the performance of individual children, schools, and school systems in relation to its standards. These assessments should form the basis for evaluating the value added by each school, and incentives should be linked to how much schools contribute to student learning.

3) Consequences. Every state needs an accountability system in which the consequences—both welcome and dire—fall not just on students but also on responsible adults. Success should be rewarded. Failing schools should be closed, reconstituted, taken over by other authorities, outsourced to private operators, or their students given the right—and full funding—to leave for better schools. This does not mean just to other public schools in their own district—the limp compromise Congress wrote into No Child Left Behind—but the capacity to transfer to any school, anywhere.

By choice, we mean that decisions made by parents rather than bureaucratic regulation should drive the education enterprise. Open competition among ideas and methods, with people free to abandon weak schools for stronger ones, is the surest way to make major progress. The education system’s “clients” must be free to select other providers that teach their children more effectively and in accord with family and community priorities as well as core American values. Options include:

1) Charter schools. Every state should give charter schools a full performance in the classroom should be the chief determinant of whether teachers are retained and promoted.

and fair chance to show what they can do to provide high-quality options to families. States should exempt charter schools from local district veto and numerical caps. They should provide charter schools with full per-pupil funding and capital funds to support facility costs. In turn, schools that do not add substantial academic value to their pupils—and satisfy their clients—should lose their charters and close.

2) Voucher experiments. While mandating that every publicly funded school should meet rigorous state content standards, every state should explore additional forms of school choice, pushing far beyond the boundaries of within-district public school choice. More states should give vouchers a proper test in selected communities, in tandem with strenuous efforts to renew the public schools of those communities.

3) Full funding for high-risk students. Children who pose difficult challenges to schools should, under a choice regimen, command added resources to pay for their education. Dis-
advantaged, disabled, and limited-English-proficiency pupils should carry with them substantially larger amounts of funding than “regular” students, both to make them more attractive to schools and to assist schools with the added costs of teaching them well.

4) Teacher quality and incentives. The principle of choice should extend to teachers and administrators as well. Training, recruitment, licensing, and compensation should be redesigned to offer wider opportunities for able, willing individuals. A person who is knowledgeable in a subject should be given a chance to teach it, with actual classroom effectiveness then used as the primary gauge of competence. Performance in the classroom should be the chief determinant of whether teachers are retained and promoted. Teachers in scarce fields should be paid more than those in over-supplied fields. And teachers and administrators who take on challenging assignments should be paid more than teachers who opt for easier situations.

By transparency, we mean that those who seek complete information about a school or school system (not including personal information about individuals) should readily be able to get it. This information should be provided in forms and formats that enable users to easily compare one school, system, or state with the next. Measurement and information systems need to be developed to provide full transparency throughout public education. Though the primary burden of transparency rests on individual schools, school systems, and states, Washington also bears a responsibility. America is overdue for a thorough upgrading of federal education data gathering and analysis, primarily housed at the National Center for Education Statistics, as well as needed strengthening and expansion of—and enhanced independence for—the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Accountability, choice, and transparency are the essential trinity of principles by which to reconstruct America’s schools. Each must be in place for the others to work. In combination, they transform the education system’s priorities, power relationships, and incentive structures.

Accountability means that all participants in the education system—the child, the teacher, the school and district leader—know what they must produce by way of results, how they will be measured, and what will happen if they do or do not attain the desired results.

Choice brings freedom, diversity, and innovation to how education is provided, who provides it, and what options are available to families.

Transparency yields the information needed to ensure both top-down accountability and a viable marketplace of methods and ideas.

Conclusion
This new system will rekindle Americans’ confidence in public education, and this should lead to a greater public willingness—once people understand how and why additional resources will make a difference—to invest more in education. Such new investments, in turn, could lead to even greater gains, such as able people entering and staying in the teaching field; better preshooling; better technology and textbooks; and better performance in the classroom.

The National Commission on Excellence in Education concluded its historic 1983 report by noting: “Children born today can expect to graduate from high school in the year 2000. We firmly believe that a movement of America’s schools in the direction called for by our recommendations will prepare these children for far more effective lives in a far stronger America.”

Since those words were written, nearly two generations of students have passed through U.S. schools.

Since those words were written, real spending per pupil in U.S. public schools has risen by about 50 percent.

But since those words were written, we have gained little by way of better education results. Twenty years of entering 1st graders—about 80 million children—have walked into schools where they have scant chance of learning much more than the youngsters whose plight troubled the commission in 1983.

The shrinking globe has made it easier than anyone in 1983 could have imagined for investments and jobs to go anywhere on the planet that seems likeliest to succeed with them. Here we must look to our schools to produce the highly educated citizenry on which America’s future economic vitality depends.

A nation that responded enthusiastically but irresolutely to the excellence commission’s thoughtful yet modest recommendations in 1983 must now find the resolve to carry out a bottom-to-top reconstruction of its system of schooling. Can we do it? The stakes are huge, the challenge historic. We must begin today, in 2003, to make the changes that will transform American public education so that it can deliver on the democratic ideal of equal educational opportunity for students in 2013 and 2023. This is a promise that our nation has made to its children. For their sake, and for the sake of our country’s future, it is a promise that we must keep.

—This is the condensed version of the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education’s report, “Our Schools and Our Future: Are We Still at Risk?” released as the first paper in the Hoover Institution volume of the same name and as an independent report. To read the entire report, log on to www.educationnext.org.