The Erosion Continues
An education system soaked in mediocrity

In 1983, a blue-ribbon education commission appointed by Ronald Reagan’s first Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell, announced that America’s “educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them.” In its report, A Nation at Risk, the National Commission on Excellence in Education declared that the “intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people” were in danger. U.S. schools, once the envy of the world, had been overtaken by competitors abroad. In one of its most quoted phrases, the Bell commission spoke of a “rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people.”

At first glance, the metaphor—a rising tide of mediocrity—seems inapt, even odd. Do tides simply rise? Don’t they ebb and flow? And when they flow, don’t good things typically happen? Perhaps a heedless swimmer may be unpleasantly surprised, but flowing waters refresh tide pools, float boats, and enchant the child who watches surf pound against the headland.

Yet as peculiar as the metaphor first seemed, it has acquired meaning with the passage of time. As the globe warms, the slow rise in ocean levels has caused great concern. As glaciers and ice caps melt, Louisiana is losing land to the sea and barrier islands are gradually slipping beneath the watery surface, drowned by a slowly rising tide, a process suggested by the cover photo.

Mediocrity can slowly engulf our education system in this same insidious way—imperceptibly, an inch at a time, without definitive scientific proof of its causes or consequences. Vested interests can deny it. The media can ignore it. Scholars can try to document it, even if never to everyone’s satisfaction. The public can sense it, but not quite understand what to do about it.

Today, on the 20th anniversary of A Nation at Risk, the Koret Task Force on K–12 Education finds the tide of mediocrity still rising. At a time when America needs greater intellectual, moral, and technological strength than ever before, the nation’s education system remains well behind those of the high-performing countries of East Asia and much of Europe. Far from stemming the tide, the recommendations of the national commission were only selectively adopted, leading to reforms more symbolic than substantive, say the 11 members of the Hoover Institution–based Koret group (who also serve as editors and editorial board members of this journal).

The issue begins with a condensed version of the Koret Task Force report (the full-length version is available at www.educationnext.org as well as from the Hoover Institution). The Koret group argues that the famed 1983 report did a better job of diagnosis than of prescription. It focused on the right issue—educational excellence—but provided an inadequate set of solutions. The commission thought higher expectations, more time in school, and more money for education could stop the rising tide. Not so, says the Task Force, calling instead for systemic change that will hold schools accountable, give parents more choices, and provide citizens with a transparent education system whose accomplishments they can assess. Only if these systemic changes are realized will the public find it worthwhile to invest more resources in our country’s schools.

This issue’s forum spotlights four commentaries on the Koret report. Milton Goldberg, the executive director of the 1983 commission, defends its work as ahead of its time. Former North Carolina governor Jim Hunt detects more progress than the Koret group finds. Patricia Graham, former dean of Harvard’s education school, sees the problem as rooted more in society than in its schools and calls for as much emphasis on equity as on excellence. Former Arizona schools superintendent Lisa Graham Keegan says the Koret recommendations will not mean much unless backed by strong educational leadership.

Following the forum are feature articles by individual members of the Koret Task Force. Their essays provide detailed assessments that support the argument stated in the main report. Given the importance, timeliness, and urgency of the topic, we have devoted nearly all of this issue to these essays. However, we also invite you to read our book reviews and enjoy our last page, which, in this month of presidential birthdays, provides a thought-provoking account by William Miller of the moral and educational development of our nation’s greatest president, Abraham Lincoln.

-THE EDITORS

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K–12 education, but Education Next partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.