American Education After
A Nation at Risk

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I would like to talk briefly about a report just completed by one of our grantees, the Center for Policy Research at Rutgers University. The report, titled *The Progress of Reform: An Appraisal of State Education Initiatives*, summarizes the status of the reform activities that have occurred during the six years since the release of *A Nation at Risk*. I think it might be useful for us to catch up on the nature of these reforms, particularly the state reforms. I would also like to offer some personal views about what I believe will be the big policy questions of the 1990s—questions that groups such as this one must address.

To summarize the conclusions of this new report, state activity over the past six years has focused primarily on increasing the academic content of the curriculum and addressing the issues of teacher certification and compensation. The states have, for example, made course requirements more rigorous, increased student testing, formulated curriculum standards and, in some cases, tried to integrate the curriculum with textbooks and exams.

Let me describe one specific outcome that supports the conclusions reached by the researchers. In 1983, as we were producing *A Nation at Risk*, we studied transcripts of 1982 high school graduates. Among the 1982 high school graduates were those whose curriculum had included four years of English, three years of math, three years of science and three years of social studies—which essentially represents what we consider the core curriculum. We discovered that only about 13 percent of American high school graduates had taken such a curriculum—13 percent in 1982. The rest took courses from what *A Nation at Risk* called a “smorgasbord curriculum.”

For example, in one high school we found that youngsters could select from more than 700 courses, each of which was worth as much as any other. For instance, a student could take a course in bachelor living that was worth as much as a course in biology. As a matter of fact, some of us thought that the course in bachelor living was a course in biology!

As a result of this lack of structure, more than 85 percent of American high
school students in 1982 were graduating with a plethora of courses that had little meaning. So, it is no surprise to see plummeting scores on Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) and other tests as well. If you do not pick the course and you do not take the work, there is a fair chance you are not going to learn the subject.

In 1987, we undertook a similar study of high school transcripts and discovered that 30 percent of American high school seniors that year were graduating with four years of English, three years of math, three years of science and three years of social studies. Apparently, in the years since A Nation at Risk was published, the American people had decided to adopt one of the changes recommended in that report: an increase in course-taking requirements. By 1987, almost one-third of high school graduates had taken the New Basics curriculum.

The second major change—and the second major conclusion to be drawn from the analysis of state reform done by the Center for Policy Research—is that despite national pressure for reform, the type of reform occurring in each state is essentially a reflection of the political culture of the state rather than a response to national pressure. For example, in states with a governor from one political party and a legislature controlled by another, a smorgasbord of reforms was adopted, usually as the result of either conciliation or argument and not because of a coherent policy. States with traditions of large-scale policy fixes chose to continue in that direction. States that favored incremental approaches and were used to pragmatic problem-solving went about educational reform in just that way. One of the big problems faced by a lot of states involved deciding who got the credit for reform, without concomitant regard to whether or not the reform actually resulted in improvement. Who got credit for it? Was it the legislature? Was it the governor? Or was it some other body in the state?

The third characteristic of the reform movement is that, in the main, states have tended to choose those reforms that are more easily implemented rather than adopting more complex recommendations. The most popular reform of the past five years has been increasing graduation requirements. Why? Because it is uncomplicated. All you have to do is say, “Starting next year, everybody has to take three years instead of two” of whatever subject. States have gone this route. In contrast, reforms requiring, for example, increased funding or changes in authority patterns or a complex restructuring of instruction and administration either were not passed or were lost very quickly after passage. It was the manageable, easily defined reforms that stuck.

Fourth, reforms lacked coherence. Through their adoption of frequently unrelated reforms, policymakers sent conflicting messages to teachers and administrators while failing to establish priorities. In other words, the reforms were not part of any coherent policy agreement reached at the state level about