The Koret Task Force does a valuable service for American education. Its recommendations are largely on target as we stick with the task of improving our schools and move toward the goal of “leaving no child behind.” But I see the events of the past 20 years in a different light. Our educators, students, parents, and policymakers deserve much more credit for what has been accomplished. While improvement has come in fits and starts—and detoured into a number of dead-ends—American education is better today than it was in 1983. And we are on the verge of making it much better.

I was governor of North Carolina in 1983 when the National Commission on Excellence in Education released A Nation at Risk. Against heavy opposition, I had pushed hard to begin statewide testing of our public school students. Our early assessments had revealed major deficiencies. Risk showed that this was a nationwide phenomenon. Many policymakers sensed that the report would provide a major boost to our efforts to bring about serious change in education.

As chairman of the Education Commission of the States (ECS) at that time, I pushed other governors and corporate CEOs to address the problem with a high-level “Task Force on Education for Economic Growth,” thus establishing the vital link between education and economic growth that has fueled so many of the ensuing efforts to improve schools at the state level. Its calls for higher standards in schools and mastery of the basic competencies required for a globally competitive work force were warmly received by the National Governors Association (NGA). Candidates who might once have touted themselves as the “Jobs Governor” suddenly found that the way to attract employers to their states was to become an “Education Governor.”

The release of Risk acted like a meteor hitting the ocean, creating tidal waves of reform everywhere. Another report of the mid-1980s, the Carnegie Corporation’s A Nation Prepared (see Chester E. Finn Jr., “High Hurdles,” p. 62), sparked a long
Today's schools are undeniably better than the schools of 1983, and a trio of recent reforms is making them even better.
focus on excellence in teaching in an effort to define what Tom Kean, former governor of New Jersey, termed “what accomplished teachers need to know and be able to do.” Nearly every leader of the NGA, Republicans and Democrats alike, made education, standards, and economic competitiveness a theme of his chairmanship. Then, in 1989, the governors and President George H.W. Bush held the nation’s first education summit in Charlottesville, Virginia, and formulated national education goals for America.

Three major developments of the past 20 years are now bearing fruit: 1) the creation of standards and accountability; 2) research on how the brain develops in early childhood and its implications for pre-K education and child care; and 3) an emerging focus on the single biggest factor in student achievement—teacher quality.

Standards and Accountability
While the Koret report finds that “standards-based reforms . . . are hard to get right,” the truth is that most states have been working hard to “get it right” and have met with good success. Groups like Achieve, the Business Roundtable, ECS, and the recent summits led by IBM CEO Louis Gerstner have had a real impact. Most of the nation’s governors have gotten the message: if you aren’t pushing hard to set high standards and making considerable progress toward achieving them, your state will not be “the place” for business to locate and jobs to be created.

Only a handful of states now lack standards. Most need better standards than they have, but they have made a good start. In 1983 only a handful of states had any standards, and we were measuring progress in education almost solely by the increase in spending rather than achievement.

It is easy to criticize the work of states and school districts on standards, but dedicated teachers, principals, superintendents, and curriculum experts have spent untold hours trying to build their systems. They deserve our commendation. Some were especially bold. Virginia and Massachusetts can attest to the agony involved in setting high standards and, as a result, having many students fail the exams. But they can also attest to the value of sticking with this venture—providing greater support to students and teachers and thus seeing test scores climb dramatically. Others are emulating them.

Any fair assessment of the events of the two decades since Risk must conclude that we are well on our way to high and rigorous standards and accountability. We should be proud of that progress and committed to do a lot better.

Ready to Learn
The Koret report hardly mentions one of the most important developments since Risk: science’s remarkable progress in understanding how a child’s brain develops in the earliest years and the ensuing efforts to provide the early child care and education necessary for school readiness.

We now know that all children are born with about the same number of brain cells, billions of them. But the capacity for intelligence is largely set early in the child’s life, when those brain cells are connected up. These connections are formed largely from stimulation—hearing sounds, seeing colors, feeling things, responding to love and care.

We also know a great deal now about what is happening when in a child’s development. This enables educators to help young, inexperienced parents know what to look for and how to be most helpful to their child’s development.

This knowledge is part of the research base that has propelled quality child care and education to the forefront as a strategy for educational success. Roughly half of the “achievement gap” is already present when poor, minority children enter the schoolhouse door. The inescapable conclusion is that we must help these children get a better start early in life.

“It is high time that we commit the full resources required to improve every school in America, so that every child is at grade level or above.”

Teacher Quality
The Koret report misses the mark most seriously with regard to teaching. It states, “Higher quality teachers are key to improving our schools, but the proper gauge to measure that quality has nothing to do with paper credentials.” It goes on to say that the only true gauge of teacher quality is “classroom effectiveness.” Of course that is the best measure. But how do we get teachers who are effective in boosting student achievement? How do we improve their knowledge and skills? How do we keep them in the classroom? Fortunately, lots of people have been working on answers to those questions.

In 1996 the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future challenged the nation to provide every child with what should be his or her educational birthright: “access to competent, caring, qualified teaching in schools organized for success.” It urged the nation to get serious about teacher standards, reinvent teacher preparation and professional development, put qualified teachers in every classroom, encourage and reward teacher knowledge and skill, and create schools organized for student and teacher success. Twenty states joined together as partners to implement the recommendations, while others have taken some action.
Major business groups have taken up the quest for better teaching and are pushing for higher standards for teachers, better preparation and professional development, and higher pay linked to performance. They also urged the creation of a corps of “master” teachers certified by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Today there are nearly 24,000 national board-certified teachers found in all 50 states. They meet rigorous standards. They receive extra compensation in many states and districts—$6,000 per year more in Mississippi and $7,500 more in South Carolina. They are superb teachers for their students and mentors and role models to fellow teachers.

In North Carolina, where I had the honor to serve as governor for 16 of the past 26 years, we have made a consistent effort to improve our schools and student performance. Our leaders have worked at this in a bipartisan manner, joined by the legislature, state board of education, department of public instruction, universities and colleges, and educators throughout the K–12 system. The business community has been especially supportive of new policies and greater resources. These efforts have yielded some impressive progress, noted by observers from Education Week to the RAND Corporation. Our standards, assessments, and accountability arrangements have been widely applauded. North Carolina now has the most “board-certified” teachers in the country—5,111, one of every 17 teachers in the state.

Most important, student performance has improved dramatically. The percentage of students scoring at or above grade level on the state’s proficiency tests has risen from 56 percent to nearly 75 percent in just six years. Results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress confirm these gains: during the 1990s, North Carolina experienced the highest gains of any state on the 4th- and 8th-grade math exams. Many of these funds will have to come from the federal government. Right after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in 1965, the share of my state’s “education bill” paid by Washington was about 14 percent. Now it is down to about 7 percent. As we all rally to “leave no child behind,” why don’t we commit to get that proportion of federal support back up to 14 percent, where it used to be?

When we as a nation are threatened by Osama Bin Laden or Saddam Hussein, money is no object. We are paying dearly to fight them and to bolster homeland security. I fully support doing both. But, as Risk said, the threat to our country from mediocre education is very much like that of war. We should fight the battle for excellent schools with equal fervor.

The Koret Agenda
The three principles—accountability, choice, and transparency—that the Koret report puts at the core of efforts to change incentive structures and power relationships in schooling are valid.

I believe that choice should be exercised within the public school system. Let the public schools compete for students; public universities in my state certainly compete against one another successfully.

Transparency is worth special attention. As the task force says, the current system is “opaque” nearly everywhere we look. We need to examine systems, at both the state and the district level, to see how schools, students, and teachers are performing. But we especially need to report to parents and students about their own schools. They should receive annual report cards showing the qualifications of teachers and records of student and teacher performance. My experience is that parents and the school respond positively if these things are done with care and honesty.

New means of accountability, such as the Standard & Poor’s School Evaluation Service and Just for the Kids, provide powerful ways of analyzing school performance (including financial data) and can be easily accessed by parents via the Internet. The popularity of these services illustrates how much demand there is for information on school quality.

It is true, as the task force insists, that we cannot improve the schools of America by just “throwing more money at them.” We must reform them in a thorough way. But we also can’t bring about dramatic improvements without a significant investment of new resources.

One example makes the case. Low-performing schools need better principals and teachers. They may also need better facilities and services for students. Let’s measure how the teachers and principals perform and pay them more if they get good results. But let’s recognize that this will take more money, not less. We will have to compete in the marketplace to get these people, and we will have to pay for them.

In fact, I believe it is high time that we commit the full resources required to reform and improve every school in America so that every child is learning, so that every child is at grade level or above.

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—James B. Hunt Jr. is chairman of the board at the James B. Hunt Jr. Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of North Carolina and the former governor of North Carolina.