

The 'tide' still rises

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Twenty years ago today, the Reagan administration's National Commission on Excellence in Education issued a 36-page report detailing the massive decline in quality public education. The commission declared that America's education system was "being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." Noting that the average scores of high school students on the then-named (SAT) had been in virtually steady decline since the 1960s, the commission asserted, "If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves." The commission concluded, "We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."

The commission's major recommendations included: (1) requiring high school students to pursue a rigorous curriculum of English, math, natural sciences, social studies, foreign language and computer science; (2) increasing the school day to seven hours and the school year from 180 days to 200-220 days; (3) assigning more homework; and (4) basing raises, promotion and tenure for teachers on merit rather than seniority. Arguing that mediocrity cost more than excellence, the commission also recommended that American taxpayers provide "the fiscal support and stability necessary" to generate the urgent reforms.

Twenty years later, the only recommendation the nation embraced with unrelenting gusto was the commission's call for taxpayers to open their wallets. And open them they did. According to the latest data from the U.S. Department of Education, the total per-pupil expenditure in public schools (measured in inflation-adjusted constant 2000-01 dollars) skyrocketed from \$5,715 during the 1982-83 school year to \$8,830 for 2000-01. That represents an increase of 55 percent per student during that 18-year period. The increase in per-pupil spending alone (\$3,115 in inflation-adjusted dollars) from 1983 through 2001 exceeds the entire per-pupil expenditure during the 1962-63 school year.

Unfortunately, any discernible improvement in academic performance since 1983 has in no way matched the massive increase in expenditures.

■ In some cases, such as the average math SAT score, performance has returned to its level of the late 1960s. While that represents improvement over the 1983 math SAT score, it also means that U.S. students perform no better

today than they did 35 years ago. That's hardly a rousing achievement, especially when other evidence suggests that post-1983 improvement in math has been far less than indicated by the SAT. In particular, the performance in 2000 by high school seniors on the math test for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) series of exams, which are known as "the nation's report card," revealed that 83 percent of high school seniors failed to reach the proficient level in math, which is the goal. This, despite data indicating that 75 percent of high school graduates had taken geometry in 1998 (compared to 47 percent in 1982) and 62 percent had taken algebra II in 1998 (compared to 40 percent in 1982).

■ The SAT verbal exam reveals that improvement in reading and comprehension has been virtually non-existent since 1983. The 2002 verbal score of 505 was one solitary point above 1983's 503, which was 40 points below the average verbal score of 543 in 1967. Indeed, the 2002 combined SAT score of 1020 (math and verbal) remains 39 points below the 1967 combined score.

■ NAEP reading scores for fourth graders declined from 215 in 1980 to 212 in 1999. For eighth-graders, they remained the same. For seniors they edged up from 286 to 288. From 1992 to 2000, the percentage of fourth graders reading below basic (the lowest level) declined from an atrocious 38 percent to an equally atrocious 37 percent.

■ On the 2001 NAEP U.S. history test, an astounding 57 percent of seniors scored below the basic level (same as in 1994) and 89 percent scored below proficiency (same as 1994).

All of these unacceptable results occurred while (1) the student-teacher ratio in public schools continued its 30-year decline; (2) the average American high school student reported doing less homework in 1998 (about 55 minutes per day) compared to 1983 (incessant parental complaints notwithstanding); (3) the length of the school year shortened; (4) the percentage of unskilled teachers increased; (5) hours of classroom instruction declined; (6) and, as noted above, per-pupil spending soared.

Despite unprecedented sums of money, the nation's education problems since 1983 remain unsolved. Why one of the world's most rabidly free-market nations refuses to give parents the freedom to choose their preferred education options is a testament to the stranglehold at the hands of the teachers' and other unions. There's probably not much wrong with public education that cannot be solved with a large dose of competition.

↳ Co. th dumb: down testing