The members of the Koret Task Force are certainly correct that student achievement in America is not as high as it ought to be. The questions are why, and whether the task force’s recommendations will improve the situation. To my mind, there are three fundamental explanations for the fact that the goal of universal academic achievement has not been accomplished in the 20 years since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*: 1) reforms continue to be prescribed for schooling, not for education; 2) achievement woes are most acute among children from low-income families, particularly minority families, who frequently attend the worst schools and live in communities with the fewest educational resources; 3) fundamental change in education takes a long time.

Schooling is an important but by no means comprehensive educational intervention. The culture surrounding adolescents is far more powerful than schooling—and also more difficult to “reform.” Today’s children live media-saturated lives. The power of culture—and its effect on student achievement—is evident in adolescents’ lesser concentration on academic endeavors as they focus more on television, video games, and excessive employment during the school year. It is also apparent in their conspicuous consumption of nonessential goods.

Second, educational problems are most acute among children from low-income families, particularly minority families, whose schools are much weaker and whose homes and communities are less likely to provide resources such as museums, libraries, books, healthy recreational activities, and a culture of success based on educational achievement. Many reforms adopted in the post-*Risk* era, such as graduation exams that determine whether students can receive diplomas, tend to punish these students, since they are unlikely to receive, either at home or in school, the instruction that would allow them to score well. Their teachers and parents often did not receive such instruction, and they find themselves unable to teach children what they themselves do not know, however much they may want to do so.

In addition, the working conditions in urban schools serving low-income children are likely to be rigid, rule-bound, and unpleasant, none of which facilitates enthusiasm among teachers or fosters academic learning. Consequently, these schools suffer very high teacher turnover, forcing them to hire inexperienced and often unqualified teachers while successful, experienced teachers move on to schools with more pleasant working environments, thereby widening the gap between the educational opportunities of the rich and the poor.

The intractability of the achievement gap is just one example of the third explanation: that fundamental school reform takes a long time. Americans, including many of the authors in this issue, wish educational improvement to occur immediately. Such expectations fly in the face of reality. Twenty years, while encompassing the schooling lifetime of one entire generation, has not been long enough for significant education reforms to take hold in the past. For example, in 1882, 20 years after the Morrill Act created the land grant colleges of agriculture and engineering, evidence of instruction in those subjects was spotty indeed, and research nonexistent. In 1974, 20 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, many communities still had schools segregated by race.

Consider another example: the Progressive Education Association officially expired in 1955, yet 20 years later many schools were still providing the curriculum recommended by its Life Adjustment subsidiary—that 20 percent of high-school students should receive vocational training, 60 percent a “general” curriculum, including such courses as “marriage and the family,” and the remaining 20 percent...
academic instruction. Such practices were still dominant when the National Commission on Excellence in Education reacted so fervently.

Paradigm Shifts
During the past century, educators reacted to at least four fundamental shifts in the priorities for their schools: assimilation, adjustment, access, and achievement. Throughout the period there was always an expectation that some children, both rich and poor, would excel academically, but never was there an assumption that all children would achieve at high levels, as we now insist. Each of these priorities had value, and over time the first three were gradually achieved.

In the early 1900s, schools were expected to “Americanize” immigrant children, so that as adults they would become loyal, productive citizens. This process involved curriculum, particularly the learning of English and of the nation’s cultural traditions (George Washington’s mutilation of the cherry tree was a favorite tale). But the process also extended beyond the formal curriculum to include other aspects of school life. For example, in New York City the nascent school lunch program eschewed the ethnic cuisine of the students’ families, preferring the boiled/baked staples of the Anglo-American diet. Similarly, athletic programs emphasized American basketball and baseball, ignoring European soccer.

In reaction to the jingoism and authoritarianism of the traditional school, Progressive educators of the 1920s fashioned a critique of teachers and teaching: that they were too rigid, too hidebound by tradition, and not adequately supportive of students. They insisted that a teacher’s primary obligation was not simply to teach a subject, but rather to help children “adjust to life.” Curriculum was out, caring was in. The new ideas of teaching the “whole child” and developing children’s creativity, social skills, and self-esteem were natural extensions of psychological principles that were just becoming popular. For youngsters whose home and community resources ensured that they would master the basics of reading and arithmetic regardless of school practices, progressive education provided a marvelous experience. The story was quite different for children who depended on school to introduce them to academic topics. Those children who inhabited the ever-growing “general” track in high school were denied a decent education. They were expected to “adjust” to a life that was seriously limited by their lack of preparation.

The paradigm shifted again during the 1960s and 1970s, when the civil-rights movement gave rise to a push to grant all children access to decent schooling. Federal mandates to desegregate schools, to provide extra help to disadvantaged children, and to include disabled children in regular classrooms, while all clearly necessary, placed the focus on contentious politics rather than on student learning. These were policies that many teachers and administrators either didn’t know how to implement or, in many cases, didn’t want to implement in their communities.

The priorities of adjustment and access were dominant when many of today’s senior teachers and administrators entered their professional lives. On average, today’s teachers are older and hence their preparation for teaching occurred when academic achievement was not recognized as the primary purpose of schooling; their professional experience was in institutions that did not demand academic performance from them or their students. The median age for teachers in 1900 was 26. By 1976, it had risen to 33; by the mid-1990s, the median age was 44. Beginning teachers are generally much more amenable to accommodating new school-imposed priorities than are experienced ones. Thus, reordering school priorities to focus on achievement—as Risk tried to do—was much more difficult with teachers and administrators who assumed their professional identities in an era when other priorities for schooling were in effect.

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The Next Wave of Reforms

If the Koret Task Force’s recommendations are to work, it is important to recognize that the principles of accountability, choice, and transparency are all policy positions. In education the issue is not simply to change the policy, but also to change the practice—a tricky translation, particularly when the policy requires fundamental change in the behavior of both adults and children. A state sets an “accountability goal,” such as requiring students to pass an examination, and uses that score as a marker for academic achievement. Yet at present it is impossible to ensure that the child has actually been taught the material tested by the exam or that the exam in fact captures the breadth of knowledge that the student should have. Changing policy is much easier than changing practice. It is easy to mandate tests, but much more difficult to ensure that all children learn and are capable of using that knowledge in a productive manner.

Like the conclusions of Risk, the task force’s recommendations pay scant attention to the educational influences that affect children outside of school. Schooling is certainly an easier object of policy focus than youth culture, but unless the values of schooling and of youth culture are congruent, then schooling is likely to lose. Among many affluent families who want their offspring to attend elite colleges, the school/home/culture values are quite well aligned, and as a group these youngsters have high levels of academic achievement. What remains to be seen is whether widespread public support for universal academic achievement can be maintained when the youth culture is against it, when significant fractions of young people are dropping out of high school, and when others are failing high-school exit examinations.

The recommendation that “decisions by parents rather than bureaucratic regulation should drive the education enterprise” limits education decisions in America to those who have children of school age. As a nation, we all have a stake in how our young citizens learn. Certainly parents have a special role, as acknowledged by the Supreme Court in the 1925 Pierce v. Society of Sisters case, where parents seeking religious education for their children in Roman Catholic schools sought to have that schooling recognized as meeting the compulsory education requirements. But it is after all the government that requires parents to make sure their children all get an education, whether the parents want it or not. Thus the higher authority is the nation, committed to preserving itself through the effective education of its young, that has a fundamental role in providing and supporting education. When that education is inadequate, as many today would assert is the case for our children, particularly those born to disadvantaged families, the issue is how we help those children learn.

The task force is right to emphasize the need for transparency in the education system. Society as a whole and parents in particular need to be able to understand how our children’s education is progressing. This information needs to be presented in a manner that is both accurate and understandable. Too often schools have failed this test miserably, sending home report cards that are meaningless and producing school transcripts that are incomprehensible. The reports nearly always present a rosier picture of the student’s progress (and by implication of the teacher’s effectiveness) than other measures might reveal. Parents are still relatively more satisfied with their children’s school than with the nation’s schools, but gradually social concern has been building about the quality of education for all.

One of the consequences of the extraordinary decline (nearly 90 percent) in federal support for education research over the past 25 years, as reported by Richard C. Atkinson and Gregg B. Jackson in their 1992 report for the National Academy of Sciences, has been the profound loss of rigorous inquiry into how schooling can be improved academically for all and how youth culture can become more attuned to the deferred gratification of academic achievement and less oriented to the immediate imperatives of money, clothes, and other amusements. Funding for policy work, such as this document, has been more readily available from private sources than has money for systematic research, both quantitative and qualitative, about education, its theory and its practice. Only with more knowledge, carefully developed, will we be able to effect the transformation of American schooling that would make academic achievement universal.

A well-educated populace will not guarantee either a strong economy or global security or even a democracy (as Nazi Germany demonstrated in the preceding century), but all three are highly unlikely without one. As Thomas Jefferson presciently observed in 1816, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.” The authors of Risk and of the Koret Task Force report correctly concluded that greater academic achievement among all living in this country is essential. The value is not in doubt. However, the means of achieving this goal immediately are illusory.

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