

Turmoil in the Public Schools

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THE Greatest Generation was in charge in 1965, and we new graduates could see many ways to improve on how our parents did things. We gradually took over and tried our best to innovate and work smarter. Fifty years later, we Boomers are relinquishing control of society's institutions to Gen X, and hoping they can do better than we did. Education is an important institution for quality of life, shaping the future, and investing the national treasure. This assessment of elementary and secondary public education over the past half century will focus on ten landmark events that had particularly important effects on the course of education policy and practice. Four are acts of Congress, four are publications, one is a new kind of public school, and one is an invention.

1. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) – 1965

As we were recovering from graduation and entering the real world, Congress was busy implementing this piece of the Great Society program. ESEA was a landmark because it vastly increased the amount of federal funding given to public schools to improve their programs. Along with the funds came influence and control. It also established the principle that children from low-income homes required more educational services than children from affluent homes, and supplied funding for new agencies to assist schools in providing these services. The private sector support infrastructure expanded greatly. New terms entered the education lexicon, such as Title I, educationally disadvantaged, and at-risk students. ESEA shaped the future of public schools by tying federal funds to specific policy initiatives (instead of general aid); providing support for extensive development in curriculum, professional development, and testing practices; and beefing up state departments of education, who were charged with administering much of the new funding.

2. *Death at an Early Age* – 1967

Jonathan Kozol reinforced the principle that children from low-income homes needed special services, and were not receiving them, at least not in urban schools. His first book, *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Hearts and Minds of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools*, brought the severity of the problem into the public spotlight. It won the 1967 U.S. National Book Award in Science, Religion, and Philosophy. Kozol reported on the racial segregation, inequality, spirit-killing classroom climate, and

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crumbling schools he experienced as a teacher. As a consequence of his views and teaching practices, he was fired from his position in the Boston Public Schools. But the egregiousness of the classroom problems and their life-altering effects that he reported shifted public opinion and fueled calls for reform.

3. Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL94-142) – 1975

If they were lucky, and not kept at home or worse, children with physical or mental handicaps have always arrived at school with needs beyond those of the “average” child. In recognition of this problem, and as a result of strong public advocacy, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (generally known as 94-142) in 1975. It mandated that to qualify for federal funding, state departments of education had to prepare plans consistent with federal policy and that schools give assurances that they will provide a free and appropriate education for all children with disabilities. New terms and practices arrived on the scene, such as Individualized Educational Plans, mainstreaming handicapped children in classrooms with their non-handicapped peers, least restrictive environment, and adaptive technology. As a result, most children with disabilities now attend their neighborhood schools, and their graduation, employment, and post-secondary enrollment rates have all increased. Perhaps most important, attention to and acceptance of handicapped individuals has improved dramatically. The price in increased educational costs has been significant.

4. *A Nation at Risk* – 1983

Public education took another political turn when the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued *A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. As much as is possible in the education community, this publication was a bomb. It argued that the state of American education was poor and deteriorating, threatening society with a “rising tide of mediocrity.” It cited numerous statistics to demonstrate declines in student performance (e.g., functional illiteracy and SAT scores) and the deterioration of public education’s sense of purpose and classroom practices. More rigorous curricula, better teacher preparation, higher expectations, and more time in the classroom were among the recommendations. While the validity of many of the report’s statistics and conclusions was heavily debated, *A Nation at Risk* unquestionably spurred enormous self-reflection and renewed efforts to improve educational practices. Equally important, the report was used as a political tool; it drove education into the political mainstream. The idea of education as a campaign agenda item originated with Ronald Reagan (who established the Commission), and was also seized upon by George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton as an issue. *A Nation at Risk* carried forward the torch lit by ESEA and *Death at an Early Age*, shaped education policy through the rest of the century, and eventually led to George W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act.

5. *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics* – 1989

New federal funding became available to encourage the development of more rigorous curriculum programs that could be scaled up at many schools. Projects were undertaken in specific content areas, such as science, funded by the National Science Foundation. Devising frameworks and standards for what learning principles and content should be included was a key enabling step. The first of these guidelines was *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics*, produced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) in 1989. It provided a national vision for preschool through 12th grade mathematics instruction. These standards set forth 10 content strands and processes that cut across the curriculum: Number and Operations, Algebra, Geometry, Measurement, Data Analysis and Probability, Problem Solving, Reasoning and Proof, Communication, Connections, and Representation. Specific expectations for student learning were established. Other professional bodies promulgated similar standards in their content areas. If not completely putting everyone on the same page, these efforts at least provided common reference points for discussing what students should know and be tested on. They set the stage for new versions of graduation criteria, textbooks, and school and teacher assessment.

6. Charter Schools – 1992

The first public charter school opened in Minnesota in 1992. School districts authorize the charters as public schools, but the charters operate outside of their district's governance and budget; about three-quarters of the students' state and local funding is transferred from their home school to their charter school. The charter school movement was fueled by public dissatisfaction with neighborhood schools and the desire for more school choice. Charters have some latitude with regulations and are often more flexible with programming. Today there are more than 6,000 charter schools across the country serving more than two million students in 41 states, with some 610,000 more students on waiting lists. One consequence of this movement is that many education reformers who used to be focused on improving traditional public schools have turned their attention to charters instead.

7. Mosaic Internet Interface – 1993

The personal computer arrived on the technology landscape in the mid-1970s and put computing hardware into the hands of the public. But it was the arrival of the Mosaic interface in the early 1990s that made it possible for many more users to connect with the Internet and actually do things like email and Web searching. It was soon followed by other popular interfaces such as Internet Explorer, Google Chrome, and Safari. Eventually, huge networks of computers and countless utilities and applications made possible practical learning developments like online courses, assessments, electronic documents, and anytime-communications among teachers and students, as well as experiences like virtual reality.

8. Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) – 1996

TIMSS collected data from a half-million students attending school in 42 nations at grades 4, 8, and 12 in 1995. The purpose was to compare mathematics and science achievement in these countries. In addition, there were intensive studies of students, teachers, schools, curricula, instruction, and policies to better understand the influence of these factors on the achievement results. Three countries, including the U.S., were selected for in-depth studies comprised of two parts: videotape analysis of mathematics instruction to compare teaching techniques and the quality of instruction and ethnographic studies to shed light on such topics as education standards, working conditions of teachers, and the role of school in adolescents' lives. Repeated at four-year intervals, TIMSS has contributed significantly to the public conversation about education policy and performance by enabling international comparisons, connecting student achievement with instructional practices and other contextual factors. It also added international economic competitiveness to the discussion.

9. No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) – 2001

The foregoing landmark events and their consequences led to the bipartisan passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 (which was the reauthorization of ESEA). NCLB continued the 1965 focus on disadvantaged students and added the requirement of standards-based reform, enshrining the premise that setting high standards and establishing measurable goals can improve education outcomes. States were free to develop their own standards, but had to establish annual performance benchmarks and test students on statewide, standardized tests in order to receive federal school funding. The culminating target is 100 percent of students being proficient (initially set for 2014, but later extended). Penalties were specified for failure to meet the benchmarks, increasing over time, and ending with a school essentially going out of business after six years of failure. NCLB greatly expanded the federal role in education by increasing the funding provided, shifting the focus of testing accountability from the state to federal level, and establishing federal requirements for student and teacher proficiency. A final important aspect of NCLB is that it requires statistical breakouts by student subgroups, such as the economically disadvantaged, disabled, and those

with limited English proficiency. Previously, overall student population averages could mask the sub-par performance of special populations.

10. American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) – 2009

A final shaping influence on education was delivered via the ARRA of 2009, which included a \$4.35 billion competition to spur innovation and reform in schools. Called “Race to the Top,” proposals for funding were solicited from states for implementing performance-based standards for teachers and administrators, complying with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), lifting caps on charter schools, turning around the lowest-performing schools, and building data systems. Over three rounds of funding, only three states did not apply, and 18 states and DC were funded. In the process, 43 states, DC, and several territories adopted the CCSS. Numerous other individual education improvement projects were funded by ARRA, but the main effect was to further ingrain curriculum standards as a way to organize the U.S. education system and test its outcomes.

So, what have these landmark events wrought? Is student learning improved? Are more students enrolled in school and, more importantly, graduating? And at what cost?

Academic Achievement

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) serves as *The Nation's Report Card*, rigorously testing and analyzing student performance in a variety of content areas. From 1971 through 2012 (the most recent data available), NAEP reported that on average 9- and 13-year-old students made significant gains in reading proficiency—on the order of five percent; the scores of 17-year-olds did not show a net improvement. For mathematics, the pattern was similar, but the gains for the two lower age groups were greater—approximately 10 percent. Of course, the students tested each year were different, and there have been significant changes in student demographics over time. In 1978, for example, the assessed students were 80 percent white, 13 percent black, six percent Hispanic, and one percent Asian/Pacific Islander; the comparable percentages for 2012 were 56, 15, 21, and 6. Most of the scoring gaps between race/ethnic groups narrowed over this period. We can conclude that overall student academic achievement has improved, except for 17-year-olds. However, the less advantaged sub-populations consistently underperformed their more advantaged peers, and these groups can be prevalent in a school.

Another revealing picture of student achievement over decades is provided by the TIMSS results. Among the many nations tested in 1995, the U.S. 4th graders scored above average in both mathematics and science; 8th graders scored above average in science but below in mathematics; and 12th graders came in below average in both subjects. By 2011, all U.S. average scores had improved: 4th graders were among the top scorers in both mathematics and science; 8th graders were above average in both; and 12th graders were not included in the study. The highest-scoring countries tended to have national curricula, concise and focused textbooks, intensive instructional techniques, and longer/more school days. The TIMSS findings offer a mixed reflection on the U.S. system—achievement is improving over time, but many countries consistently exceed our performance levels, and the factors that contribute to success are often not prevalent in U.S. schools.

Enrollment and Graduation

From 1970 to 2014, public school enrollment increased a net of 1.5 million students, from 43.3 to 44.8 million, with many up and down trends over the years. Non-public school enrollment declined 1.3 million students, from 5.2 to 3.9 million over the same period. Charter school enrollment increased from 300 thousand to 1.6 million students in the decade from 2000 to 2010. Average public school graduation rates have increased somewhat from 78 percent to 80 percent. So, school enrollment is not increasing as much as the U.S. population, non-public schools are being stressed, and charter schools are in expansion mode.

Too many students are not graduating, and a disproportionate number of them are in lower income environments. Meanwhile, higher education enrollment increased dramatically from 5.9 to 21.4 million over the years 1965 to 2011; about half of these students graduate.

Education Costs

The cost of public schools rose from approximately \$4,000 per pupil in 1965 to \$13,000 in 2012 in inflation-adjusted dollars, for a total annual current expense of more than \$600 billion. Higher salaries and benefits, special education needs, higher energy costs, and lower student-teacher ratios account for much of this dramatic rise. Comparable per pupil expenditures currently average \$8,000 for charter schools and \$6,400 for cyber charters. Public education is a major expense; it is growing; and it is more expensive in traditional schools.

Outlook for the Future

Given the developments in education over the last 50 years, these outcomes, and the zeitgeist of the time, what can we expect in the future?

Some of America's schools still fail to perform well for their students and communities. These schools are usually located in lower income areas. Persistent underperformance has fueled the call for more charter schools that follow less traditional models of school organization, conduct, and governance. Non-traditional formats for educating students have also been stimulated by the easy availability of various computer technologies; public schools have been slower than other sectors to take advantage of this resource. Trending public policy and economic pressures will force non-competitive schools and districts out of business and a reshaping of the education enterprise. This will happen sooner rather than later; the one certainty for the future is that it will bring more change.

In addition, many educators and much of the public are skeptical about the role of standardized testing today. They are unconvinced that the way we measure student performance is valid or worth the instructional time it supplants in the school schedule. It is not diagnostic of learning problems, instructive to students, or the best measure of what is needed for quality of life. The future will bring assessment techniques that are more diagnostic, naturalistic, and congruent with instructional activities..

There will be a Princeton Class of 2065. As they graduate, with the strains of *Old Nassau* still echoing in their ears, and having witnessed the conferring of honorary degrees on Justin Bieber (age 71) and Taylor Swift (age 76), the young men and women of the class will be imagining how better things will be after they take control of society's institutions. And they will be right.