The core of *A Nation at Risk* was its concern that America’s public schools were not challenging enough to prepare students for a future built on technology and information. Students, Risk said, were not taking enough academic courses. Expectations for students were set too low, evidenced by the fact that grades for coursework often failed to correlate with students' scores on independent exams. Too little of the day was spent in class or doing homework. The school year was too short. Too few teachers were qualified to teach math and science. Finally, teachers were being drawn mainly from the bottom of the achievement distribution among college students.

Risk’s recommendations focused on solving the problems in four areas: curriculum, expectations, time, and teaching. Twenty years later, progress on these recommendations has been spotty and altogether disappointing. Substantial progress has been made in the area of curriculum, where Risk’s recommendations could be fulfilled by rule changes, such as increasing requirements for graduation. A much larger share of students is taking an academic slate of courses (see Figures 1–3). But whether the content of these courses is actually any more difficult is impossible to tell. Progress has also been made on recommendations that required real change, if they were supported by powerful interest groups in education, especially the teacher unions. For instance, teachers have seen real increases in salary, though the average salary of other college graduates grew at a higher rate during the boom years of the 1990s (see Figures 4 & 5).

The authors of *A Nation at Risk* were opposed to “more of the same”: more spending on the same old curriculum without fundamental changes in expectations and time use. Nevertheless, powerful interest groups were able to use the climate of urgency created by the report to get their own preferred policies enacted, even when the policies were not recommended by Risk. For instance, per-pupil spending has risen sharply while class size has fallen significantly (see Figures 6–8). The same interest groups were able to block some Risk recommendations that would have required real changes, such as lengthening the school year and assigning more homework (see Figures 9–11).

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Squeezing Out the Vocational Track (Figure 1)

A Nation at Risk urged the nation to refocus its schools on academics, and the schools at least appear to have answered the call. Whether this represents a real increase in rigor, however, is nearly impossible to know.

Tougher Math and Science Courses (Figure 2 and Figure 3)

The share of students taking apparently challenging courses such as Calculus, Trigonometry, Algebra II, Physics, and Chemistry has increased across the board.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education
Ahead, But Still Behind (Figure 4 and Figure 5)

A Nation at Risk recommended that teachers be paid higher salaries—a policy backed by powerful interest groups. The ensuing two decades saw a 12 percent increase in teachers’ salaries after adjusting for inflation, but they had in fact fallen further behind the average college graduate in relative terms.

Average Teacher Salary (in inflation-adjusted 2001 dollars)

Average Salaries for Teachers, College Graduates, and Workers (not adjusted for inflation)

Increasing Equity (Figure 6) ... 

School-finance lawsuits and increased federal spending on compensatory education have combined to boost spending in poor districts, thus narrowing the money gap.

Variation in Per-Pupil Expenditure in the United States

... And Reducing Class Sizes (Figure 7) ...

The student-teacher ratio has dropped dramatically in the past 30 years, an enormously expensive reform.

The Student-Teacher Ratio in U.S. Public Schools

... Has Proven Expensive (Figure 8)

Increased spending in disadvantaged school districts, higher teacher salaries, and reduced class sizes have resulted in a dramatic rise in average spending since A Nation at Risk was released.

Per-Pupil Spending in the U.S. (Real 2002 Dollars)

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Bureau of the Census

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education
The Agricultural Schedule (Figure 9)
A Nation at Risk recommended that the school year, originally designed for a rural society, be lengthened, but it has actually grown shorter over the past three decades.

Length of School Year in Days

The Homework Myth (Figure 10)
Parents and the media report a wild increase in homework during the past few years, but the data based on student responses show no increase and possibly a drop.

Hours of Homework per School Day, Average American High School Student

The Unskilled Teacher (Figure 11)
A Nation at Risk called for recruiting more teachers with degrees in subject areas rather than majors in education, but the education system has only grown less successful in attracting knowledgeable graduates.

Teachers with College Degree in a Subject Area

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education