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DECADES
LATER,
A NATION
IN CRISIS



Decades Later, A Nation in Crisis

Executive Summary

In the 37 years since it was published, [much has been debated](#) about *A Nation at Risk*, its recommendations, and the eventual policies that were guided by it. But consensus is quite clear on one argument—our nation remains at risk.

In fact, our nation is now in crisis. That's because [our education system is obsolete](#), and many students are still being left behind. Given the U.S. is facing an alarming talent shortage that could [cost our economy up to \\$1.7 trillion](#) by 2030, we must act now to correct course.

In the wake of COVID, we are at an [inflection point](#). Our education system has to change and improve student outcomes for good, so we must reevaluate our policy-making decisions from the last 50 plus years, not just the last two. We must create a nonpartisan stakeholder task force that examines what we've learned since *A Nation at Risk*, redefines the purpose of education in our country, and recommends policy solutions that work for 2022 and beyond.

Together, this task force must:

- incorporate equity into everything we do, so all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or zip code have the opportunity to succeed;
- evaluate how we value and invest in teachers and students;
- reassess how we use data to measure success;
- look forward to what students need to learn to be successful in the future;
- and ensure students have the basic reading and math competency they need (though not at the expense of losing valuable subjects such as science and social studies);

We have the opportunity, at this critical inflection point, to make education once again a national priority. Unlike the commission that created *A Nation of Risk*, which was comprised mostly of researchers, we must bring together all stakeholders from across political spectrums, from different lived experiences, and from different institutions and backgrounds, **including research**, to ensure that all students are able to succeed and be productive. We must act now to ensure our policies and systems support our students' ability to succeed. Because we simply cannot allow another 37 years to go by while our students continue to be at risk.



Decades Later, A Nation in Crisis

Introduction

In 1983, Ronald Reagan was president, "Star Wars—Return of the Jedi" was the top grossing movie, and *The New York Times* declared that the personal computer would be [underneath Christmas trees](#) in homes across America. Approximately [16 percent](#) of children under 18 lived in poverty, [one in four adults](#) had a college degree and [one in four workers](#) held a job in manufacturing, construction, or mining.

In education, the seminal report [A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform](#) was published. The report, resulting from 18 months of study by President Ronald Reagan's United States Commission on Excellence in Education, declared that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people."

A Nation at Risk included recommendations to improve public schools and called for the adoption of rigorous standards, including more stringent graduation standards; the use of state and local tests to measure achievement; sufficient funding and resources for schools; and curriculum changes that would give students a solid grounding in basic subjects like reading and math.

In the 37 years since it was published, [much has been debated](#) about *A Nation at Risk*, its recommendations, and the eventual policies that were guided by it. But consensus is quite clear on one argument—our nation remains at risk.

In fact, our nation is now in crisis.



An obsolete system in a changing world

That's because [our education system is obsolete](#), and many students are still being left behind. Given the U.S. is facing an alarming talent shortage that could [cost our economy up to \\$1.7 trillion](#) by 2030, we must act now to correct course.

We now live in a knowledge economy, not an industrialized nation. [Ninety-two percent of households have a computer](#) and 84 percent have a smartphone. Half of 25 to 29-year-olds have [an associate's degree or higher](#), and [65 percent of children](#) who enter elementary school today will have jobs that don't yet exist. Jobs in skilled trades such as manufacturing, mining, or construction will continue to require new skills as robotics, artificial intelligence, and digitization make them more technologically advanced.

Our country and our world have changed and continue to evolve at a rapid pace.

Yet [17.5 percent of children](#) still live in poverty, and NAEP's recently released [long-term trend scores](#) show us that many children—especially children of color, children in poverty, and children from rural communities—are still being left behind. This is reinforced by the fact that test scores have [remained stagnant since about 2009](#), says Dr. Morgan Polikoff of the University of Southern California. Polikoff writes, "...there have been troubling signs over at least the last decade that a) various longstanding achievement gaps have not been closing, and b) gaps between high- and low-performing students have been widening."

Moving Forward

As we return to a new normal after mass disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we're beginning to grapple with the effects of COVID on student learning. We're wondering how badly have [our students fallen behind](#)? Have the [gaps gotten bigger](#)? [How do we fix it](#)?

But the reality is that while COVID may have exacerbated the existing issues within our educational systems, it certainly did not create them.

We know [so much more](#) about how people learn than we did in the 1980s. But our current education system is not centered around how students learn. [It's centered around a factory model](#)—a one-size-fits-all approach that does not work in our current knowledge economy. In a 2021 Cengage survey, [more than half of college graduates](#) had not applied to an entry-level job in their field because they felt unqualified. Nearly half of those graduates felt unqualified because they did not have all the skills listed in the job description.

In our current knowledge economy, we need life-long learners who have strong academic and performance skills and the social and collaborative skills [business leaders say](#) they need from their workforce. We need future leaders who have the adaptability, creativity, and flexibility that will serve them well throughout their careers. We must strive for a system that's rooted in the science of learning and brain development—a [whole child](#) approach that starts with reading and math as a foundation and recognizes that children need social and emotional skills to succeed.

Additionally, there is an urgent need to address equity in all aspects of education. [Science shows](#) us that our society and our culture shape our biology and brain development. Our life experiences, both in and outside of school, affect everything about us, from our emotions to our cognition to the way we identify with others. Students of color, rural students, students in poverty, and many other students simply aren't getting what they need to be successful and flourish. Members of communities who are impacted by policy decisions must be in the room or have policymakers who listen to and understand their needs and concerns.

A call to action

It is critical we act now so our policies and systems remain grounded in reading and math but also support all students' ability to thrive in this rapidly changing world. We simply cannot allow another 37 years to go by while our students continue to be at risk.

In the wake of COVID, we are at an [inflection point](#). Our education system has to change and improve student outcomes for good, so we must reevaluate our policy-making decisions from the last 50 plus years, not just the last two. We must create a nonpartisan stakeholder task force that examines what we've learned since *A Nation at Risk*, redefines the purpose of education in our country, and recommends policy solutions that work for 2022 and beyond.

As Dr. Linda Darling Hammond and Dr. Channa Cook-Harvey write in [Educating the Whole Child: Improving School Climate to Support Student Success](#), we must ensure that all students and educators have:

- a learning environment that supports motivation and encourages mastery over grades or performance goals;
- explicit instruction in social and emotional learning and opportunities to learn and use social-emotional skills;
- and a positive school climate, fueled by supportive environmental conditions, strong relationships and community.

To meet this goal, we must:

- incorporate equity into everything we do, so all students, regardless of race, ethnicity, or zip code have the opportunity to succeed;
- evaluate how we value and invest in teachers and students;
- reassess how we use data to measure success;
- look forward to what students need to learn to be successful in the future;
- and ensure students have the basic reading and math competency they need (though not at the expense of losing valuable subjects such as science and social studies).

Reassess how we use data

While data is an important tool in student and teacher assessment, we must recognize that data can be flawed, [according to the Christensen Institute's Michael Horn](#). "The metrics and data on which an institution might optimize are fundamentally supply-side in nature—that is, they view the world from the perspective of those institutions that deliver education," Horn says. The problem, Horn argues, is that the data will not show what success means for an individual learner in their specific circumstances.

Relying only on data can also lead to flawed comparisons that further inequities. Take the recent *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of middle and high schools, which *Forbes* contributor author Natalie Wexler, author of [The Knowledge Gap: The Hidden Cause of America's Broken Education System—and How to Fix It](#), calls a "terrible idea." That's because there's an increased understanding that ranking systems that use test scores to sort and classify schools show results that "[often mirror school demographics—potentially reinforcing and exacerbating school segregation](#)," according to Chalkbeat. For example, when [popular rating website GreatSchools](#) rolls out its ratings in an area, housing prices around highly-rated schools increases. Those areas then attract more white, Asian, and high-income families.

Evaluate How we Invest in Students and Teachers

Long-standing funding disparities are part of the problem. A 2021 report from the Education Law Center shows that high-poverty schools in nearly half of all U.S. states get less money per student, or at best the same amount, as low-poverty schools. However, [evidence](#) shows that high-poverty schools benefit from more robust investment. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that, on average, schools in the U.S. spend roughly \$15,000 per student. But a [comparison of state-by-state average funding](#) shows wide disparities. For example, Arizona spends \$9,700 per student, but in New York, it's just over \$26,700—a difference of \$17,000 per student. Additionally, per-student spending in more than half of U.S. states is lower than the national average.

During the Great Recession, school budget cuts led directly to a [decrease in student achievement](#), and schools across the country are one again facing budget cuts because of COVID-19. With the infusion of federal relief funds, states have an opportunity to wisely rebuild education systems that invest in students and teachers.

Ensure Basic Math and Reading Competency (But Innovate How We Teach and Assess)

For at least 20 years, reading and math scores have been considered the measure of school quality. But during [that period](#), scores have been [stagnant or declining](#) with an ever-[widening gap](#) between high- and low-scorers. Emphasis on test scores has resulted in schools [marginalizing or eliminating](#) social studies and science from the curriculum to focus on reading and math. This is especially true where test scores are low. [Reading instruction](#) often mirrors test structure, with teachers focusing on short, disconnected passages followed by questions.

Where there's learning innovation, there's also progress. One example of this is [in Mississippi](#), where test scores were boosted dramatically after the state made sure that teachers understood the science of how we learn to read. We know so much more about how students learn, and how teachers can successfully teach. It's time to incorporate innovation and the science of learning into all we do, so we can ensure students have the basics they need.

Look forward to what students need

The pandemic has accelerated existing trends in remote work, e-commerce, and automation. As a result, more than one in 16 workers—[25 percent more than before the pandemic](#)—will need to find a new job by 2030.

We must acknowledge that education should be about teaching students to think and be adaptive, because the world will continue to rapidly change. Fortunately, we know that when we approach learning with a whole-child approach, we encourage and reinforce the skills students will need to achieve in school and in their careers, no matter how the world around them changes.

Incorporate equity into everything

There is an urgent need to address equity in all aspects of our education system.

[The science is increasingly clear](#)—our society and our culture shape our biology and brain development. Our life experiences, both in and outside of school, affect everything about us, from our emotions to our cognition to the way we identify with others. Our brains grow and change in response to our experiences and relationships. Students of color, rural students, students in poverty, and many other students simply aren't getting what they need to thrive because, over time, racism and discrimination have both purposefully and inadvertently led to the creation of inequitable systems and institutions that are actively harming their learning and development.

While 2019 NAEP scores show [just under half](#) of white fourth grade students were reading at or above proficiency, [the number drops to 18 percent](#), or roughly one in six, for Black or African American students. For Hispanic or Latino students, fourth grade reading proficiency is 23 percent, or just under one in four students. Eighth grade data for Black and African American students, Hispanic and Latino students, and other students of color [tells a similar story](#).

Rural schools “receive little attention in either policy or academia” according to a report by the [Center for Public Education](#), despite the fact that [one in five](#) U.S. students go to school in a rural district. High rates of poverty, inequitable access to technology and other resources, and a [disproportionately high shortage of teachers](#) and administrators are just some of the challenges rural schools face.

As [Dr. Pamela Cantor writes](#) in *All Children Thriving: A New Purpose for Education*, we must put an end to harmful practices that further racism and inequities “such as tracking, harsh discipline, exclusion, shaming, and many others” and instead embrace “the cultural nature of learning.”

A better future

We have the opportunity, at this critical inflection point, to make education once again a national priority. Unlike the commission that created *A Nation of Risk*, which was comprised mostly of researchers, we must bring together all stakeholders from across political spectrums, from different lived experiences, and from different institutions and backgrounds, including research, to ensure that all students are able to succeed and be productive. We must act now to ensure our policies and systems support our students’ ability to succeed. Because we simply cannot allow another 37 years to go by while our students continue to be at risk.

