The Manufactured Crisis

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Myths, Fraud, and the Attack on America's Public Schools

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1995

Addison-Wesley Publishing Company

Reading, Massachusetts Menlo Park, California New York
Don Mills, Ontario Wokingham, England Amsterdam Bonn
Sydney Singapore Tokyo Madrid San Juan
Paris Seoul Milan Mexico City Taipei

Chapter Four

Why Now?

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We now turn to questions that are both fascinating and hard to answer. Why have so many flawed criticisms of American public schools recently appeared, and why have those criticisms had such an effect? What has been unique about the past few years? Why now?

Our answers to these questions will focus largely on social forces, on recent problems faced by American education, and on events in the society at large, rather than on the critics and their followers. We choose this focus deliberately. Most Americans are people of good will, and we believe that in many cases those criticizing education have simply misunderstood or are not aware of the actual problems faced by American schools. On the other hand, a few actions of the critics seem to have reflected less than total honesty and goodwill, and we shall alert readers when we believe this to be the case.

Mounting Problems

> The popularization of American schools and colleges since the end of World War II has been nothing short of phenomenal, involving an unprecedented broadening of access, an unprecedented diversification of curricula, and an unprecedented extension of public control. In 1950, 34 percent of the American population twenty-five years of age or older had completed at least four years of high school, while 6 percent of that population had completed at least four years of college. By 1985, 74 percent of the American population twenty-five years of age or older had completed at least four years of high school, while 19 percent had completed at least four years of college. . . . It was in many ways a remarkable achievement, of which Americans could be justifiably proud. Yet it seemed to bring with it a pervasive sense of failure.
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> —Lawrence Cremin (*Popular Education and Its Discontents*, 1990, pp. 1–2)

The twenty-five years following World War II were unique in American history. These years generated not only a booming economy but also a huge expansion of public education. During this period enrollment in America's high schools increased by 50 percent or more, and American colleges and universities more than doubled their capacities. At the end of this period, the United States had an educational system that was the envy of the world for the opportunities it offered to a much-expanded range of Americans.

Unfortunately, the same decades also generated problems for education that Americans found difficult to solve or, in some cases, even to think about clearly. These problems increased sharply during the 1970s, and by the end of the decade, American education was facing a number of dilemmas that called for careful analysis and remedial action. Unfortunately, neither was to be provided. Most of these dilemmas have yet to be resolved, and many have become worse.

For one thing, by the 1970s Americans were beginning to suspect that public schools could not fulfill the many expectations that had been expressed for them in the 1950s and 1960s. Those earlier years were a period of great optimism in America. The expansion of education that took place then was often justified by claims about the ability of public schools to accomplish a huge range of tasks. In those years schools were seen not only as providers of knowledge and cultural uplift but also as centers for hobby and recreational interests, objects of ethnic or community pride, solvers of social problems, purveyors of services for individuals and their families, and engines of economic growth. In retrospect, many of these expectations were unrealistic, but this was not understood at the time. And when the economy soured and social problems soared in the 1970s, these expectations became standards against which schools were judged and found wanting.

This dilemma was compounded because American schools were not provided funds with which to finance their expanded programs. As a rule, expansions in the 1950s and 1960s were matched by increased funding, but as the economy turned sour in the 1970s, Americans became less willing to fund the expansions in education that they still wanted. As a result, funding for education became strained, per-capita expenditures for primary and secondary education began to fall, and eventually they came to lag behind those in other Western nations. American educators were not unaware of this problem, of course, and by the mid-1970s, they were issuing anguished calls for additional tax dollars to match the expanded programs they were still being asked to provide.

Unfortunately, those calls were not answered. Instead, the 1970s brought not only economic stagnation but also increases in other demands for tax dollars, particularly those associated with medical care, entitlement programs, public aid, and debt servicing. And if this were not enough, by the late 1970s, America was in the grip of a serious inflation, which meant that each year the public schools had to plead for increased tax support merely to keep abreast of their mounting costs. (Like the Red Queen in *Through the Looking Glass,* the schools had to run as hard as they could merely to stand still.) By the end of the decade, then, public education in America was facing not only a loss of confidence but also the annual need to beg for additional funds from an increasingly strained public purse.

The expansion of American education had also generated dilemmas concerning curricula and educational standards. Prior to World War II, about

50 percent of all students in the country dropped out of high school before graduation, and only 20 percent actually entered higher education. This meant that in those years it was thought appropriate that public high schools conducted tracking programs in which a quarter of their students were selected for "college preparation" and were required to take a tough, focused curriculum; "vocational" curricula were provided for another quarter; and "general education" was offered to the remainder (who would shortly leave school). Contrast this with today's high school, where any student who withdraws from school before graduation is stigmatized as a "dropout," *all* students are encouraged to consider at least some form of post-secondary education, and tracking programs are widely questioned.

As time passed, American high schools also made curricular adjustments to accommodate the wider range of students they were now to serve. Some schools began to offer a broader range of courses, many focused on "soft" subjects (such as civics, health, personal development, or recreation), and some changed the contents of core courses so as to make them more "interesting." Many also began to relax their requirements and academic standards to encourage students to remain in school as long as possible. Thus, in many schools students with potential interests in college were no longer required to take foreign language courses, four years of English, or three years of science and mathematics—which had been the norm for college-bound students in earlier years—and grading procedures were modified to make academic failure less likely.

These adjustments were controversial, of course. Parents with degrees in higher education could remember the tough, focused requirements and standards they had had to meet when preparing for college, and they became alarmed by new policies that were apparently "shortchanging" their children. Debates concerning curricula and standards had become common in school boards and state legislatures by the late 1970s. Moreover, some people began to reason that the "declining academic standards" of American high schools would inevitably generate a matching decline in academic achievement. (Such reasoning made untenable assumptions, of course. It ignored the fact that the earlier tough curricula had *never* been applied to the majority of students and assumed that high school students will only achieve if *forced* to do so by tough requirements. Repeated studies have shown that students are more likely to achieve when they are offered materials that are interesting and relevant to their needs than when they are coerced.)

As schools expanded their programs, they also came under pressure to provide better opportunities for blacks, Hispanics, women, students with disabilities, and other "minorities" who had been underrepresented among college-bound elites in earlier years. This was, of course, a threat to older people who had been members of those elites, since "social groups possessing a relatively rare and highly valued commodity that establishes their superiority over other groups are reluctant to see that commodity more widely distrib-

uted."[1] And if this weren't bad enough, in the 1970s these pressures were often generated by court decisions and the federal government, which had the effect of reducing the powers of local school boards or of challenging the prejudices of powerful groups in local communities. (Court decisions and federal programs designed to promote racial desegregation, for example, were often resented by prejudiced white school boards.) By the late 1970s, then, some traditional power-holders were being threatened by changes in the public schools that they felt they could no longer control.

Finally, for years America has suffered from serious social problems that place pressures on public schools. Several of these problems escalated significantly in the 1970s. Violence and drug use increased, the urban centers of American cities were decaying, and poverty among America's children was growing. As a result, educators forced to cope with these problems were coming under increased pressure, and since they were not provided with extra resources to help them cope, their schools and programs often deteriorated.

By the end of the 1970s, then, American education was suffering from many dilemmas—dilemmas perceived somewhat differently by educators, school boards, suburbanites and urban dwellers, legislators, minorities, elite groups, bigots, ideologues, and other sets of concerned citizens. Most would have agreed, however, that public schools were then suffering from problems that needed attention. Thus, many Americans were becoming worried about education, and this worry set the stage for the critics and their actions.

The Entitlement of Reactionary Voices

> If the 1960s go down in history as the decade of liberal educational reform, the 1980s will most likely be known as the decade of conservative restoration. Although many reforms were eroding by the late 1970s, they came under direct assault in the 1980s, especially after the election of Ronald Reagan.
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> —Fred L. Pincus (The rebirth of educational conservatism, 1984, p. 152)

Surely a major reason for increased criticism of schools in the 1980s was that reactionary voices were given more credence in America during that decade. When Americans elected Ronald Reagan, and afterwards George Bush, to the presidency, they made the expression of right-wing ideologies fashionable. Ideologues on the right had long been critical of the public schools, and once avowed conservatives were in the White House, those criticisms were granted legitimacy and given prominence by the press. This was, indeed, a break with recent history.

It's useful to look at the events that encouraged these reactionary ideas. America has always supported conservative notions; indeed, for years political

thought in the United States has generally been to the right of political thought in other advanced countries. Early in the 1970s, however, a number of wealthy people with sharply reactionary ideas began to work together to promote a right-wing agenda in America. Their major tools for this were a set of well-funded family foundations such as the Adolph Coors Foundation and the John M. Olin Foundation among others. For the past two decades, these foundations have undertaken various activities to "sell" reactionary views: funding right-wing student newspapers, internships, and endowed chairs for right-wing spokespersons on American campuses; supporting authors who write books hostile to American higher education; attempting to discredit social programs and other products of "liberal" thought; supporting conservative religious causes; lobbying for reactionary programs and ideologues in the federal Congress; and so forth.[2]

From the beginning, these same foundations have also invested heavily in think-tanks or institutes that can be counted on to express ideas—organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Hudson Institute, the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, the Manhattan Institute, and the Madison Center for Educational Affairs. Over the past twenty years, these organizations have had a remarkable impact in America—in part, because they are well funded; in part, because they are able to make use of the press; and in part, because they have provided an alternative public forum for prominent people who had also served, or would later serve, in key federal posts. The rhetoric they produced certainly helped to propel Ronald Reagan into the presidency, and even today the propaganda they generate commands significant press attention.

Despite its successes, this reactionary movement is not a monolith but actually represents a variety of ideological strands. These include, for example: classical conservatism a la Edmund Burke; "economic rationalism"; defense of the rich; religious fundamentalism; suspicion of the federal government; hostility to public education and the academy (in general) and to social research (in particular); and racial, sexist, and ethnic bigotry. Most analysts have identified several groups within this movement, and we distinguish here among three of them that have expressed somewhat different views about education: the *Far Right,* the *Religious Right,* and *Neoconservatives.*

The Far Right. A faction that had great influence during the early Reagan years is the Far Right (sometimes called the New Right, the Radical Right, or the Reactionary Right). One of the Far Right's major voices is the Heritage Foundation, and at earlier points we've quoted some of that Foundation's questionable opinions about education. Far Righters such as Edwin Meese and David Stockman were prominent within the early Reagan White House, Orrin Hatch and Jesse Helms can still be counted on to express Far Right ideas in the United States Senate, and some Far Right tenets have appeared in Rep. Newt Gingrich's "Contract with America."

In general, the Far Right blames the federal government for most of the problems facing American schools today. Fred Pincus, for example, quotes the following from the Heritage Foundation:

> The most damaging blows to science and mathematics education have come from Washington. For the past 20 years, federal mandates have favored "disadvantaged" pupils at the expense of those who have the highest potential to contribute positively to society. . . . By catering to the demands of special-interest groups—racial minorities, the handicapped, women, and non-English-speaking students—America's public schools have successfully competed for government funds, but have done so at the expense of education as a whole.[3]

Such views reveal hostility both to the public sector and to the interests of minorities in American society.

Given such beliefs, a major goal of the Far Right has been to decentralize education so that all federal involvement in education is abolished or "returned" to the states or local communities. At a minimum, this means abolishing the Department of Education, closing down federal support for educational research, eliminating funds for categorical grants in education that support minorities, and reducing the influence of federal courts.

In addition, some from the Far Right seem to believe that *all* public expenditures are inherently feckless or pernicious (pick one) and advocate reducing the entire public sector as a matter of policy. This has led to all sorts of proposals for privatization—e.g., of the post office, of the TVA, of state prisons, of welfare services, and the like—proposals that have become more strident since the demise of communist governments in the former Soviet Union, where central planning had been excessive. And if other citizen services are to be privatized, why exempt the schools, which consume such a large portion of public funds? In particular, economists of the Far Right (such as Milton Friedman) have argued that public-school districts should be replaced by a "free market" of competing private schools that are supported through tax credits or vouchers.[4]

Regarding the interests of "minorities," the Far Right argues that increased federal control has allowed powerful "vested interests" to have excessive influence in schools and that balance will not be restored until control over schools is "returned" to the states or local communities. (The vested interests they have cited include, for example, teachers' unions, educational associations, and federal bureaucrats; racial, religious, and ethnic minorities; women, the disabled, and homosexuals—indeed, presumably, anyone who is not WASP, male, and straight.)

To see how these ideas were expressed at the beginning of the Reagan years, we turn to a document designed to affect the president's early policies. In the second half of 1980, shortly before his election as president, Ronald Reagan appointed an Education Policy Advisory Committee that was to prepare a private set of recommendations for the new administration. This group

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was chaired by W. Glenn Campbell, director of the Hoover Institute, and we have been given a document dated October 22, 1980, that is labeled a "tentative draft" of the committee's report. We have been unable to locate a copy of the submitted report, but Glenn Campbell has assured us that it followed the "tentative draft" closely.[5] This "tentative draft" offers good insights into how the Far Right viewed education during this crucial period.

As one reads the "tentative draft," one is struck by how many of the myths and themes of the Manufactured Crisis it expresses. Educational achievement is reported to have declined sharply in America, and SAT and NAEP data are said to confirm this decline. Constant-dollar educational expenditures are said to have tripled in recent years. Discipline is said to have broken down in the schools. And these problems are seen as the product of federal interference that favors unruly minorities, bilingualism, and persons with disabilities; encourages mediocrity; and slights talented students. Public schools are called weak because they enjoy monopoly status, while private schools are stronger because they must compete in the marketplace. Educational research is "largely propaganda." Standards are falling and costs are rising in higher education because of federal harassment and because of the imposition of racial and ethnic quotas. And to solve these problems, the "tentative draft" suggests abolishing the Department of Education, restricting categorical grants in education, reining in the courts, and funding voucher plans to encourage private schools.

Members of the Education Policy Advisory Committee presumably had reason to expect good things from these recommendations. Candidate Ronald Reagan had already proposed to abolish the Department of Education and was known to favor school vouchers. As it turned out, however, the committee had less initial effect on administration policy than the Far Right had hoped. President Reagan's first secretary of education was Terrel Bell, former U.S. commissioner for education; and Terrel Bell did *not* favor abolishing the Department of Education. In addition, educational issues were not high on the president's early list of concerns. As a result, Bell was able to block some of the Far Right agenda.[6] Nevertheless, advocates for the Far Right remained prominent in the early Reagan White House, and they influenced education policy in various ways both during the Terrel Bell years and afterwards. Even today, some claims and beliefs of Far Right rhetoric may be detected in documents released by the Department of Education.

The Religious Right. A second reactionary faction, the Religious Right, also became prominent in the early Reagan years. The core of this movement seems to be represented by the Religious Roundtable, a network of leaders who help to coordinate its activities. Prominent figures associated with it include Jerry Falwell, Tim LeHay, Mel and Norma Gabler, and former presidential candidate Pat Robertson. Although the Religious Right did not secure "insider" positions in either the Reagan or Bush administrations, both admin-

istrations were beholden to it for political support and paid lip service to some of its ideas. The Religious Right also remains active today and wielded considerable influence at the 1992 Republican National Convention.

In general, the Religious Right argues that federal controls have been used to deny students the "right" to pray in schools; to restrict unfairly the teaching of "scientific creationism"; to encourage the appearance of "dirty," "anti-family," "pro-homosexual," and "anti-American" books in school curricula; and to enforce "cultural relativity" in courses on values-and-sex education. In the typical rhetoric of religious fundamentalists, these "evils" are bundled together as "secular humanism," a catch-all phrase that refers to educational philosophies that are "human-centered rather than God-centered."[7] Such "evils," they believe, can be countered only by doing away with federal controls in education or, paradoxically, by promoting federal laws or constitutional amendments that prohibit the government from imposing "secular humanism" on public schools.

In addition, advocates among the Religious Right argue that because public schools are *inevitably* used to promote "secular humanism," they are iniquitous and should be abolished completely! You might think that we're exaggerating this argument to make a point, but we aren't. According to one Religious Right advocate, Robert Thoburn,

> I imagine every Christian would agree that we need to remove the humanism from the public schools. There is only one way to accomplish this: to abolish the public schools. We need to get the government out of the education business. According to the Bible, education is a parental responsibility. It is not the place of the government to be running a school system.[8]

And how should "Christians" proceed to dismantle public education? They are urged to take all legitimate actions to hamper and discourage public schools, such as arguing against them in public debates and voting No in all school-bond elections. Moreover, "subversive" actions are also encouraged:

> Christians should run for the school board. This may sound like strange advice. After all, I have said that Christians should have nothing to do with the public schools. What I meant was that Christians should not allow their children to have anything to do with public schools. This does *not* mean that we should have nothing to do with them. . . . Our goal is not to make the schools better. . . . The goal is to hamper them, so they cannot grow. . . . Our goal as God-fearing, uncompromised . . . Christians is *to shut down the public schools,* not in some revolutionary way, but step by step, school by school, district by district.[9]

So, apparently, running for the school board under false colors would also be an acceptable means, given that the end is "pure."

Recommendations of the latter type held little charm for Ronald Reagan or George Bush, but both tried to accommodate Religious Right educational interests in their policies. Both made speeches favoring school prayer and "family values." Moreover, both argued that federal funds should be used to

support religious schools through vouchers or other means. And the ideology of the Religious Right has clearly promoted dissatisfaction with public education over the years, thus also helping set the stage for the Manufactured Crisis.

The Neoconservatives. By the mid-1980s, a third faction had begun to emerge that claimed to represent "centerist" conservative thought, the Neoconservatives. Many people associated with the Neoconservative movement have had ties to the American Enterprise Institute, another conservative think tank, and their ideas often appear in *Public Interest, Commentary,* or (more recently) *The New Republic.* In addition, a set of influential Neoconservatives—William Bennett, Chester Finn, Lamar Alexander, and Diane Ravitch—came to dominate federal education policy during the late Reagan years and the Bush administration.

In general, Neoconservatives argue that American schools have suffered from two serious problems: a history of social experiments concerned with peripheral issues that made too many demands on schools and diverted them from their basic missions, and excessive federal intervention to promote educational equity. As a result, they argue, academic standards and discipline have eroded, and basic achievements in American schools have fallen and now lag behind those of other countries. This threatens both the moral integration of the nation and its ability to compete with other industrialized countries.

Neoconservatives also prescribe various steps that should be taken to meet these problems: schools should recommit themselves to academic excellence and require a larger number of basic-skills courses; higher academic standards should be encouraged through tougher grading procedures and national tests of student achievement; schools should maintain discipline and reassert their rights to discharge students who cannot meet reasonable standards for behavior; stress should be given to competitiveness and other values thought to be "traditional" in America; and greater effort on the part of teachers should be encouraged through merit pay, competency testing, and stronger requirements for teacher certification. Above all, schools and educators should be made "accountable"; they should be required to provide objective evidence of their accomplishments.

Neoconservatives also generally oppose the concepts of educational or hiring quotas for minorities as "reverse discrimination" and argue that the federal government has already "taken care of" most problems of educational equity. (This may come as surprising news to the many thousands of educators who today serve the needs of minority students in desperately underfunded schools in urban ghettos and isolated rural areas.) In contrast with the Far Right, however, Neoconservatives favor a strong educational role for the federal government to ensure that schools carry out their mission. In addition, Neoconservatives have been ambivalent about private schools, some

(James Coleman, for example) urging that the federal government provide increased support for the private sector, others (such as the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force) arguing that "provision of free public education must continue to be a public responsibility of high priority, while support of non-public education should remain a private obligation."[10]

Neoconservative ideas were not new in the 1980s, but they emerged influentially during the later Reagan years and the Bush administration. A good deal of recent criticism of the schools reflects Neoconservative tenets.

Common Ideas. Despite their obvious differences, the three conservative ideologies we have reviewed share basic ideas about American education. All three are offended by recent changes in public schools and would like to return to mythic "golden years," when schools were more to their liking. All believe that public education has recently "deteriorated." All tend to be intolerant of the interests of minorities in education. All share a profound mistrust of both educators and students. (The former are never portrayed as trustworthy professionals; the latter are never thought to be capable of self-motivated learning.) And all blame "defects" in the public schools for problems in the larger society and propose changes in federal policy that will presumably cure those problems.

Moreover, spokespersons for both Far Right and Neoconservative positions argue that academic achievement has declined in recent years in American schools, and, given the dominance of these ideologies within the Reagan and Bush administrations, it is small wonder that those administrations promoted the myths that we tackle in this book. Ideologues committed to these beliefs have had little reason to challenge simplistic "evidence" that public education was in trouble, and in the Reagan and Bush years they were provided marvelous opportunities to sell these beliefs from the bully pulpit of the White House.

Since the defeat of George Bush in 1992, reactionary rhetorics about education have been given less attention. Nevertheless, many Americans (including leaders in the Clinton administration) have embraced some ideas from these rhetorics, and the congressional elections of 1994 resurrected many conservative tenets. So educators may have to contend with the debris of reactionary educational thought for some time to come. Thus, it is worthwhile pointing out that, since they reflect prejudices against minorities and tend to ignore or misunderstand the *real* problems of American schools, right-wing educational agenda are usually misguided and are often dangerous. To quote Fred Pincus:

> Like the more humane liberal policies of the 1960s and 1970s, [conservative] educational policies have their own contradictions. In a society characterized by racism, class conflict, and economic stagnation, there is little that the schools can do to help create a better society. Liberal policies can make things less bad and create limited avenues of upward mobility for a few individuals. Conservative

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"A Nation at Risk," The Human Capital Ideology, and CRISIS Rhetorics

> Since 1983 the United States has been besieged by a series of reports that severely criticize the nation's public school system. In prose befitting a public relations firm preparing the nation for war, the reports discover massive problems in the schools and recommend hundreds of solutions that, taken together, would cost about as much money as a major war.
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> —Ron Haskins, Mark Lanier, and Duncan MacRae, Jr. (The commission reports and strategies of reform, 1988, p. 1)

As far as the public was concerned, the Manufactured Crisis began on April 26, 1983—the date when, amidst much fanfare, the Reagan White House released its critical report on the status of American schools, *A Nation at Risk*. In many ways this report was the "mother of all critiques" of American education. The bashing of public education has long been a popular indoor sport in America, but never before had criticism of education appeared that

- was sponsored by a secretary of education in our national government;
- was prepared by such a prestigious committee;
- was endorsed by a president of the United States;
- made such explicit charges about a supposed recent, tragic decline of American education—charges said to be confirmed by both longitudinal and comparative studies;
- asserted that because of this putative decline of education the nation was losing its leadership in industry, science, and innovation;
- assigned blame for said decline to inadequacies in teaching programs and inept educators; and
- packaged its messages in such flamboyant prose.

To illustrate merely the last of these wonders, on its first page the report asserted:

> Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . . . 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 a people. . . . If an unfriendly foreign 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. . . . We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.[12]

This was heady stuff. *Never* before had such trenchant rhetoric about education appeared from the White House. As a result, the press had a field day, tens of thousands of copies of *A Nation At Risk* were distributed, and many Americans thereafter read or heard, for the first time, that our public schools were "truly" failing.

Terrel Bell was then secretary of education. Bell had previously helped to prevent Reaganaughts from dismantling the federal Department of Education. Why, then, did he sponsor the committee that prepared this alarming report? At an individual level, it appears that Bell sincerely believed in the simple idea that "declining academic standards" in American high schools inevitably meant that achievement had also declined, and he felt he had to do "something" to awaken concern for education within the White House.[13] At a deeper level, however, *A Nation At Risk* merely gave public voice to charges about education that right-wing ideologues had already been telling one another. Thus, it served to publicize tenets of conservative educational thought and was, as a result, embraced with enthusiasm by right-wing troops in the Reagan White House. (Actually, their enthusiasm was tempered. *A Nation At Risk* also called for raising the salaries of teachers and for increased federal funding of education, but these recommendations were conveniently ignored by the White House.)

The White House was not alone, however, in sponsoring critiques of public schools in the early 1980s. The same years also produced an explosion of independently generated books and commission reports about American education, some well meaning and scholarly, some not, *all critical.* Consider just the titles of some of these documents:

- *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*
- *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*
- *America's Competitive Challenge: The Need for a National Response*
- *Action for Excellence: A Comprehensive Plan to Improve our Nation's Schools*
- *Making the Grade*
- *Business and Education: Partners for the Future*
- *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*
- *Investing in our Children: Business and the Public Schools.*[14,15]

Why did so many highly critical reports about American education suddenly appear in the early 1980s? In part, these works expressed legitimate

concerns. But they also reflected the blossoming of conservative ideologies then underway. In addition, many of these works revealed concerns about an economic crisis thought to be pending for American business, coupled with a belief that this crisis was linked to changes needed in education.[16]

In the early 1980s, concern began to be expressed by business leaders that the American economy was not keeping pace. Analysts began to refer to the "deindustrialization of America" and to observe that the United States had lost its once-competitive advantage in labor-intensive industries.[17] This suggested that America needed to develop a new industrial policy in order to "transfer labor-intensive, low-skill production to Third World developing countries, at the same time maintaining control over the entire world production process in ways that ensure the future competitive supremacy of the United States."[18] Such a need, in turn, implied that American schools should be training their students for somewhat different jobs—but what might those jobs be?

Answers to this question involved assumptions about the likely effects of automation, computers, robotics, lasers, telecommunications, and other new technologies on the labor market. Conventional wisdom had it that these technological innovations would gradually make manual labor obsolete but that America could enjoy a new burst of technological growth and development—with associated increases in productivity and standard of living—if only its labor system generated skilled workers able to plan and implement that kind of growth.[19] Thus, our educational system should stress skills appropriate to the new technologies—technological visualization; abstract reasoning; mathematical, scientific, and computer expertise; knowledge of specific technologies and production techniques; individual initiative; and so forth—because the evolving job market will need more workers with these skills.

This argument was actually an offshoot of yet another ideology that had evolved in the nineteenth century but that flowered in the late 1950s concerning "Human Capital."[20] Human Capital theorists argued that education should be thought of as "investing" in human resources and that appropriate investments in education can benefit industry and fuel the national economy. In early years this argument had been seized by canny industrialists, who realized they could reduce costs if the public schools could only be persuaded to provide the specialized training their firms would otherwise have to fund in apprenticeship programs. In addition, Human Capital arguments became a strong catalyst for the growth of educational systems in underdeveloped countries.

Although it remains popular today, Human Capital theory has never been supported by much evidence. In addition, analysts have raised questions about whether the new technologies will actually create or destroy more jobs.[21] They have pointed out that "unlike other technologies which increase the productivity of the worker, the robot actually replaces the worker. That

indeed is one of the prime tasks for which robots are built"[22] and that it takes only a small number of highly trained people to design the robots, computers, and machinery that will replace large numbers of dangerous and boring jobs. Such arguments suggest that conventional industrial thinking about education was flawed, that the proposals it advocated would not have worked in any case. Indeed, recent employment statistics suggest that job growth is appearing not in "high tech" industries, but rather in *service* occupations and in the skilled crafts.

Nevertheless, conventional wisdom largely held sway. And as the business community came to think that deindustrialization was indeed a looming problem, and that this problem required changes in American schools, it began to sponsor reform reports that sought to remold education in "appropriate" ways. These reports argued that schools should:

- Revise their curricula to give more stress to information-age subjects and to science and mathematics;
- "Intensify" their programs by lengthening the school day or year, by raising academic standards, and by increasing core curricular requirements;
- Assist students with school-to-work transition problems;
- Stock classrooms with "the latest" instructional materials and computers;
- Stress achievement, individual initiative, free enterprise, and other values thought to help students become information-age leaders;
- Require upgraded levels of technical competency among teachers and provide programs to increase teachers' skills;
- Identify talented students at an early age and provide them with "enriched" educational experiences (and thus adopt or strengthen ability-grouping programs).

Some of these proposals would have generated changes that could benefit *any* student in the school. Others, however, such as the last we listed above, would have turned back the clock and recommitted America to an elitist model for education. In fairness, concern for the elitist implications of some of their recommendations often appeared in the reform reports, and most of the reports paid at least lip service to both "excellence" and "equity." Despite such protestations, however, most of the reports did not make clear how the twin goals of excellence and equity could be achieved while adjusting school programs to meet "the problem of deindustrialization." In addition, many of the recommendations made in the reports would have required additional funds for schools, and enthusiasm for providing these funds has not been great in recent years.

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Although most of their recommendations were not funded, the reform reports certainly have had an effect on education. First, some of their proposals are still being debated as ways of "improving" American schools. Proposals for "intensifying" school programs, for example, by increasing hours in the school day or days in the school year, by assigning more homework, by covering more subject matter during lessons, and so forth, have proved popular among politicians—possibly because they appear to offer more bang for the same educational bucks. And some of the proposals the reports made to "strengthen" curricula in the sciences and mathematics eventually found their way into George Bush's America 2000 agenda and Bill Clinton's recent Goals 2000 legislation.

Second, the reports led to calls for greater contact between educators and industrial leaders. Such contact was needed, the argument went, to make education relevant to industrial needs, to increase the employability of graduates, and to improve productivity—thus enhancing America's ability to compete successfully in the global economy.[23] In response to these calls, many school districts set up "Adopt a School" programs or other arrangements that allowed members of the business community to exert more influence on their local schools.

Unfortunately, such programs also bring problems. For one thing, they can lead to overemphasizing the needs of business or industry when making decisions about education. They may lead, for example, to overstressing technological curricula rather than curricula concerned with moral, social, or aesthetic concerns. The latter, we would argue, are not only necessary for a well-rounded education but also may do more, finally, to preserve our democracy than a curriculum that focuses largely on business needs. In addition, when industrial leaders are given unique leadership roles in education, it is assumed, in effect, that they are peculiarly able to estimate the future educational needs of American society. This seems a dubious assumption; industrialists are often very bright people, but we know of no evidence to suggest that they are more prescient than other thoughtful leaders in the community.

Above all, the reform reports reinforced the belief, first announced in *A Nation at Risk*, that American education is in deep CRISIS. Moreover, the education crisis message has since been repeated endlessly by leaders in both government and industry and has been embraced by a host of journalists, legislators, educators, and other concerned Americans. Thus, in a September 1991 address by President Bush: "The ringing school bell sounds an alarm, a warning to all of us who care about the state of American education. . . . Every day brings new evidence of crisis." And from a September 1991 article in *Time* magazine entitled "Can this man [Lamar Alexander, the newly appointed secretary of education] save our schools?":

> By almost every measure, the nation's schools are mired in mediocrity—and most Americans know it. Whether it is an inner-city high school with as many security

checkpoints as a Third World airport, or a suburban middle school where only the "geeks" bother to do their homework, the school too often has become a place in which to serve time rather than to learn. The results are grimly apparent: clerks at fast-food restaurants who need computerized cash registers to show them how to make change; Americans who can drive but cannot read the road signs; a democracy in which an informed voter is a statistical oddity.[24]

The trouble with such messages is that they can lead to quick-fix or damaging "solutions" for minor distresses and to ignoring the truly serious problems of education and American society that need long-term effort. People can become blasé when critics cry educational "wolf" too often.

Americans need to keep two ideas about education clearly separated. The first is the notion that American schools are *generally* "mediocre." As we have shown repeatedly, the evidence simply does *not* support this claim. The second is that *some* American schools are terrible places. This is certainly true, but it is largely true because those schools lack resources and must contend with some of society's worst social problems. Thus, hysterical utterances about a broad, fictive crisis in American education are not only lies; when they are believed, *they are likely to confuse and derail efforts that are badly needed to help our neediest schools. The Sandia Report* expressed it thus:

> Although we have shown that there are indeed some serious problems at all levels of education, we believe that much of the current rhetoric goes well beyond assisting reform, and actually hinders it. Much of the "crisis" commentary today professes total system-wide failure in education. Our research shows that this is simply not true. Many claim that the purpose of the rhetoric is to garner funding for reform; but, if these funds are used to alleviate a nonexisting "crisis," education and educators will suffer in the long run.[25]

School-Bashing and Governmental Scapegoating

> School-bashing enjoys a long and rich tradition in this country. It appeals to the public, it grabs attention, and it doesn't cost anything.
>
> —Richard M. Jaeger (World class standards, choice, and privatization, 1992, p. 124)

> As far as we're concerned, many of our political and corporate leaders are using educational reform as a scapegoat for problems schools didn't cause and can't fix. We believe many of these elected leaders and their corporate sponsors are engaging in a conspiracy—a conspiracy against candor with the American people.
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> —Joe Schneider and Paul Houston (*Exploding the Myths*, 1993, p. 3)

We turn now to more subtle reasons for the Manufactured Crisis. At least some recent attacks on schools have come from elitists who are against the

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whole idea of public education. Such elitism is not new, of course.[26] There have always been those—such as Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray—who refuse to believe in the intelligence of the poor or who never want to share the advantages of education with "common people."

Some criticisms of education are simple scapegoating, however. It is no longer fashionable in most American settings to blame the economic and social tragedies of contemporary life on an "international Jewish conspiracy" or on the "lack of motivation or talent" of Irish American, African American, Polish American, or Mexican American workers. "Greedy union bosses" cannot be blamed anymore, since the country no longer has strong unions. Right-wing politicians still hurl charges against welfare "cheaters," but these charges pale because the amounts spent on welfare are small potatoes compared with the amounts recently used to bail out the savings and loan companies. (Moreover, the savings and loan robbery of the American people was perpetrated by nice, upper-class, well-educated, religious white men from two-parent households—the kind of Americans who we are supposed to admire.) But blame for society's ills, of which there seem to be so many, needs to be assigned somewhere. And one visible, ordinarily passive, relatively defenseless group is still available. Thus, since the early 1980s, Americans have been told relentlessly by prominent leaders that ours is "a nation at risk" because its schools and teachers have failed us.

Actually, attacking the public schools has long been a popular pastime in America. To illustrate, a 1900 article in *Gunton's Magazine* told us, "The mental nourishment we spoon-feed our children is not only minced but peptonized so that their brains digest it without effort and without benefit and the result is the anaemic intelligence of the average American schoolchild."[27] (Although the language is quaint, the message seems to be familiar.) Again, in 1909 the *Atlantic Monthly* criticized the schools for: (a) not teaching enough facts, (b) not teaching thinking skills, and (c) not preparing young people for jobs.[28] (Does this also sound familiar?)

Our favorite early example comes, however, from the *Ladies Home Journal* of 1912. There, Ella Francis Lynch criticized the schools because life in America had changed and the schools had not changed with it. Lynch had a wonderful way with words. She asked if the millions of middle-class women who were her readers could

> imagine a more grossly stupid, a more genuinely asinine system tenaciously persisted in to the fearful detriment of over seventeen million children and at a cost to you of over four-hundred and three million dollars each year—a system that not only is absolutely ineffective in its results, but also actually harmful in that it throws every year ninety-three out of every one hundred children into the world of action absolutely unfitted for even the simplest tasks of life? Can you wonder that we have so many inefficient men and women; that in so many families there are so many failures; that our boys and girls can make so little money that in one case they are driven into the saloons from discouragement, and in the other into

brothels to save themselves from starvation? Yet that is exactly what the public-school system is today doing, and has been doing.[29]

School bashing was not confined to the first years of the century, of course. *Time* magazine charged in 1949 that the schools were failing to teach traditional subject matter because it was too concerned with life-adjustment education.[30] The year 1951 seems to have been a particularly good year for criticism. From *Readers Digest* and *Scientific Monthly* in that year one learned that

> there were complaints from frustrated university professors and angry business people that public school students were woefully unprepared for college as well as for work. The typical high school student could not write a clear English sentence, do simple mathematics, or find common geographical locations such as Boston or New York City. There were no basic standards. . . . The schools also were ignoring religion. The curriculum was inappropriate for life at mid-century, giving students worthless information and outdated training and worst of all, boring them. As one critic put it: "We are offering them a slingshot education in a hydrogen-bomb age."[31]

Nor was this all. The 1950s also witnessed savage criticisms of the schools in books by Arthur Bestor, Albert Lynd, and Admiral Hyman Rickover—and this was during a decade of unprecedented growth in and optimism about American education![32] Consider, for example, Admiral Rickover's comments:

> Everyone is aware today that our educational system has been allowed to deteriorate. It has been going downhill for some years without anything really constructive having been done to arrest the decline, still less to reverse its course. We thus have a chronic crisis; an unsolved problem as grave as any that faces our country today. Unless this problem is dealt with promptly and effectively the machinery that sustains our level of material prosperity and political power will begin to slow down.[33]

(Makes one wonder how America has managed to survive the past thirty-five years, does it not?) Nor have such wholesale attacks on American education ceased in subsequent decades—take a look, for example, at recent books by Paul Copperman and Allan Bloom.[34]

Why on earth should school bashing be so popular in our country? Perhaps playwright Jane Wagner had it right when she said "I personally think we developed language because of our deep inner need to complain." But Americans seem to attack schools in particular because they have such unrealistic expectations of those schools, and become disgruntled when the schools cannot meet those expectations. Moreover, many Americans seem to remember the boredom or repeated failures they experienced in classrooms where public competitions and competitive evaluations are practiced endlessly. And, as Richard Jaeger suggested in the quotation with which we began this section, attacks on the schools are attention-grabbing and cost very little—indeed, they often make money for the attackers.

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In addition, most American schools are, after all, *public* institutions and are subject to public scrutiny and review. Public education also eats up large chunks of tax dollars; educators and their supporters are forever calling for additional support funds; and nobody likes to pay taxes. And educators are a relatively passive group, often from working- or middle-class backgrounds, who have an embattled professional status and who are also likely to be women—a traditionally unempowered group. In sharp contrast, many of the critics have been males who were educated in private schools and who presently enjoy secure and prestigious positions.

And if these weren't reasons enough, American teachers actually set themselves up for attack because of some of their most responsible, professional conduct. How does this occur? As it happens, Americans are very likely to take personal credit when they succeed in difficult tasks.[35] Not only is this tendency widespread in the United States, but it is also approved of by Americans who associate it with creating the appearance of being able to cope.[36] Moreover, the tendency is promoted in American schools by teachers, who encourage students to believe that *they* are personally responsible for their successes in schools. But if students are to take personal responsibility for their successes, what does that say about the teachers who helped them to succeed? According to data presented by Philip Tetlock, teachers are most approved of when they *downplay* their own contributions to student successes.[37] Should we then be surprised if others sooner or later take teachers' self-deprecatory styles as evidence of incompetence?

But the question remains, why were America's educators so often scapegoated in *the 1980s,* and why did *government* leaders—for the first time in American history—then lead this attack on the schools? Three reasons presumably lay behind this action by the White House. First, as we noted above, for the first time *ever* Americans had elected a government composed of individuals who subscribed to reactionary ideologies that condemned public schools, and when they scapegoated education, that government was just expressing publicly the hostile notions that right-wing ideologues had been telling one another in recent years.

Second, the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George Bush came under strong pressure from Human Capitalists in industry who wanted extensive and expensive modifications in American education. But both administrations were concerned with other matters and had no intention of spending additional dollars on education. (In fact, despite suggestions to the contrary, federal support for education *declined* in constant-value-dollar terms during most of the Reagan and Bush years.) Human Capitalists tend to be powerful business leaders, however, and neither Ronald Reagan nor George Bush wanted to annoy them. Consequently, both paid lip service to educational reform. Indeed, George Bush styled himself "The Education President." But they tried to shift the burden of that reform to the states, local communities,

parents, and, above all, *educators,* who were deemed to be both incompetent and responsible for education's problems. A paradox, indeed.

Third, the Reagan and Bush administrations were faced with escalating domestic social problems that neither government wanted to tackle. (Rather, the Reagan and Bush administrations generally represented interests of the rich, and many of America's social problems got worse during their tenures—see Chapter 6.) Thus, both administrations had reasons for diverting America's attention from federal failures to deal with domestic problems, and one way to do this was to blame those problems on educators and the schools.

None of these reasons compliments the Reagan and Bush administrations, of course, and other reasons might also be unearthed for the recent explosion of educational scapegoating. Our basic concern, however, is not with assigning blame but rather with countering the evil effects that scapegoating imposes on innocent people. Educators are *not* responsible for most of the reputed shortcomings of American schools, let alone for the overwhelming problems in American society. Indeed, most of the "shortcomings" of schools suggested by critics are nonexistent; and in most cases American educators are coping well with intellectually complex, emotionally demanding, time-consuming, and often dangerous tasks.

Rather than leading us to ruin, the vast majority of teachers and administrators run a school system that works well for most American children. Educators in the schools with the least support—those who serve children who need the most help—are indeed having a hard time. These schools may indeed be failing, but as we have noted before, the causes of their failure usually lie outside the school building. Such causes are embedded in the problems and social inequities of our society, which many of our politicians seem wonderfully able to ignore.

Self-Interest Versus Public Interest

> When I first heard about America 2000 and its provisions for diverting public funds to private schools, I classified it as just another attempt to reinforce the image of the Education President. . . . Further probing of the evidence, however, has convinced me that America 2000 is more than a mere quest for image.
>
> Total expenditures for public elementary and secondary education have grown steadily over the past three decades. . . . It takes no special insight to realize that, as the original forty-niners might have said, "Thar's gold in them thar hills!"
>
> —Richard M. Jaeger (1992b, p. 125)

It is also useful to discuss briefly some of the more invidious, self-serving reasons why critics may have attacked education during the past few years.

We examine these with reluctance. Most Americans like to think well of their fellow citizens, and some people will find it hard to believe that criticism of schools may also be motivated by hidden selfish interests; and yet, such interests often underlie campaigns of public advocacy.

To illustrate, rich and powerful people often create marvelous explanations for why they should continue to enjoy their privileges. Consider, for example, the many creative rationales offered by the tobacco industry for discounting or hiding research that links smoking with cancer, or the huge panoply of "disinterested" objections to national health care voiced by rich doctors, drug companies, and insurance executives. Such statements are obvious masks for self-interest. It seems at least possible that similar self-interest may have also motivated some recent actions of the critics of education.

For example, take the case of arguments for vouchers that could be used to support private schools. In Chapter 6 we review evidence showing how federal policies generated massive transfers of income and wealth to rich people during the Reagan and Bush years. Ronald Reagan and George Bush are both rich people, as are many of their friends. Many of their own or their friends' children have attended high-status, expensive, private high schools, and George Bush himself graduated from such an academy. Both the Reagan and Bush administrations favored vouchers, and in the spring of 1991 the latter brought forth America 2000, a proposed educational policy that would have provided, among other things, tax-supported vouchers that could be used in private schools. One does not need Albert Einstein to explain that if such a program were adopted, tuition charges at high-status, expensive, private high schools could be reduced. Do you suppose that self- or class-interests helped to motivate these enthusiasms for vouchers?

Critics in the federal administration may have had other selfish reasons for lambasting public schools. As readers may know, Chris Whittle is a business tycoon from Tennessee who operates a business that provides video equipment and news programming for schools in exchange for guarantees that those schools will show students two minutes of television commercials each day. Lamar Alexander, secretary of education in the Bush administration and a former governor of Tennessee, is a long-time friend of Chris Whittle's. His close connections with the Whittle Communications enterprise are documented in a recent article by Jonathan Kozol, which indicates that Alexander had previously served on Whittle's board, worked as a consultant for Whittle, and had profited greatly from transactions of Whittle stock.[38] Moreover, in March of 1991, the *Wall Street Journal* suggested that other leaders in the Department of Education had also benefited from relationships with Whittle.[39]

Suspicions that education policies under George Bush reflected Whittle interests escalated in 1991 when, in quick succession, the Bush administration published America 2000 (which called for school vouchers); Chris Whittle formed a new business, the Edison Project, responsible for a proposed coast-

to-coast network of profit-making schools (which would have benefited greatly had America 2000 become law); and Chester Finn, former assistant secretary of education (a consistent critic of public schooling and a major architect of America 2000), signed on to work for the Edison Project. Strange.

Industrial leaders may also have selfish motives for criticizing the schools. To illustrate, during the 1980s industrialists began to complain about an anticipated "shortage" of engineers and scientists. Moreover, those complaints were endorsed by Erich Bloch, then head of the National Science Foundation, who used flawed data to support his arguments. (We detail this sad story later in the chapter.) These actions stimulated a greater supply of scientists and engineers who could be employed by industry, and, as the actions were largely successful, the salaries that industries now need to pay

■ EXHIBIT 4.1

Big Business Goes to School

Shortly before George Bush was defeated for reelection in 1992, John S. Friedman wrote about the suspicious alliance between corporate interests and White House education policies.

Chris Whittle, chairman and founder of Whittle Communications, represents the new intersection between business and education. Until recently, corporate America, for the most part, has avoided direct involvement in education. But it has now turned to the classroom. The Bush Administration is the point of entry and Chris Whittle is the point man.

Whittle Communications is a media company [whose] centerpiece is Channel One. The Whittle formula is ingenious. His company lends the schools TVs, VCRs and satellite dishes to receive the programming and then wires the system. . . . In exchange, schools agree to show Channel One to most students on 92 percent of the days in which school is in session [which features] two minutes of ads on every Channel One program. . . .

Buoyed by its $102 million in gross annual revenues from Channel One, Whittle Communications is looking for ways to expand. About nine months ago Whittle unveiled a plan [the Edison Project] to "invent," build and open 200 private schools by 1996. His plan resembles the Education Department's original proposal to create some 535 experimental schools by the same year. Referring to his "new American schools," Whittle even echoes some of the rhetoric used by the Bush Administration in its "America 2000" education goals, announced about the same time. . . . Whittle estimates that $2.5 billion to $3 billion will be required to put his first 200 schools into operation. By the year 2010, there could be 1,000 campuses. . . .

As for Whittle's relationship with the Bush Administration, it is cozy. Although not a partner in Whittle Communications, Lamar Alexander,

for scientists and engineers have fallen dramatically. Is it possible that industrialists had this outcome in mind when they issued their complaints?

This does not mean that all advocates for policies that would harm public schools have hidden selfish motives. On the contrary, some announce their selfish motives openly. Such is often the case, for example, in arguments for vouchers made by representatives of private, sectarian schools. People making these arguments may be quite open about the benefits that vouchers would provide their constituents; indeed, they often suggest how "unfair" it is that parents whose children attend private schools should have to pay both public-school taxes and private-school tuition. Voucher programs, they argue, would merely rectify an "injustice"—an argument which suggests that rationalizations for private interests are by no means confined to the rich.

> Bush's top education official has, in his own words, been "a good close friend for twenty years" of Chris Whittle. . . . Conservative educational theorists and business leaders are important influences on Whittle and Alexander. For example, Chester Finn Jr., . . . who served in the Nixon White House and later was a top policy-maker at the Education Department under Reagan, is also an old friend of Alexander's [who] "worked very closely" with Alexander on America 2000, [and was subsequently hired by Whittle to work on the Edison Project].
>
> Alexander himself was on the Whittle advisory board that guided Channel One and worked for Whittle after leaving the [Tennessee] governorship in 1987. His compensation was $125,000 in consulting fees plus the opportunity to buy four shares of Whittle stock, for which he wrote a $10,000 check, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. . . . At the end of 1988, Whittle bought back the stock for $330,000, giving the Alexanders a hefty profit. . . .
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> After his nomination as Secretary of Education, Alexander asked Whittle [and other business leaders] for their advice. In a series of meetings, three of which Whittle attended, the proposals that became America 2000 were mapped out along with a voucher system [that would support private schools], according to one participant. . . .
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> [Then,] after his confirmation, Alexander sold his home in Knoxville, Tennessee, for $977,500. He had paid $570,000 for it about a year before. The buyer was Gerald Hogan, a top executive of Whittle Communications. Hogan received a mortgage of $780,000 from the First Tennessee Bank. Alexander was on the board of the bank's holding company until he became Secretary of Education. Whittle is still on the board. . . .
>
> The Whittle-Alexander connection symbolizes the new alliance between business and government to exploit the educational system. . . . Whittle sees nothing wrong in this. Is there an inherent conflict between profits and education? No way. The biggest contribution business can make to education is to make education a business."
>
> —John S. Friedman (1992)

We don't want to suggest that all criticisms of education or proposals for reforming public schools are motivated by crass, selfish interests. Indeed, some criticism of education comes from people with genuine concern for the problems faced by our schools and are focused on the parts of education that clearly need fixing. But some school bashing certainly seems to reflect the special interests of the critics themselves; friends or business interests of the critics; or the ideological, racial, ethnic, religious, or class interests that critics represent. Such possibilities should alert us all to read criticism of the public schools with a healthy dose of skepticism.

American Individualism and the Powers of Education

> The cool, disinterested judgment of thousands of investigators shows that success or failure lies within the person himself [*sic*] rather than with outside conditions.
>
> —An early twentieth-century business analyst (quoted in Wyllie, 1954, pp. 32–33)

Since many people have criticized American education over the years, it seems likely that this criticism also reflects beliefs, expectations, and myths that are widely shared in American society.

One such myth concerns individual efficacy and the powers of education. Americans tend to assume that most social outcomes are generated by the characteristics of individuals—rather than, say, by unfair laws, structural forces in the society, industrial greed, accidents, or divine intervention. And we also believe that schools are given broad responsibility for molding individuals so that they are more likely to experience positive outcomes. This is all very well, but what happens when social outcomes are negative? And what happens when, as in the past twenty years, social problems escalate in America? What happens when American industries lose out to foreign competitors, when more and more people lose their jobs, when crime rates soar, when the country must deal with high rates of violence and drug addiction, when the divorce rate shoots up, or when Americans suffer in increasing numbers from sexually transmitted diseases? By extension of the above logic, the individuals experiencing those social problems are (obviously) responsible for their fates, the schools those individuals attended have (obviously) failed in their missions, and those schools should be brought to account.

Let's decompose this argument into its constituent beliefs. The first is *the myth of individual efficacy*. Almost since the country's founding, Americans have shared a tenacious belief that individuals in this country are largely responsible for their own outcomes, their own successes or failures. Thus, defying all odds, the person with enough skills and energy, and right attitude

can succeed. And the person who fails does so because of factors that he or she might have controlled.[40] Robert Reich provides a good description of this myth in his "American morality tale of the Triumphant Individual":

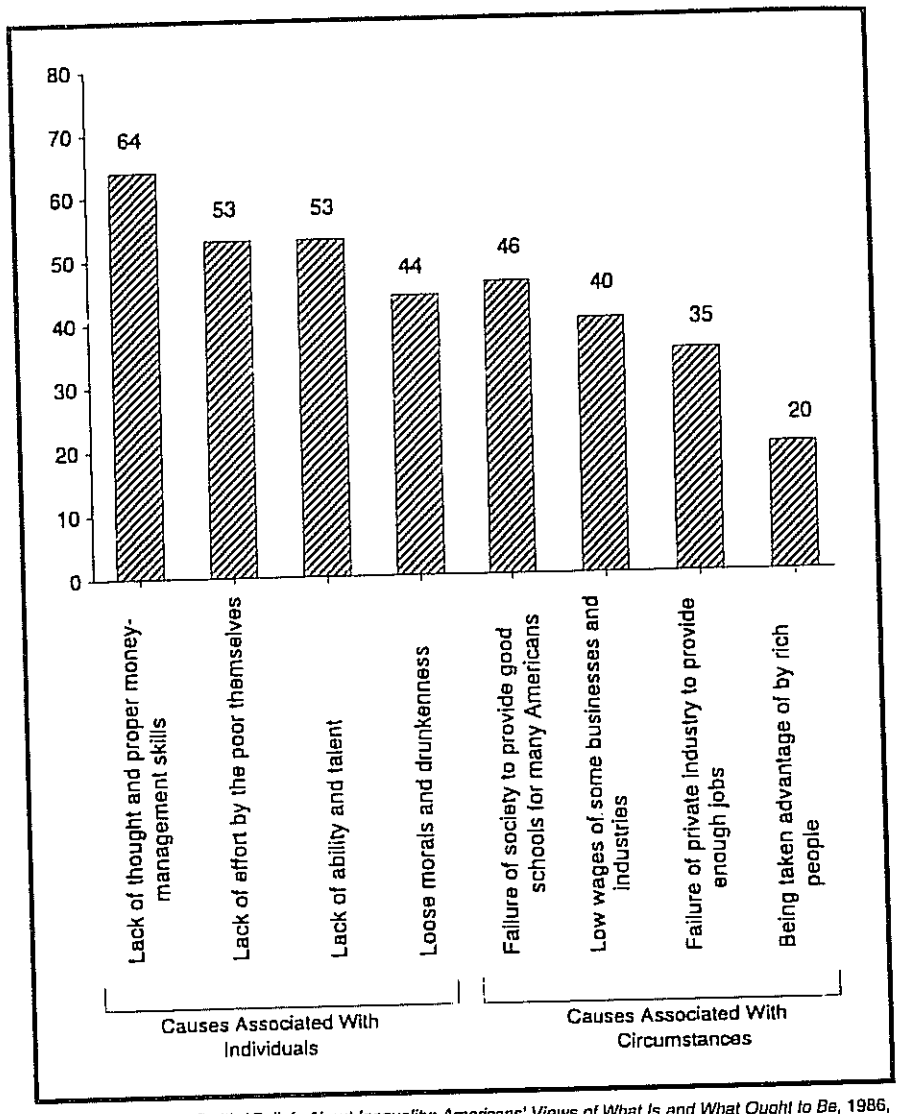
> This is the story of the little guy who works hard, takes risks, believes in himself, and eventually earns wealth, fame, and honor. It's the parable of the self-made man (or, more recently, woman) who bucks the odds, spurns the naysayers, and shows what can be done with enough drive and guts. . . . The theme recurs in the tale of Abe Lincoln, log splitter from Illinois who goes to the White House; in the hundred or so novellas of Horatio Alger, whose heroes all rise promptly and predictably from rags to riches. . . ; and in the American morality tales of the underdog who eventually makes it, showing up the bosses and bullies who try to put him down; think of *Rocky* or *Iacocca*. Regardless of the precise form, the moral is the same: With enough guts and gumption, anyone can make it on their own in America.[41]

As Reich suggests, Americans often tell one another versions of the myth of individual efficacy and assume that such tales have the effect of encouraging individual accomplishment.

Evidence also confirms American acceptance of the individualism myth. James Kluegel and Eliot Smith reported data from a 1980 national survey of Americans' beliefs about economic inequality.[42] Respondents were asked to rate the importance of various causes of wealth and poverty, some focused on the individual, some focused on circumstances. Exhibit 4.2 gives the percentages of respondents who said that each of the listed conditions was a "very important" cause for poverty. As can be seen, only three causes were thought to be "very important" by a majority of respondents, and those three were *all* associated with the individual. (Similar results were reported for causes of wealth.) What this suggests is that in 1980, most Americans assumed that the *individual* was largely responsible if he or she became poor—despite years of media coverage indicating that American poverty is often a result of involuntary unemployment, substandard wages, medical emergencies, family crises, or other circumstances beyond individual control.

Why do Americans embrace the myth of individual efficacy? Commentators suggest that this tendency is rooted in both American political history and in the weak structure of American institutions, which provide fewer "safety nets" than are provided in other Western countries. At the same time, the numbers suggest that acceptance of the individualism myth is by no means universal. Kluegel and Smith also looked at which Americans were most and least likely to endorse the myth, and—lo—they found that beliefs about individual efficacy were weaker among people who were most likely to have experienced economic failure or discrimination—namely, those who were young, black, female, impoverished, or from poorer sections of the country. The researchers commented, "The picture of the prototypical believer in the [myth of individualism that] emerges quite clearly and, perhaps not coinci-

Exhibit 4.2 Percentage of Americans Stating That Each Condition Is a Very Important Cause of Poverty



—Source: Kluegel & Smith (*Beliefs About Inequality: Americans' Views of What Is and What Ought to Be*, 1986, Table 4.2, p. 79).

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If the commentators are right, the myth of individual efficacy is preeminently American, and evidence is also available confirming that the myth is weaker in other countries. In an ingenious study, P. S. Fry and Ratna Ghosh asked leading academics (namely, those who had received Fulbright grants) in the United States and India to explain their professional successes and found that the Indians were *far* more likely to stress circumstantial causes such as family ties and luck.[44] Somehow, readers may not be surprised to learn that belief in individualism is lower in India than in the United States—indeed, such an effect has also been reported by other researchers[45]—but what about comparisons between the United States and other Western countries? A good answer to this question has come from research comparing Australia and the United States. An early study of American myths about poverty was reported in 1972 by Joe R. Feagin, and, two years later, Norman Feather published comparative findings suggesting that Australians were less likely to blame the poor for their poverty.[46] Moreover, in 1985 one of us collected data about the causes of poverty from matched samples from the United States and Australia and found that Australians gave much lower ratings than did Americans to individual causes, and much higher ratings to circumstantial causes.[47]

To summarize then, evidence suggests that many Americans embrace the myth of individual efficacy, that belief in this myth is somewhat less in other countries, and that belief in the myth is stronger among Americans who are rich and powerful. At best, the myth of individualism serves to motivate effort in America, but unfortunately, it also tends to discourage compassion and support programs for those who fail. Indeed, the myth is often cited by reactionary politicians in our country as an excuse for reducing public support for the poor and needy.

But what about the second part of our argument, beliefs about the responsibilities of schools for molding students? Earlier, we suggested that sharply different instructional tasks may be proposed for American schools by specific groups. (Compare, for example, demands from the Religious Right that the schools teach "creation science," requests by Neoconservatives that schools stress basic academic subjects, or proposals by Human Capital advocates that schools offer curricula for specific technologies.) Most analysts, however, also suggest that Americans tend to agree on a broad core of instructional tasks that schools should stress. A good discussion of these agreed-upon tasks recently appeared in *The Way Schools Work* by Kathleen Bennett de Marrais and Margaret LeCompte, and we reproduce the tasks they list as Exhibit 4.3.

One can argue with the specific tasks appearing in such lists, of course. (To illustrate, aesthetic interests and motor skills do not appear in it.) But the basic point is that American schools are given responsibility for a *broad range* of instructional tasks that can help students achieve success and avoid failure. Thus, if we accept the Bennett de Marrais and LeCompte list, we see

■ EXHIBIT 4.3

Instructional Tasks for Schools in America

Kathleen Bennett de Marrais and Margaret LeCompte suggest that "commonly held or conventional wisdom" has it that American schools are expected to accomplish four types of instructional tasks—intellectual, political, economic, and social.

Intellectual Tasks

1. To assist students in the acquisition of cognitive skills (reading, mathematics, etc.)
2. To assist students in the acquisition of substantive knowledge
3. To assist students in the acquisition of inquiry skills (evaluation, synthesis, etc.)

Political Tasks

1. To educate future citizens for appropriate participation in the given political order
2. To promote patriotism by teaching myths, history, and stories about the country, its leaders and government
3. To promote the assimilation of immigrants
4. To assure order, public civility, and conformity to laws

Economic Tasks

1. To prepare students for later work roles
2. To select and train the labor force

Social Tasks

1. To promote a sense of social and moral responsibility in people
2. To serve as sites for the solution or amelioration of social problems
3. To supplement the efforts of other institutions of socialization, such as the family and the church

—Adapted from Kathleen Bennett de Marrais and Margaret LeCompte (*The Way Schools Work: A Sociological Analysis of Education*, Second Edition, 1995, pp. 9–13).

that Americans believe that schools can and should assist students in intellectual tasks AND political tasks AND economic tasks AND social tasks. This does not mean that American schools can actually *accomplish* such a wide range of tasks, of course. (Indeed, evidence concerning the accomplishment of many of these tasks is, at best, skimpy.) But Americans tend to share a wide range of beliefs about the potential *ability* of their schools to do a great deal.

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Let us call such beliefs *the myth of unbounded instructional responsibility.* Is there any evidence to back up the notion that Americans embrace this myth? Indeed there is. Look again at Exhibit 4.2. Of the four causes for poverty associated with circumstances, the cause involving *schools* received the highest rating for importance, which means that in 1980 Americans judged *schools* to have more of an effect on poverty than low wages, lack of jobs, or being taken advantage of by the rich. Moreover, a wide range of other studies have also reported that Americans hold broad expectations for the ability of schools to help students accomplish many goals in life.

Why should Americans hold such broad expectations for schools? Perhaps it is because they reflect a history of educational advocacy by influential Americans, ranging from Thomas Jefferson to Horace Mann, Edward A. Ross, John Dewey, and others who have argued that schools should be viewed as coming to replace the church, family, and community as the *primary* institution for socializing young people, thus solving a broad range of social problems in the country. Moreover, America's broad expectations for schools contrast with narrower expectations that have generally evolved in other Western countries.

American educators and their supporters have also generally embraced the myths of individual efficacy and unbounded instructional responsibility. Such myths flatter the public schools and may (it is hoped) promote additional financial support for education. But when educators embrace such myths they also make schools more vulnerable to criticism. Many social problems worsened during the past two decades in America, and if Americans believe (a) that the individuals who suffer from those problems are personally responsible for them, and (b) that the schools they attended had the ability, but failed, to educate those people for better conduct, the fat is indeed in the fire. How many times recently have you heard or read one or more of the following complaints?

- Because schools have provided sex education courses—or, sometimes, have *failed* to provide sex education courses(!)—young people are more promiscuous, teenage pregnancy rates have soared, and we suffer from the AIDS epidemic
- Because schools have failed, too many Americans are illiterate, lack basic mathematical skill, are ignorant of geography, or cannot write or spell coherently
- Because schools have failed, Americans do not vote, cannot name their senators, tolerate urban corruption, and know less about the history of their country than people do elsewhere
- Because American schools have failed, gangs of youth roam the streets, drug use has soared, and urban violence dominates our cities

- Because American schools have failed, American youths lack the work ethic, Christian values, concern for the environment, the habit of thrift, and respect for the flag
- Because schools have failed, the American economy is currently deteriorating—indeed, "our educational system is failing miserably to prepare young people for today's competitive world."[48]

Thus, beliefs in the myths of individual efficacy and unbounded instructional responsibility can become a major force generating criticism of public schools when, as in recent years, social problems are getting worse in America. Unfortunately, American educators have often been guilty of "selling" both of these myths. And the selling of myths can be dangerous.

The Use, Misuse, and Abuse of Evidence

> Why all the fuss, then? How, if at all, did the criticisms of the 1980s differ from those that had come before? I believe that they differed in three important ways: they were more vigorous and pervasive; they were putatively buttressed by data from cross-national studies of educational achievement; and, coming at a time when Americans seemed to be feeling anxious about their place in the world, they gave every indication of being potentially more dangerous and destructive.
>
> —Lawrence Cremin (*Popular Education and Its Discontents*, 1990, pp. 6–7)

We turn finally to a factor that sharply increased the force of recent criticisms. As never before, those criticisms were often bolstered by claims of *evidence*—by supposed findings from national surveys and cross-cultural and historical research—that seemed to point to shortcomings in American education. Whereas authors in the past could only cite anecdotes or personal opinions to back their criticisms of education, critics in the 1980s were able to draw on a host of "negative" findings from massive studies that apparently confirmed the poor performance of American schools.

Such negative findings seem to have played two roles in critical thinking about education. In some cases, particularly in the early 1980s, specific negative findings were apparently unexpected. These seem to have been accepted without question by critics, and became, in effect, a force that helped to generate sincere concern about American schools. More recently, however, ideologically driven criticism of the schools has grown more strident, and negative findings known to be questionable or wrong are now being cited in that criticism—findings that are often drawn from unidentified or secondary sources, and are used as ritualized support for lambasting education.[49]

Simplistic Analyses. As we have made clear, most of these apparently negative findings about school effects are chimerical. Or, to quote *The Sandia Report,* "much of the nonproductive rhetoric surrounding education today is based on improper use of simplistic data."[50] American education faces structural problems that are unique in the Western world, and American schools today serve the needs of students from a very broad range of ethnic, social class, and economic backgrounds. And once these factors are taken into account, it turns out that American schools today are actually doing quite well. This fact illustrates the first of several points we want to make about the misuse of evidence.

Let us assume that one is shown a simple graph, table, or statistic from survey data showing that student achievement in America is lower than student achievement in other countries. Does this mean that inadequacies in American schools "caused" this result? To jump to this conclusion is tempting but unwise, since other forces could easily have produced such a result.

To understand how this can happen, consider the effects of poverty on student achievement. Many, many studies have shown that impoverished students do badly in school. Moreover, a *much* larger proportion of students live in poverty in the United States than in other Western countries. (This dismal fact may surprise some readers; data confirming it are given in Chapter 6.) Taken together, these two facts mean that if one compares only the simple, aggregated achievement scores of students in Western nations, the United States is bound to look bad simply because it has to contend with more student poverty.

How, then, does one estimate the *true* effects of American schools on student achievement in multinational studies? To do this, in the analysis one must control for the effects of other crucial factors that are also related to achievement, such as student poverty. This can be done in various ways. Sometimes the analyst will construct a graph or table showing disaggregated levels of achievement for students who are and who are not impoverished in the countries compared. On other occasions the analyst may use complex statistical techniques (such as "regression analysis") that allow one to estimate the independent impact of several different factors—such as nationality and student poverty—that have concurrent effects on school achievement. Regardless of the technique used, when one conducts an analysis that also controls for the effects of other crucial factors, one may discover surprising things about national differences in school achievement. Sometimes the apparent national differences that appeared in simplistic analyses are increased; sometimes they are reduced sharply; sometimes they are even reversed!

This suggests a general point that we shall call the "Principle of Control," which states that to estimate the true effect of a factor using survey data one MUST control, in the analysis, for the effects of other crucial factors that can affect the relationship. Trained data analysts are very aware of this principle—indeed, it is one of the first things taught in courses on statistics. More-

over, the general public is also coming to understand the principle. Consider, for example, the many demands people have made to apply controls in studies of the effects of tobacco smoking on lung cancer.

But why then have so many critics been willing to quote simplistic "negative" findings as if they indicated the true effects of American schools? It seems possible that early critics were actually ignorant of the "Principle of Control," that a decade or two ago they may have thought that simple interpretations of aggregate survey findings were justified. That was then, but today is now, and good analyses, involving controls, are now available that examine the impact of schools on achievement—see Chapter 2. Most of these analyses suggest that the original dismal portrayal of American schools suggested by simplistic findings was *wrong*—when appropriate controls are applied, American schools look quite good in both cross-cultural and historical studies. Therefore, it is now less tenable to argue that the critics are simply ignorant. (Is it possible that they cling to simple, negative, aggregate findings because they don't like to admit error and want to continue bashing the schools?)

Liars, Damn Liars, and Statisticians. Violations of the "Principle of Control" are certainly serious, but alas, other techniques are also available for those interested in misusing evidence. Another example is provided by the work of Chubb and Moe that we discussed in Chapter 3.[51] To recapitulate the Chubb and Moe technique, their text claims that the educational programs of private schools generate higher levels of achievement than do those of public schools and implies that this claim was supported by their analyses of survey data. But in their analyses they did *not* provide findings comparing the net effects of public and private schools in a single, controlled analysis. Instead, they strung together several analyses (using different controls) which showed that, by comparison, private schools were more likely to have certain characteristics, and that those characteristics were, in turn, associated with achievement. Such procedures are statistical voodoo, and it seems likely that Chubb and Moe knew this was the case.

Other examples where textual claims are not backed up by the evidence cited are also easy to find. Consider, for example, *National Excellence: A Case for Developing America's Talent*, a document released in late 1993 by the U.S. Department of Education. This document advocates spending more for the education of talented students, "reviews" evidence concerning the issue, and makes various claims concerning the treatment of talented students in American schools. One of its claims states that

> Compared with top students in other industrialized countries, American students perform poorly on international tests, are offered a less rigorous curriculum, read fewer demanding books, do less homework, and enter the work force or postsecondary education less well prepared.[52]

This sounds as if data are available comparing the treatment and achievements of equivalently defined groups of "talented" students in various countries, but NO such data are reviewed in *National Excellence.* Instead, the authors of this work merely recapitulated the standard, misleading, aggregate evidence from studies comparing the total range of students in the educational systems of different countries. Thus, their claims were not matched by the evidence they cited, and we know of at least one well-meaning commentator who was bamboozled by those claims.[53]

Evidence should always be matched to results that are claimed in textual materials, and researchers or reviewers are culpable when they do not conform to this tenet, which we shall call the "Principle of Honest Claims." Unfortunately, many lay persons are either frightened or bored by statistical evidence, tables, graphs, or study details. When such people read research reports, they have few options other than to swallow whole hog the textual claims that those reports make. Needless to say, this is unwise. Most educational researchers and reviewers are also advocates for something-or-other—just as we clearly are—and sometimes the claims they make are driven more by wishful thinking or expediency than by honesty. (And for this reason, although we have tried to honor the "Principle of Honest Claims," readers should also look closely at the evidence *we* cite to back *our* assertions.) Viable plans for improving education are more likely to evolve when *honest* claims are made; and to monitor those claims, people must be prepared to grit their teeth, screw up their courage, and *look* at the evidence cited by investigators.

Confusing Science and News. A more subtle problem appears in the way in which empirical results are sometimes reported. As we noted in Chapter 3, on two different occasions James Coleman and assorted colleagues announced early conclusions to the press, based on massive survey evidence, that were damaging to public education.[54] In neither case had these conclusions been given peer review. On both occasions the conclusions had been generated by questionable techniques, and subsequent reanalyses of the data have generated findings that contradicted those of Coleman and his associates. But in each case the early, questionable conclusions set the tone for subsequent debates, and critics to this day continue to cite both sets of early conclusions as if they were gospel.

Great mischief can result when investigators trumpet premature, poorly reviewed, biased conclusions to the press in the name of research evidence. To do so violates a tenet we shall call the "Principle of Responsible Publicity." Although violations of this principle are easy to find for research on schooling and its effects, they are by no means confined to education. An egregious violation appeared recently, for example, when two investigators at the University of Utah, B. Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann, called a press conference in which they claimed to have found evidence for cold fusion.[55] The research conducted by the Utah group had *not* been given peer review—in-

deed, the researchers had not at that time submitted even a single report of their research to colleagues. But their premature claims were embraced by the gullible media, and those media reports quickly generated millions of promised dollars for research support from foundations and the Utah state legislature, as well as scores of time-consuming research projects in other laboratories trying (in vain) to replicate the Utah results.

As this example suggests, irresponsible publicity about research in the physical and biological sciences can waste dollars and the efforts of other researchers, but such irresponsibility is even more serious when it comes to education. Indeed, unwise policy decisions that affect the lives of thousands of students are *still* being made by people who cite the erroneous early findings of the 1966 Coleman Report. How can people guard against such irresponsibility? They can do so in several ways: by being skeptical, by being aware that some researchers will be tempted to violate the "Principle of Responsible Publicity," by remembering that unimpeachable results simply cannot be obtained by a single study, by checking the fit between claimed results and study evidence, by refusing to give credence to announced results unless those results have been given responsible peer review. Such strategies will not throttle all premature research publicity, of course, but they will help to blunt the damage that such publicity can otherwise cause.

Propaganda, Dissimulation, and Research. Yet another strategy for misusing evidence appeared in *What Works: Research About Teaching and Learning*.[56] This sixty-five-page publication, reportedly an unbiased review of research findings, was released amidst much fanfare by the U.S. Department of Education in January of 1986, complete with a foreword by Secretary William Bennett and a dedication by President Ronald Reagan. By midsummer of that year, over three hundred thousand copies were in circulation, according to a departmental news release. Moreover, the document was received warmly by many lay people and investigators, who were impressed that, at long last, "important personages" had something good to say about educational research.

Sounds promising, doesn't it? But let's look more closely at *What Works*. After an introduction by Assistant Secretary Chester Finn (the primary developer of the work), the bulk of the publication consisted of a set of snappy, one-page summaries of research "findings" that were expressed and interpreted so that they appeared to be extensions of "common sense." Many of these summaries were also set off by quotations from "distinguished thinkers" of bygone years, implying that the "findings" were mere confirmations of revered wisdom. In addition, the "findings" chosen were focused almost entirely on the impact of teachers or parents on pupil achievement and papered over major debates in the research literature.

All of these ploys were deliberate. In his dedication to *What Works*, President Reagan wrote of his hope that through "renewed trust in common

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sense, we Americans will have even greater success in our unstinting efforts to improve our schools," and in his foreword Secretary Bennett stated,

> Most readers will, I think, judge that most of the evidence in this volume confirms common sense. So be it. Given the abuse that common sense has taken in recent decades, particularly in the theory and practice of education, it is no small contribution if research can play a role in bringing more of it to American education.[57]

And in his introduction, Assistant Secretary Finn said, "In this volume . . . we draw upon the knowledge and opinions both of modern scholars and of distinguished thinkers of earlier times."[58]

Regarding the narrow focus of *What Works,* Assistant Secretary Finn acknowledged that its coverage was not "comprehensive" but suggested that materials left out reflected topics for which "not much formal research has yet been done, or that which has been done is fragmentary, inconclusive, or hotly disputed."[59] This assertion no doubt "impressed" the hundreds of authors of (totally ignored) studies on computer-assisted instruction, for which major summary articles had already appeared, or the many, many researchers who had generated well-established (but equally ignored) findings for the effects of school and community characteristics on pupil achievement. Moreover, the summaries also slighted serious debates then underway about findings concerning the effects of teachers and parents.[60]

Far from being unbiased, then, *What Works* was in fact a clever piece of propaganda—disguised as a review of research—that was designed to further the initial educational goals of the Reagan administration. What were those goals? As we noted earlier, they were generally those of the Far Right. Thus, in his 1987 review of *What Works,* Gene Glass observed,

> The political goals of *What Works* are those of the administration that produced it: to disestablish the federal bureaucracy in education, to decentralize control over education, to deregulate the practice of schooling, and to diminish financial support for schools. *What Works* seeks to further these goals by (a) arguing that the results of educational research merely confirm what has already been apprehended by common sense or revealed in the works of great thinkers, and (b) maintaining that the only needed reform in schooling is a change in the ethos of the school and classroom—a change in the way teachers and parents think about and act toward children—not a change in the level of resources invested in education. . . . [Moreover,] if, as *What Works* argues, the findings of educational research are "common sense," then the apparatus of federal support for educational research that has grown up since 1956 . . . is unnecessary.[61]

It would be disingenuous to slight *What Works* alone for biased reviewing. Virtually all works of advocacy tend to cite studies that support, and ignore those that contradict, their arguments. But honest authors explain their agenda so that readers can take the authors' biases into account when assessing their research evidence. *What Works* was culpable because it hid its intentions and pretended to be something other than a piece of propaganda. It thus

violated a tenet that we shall call the "Principle of Open Advocacy." Moreover, a lot of well-meaning people were taken in by its pretenses.

Suppressing Evidence. Given that people in the Reagan and Bush administrations were willing to misuse evidence to further an agenda hostile to public education, we should not be surprised to learn that the same people were also willing to suppress evidence when that evidence contradicted their ideas. We discuss two instances where this was done systematically.

Our first example occurred during the later years of the Reagan administration and involved the National Science Foundation—of all agencies. The NSF has always portrayed itself as committed to good evidence, impeccable analysis, peer review, and honest dealing—all absolutely required in an organization dedicated to supporting scientific research in the national interest.

Despite these principles, in 1985 an employee of the NSF prepared a badly flawed study suggesting that since the number of twenty-two-year-olds in the population was declining, the nation's supply of scientists and engineers would soon suffer a serious "shortfall." This study had many defects. Among others, it provided no information at all about likely demands for scientists and engineers; thus its projection of a "shortfall" tacitly assumed that demands for their skills would remain constant. (For obvious reasons, *responsible* labor-force studies make estimates for both supply and demand.) These defects were well known in the NSF. Indeed, from the beginning the 1985 study had been roundly criticized by others in the agency.

Despite its defects, this study became the basis for a vigorous campaign and scores of speeches by the Director of the NSF, Erich Bloch, who argued that the nation faced a serious "crisis" and had to step up its production of scientists and engineers. Endless versions of the 1985 study were prepared, and these were circulated widely by NSF officials. Outside peer reviews of the study were assiduously avoided, and contradicting data were ignored or suppressed. Eventually, however, the chickens came home to roost. When the predicted "shortfall" of scientists and engineers failed to materialize, the NSF came under attack. Finally, in April of 1992, the NSF was called upon to explain its actions in a congressional inquiry. Howard Wolpe, chair of the subcommittee which conducted the inquiry, wrote a marvelous summary of the NSF story that we have abridged as Exhibit 4.4.

Not only had the NSF conducted a flawed study, but it had trumpeted the conclusions of that study widely, ignoring and suppressing contradictory evidence, in order to promote the idea that America was facing a serious "shortfall" of scientists and engineers. Why on earth did NSF officials try to sell this false notion to Americans? Howard Wolpe suggested that this action was motivated largely by desires to increase the NSF budget. Perhaps. It is also true that industrialists who embrace the Human Capital ideology were then complaining loudly about the need to train additional scientists and engineers—a need that, if met, would also mean they could hire qualified

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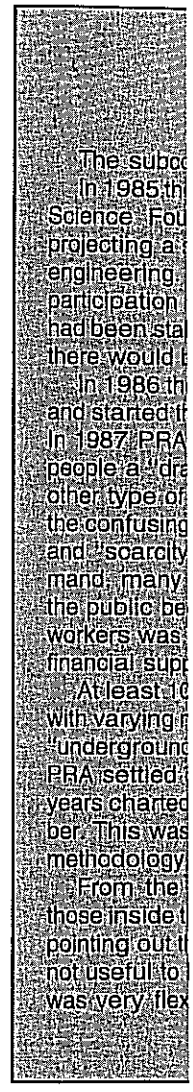

professionals for a lot less money. Is it possible that officials of the Reagan administration wanted to help those industrialists?

Unfortunately, this was not the only occasion when evidence about education was suppressed during the Reagan and Bush years. Our second example concerns *The Sandia Report*,[62] which we have described in earlier chapters. This report, initially prepared in 1990 by officials of the Sandia National Laboratories, a component of the U.S. Department of Energy, documents a careful analysis of the status of American education. Major findings in *The Sandia Report* flatly contradicted claims about education that were then being

■ EXHIBIT 4.4

How Good Are the Numbers?

The subcommittee will come to order. Good morning.

In 1985 the Policy and Research Analysis Division, or PRA, of the National Science Foundation began to work on a demographically based study projecting a shortfall of 692,000 bachelor's degrees in natural science and engineering. The study was a deceptively simple one. It held that, as the participation rate of 22-year-olds in natural science and engineering degrees had been stable for a decade, and the number of 22-year-olds was dropping, there would be a shortfall of degrees.

In 1986 the then director of the Foundation took that number to Congress and started the shortfall ball rolling in his fiscal year 1987 budget testimony. In 1987 PRA furthered it by publishing and distributing to over a thousand people a "draft" of the study. It had never been peer reviewed or given any other type of serious methodological review before its release. Because of the confusing and interchangeable use of the words "shortfall," "shortage," and "scarcity," and discussions by Foundation officials of supply and demand, many members of Congress, academic institutions, the media, and the public became convinced fewer degrees meant that a real shortage of workers was looming, and government intervention in the form of increased financial support for science and engineering education was necessary.

At least 10 other drafts were produced and distributed between 1988–90 with varying numbers and years of shortfalls. They became known as NSF's "underground literature," with different people possessing different drafts. PRA settled on a constant number of 675,000, but, strangely enough, the years charted changed from report to report without any change in that number. This was relatively easy to do, as the report contained no statement of methodology, data points, lists of assumptions, or bibliography.

From the very beginning, labor economists and statisticians, including those inside the Foundation, scoffed at the methodology as seriously flawed, pointing out that new graduates were only one part of supply . . . that it was not useful to look at supply without looking at demand, and that the market was very flexible in adjusting to demand. The Foundation's statistical unit

(continued on next page)

peddled by President Bush and others in his administration, so the report was squelched.

How this was done is largely told by Daniel Tanner,[63] and we draw much of our story from his account. By early 1990 George Bush had announced his intention to become "the education president." Since this goal involved overhauling the supposed shortcomings of schools, officials in his administration were motivated to help by gathering supportive evidence. To this end, James Watkins, then secretary of energy, made the "tragic mistake" of instructing the Sandia National Laboratories, a former wing of the Atomic

found that the "stable" participation rate wasn't stable. However, the study, through its repeated use in speeches and testimony by the Foundation's director, university administrators, and members of Congress, and countless articles and news stories, took on a life of its own that was slowed only when the engineering community publicly attacked it in late 1990. . . . Even today, the study's echoes still are heard in news stories and halls of Capitol Hill. Senator Danforth cited it in discussing the NASA authorization bill last year; *Fortune* Magazine referred to it just last month. . . .

The purpose of this hearing is to review how a study so flawed survived for so long in the Nation's premier scientific agency. The subcommittee's investigation has revealed that valid criticism was ignored and even suppressed within the Foundation. A $3000 internal peer review report was deep-sixed in 1989. The Foundation's statistical unit, which is charged with providing information about scientific and technical personnel resources to the Administration and the Congress, never agreed with these numbers, but its objections and its work were ignored by NSF officials. . . . Although the Foundation claimed in a letter to me that the 1987 draft had been reviewed, when GAO contacted the reviewers, it found that none of them had conducted a review beyond casual conversations in the hallway.

In 1991, after the study was ridiculed publicly—and the already four-year-old projected shortfall/shortage showed no signs of materializing—the NSF quietly buried the study and removed the 675,000 number from its lexicon. The new head of the planning office admitted to us that a study of supply without demand was not "very useful." But the NSF has never publicly repudiated the study or the manner in which it was used. And as far as we can tell, it has taken no steps to prevent a recurrence. An advisory committee that recommended that publicly released policy work be peer reviewed was unceremoniously scrapped last fall during the NSF reorganization. Regrettably, there is as yet little evidence to indicate that the NSF is particularly concerned about the repercussions the study has had on the Foundation's reputation or the structural weaknesses that allowed this terribly flawed work product to be given wholly undeserved legitimacy.

—Rep. Howard Wolpe (opening statement made by its Chairman to a Hearing before the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight of the Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, U.S. House of Representatives, 1992)

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Energy Commission, to undertake a comprehensive study of the status of American education. (Sandia had previously done some research on higher education, and it was also hoped that the study would allow Sandia to plan future activities relevant to primary and secondary schools.)

The study itself drew from existing data sources and was originally drafted in late 1990. It was then circulated among various educators and researchers for comment, and it became the subject of briefings in the Department of Education and a congressional hearing in the summer of 1991. Alarmingly (to supporters of President Bush), many of its findings flatly contradicted claims then being made by administration officials, claims that eventually undergirded Bush's education initiative, America 2000. This led officials in the Department of Education and others in the administration to demand that *The Sandia Report not* be released but instead that it be subjected to unprecedented reviews by minions of the National Center for Education Statistics and the National Science Foundation. (Ironically the task of reviewing in the NSF seems to have been assigned to the same person who had earlier prepared the flawed 1985 study, which predicted the nonexistent "shortfall" of scientists and engineers!)

These reviews were conducted, the reviewers dutifully detected trivial "flaws" in the report, and it was recommended that the report not be released but that it be rewritten and subjected to further reviews. Following these recommendations, the report *was* rewritten and was subjected to more internal review, further demands for rewriting, and even an audit by the General Accounting Office[64]—all of which effectively prevented timely release of the report.

But America is a wonderful land, where photocopying machines abound, and within a few months scores of draft copies of the report had been "leaked" and were floating around the country. A condensed version of the report was then printed by the *Albuquerque Journal* on September 24, 1991. As Daniel Tanner explains, this "prompted Secretary Watkins to issue an immediate response, . . . dated 30 September, [which] opened with this sentence: 'The Sandia National Laboratories study, "Perspectives on Education in America," reported in your September 24 issue is dead wrong.'"[65] Finally, the report itself eventually appeared in the *Journal of Educational Research*—without fanfare, without even a listing of its authors!—after George Bush had been voted out of office. To our knowledge, no former official of the Bush administration has as yet publicly acknowledged that, in view of Sandia report evidence, some claims about "the education crisis" or plans outlined in America 2000 might have to be modified.

The trouble with suppressing evidence is that it leads to policy errors that can ruin people's lives. Thus, when the National Science Foundation suppressed the truth about America's production of scientists and engineers, the federal government increased its support for training in these fields, and

hundreds of America's scientists and engineers now cannot find jobs.[66] Moreover, a host of well-known, well-intentioned Americans have been deceived by the nonsense that a shortage of scientists and engineers is impending. In 1993, for example, the American Psychological Association published a volume detailing how psychologists could help to solve the "looming" shortage of scientists and engineers. As we noted in Chapter 3, this book began with a foreword by Charles Spielberger, then president of the association, which referred to "predicted catastrophic shortfalls by the turn of the century" in the supply of scientists, engineers, and technicians.[67] And many similar quotes could be cited from other academics, university administrators, and political leaders from across the nation. Seldom have so many well-intentioned people been so seriously misled by their government!

And when the Bush administration suppressed *The Sandia Report,* it allowed lies to be repeated that scapegoated educators and prompted actions that have harmed American schools. Moreover, lies are hard to defeat. Most Americans do not know today that much of the Bush rhetoric about education was effectively contradicted by *The Sandia Report,* which was originally drafted in 1990, and good-hearted people are still being asked to consider tragic policy proposals that follow from those uncontested lies.

These two episodes, then, involved violation of one of the most basic of all tenets concerning evidence, which we shall call the "Principle of Open and Honest Reporting." One absolute condition of democracy is that citizens have access to relevant information, and this condition is violated when governments suppress evidence. These two episodes were not the only cases of suppression of evidence by American governments, of course. (As we write, Americans are just beginning to discover how often they were lied to about "experiments" that involved dosing unwitting victims with massive amounts of radiation. Somewhere down this road one finds totalitarianism and the Nazi death camps.) But, to the best of our knowledge, prior to the Reagan and Bush administrations, *no* American government had ever suppressed evidence about primary and secondary education. And it is difficult to understand how the public can make effective decisions about education—or any other concern, for that matter—unless it has full access to the facts.

Press Irresponsibility. For better or worse, citizens in a modern urban society depend strongly on the mass media for much of their information. When they tune to network news programs or read the front page of their daily newspapers, they expect to find accurate accounts of newsworthy events. Unfortunately, that expectation is not always met. Sadly, news media are not generally rewarded for documenting "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth." Rather, they frequently earn their Nielsen ratings or circulation figures by pandering to public fascination with catastrophe, exaggeration, human-interest stories, and superficial reporting. Germs of truth are present

in news stories, of course, but it is often difficult to separate the truth from the "chaff."

The media seem to have particular difficulty when it comes to reports of research. Some of the nation's more "responsible" newspapers—such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*—will prepare stories that report not only research findings but also study details, potential problems with research claims, and the identities of investigators.[68] But this information is often stripped away in wire-service accounts or secondary reports that appear in network news programs or local newspapers. Thus, what the majority of Americans learn is only that "research shows . . . " or "a study has found . . . " something or other. This converts a tentative and questionable conclusion into "certain knowledge." Moreover, since the media feed off one another extensively, the most attractive or hysterical bits of "certain knowledge" associated with research spread like wildfire.

We could cite many examples of how this kind of media irresponsibility has hurt education, but we describe only three here. Our first example concerns press treatment of *A Nation At Risk*. As we have noted, this document made many charges about recent "declines" in the achievement of American students and about how "poorly" those students were supposedly doing in international comparisons. These charges were all said to be based on evidence, yet *not one study* was cited in the document to support those charges. By itself, this is not too surprising. Propaganda pieces often make unsupportable claims for which no citations are provided, and responsible journalists will either ignore such works or discuss their evidentiary shortcomings. But this kind of careful treatment was *not* given to *A Nation At Risk*. Instead, this document was reported in literally hundreds of newspaper and television accounts across the nation, and as far as we can tell, *none* of those reports noted its lack of citations or called for documentation of its incendiary charges. (In this case, even the "responsible" newspapers seemed to have been mesmerized by the prestigious creators of *A Nation At Risk* and did not notice its shortcomings.) As a result, the public was led to believe that the claims it made were unimpeachable.

Our second example concerns media reports of Americans' supposed ratings of "top" problems in public schools, as discussed by Barry O'Neill in his article, "The History of a Hoax." Readers may have seen one or more news reports of "surveys" from the 1940s and 1980s that compared "the public's lists of top school problems" for those decades. According to one version of this report,

> In the 40's the [top] problems were: 1. talking; 2. chewing gum; 3. making noise; 4. running in the halls; 5. getting out of turn in line; 6. wearing improper clothing; 7. not putting paper in wastebaskets. [In contrast] the top problems in the 80's had become: 1. drug abuse; 2. alcohol abuse; 3. pregnancy; 4. suicide; 5. rape; 6. robbery; 7. assault.[69]

Clearly, such evidence would indicate that our schools have become dreadful, threatening places!

Of course, this was all nonsense. No such surveys had ever been conducted. Indeed, when O'Neill was finally able to trace the story back to its roots, he found that it had first been expressed, about 1982, as a set of personal opinions by one "T. Cullen Davis of Fort Worth, a born-again Christian who devised the lists as a fundamentalist attack on public schools." Then, by a complex process of misreporting and advocacy, the lists were repeated, elaborated, and converted into "surveys" by other members of the Religious Right (Tim LeHay, Phyllis Schlafly, and Mel and Norma Gabler), officials from the state of California, and then—literally—hundreds of different newspaper, magazine, and television accounts. And given wide circulation as news stories by the press, the tale of worsening school problems has since been repeated by many columnists, leading federal politicians (such as William Bennett), education officials (such as Joseph Fernández, former chancellor of New York City schools), and academics (such as Derek Bok, former president of Harvard). Indeed, O'Neill suggests that these lists have now become "the most quoted 'results' of educational research, and possibly the most influential." Thus, once again, public schools were given a black eye because of a media "feeding frenzy."

Our third example concerns press treatment of the "political correctness" issue in higher education. A good review of this matter has recently been prepared by the National Council for Research on Women, and we draw from their account.[70] In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a set of books appeared attacking higher education in America, several of them financed by ultra-conservative foundations.[71] These works charged or implied that "liberals" had taken over American campuses and were now preventing the expression of viewpoints they deemed not to be "politically correct." In response, the press began slowly to generate stories concerning the "political correctness" issue. Then, in 1991, Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* appeared. In this work D'Souza discussed six examples of policy conflicts at prestigious universities—conflicts that had *not* been resolved in ways approved by the Far Right—thus creating "the false impression that most of the nation's 3,500 colleges and universities were engulfed in the 'p.c.' debates and experiencing conflict over diversity in exactly the same way."[72] As a result, massive numbers of news stories about "political correctness" began to appear—3,989 in 1991 alone—the vast majority relying only on secondary accounts or drawing simply from the six incidents that had been portrayed by D'Souza.

Thus, through cupidity, bias, or desires to pander to readers, the media had created beliefs that "liberals" were on the rampage and that "political correctness" debates were rife on American campuses. These beliefs were not only false but were flatly contradicted by evidence of continuing right-wing intolerance associated with race, gender, and sexual preference on those same campuses.[73] Such beliefs have caused headaches for university administrators

and have diverted attention from the real problems of American higher education.

These three examples illustrate a specific form of press irresponsibility, violation of a tenet we shall call the "Principle of Source Citation." As a rule, scholars will not tolerate the citing of secondary materials but demand that their colleagues look at and cite original sources when discussing research results. It may be too much to ask that journalists actually *look* at original research documents, but it is surely not too much to demand that journalists *cite* their sources when writing about research and take responsibility for alerting readers when propagandists have failed to provide needed citations.

It is a nasty fact that many public lies are now uttered in the name of research, and those lies can cause untold mischief in education and other public-policy fields. It would help keep these lies within manageable bounds if journalists were trained to respect—and tried always to honor—the "Principle of Source Citation."

Beyond this basic point, the three examples we've given also illustrate an observation we've made in earlier chapters. For obscure reasons the press delights in stories about the failures of education but shies away from stories that report education's successes. We're not the first people to have observed this effect, of course.[74] But until and unless the press can be induced to mend its ways, Americans will continue to be given the false impression that their public schools, colleges, and universities are in deep trouble—when in fact they are doing remarkably well despite the increasing social problems of American society. This, then, is a second, pervasive form of press irresponsibility.

The Proper Use of Evidence. To summarize, recent criticisms of American schools have often been bolstered by impressive claims of evidence that appeared, on first glance, to support arguments about our "troubled" schools. On closer examination, however, many of those claims have turned out to be garbage. A decade or so ago one could be persuaded that at least some of the critics were making honest errors when they cited faulty evidence. Over time, however, the notion that misuse of evidence by the critics represents "honest errors" has worn thin. Unfortunately, recent critics of the schools have employed various tactics for misusing and abusing evidence, often aided by a biased, ignorant, or hysterical press. People who are sincerely interested in improving American education must be alert to such chicanery.

Since it is frighteningly easy to misuse and misunderstand evidence concerning education, we suggest a final tenet, which we state in the form of a three-part maxim in Exhibit 4.5. When it comes to evidence concerning education and other matters of social policy, it is very easy to misinterpret that evidence; advocates and scoundrels are only too likely to embrace or create those misinterpretations; and the press and public are far more willing to buy into those misinterpretations than to examine the evidence on which

■ EXHIBIT 4.5
Berliner and Biddle's Evidence Maxim

Evidence attracts misinterpretation.
Misinterpretations attract advocates and scoundrels.
Advocates and scoundrels attract the press and the multitudes
who far prefer to be told tales than to look at the evidence.

they are based. Let all of the many, many friends of education take appropriate heed!

Legitimate Concerns

> If there is a crisis in American schooling, it is not the crisis of putative mediocrity and decline charged by the recent reports but rather a crisis inherent in balancing [the] tremendous variety of demands Americans have made on their schools and colleges—of crafting curricula that take account of the needs of a modern society at the same time that they make provision for the extraordinary diversity of America's young people; of designing institutions where well-prepared teachers can teach under supportive conditions, and where *all* students can be motivated and assisted to develop their talents to the fullest; and of providing the necessary resources for creating and sustaining such institutions.
>
> —Lawrence Cremin (*Popular Education and Its Discontents*, 1990, p. 43)

Finally, let us also remember that some criticism of education represents sincere attempts by thoughtful Americans to cope with serious issues in a public institution to which they are strongly committed. There is, therefore, every reason to believe that criticism of public schools will continue in America. Let us, however, learn lessons from the sorry record of the recent past and rededicate ourselves to the principle that those debates must reflect honesty, goodwill, respect for evidence, acknowledgement of the dedication and contributions of educators, and a sincere desire to improve the lives of all Americans. Agreement on these principles would seem a reasonable basis for meaningful debates about how to resolve education's many dilemmas.