A Landmark Revisited by Albert Shanker

The following retrospective on A Nation at Risk is reprinted from the American Federation of Teachers’ “Where We Stand” column. It originally appeared on May 9, 1993.

Recently I reread A Nation at Risk, the landmark report that started the education reform movement, and I was surprised at what I found. After 10 years, some of the words and ideas were still familiar, but I wasn’t prepared for an exposition of what we would now call “systemic reform”: figuring out what we want students to know and be able to do and making sure that all parts of the education system—standards, curriculum, textbooks, assessments, teacher training—move simultaneously toward the achievement of agreed-upon goals. This is the way successful school systems in other industrial democracies work, and it is why their students achieve at a much higher level than ours.

We didn’t recognize the revolutionary thesis of A Nation at Risk because we associated the report with Ronald Reagan. He opposed a federal role for education, and the solutions he proposed for complicated problems were simple and mischievous—for example, merit pay and vouchers. In fact, the report came from an independent commission appointed by Secretary of Education Terrel Bell, who had a very different agenda.

Nevertheless, it was easy to ridicule something that emphasized the importance of subject matter and standards as an old-fashioned piece of nonsense. States that tried to implement A Nation at Risk picked a few parts that were relatively easy to carry out and ignored the rest. For example, course requirements were increased in some places without looking at course content or changing the tests to bring them in line with the courses or making grades count for students. This approach to reform is like trying to build a four-legged stool with only one leg, and it’s no surprise that student achievement hardly improved.

What were the important recommendations of the systemic reform A Nation at Risk proposed?

1. Along with a call for rigorous content and high standards, the report took a stab at defining content standards in some basic subjects. And recognizing that if there was a single set of performance standards, it would be fixed at a minimum level, the report recommended what successful education systems in other industrialized countries have—different standards because students function at different levels. At the same time, it stressed the necessity of demanding “the best effort and performance from all students” and giving them the help they would need to meet those demands.

2. In order to see how well students were meeting standards, the report recommended a system of curriculum-based exams. These exams would contrast sharply with the standardized tests we then relied on and still do—that is, tests that are divorced from curriculum and merely show how students or schools compare with one another without any reference to a standard of achievement.

3. While stressing that teachers were not responsible for the terrible condition of education, the report acknowledged what is still true—that it would be hard to raise standards when “not enough academically able students are being attracted to teach-
regarded as most significant the fact that students were taking fewer basic academic courses and more nonacademic electives; studies from Massachusetts showed that schools had been adding such courses as “Film Making” even as course offerings in 11th-grade English and world history were being eliminated. The panel also pointed out that “less thoughtful and critical reading is now being demanded and done” and that “careful writing has apparently about gone out of style.” The panel cast blame on absenteeism, social promotion, less homework being assigned, and a general lowering of standards. Coming as they did from a blue-ribbon commission with impeccable educationist credentials, these charges set the stage for Risk only six years later.

In the late 1970s, no one suggested that criticism of the education system was motivated by partisanship or that it emanated from “enemies of the public schools.” In the closing years of the Carter administration, two presidentially appointed commissions lamented the flawed teaching of specific subject areas. In 1979 a commission created to examine foreign-language instruction in the United States concluded that “Americans’ incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous, and it is becoming worse.” High-school enrollments in foreign-language study, it pointed out, had fallen from 24 percent of each grade in 1965 to 15 percent in the late 1970s. Only 1 of every 20 high-school students ever studied a second year of a foreign language. Colleges had ceased to require foreign-language study for admission, in response to campus revolts against requirements in the late 1960s, and high-school students had stopped taking foreign languages once it was no longer necessary for college admission. In 1980 another Carter-appointed commission lamented the condition of education in mathematics, science, and engineering; it pointed to lower standards in the

“Education reforms are useless unless our kids take responsibility for their education,” legendary union leader Albert Shanker wrote a decade ago.

A Nation at Risk was revolutionary in another way. At the time it appeared and since, many reports and studies have been fixated on teacher accountability for student achievement, ignoring the fact that in countries with successful school systems, students, not teachers, are held accountable for their achievement. This report supported student accountability, and that’s the note on which it concluded. In the final pages, the authors addressed students directly, telling them that they were responsible, finally, for what they got out of school: “When you give only the minimum to learning, you get only the minimum in return. Even with your parents’ best example and your teachers’ best efforts, in the end it is your work that determines how much and how well you learn.” A Nation at Risk got this right, too. Education reforms are useless unless our kids take responsibility for their education, the way students in other countries do.

Until we agree on standards for what students should know and be able to do, assess them on their achievement of those standards, and give them a reason to work hard in school by linking their achievement with what they want—access to college or to jobs—we will not raise student achievement. A Nation at Risk told us this 10 years ago, but we missed it. If we don’t listen now, we’ll have 10 more years without progress in student achievement. —The late Albert Shanker was president of the American Federation of Teachers for 23 years. To view an archive of his “Where We Stand” columns, log on to www.nysut.org/shanker.