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# Minority Children at Risk

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**A** *Nation at Risk* played the national security card. Just as a nuclear exchange with the Soviet Union would devastate all Americans, so, it argued, would ignorance. Just as no American could be safe against nuclear war unless all Americans were safe, so could no American be protected from the consequences of a bad school system. Bomb shelters and privileged educational enclaves were shortsighted solutions, from which the privileged would emerge only to face the tribulations of a devastated society.

The national security analogy worked, in that K–12 education became a national issue, and Americans became convinced that general improvements, not just islands of excellence, were necessary. But like all metaphors this one was imperfect. When it came to solutions, *A Nation at Risk* drew uniform prescriptions analogous to national security strategies. Like strategic missile defenses that protect everyone, *A Nation at Risk* prescribed educational standards and investments that would lift up everyone.

The benefits of *A Nation at Risk*'s prescriptions were not uniform, however, or indivisible because they overlooked the distinctive problems of poor and minority students, especially in the big cities. The remedies the report suggested, more exacting course requirements and higher graduation standards, though not always bad for these groups, were nonetheless grossly insufficient for them. Subsequent sections of this chapter will show that

- *A Nation at Risk*'s prescriptions for reform ignored the special problems of poor and minority children in big cities.
- These children have benefited little if at all from the reform initiatives stimulated by *A Nation at Risk* and are still desperately behind national averages.
- To transform the educational opportunities of poor and minority children, very different reforms are necessary.

### ***A Nation at Risk* Ignored the Special Problems of Urban Poor Children**

*A Nation at Risk* prescribed remedies that made sense for students whose basic preparation for school was sound and for school systems that had the capacity to respond to pressure by offering more rigorous courses. But raised expectations alone are not good remedies for the problems of children who enter any level of schooling unprepared to do the work normally expected. Similarly, requirements that schools teach more challenging materials and move students to higher levels of mastery are not sufficient remedies for schools that cannot provide competent instruction. Nor is the prescription to increase entry requirements for teaching necessarily helpful to schools and districts that are the least attractive employers and generally recruit from the very bottom of the labor pool.

Here we abandon the national security metaphor for a nautical one. A rising tide might lift all boats, but if the tide rises only slightly,

those boats that are thoroughly stuck on sandbars might still not float. As this essay will show, though poor and minority students might have gained slightly since the days of *A Nation at Risk*, their educational performance remains low, low enough to keep millions out of good jobs and higher education.

Although these disadvantaged and minority students were numerous when *A Nation at Risk* was written, their numbers have only continued to grow. Hispanic students are the fastest-growing population among K–12 school-age children. In 1983, Hispanics made up 9 percent of K–12 public school students, compared with 16 percent in 1999.<sup>1</sup> For black students, the population increase was minor, going from 16 percent in 1983 to 17 percent in 1999. But these minority students are becoming increasingly concentrated in urban school districts. During the 1990–1991 school year, of the fifty-seven districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools, forty reported majority-minority student populations. By the 1997–1998 school year, that number had risen to forty-six districts.

Being a member of a minority group nearly doubles the probability that a student will be educated in urban schools. Black and Hispanic students are more than twice as likely as white students to attend central city schools. White students are disproportionately educated in suburbs and rural areas. Another way to understand the concentration of minority students in big cities is this: Though there are 15,000 school districts in the United States, ten big districts educate 19 percent of all black children, and six educate 21 percent of all Hispanic students.<sup>2</sup>

Not only are minority students disproportionately concentrated in urban school districts, students in these urban districts are likely to be poor and to attend school with others who are poor. According to *Education Week*, 53 percent of students in urban districts attend high poverty schools, compared with 22 percent of students in nonurban districts.<sup>3</sup>

The remainder of this chapter provides the best evidence available

on post-*A Nation at Risk* trends in performance of urban minority students. Because the best sources—nationwide and state tests—are not always designed to track results by both student ethnicity and locality, some of the data presented represent minority students nationwide, and some represent students from urban areas. Taken together, these diverse sources of information illustrate the point that students who are both minority *and* in big cities are the ones who have benefited least from *A Nation at Risk* reforms.

### Minority Students Are Less Ready for School

Preschool preparation is a class phenomenon in America. Middle-class children, disproportionately white, come to school knowing letters and colors, understand that people record ideas on paper and learn by reading, and expect to learn via a combination of listening and doing. Poor and lower-working-class children, of whatever race, are far less likely to know these things.<sup>4</sup> Studies of learning in kindergarten show that black and Hispanic children are able to close the gap in basic reading and math skills, but they acquire advanced communication and reasoning skills more slowly than their white counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

A longitudinal study of early childhood found that white children were likely to enter kindergarten with higher proficiency in reading, mathematics, and general knowledge than black or Hispanic children.<sup>6</sup> Table 1, taken from this work, illustrates the difference in kindergarten reading performance. Scores in mathematics and general knowledge followed similar patterns.

### Poor Minority Students Learn at a Slower Rate

Schools are engineered for students who are motivated and who can concentrate on learning. The correlates of poverty, including family turbulence and lack of consistent support for study, put poor and minority students at a disadvantage throughout their school careers.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1. Distribution of first-time kindergarteners' reading scores**

	Lowest Quartile (0–25)	2nd Quartile (26–50)	3rd Quartile (51–75)	Highest Quartile (76–100)
Black	34%	30%	21%	15%
Hispanic	42%	24%	19%	15%
White	18%	24%	28%	30%

Note: Estimates based on first-time kindergarteners who were assessed in English (approximately 30% of Hispanic children were not assessed because testers assumed they could not understand English).

In a 1998 study, it was found that for children entering school with similar test scores and socioeconomic backgrounds, black children learn less than white children by the time they graduate from high school.<sup>8</sup> Important to note is that children in this comparison were attending the same schools.

Most of *A Nation at Risk's* prescriptions concerning standards of instruction and graduation requirements focused on the secondary level, by which time many students are already too far behind to catch up. Many minority and low-income students are not able to benefit from more demanding high school courses because they lack skills normally taught in the upper-elementary grades—such as reasoning by analogy and converting fractions, decimals, percentages, and rates—that allow them to take normal secondary school courses. In the 1999–2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 5 percent of black, 10 percent of Hispanic, and 34 percent of white fourth-graders scored at the *proficient* level or above in mathematics.<sup>9</sup> Forty percent of white fourth-graders scored at *proficient* or above in reading, compared with 12 percent of black and 16 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders.

A 2001 study shows that passing normal secondary school courses matters.<sup>10</sup> Minority students who graduate from high school with high academic skills are equally as likely as white students with high academic skills to attend college. In addition, the college graduation rate

of black, Hispanic, and white students with the same tenth-grade academic skills are very similar. Unfortunately, black and Hispanic students, on average, have significantly lower tenth-grade academic skills.

### **Poor and Minority Children Remain Desperately Behind**

Though some poor and minority students are doing better than at the time of *A Nation at Risk*, most are still as far behind as ever on criteria such as tested skills, high school graduation rate, college enrollment and completion rates, and readiness for the labor market. In this section, we will show that minority students' test scores have increased marginally, if at all, since *A Nation at Risk*. The gaps between minority and white achievement are as great now as then. Moreover, gaps in "authentic" indicators such as high school completion and college entry rates continue to be very large.

#### **Persistent Gaps in National Test Scores**

In a preceding chapter, Paul Peterson showed that national average scores on the NAEP had risen only slightly. Here, we compare the scores of white, black, and Hispanic children on the same test. Trends in NAEP reading and math scores show no consistent change in the achievement gap between black and Hispanic students and their white peers. For example, as figure 1 shows, the reading gap between white and black students was 0.73 standard deviation units in 1984: Twenty-four years later, in 1998, the gap was the same. The gap has both narrowed and widened over time, attesting to the reality of measurement error and differences among age cohorts, but currently it remains right where it was in 1984. Close reading of figure 1 will show that the achievement gap did narrow in the years immediately pre-

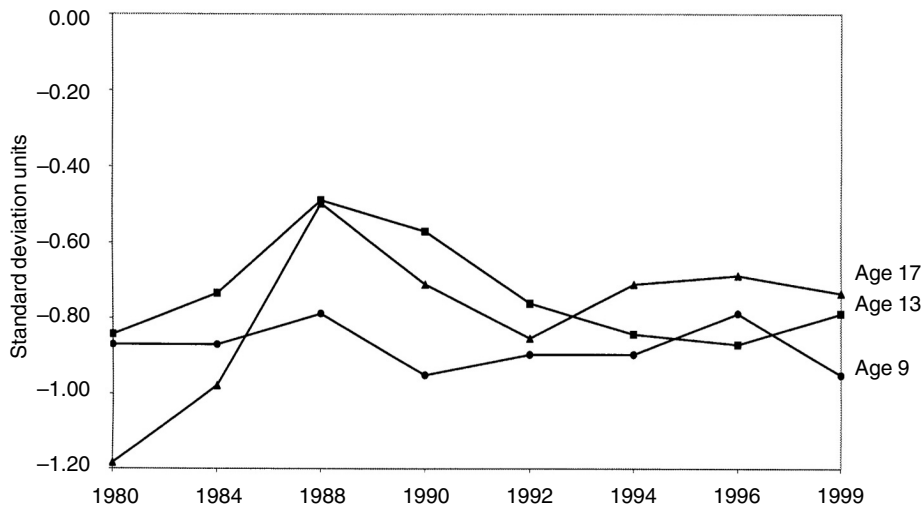


Fig 1. Gap in black-white NAEP reading scores, 1980–1999

ceding publication of *A Nation at Risk*, but that it has not narrowed since.

Figures 1 through 4 show that these generalizations hold for the gaps between white and black and white and Hispanic students, for most age groups and in both reading and mathematics. As of 1999, some relative gains are evident, notably for black and Hispanic seventeen-year-olds in reading. Whether these small gains will be sustained is difficult to predict. One might hope to predict gains by following particular age cohorts, reasoning that if scores for nine-year-olds in one testing rose, scores for thirteen-year-olds would rise four years later. However, scores on successive tests of particular cohorts appear to vary at random.

Similar patterns—small and inconsistent gains, with no significant narrowing of the gap between poor and minority students—are also evident in norm-referenced tests administered by states and city school systems. Disadvantaged students in California are much less likely than well-off students to score at national norms (24 percent

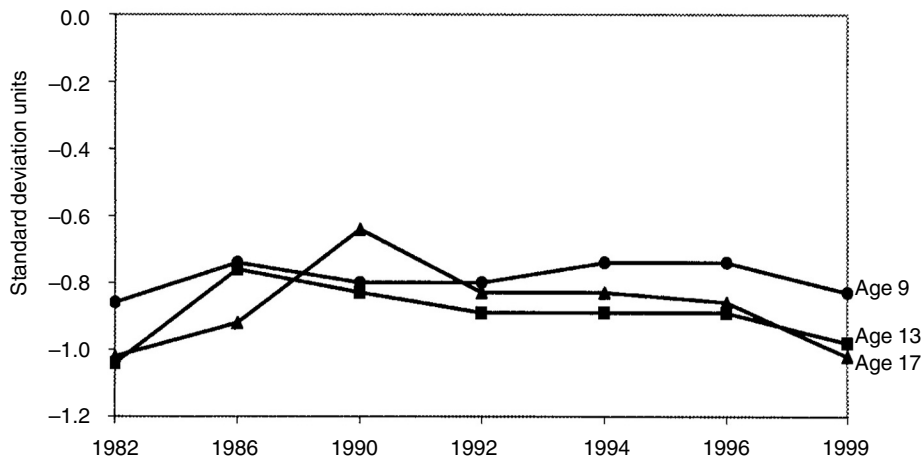


Fig. 2. Gap in black-white NAEP math scores, 1982–1999

versus 70 percent in fourth-grade reading). And a comparison of minority and majority students, not controlling for socioeconomic status, yielded similar results, 23 percent versus 63 percent.<sup>11</sup>

### Gaps in State Standards-Based Tests

Critics of conventional norm-referenced tests hoped that state-specific standards-based tests would be more closely tied to school curriculum and therefore be less biased against children who have fewer opportunities for out-of-school learning. However, state standards-based testing reveals the same large gaps as do NAEP and other more conventional tests.

Statewide standards-based testing programs did not exist when *A Nation at Risk* was published, so there are no trend data from 1983. But current results show huge gaps between poor minority children and others. We focus on results from two states, Massachusetts and Washington, the first because detailed results are available in published form and the second because we have access to data that sup-



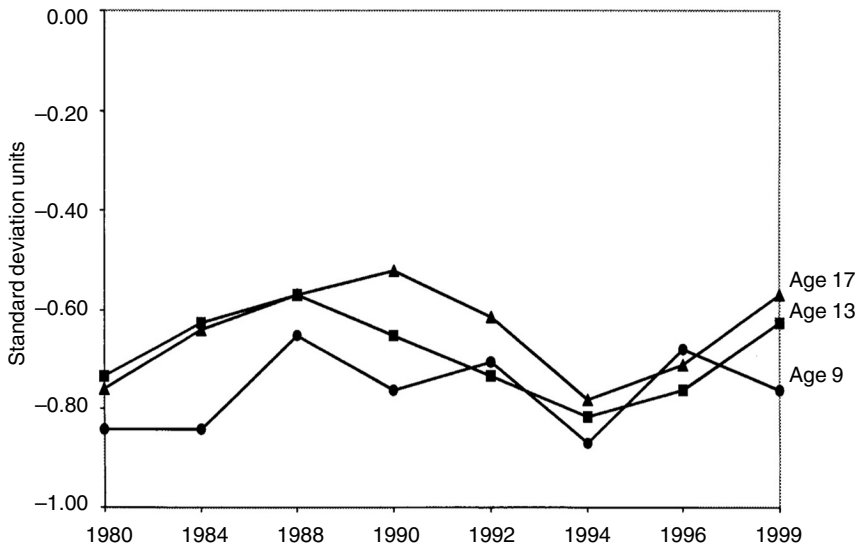


Fig. 3. Gap in Hispanic-white NAEP reading scores, 1980–1999

ports a unique form of analysis (reported below). Results from other states are likely to be similar.

Though each state designs its own tests, differences in composition do not lead to diverse results. White scores are uniformly higher; on most subjects and at most grade levels white and Asian students are roughly twice as likely as black and Hispanic students to meet standards. The pattern evident in national tests such as the SAT is evident in most states' standards-based tests: Average scores for white and minority students are between half and three-quarters of a standard deviation apart.

#### *Massachusetts Results*

As is typically the case in state standards-based tests, black fourth-graders taking the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) are twice as likely as white students to have a failing score in reading and three times as likely to have a failing score in mathematics.

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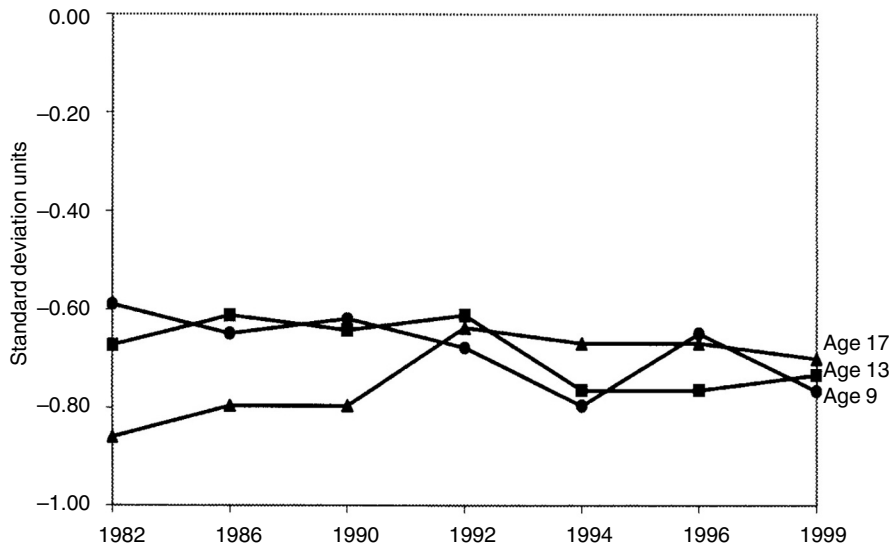


Fig. 4. Gap in Hispanic-white NAEP mathematics scores, 1982–1999

Tables 2 and 3 show the distribution of fourth-grade scores by students' race or ethnicity.<sup>12</sup>

Whether these score differences are important depends on the quality of the test and the true performance gap between categories such as those in tables 2 and 3—advanced, proficient, needs improvement, and failing. Tests like the MCAS have been given for only a few years, so it is impossible to say for sure whether assignment to different score categories leads to differences in outcomes such as high school completion, college attendance, or access to gainful employment. Moreover, every state creates its own categories, and some might be more predictive than others.

#### *Washington Results*

We conducted our own analysis of results from the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL). These results suggest that gaps between white and minority performance on state tests might be even more significant than the bland category names might suggest.

**Table 2. 2001 MCAS fourth-grade reading test:  
Percentage of students at each performance level**

	<i>Advanced</i>	<i>Proficient</i>	<i>Needs improvement</i>	<i>Warning/failing</i>
Black	1%	23%	52%	24%
Hispanic	1%	18%	50%	31%
White	5%	38%	45%	12%

As in other states, WASL results show that white students are twice as likely as black students to meet state standards in reading and slightly more than twice as likely to meet standards in mathematics.

As table 4 shows, the black-white test score gap ranges from one-half to a full standard deviation across grade levels in both math and reading. However, the gap is largest for students in urban schools.

Close analysis using relative distribution methods shows that even these clear disparities mask even more severe differences. For all grade levels and in both reading and math, black and Hispanic scores fall into the lowest ranges of white scores, and the concentration of minority scores in the lowest ranges of the distribution is significantly worse for minority students in urban schools.

Figure 5 shows the distribution of seventh-grade black, Hispanic, and white math and reading scores in urban schools in Washington. The straight line at 10 percent indicates that 10 percent of the white scores fall into each of the reference deciles. In contrast, more than 30 percent of black and Hispanic students in urban schools receive scores earned by only 10 percent of white students. Another 20 percent or more of minority students fall into the second-lowest 10 percent of white scores, so that half or more of minority students in urban schools in Washington receive math and reading scores that the lowest 20 percent of white students receive. Another way of saying all of this is that although the proportion of black and Hispanic students who fail to meet standards is only twice that of whites, the proportion of black

**Table 3. 2001 MCAS fourth-grade math test:  
Percentage of students at each performance level**

	<i>Advanced</i>	<i>Proficient</i>	<i>Needs improvement</i>	<i>Warning/failing</i>
Black	1%	9%	50%	40%
Hispanic	2%	9%	45%	44%
White	13%	29%	46%	12%

and Hispanic students whose scores are in the lowest 10 percent is more than three times as great as for whites.

These results are especially significant because the bottom decile can include many extremely low scores: Students who answered many questions correctly (albeit far fewer than most children of their age) can fall into the bottom decile, along with students who could answer few or no items correctly. Thus, the gap in performance between a student who scored in the 1st percentile and one who scores in the 11th percentile can be far larger than the gap between students at the 11th and 21st percentiles. Based on the Washington analysis, there is reason to fear that simple comparisons of average scores for whites and minorities mask a troubling fact—that a third or more of minority students in urban schools perform at extremely low levels.

Among black students, those attending school in city districts are far more likely to cluster at the bottom of the distribution. This is true at all grade levels and for both math and reading. Figure 6 illustrates this pattern for seventh-graders taking the WASL. Although one-third of black seventh-graders in urban schools fall into the bottom 10 percent of white math scores, only 26 percent of black seventh-graders in nonurban schools do the same. More than 54 percent of black urban students fall into the bottom two deciles of the white scores, while the percentage of black nonurban students in these lowest deciles is 46 percent.

Another way of looking at the deficits in achievement that face minority students, particularly in urban schools, is displayed in figure

**Table 4. The black-white achievement gap in Washington**

	4TH-GRADERS		7TH-GRADERS		10TH-GRADERS	
	<i>Math</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Math</i>	<i>Reading</i>
Urban schools	0.75	0.63	0.86	0.73	0.95	0.85
All nonurban schools	0.62	0.53	0.66	0.55	0.74	0.59
Urban fringe	0.70	0.59	0.72	0.59	0.80	0.63
Town	0.40	0.29	0.56	0.55	0.84	0.65
Rural	0.42	0.36	0.46	0.31	0.60	0.48

Note: These figures represent the gap measured in standard deviations.

7. Here the changes in scale scores for seventh-graders from the first year of testing are compared for white, black, and Hispanic students. In general, improvements in math were proportionally greater than improvements in reading for all racial groups, but the rate of improvement needed to close the gap over the four-year period is at least three times greater than what was experienced.

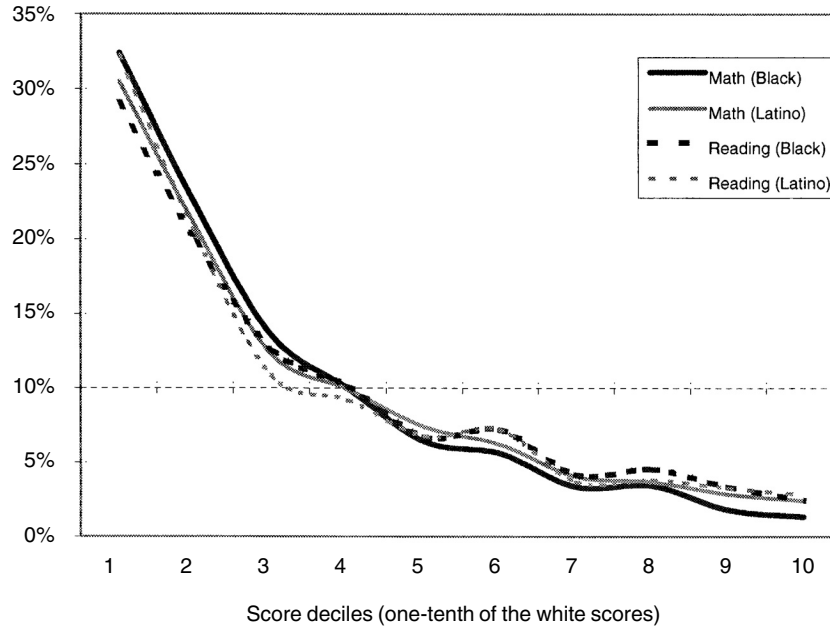
Minority students in Washington have improved their average performance, but not at rates that would close the gap in the foreseeable future under present practices.

### Real Outcomes

Aside from test scores, we tried to assess three other indicators that have profound implications for children's futures: the school dropout rate, the high school graduation rate, and the college enrollment rate. Compared with test scores obtained in a particular school year, each of these indicators is affected by many factors not controlled by school officials and more closely linked to a young person's ultimate ability to find productive and well-paid work.<sup>13</sup>

### Dropout Rates

Students are less likely to abandon school definitively now than in 1983. Nationwide, dropout rates for white students have decreased



**Fig. 5. Relative density of black and Hispanic versus white math and reading scores, urban schools (combined 7th-grade WASL, 1998–2001)**

Note: In Washington, black and Hispanic students cluster in the bottom deciles of white scores.

from 11 percent to 7 percent, and for blacks, from 18 percent to 13 percent.<sup>14</sup> In 2000, the dropout rates for first- and second-generation Hispanic youth were only slightly higher than for blacks (15 percent and 16 percent respectively), but foreign-born Hispanic students dropped out at rate of 44 percent.<sup>15</sup>

The national averages, however, do not reflect the reality in large, predominately minority, urban school districts. In seventy-four urban districts studies by *Education Week*, less than 50 percent of the freshmen entering high school in 1990 graduated four years later.<sup>16</sup> A 2001 study found that more than 40 percent of all students in the Chicago public schools drop out by age 19.<sup>17</sup>

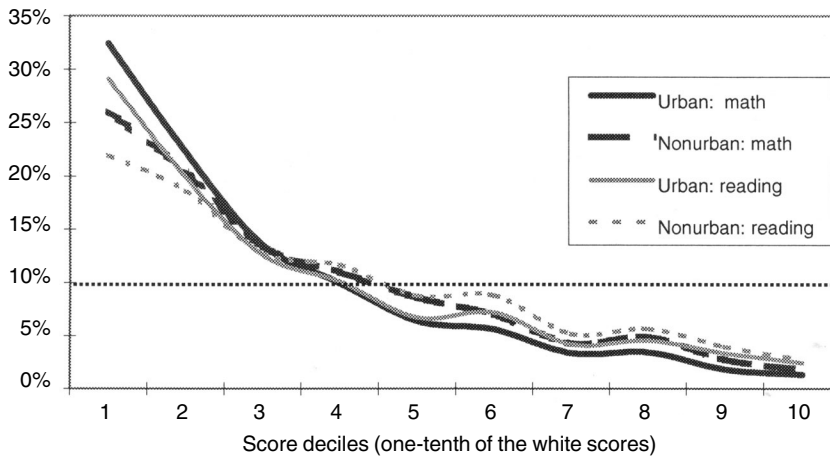


Fig. 6. Black urban students are clustered in the lowest deciles

Reforms arising out of *A Nation at Risk* were intended to decrease student academic failure, but in situations where standards are raised but instruction is not improved, they might, in fact, increase the dropout rate. Russell Rumberger suggests that some high schools might “push out” students expected to get low test scores.<sup>18</sup> Melissa Roderick and Eric Cambron have also shown that students drop out owing to fear of being unable to complete all required credits.<sup>19</sup> They suggest that large, impersonal high schools and poor elementary and middle school preparation lead to early failure in key courses and hence to dropping out.<sup>20</sup>

### High School Graduation

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 77 percent of blacks aged eighteen to twenty-four completed high school in 1983. By 2000, that number had risen to 84 percent. For whites, the numbers were 87 percent and 92 percent respectively. For Hispanics, the number rose from 59 percent in 1983 to 64 percent in 2000.<sup>21</sup> (See chapter 2 by Paul Peterson for a more detailed discussion of overall graduation rates and how they are calculated.)

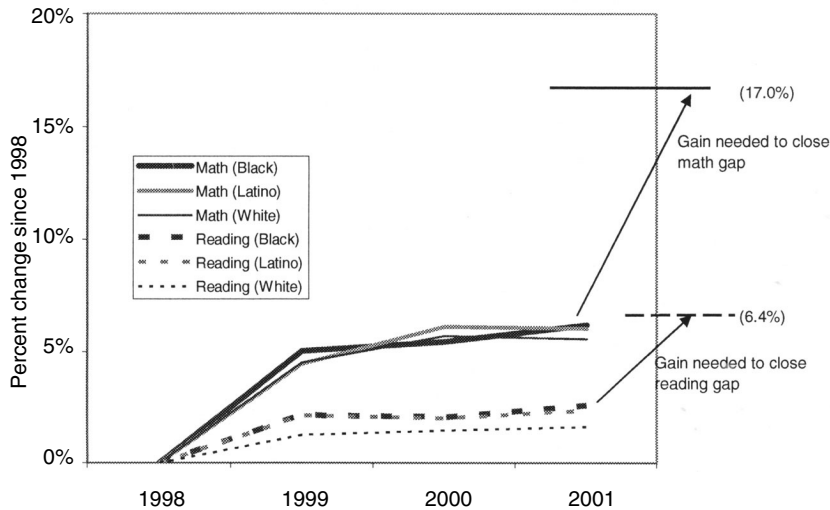


Fig. 7. Seventh-grade math vs. reading scores from 1998–2001

These figures are positive, but there is reason to question whether they represent educational progress or favorable methods of calculation. Many school districts calculate graduation rates based on a denominator that includes only students with whom they maintained contact through all four years of high school. The NCES counts as a high school graduate anyone eighteen to twenty-four years old who obtained a high school diploma or a General Educational Development certificate (GED).

In a recent study, J. P. Greene found that the national graduation rate for the class of 1998 was only 71 percent.<sup>22</sup> White students graduated at a rate of 78 percent, while the rates for black and Hispanic students were 56 percent and 54 percent, respectively.

Greene compared the number of eighth-grade students enrolled in the fall of 1993 with the number of high school diplomas awarded in the spring of 1998. Adjustments were made for varying enrollment numbers and student population increases during that period. GEDs were not included because of the overwhelming evidence that a GED



is inferior to a high school diploma as a ticket to later earnings and higher education.<sup>23</sup>

According to Greene, seven states graduated less than 50 percent of their black students, while eight states graduated less than 50 percent of their Hispanic students. Among the nation's fifty largest school districts, sixteen districts have a graduation rate for their black students at or below 50 percent, with three districts graduating less than 40 percent (Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Memphis). Milwaukee graduates 34 percent of black students and 42 percent of Hispanic students, compared with 73 percent of its white students. For Hispanic students, only fifteen of the fifty largest school districts have a graduation rate above 50 percent, with six districts having a rate below 40 percent. Conversely, only five of the fifty largest school districts fail to graduate more than 50 percent of their white students.

#### *College Enrollment and Completion*

Minority students who successfully navigate their way through high school face additional challenges in entering and completing higher education. From 1983 to the present, the college attendance rate for blacks has remained constant, about 84 percent of the rate for whites. Between 1975 and 1998, the black-white gap in the four-year-college completion rate of twenty-five- to twenty-nine-year-olds with a high school diploma increased slightly, from about 13 percent to about 17 percent.<sup>24</sup> Similar to the increase in the dropout rate, this decline in the educational fortunes of poor and minority students could well be linked to initiatives inspired by *A Nation at Risk*—in this case, changes in university admission requirements that provide an edge to students who take advanced placement courses, which are offered less frequently in high schools serving minority students.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, those minority students who reach college often lack the academic preparation necessary to succeed in university-level courses. For first- or second-year undergraduate students in 1999–2000, 46 percent of blacks and 45 percent of Hispanics reported having

taken at least one remedial course, compared with 32 percent of their white counterparts.<sup>26</sup> The quality of black students' high school preparation matters: For black students whose prior educational achievement was similar to whites, their college attendance rate equaled or exceeded that of white students across all years.

Well-prepared minority students are sought by colleges, and they do well, both in college and later. In their study on high school math curriculum, Heather Rose and Julian Betts found that minority students who take advanced math courses in high school obtain higher levels of education and earn significantly higher incomes than students who completed lower-level high school courses.<sup>27</sup> However, on average, black and Hispanic students are less likely than their white and Asian counterparts to take advanced math courses. This is owing in part to the low availability of such courses in the high schools minority students attend—and, in turn, to the low level of mathematics instruction in elementary and middle schools serving minority students.<sup>28</sup>

### **Why *A Nation at Risk* Reforms Missed the Point for Urban Poor Children**

It is plausible to expect that tougher standards, more time for instruction, better teachers, and more accountability for leaders are all good for students and schools. But, in education at least, plausibility is a weak guide to action. Courses of action that sound reasonable can be ineffective because they ignore confounding factors. Thus, as the newspapers constantly document, outcome measurement and consequences for performance, plausible in themselves, can lead some schools to cheat on testing and some students to give up.

These facts do not argue against higher standards. Students need to know what the broader society expects, and they need to learn this while in school, not later when they try to get advanced training or find a good job. However, in places where schools lack capacity or are

held firmly in place by arrangements made to protect adults, raised expectations alone do not lead to improved student performance.

The most important questions lie between the poles in the dispute about raised expectations: What is required to make higher standards influential in schools that have never met the lower standards, and what will it take to significantly improve academic performance for the most disadvantaged children?

The initiatives derived from *A Nation at Risk* did not answer these questions. They assumed that pressure would stimulate educators to work harder and to focus on skills instruction, leading to achievement gains. These assumptions ignored some critical facts about big-city public school districts, such as the following:

- Local school boards are political bodies pursuing many agendas, of which educational effectiveness is only one, and they are insulated from the performance pressures targeted at schools.
- School districts allow money and other resources to follow political influence, so that poor students end up receiving the least and worst of what is available.
- Teachers with experience, superior preparation, or other attributes that make them attractive to the “nicer” schools within a district can avoid working in schools that teach the most disadvantaged children.

Faced with the ineffectiveness of raised expectations in these cases, some disciples of *A Nation at Risk* have proposed additional measures, including sanctions against school districts in which the same schools fail year after year. The Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind program, enacted in early 2002, threatens the withdrawal of federal funds unless districts improve failing schools or offer children in those schools choices, including the option to attend privately run schools. Opposition to No Child Left Behind is driven in part by

fear that school districts cannot comply: They are frozen by local politics, state regulations, and union contracts.

Clearly, in our existing public education system, raised expectations are not sufficient to drive universal improvement. High expectations are necessary, as long as they reflect what children really need to know, not a utopian vision of what every child in a perfect world would know.<sup>29</sup> But the expectations need to be coupled with fundamental changes in the education system such as those described below.

### An Open Entrepreneurial System

A common observation among social service workers and foundation heads is that big-city public school systems are the toughest and least malleable bureaucracies they deal with. Moreover, public education has little capacity to invest in new ideas. The vast preponderance of money in K–12 schools goes for salaries, and certification rules and union contract provisions control employment. Even when government increases education spending, unions make sure that most of it is used for salary increases. Though there are substantial amounts of funds for teacher in-service training, the money is separated into small pots controlled by different federal and state programs. When there are new investments—for example, California’s recent major spending increase to reduce elementary school class size—they are targeted via political entrepreneurship and bargaining, not via competition over what works.

These facts make it difficult for new ideas and new people to penetrate public education. Public schools allow small-scale innovation by individual teachers, but these are usually limited to one classroom or school, leading to complaints among educators concerning the futility of random acts of innovation and the impossibility of scaling up good ideas. There is no mechanism for a promising idea to capture a wider market, and no incentive for other teachers or schools to adopt a promising idea.

Being an unfriendly environment for entrepreneurship hurts public education in two ways: First, it is not oriented to a continual search for better ways of serving students; second, it can seldom take full advantage of ideas and resources available in the broader society.

With respect to a search for better ways of providing instruction, big-city school systems are constrained by rules and individual ownership of jobs. Districts can do anything that their funders and regulators (including courts with which they have consent decrees) will permit. Unfortunately, in practice, the aggregate effect of these constraints is to make any action outside the status quo risky. Almost any reallocation of time, money, teachers, or students is likely to generate objections.<sup>30</sup> Teacher union contracts in most cities also prevent schools from choosing teachers and assume that a good “fit” does not matter: teachers are interchangeable and schools are created only by assembling standard parts. This attitude ignores the reality that schools with inferior or mismatched parts, such as less capable teachers, will likely produce inferior products (that is, low-achieving students).

With respect to use of ideas available in the broader society, public school systems limit the use of civic resources in the schools. Our cities are treasure houses filled with human talent and great institutions—museums, universities, orchestras, religious institutions, and foundations, all of them dedicated to learning. Unfortunately, the way we now run public education has kept these institutions on the sidelines. They can give money and moral support, but they cannot create or operate public schools, nor can their musicians, scientists, writers, and artists teach students, except before and after school hours or as volunteers.

This combination of inflexibility and distance from the rest of society gives many cities a much weaker and less effective public education system than they could have. Often, even school superintendents, generally cast as defenders of the systems they run, are candid about their school systems’ inability to meet the needs of the

most disadvantaged children. In interviews conducted by Paul Hill, big-city superintendents consistently say that making schools effective for poor minority children will require reallocating money and personnel.<sup>31</sup> They dreamed of creating all-literacy primary schools, reading-focused preschools for poor children only, ungraded primary schools to eliminate the stigma of children being held back, back-to-basics and charter schools, longer school years for disadvantaged students, and even boarding schools for children in abusive or dangerous homes. Rather than relying on learning goals or professional development—stock solutions that do not perturb the current system—these superintendents talked tough about reading, longer school days, and giving the most at-risk kids extra time. For them, control of money is the core issue: “You need to be able to change how every dollar is spent,” said one. “You have to try to get hold of the central office. This requires getting hold of the money it now controls.”

### **Making Sure Poor Children Get the Benefit of Public Expenditures**

The high negative correlation between poverty and student achievement is well-known. Less well-known is that the schools serving the poor get less money, even within districts. In a pathbreaking analysis of real-dollar funding levels in a sample of big-city districts, Marguerite Roza and Karen Hawley Miles found that per-pupil funding in schools can vary by as much as a factor of three and that elementary schools in low-income areas receive between 10 percent and 30 percent fewer dollars per pupil than higher-income schools in the same districts.<sup>32</sup> These differences are offset slightly by funds from state and federal programs targeted to the poor, but at best these funds equalize spending rather than, as advertised, support higher per-pupil spending for children considered the most difficult to educate.

### Quality Teachers in Low-Income Schools

In cities, the schools serving low-income black and Hispanic children also employ the least experienced teachers and experience the highest rate of teacher turnover.<sup>33</sup> Under union contracts, teachers with even one or two years' experience have some say over where they teach, and the vast majority of teachers with any choice avoid the most challenging schools. As Marguerite Roza has found in several large school districts in the West, schools in wealthier neighborhoods may receive more than a hundred applications for a teacher vacancy while schools in poor neighborhoods might receive only two or three. For schools serving the poorest children, this means three things: They have almost no choice of whom they employ; they always employ green teachers and those who have no alternative; and they open every fall with a group of teachers who have never worked together.

Union leaders argue that teacher performance is not correlated with pay, and they are right, at least in big cities. Because teachers are tenured and promoted automatically, raises come to anyone whose performance is not grossly deficient. Schools are prevented from paying more for the best teachers and less for poorly prepared teachers and individuals who have not proven themselves. Schools pay the same high salaries for experienced teachers who are "stars" as for those who have burned out, and cannot pay more for brilliant young teachers than for marginal ones. Thus, the consistent finding of no correlation between teacher salaries and productivity could be an artifact of the rules under which teachers are now paid and assigned to schools.

If there were a true teacher labor market, in which teachers were paid on the basis of their reputations for productivity, would there be a correlation between pay and performance? One way to explore this question is to take advantage of one marketlike feature of the teacher allocation process, the fact that teachers with even a little seniority can choose which school vacancies to apply for. Because highly paid

senior teachers claim vacancies in the schools that are considered to have the best working environments, other schools are forced to hire mainly younger and lower-paid teachers. As a result, there is significant within-district variation in schools' average teacher salaries.

As Marguerite Roza has argued, schoolwide average teacher salaries might be correlated with performance even if individual teacher salaries are not. In preparation for this essay, Robin Lake and Kacey Guin made a preliminary test of this hypothesis on data from Seattle. Even controlling for students' socioeconomic status, they found a positive correlation between schoolwide average salary and student test scores. For every dollar increase in average teacher salary, the percentage of students reaching "standard" increased by 0.0014 percent.<sup>34</sup> This means that for every \$5,000 increase in schoolwide average teacher salary, the percentage of students reaching standard would increase by 7 percent.

Though *A Nation at Risk* prescribed more rigorous teacher training and licensing, it said nothing about changing the distribution of teachers, to reverse the pattern of more demanding schools' having the weakest teaching forces. In fact, as states have raised their teacher certification standards, the concentration of poorly prepared teachers in high-poverty schools has grown. This is not because there is an absolute shortage of teachers: the numbers of experienced, certified teachers of working age who are not teaching far exceeds the number of unqualified teachers high-poverty schools employ. It is because qualified teachers have other alternatives—nicer schools, central offices, lines of work other than teaching, and early retirement.

The consequences for the education of the poorest children are dire. Their schools experience the highest rate of teacher turnover, ensuring that whatever teachers learn on the job will move elsewhere with them. Schools that consistently lose in the market for experienced teachers often have annual teacher turnover rates above 50 percent. Such schools are turbulent and difficult to lead. They are also impenetrable for parents, who cannot build stable and mutually confident



working relationships with teachers and principals. *A Nation at Risk's* preoccupation with credentialing and licensing of teachers does not touch this problem. In the absence of financial incentives to attract teachers and without freedom from regulation to allow improvements in working conditions, the poorest schools will always get the teachers with the fewest options and lose those teachers as soon as they gain seniority.

### Conclusion

Raised expectations have their place, but they are not enough for the poorest children in the poorest schools. *A Nation at Risk* did not perturb the system of constraints and incentives that lead big-city school districts to tolerate disastrously low-performing schools. Schools that are well staffed and enjoy the support of parents and local school officials can adapt to performance pressure. But schools that get the worst of everything and are frozen in place by rules and contract provisions cannot transform themselves. State and local superintendents and board members know this: that is why they think it is unfair to demand more of the schools serving the most disadvantaged children.

There might be some slackers in public education, but lack of effort is not the greatest barrier to improvement of urban schools. False certainty—the belief that a school board or the educational bureaucracy can mandate the best methods of instruction and the most effective uses of time and money—is the greatest barrier.

Schools and school districts need to become problem-solving organizations whose job is to find the best possible way to educate the children entrusted to them. Schools need to have the entrepreneurial freedom to find the best combination of people and technologies for the children they serve. Parents and taxpayers need to know exactly how individual schools and districts are performing, and they need to have the power to move children from stagnant schools to better ones.

Low-performing schools need investments in order to attract excellent people and to replace ineffective methods with effective ones. Finally, teachers and administrators need to join other Americans, gaining benefits—pay and job security—from good performance and putting those benefits at risk when performance is lacking.

High expectations are necessary, and fine as far as they go. But in the absence of accountability, choice, and transparency, high expectations have largely become unfulfilled hopes.

As the members of the Koret Task Force have argued, progress requires accountability, choice, and transparency. Together these features add up to honest engagement of difficult problems and open acknowledgment of uncertainty. Improvement in big city schools requires imagination, talent, money, and time, all disciplined by a system that rewards success and creates alternatives to failure.

### Notes

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