



ACTION ALERT

The Learning Society

Twenty-five years ago this month an education report entitled “*A Nation at Risk*,” made recommendations in five critical categories to reverse the “poor performance at nearly every level of the education system.”¹ In April 1983, the report stated, “Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world.”² The Blue Ribbon Commission appointed by former President Ronald Reagan warned of a “rising tide of mediocrity” and cited the needed change in the following areas:³

Content: “High School graduates should master four years of English, three of math, science and social studies and one half year of computer science. Students should begin foreign language competency starting in the elementary grades.”

Standards and Expectations: “Schools should adopt more rigorous and measurable standards and cautioned against grade inflation.”

Time: “Schools should strongly consider seven hour days and a 200 to 220 day year.”

Teaching: “Better teacher training; salaries should be professionally competitive.”

Leadership and Fiscal Responsibility: “Citizens should hold educators and elected officials responsible for leadership and fiscal support to drive reform.”

The report is credited with launching the American policy focus on public school reform, which culminated in the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law. Education historian Diane Ravitch said the report “was the most important education reform document of the 20th century.”⁴ At the time of the report 30 percent of seventeen year olds could solve multi-step math problems and only 20 percent of students in high school could write a positional essay.⁵ The American Federation of Teachers, the recommendations, and the President faced calls to end cuts in public education. In 1980 spending on K-12 education reached \$16 billion, expenditures in 2007 totaled \$72 billion.

At the heart of the NCLB reform is the Reading First program. The twenty-fifth anniversary of *A Nation at Risk* coincided with the release of an assessment of the Reading First Initiative. In 2007, funding for Reading First was \$1 billion. Congress reduced the program’s budget allocation to \$393 million in 2008; however the President’s 2009 budget request seeks a return to the \$1 billion funding level.⁶

The release of the assessment led educators to ask how much the realities of today reflect a change in conditions that the Blue Ribbon Commission first reported and what are we now learning about the state of education in America? Strong American Schools, a non-partisan organization, concluded in its report card on the twenty-five years of progress since *A Nation at Risk* that:

“While the national conversation about education would never be the same, stunningly few of the Commission’s recommendations actually have been enacted. Now is not the time for more educational research or reports or commissions. We have enough commonsense ideas, backed by decades of research, to significantly improve American schools. The missing ingredient isn’t even educational at all. It’s political.”⁷

Christopher Swanson, a researcher, recently issued data noting that about half of all students in the largest cities in the U.S. graduate on time.⁸ In Detroit, Baltimore, Cleveland and Indianapolis less than 35 percent of students graduate. The Department of Education’s own data indicated that only 36 percent of high school graduates experience the challenging curriculum specified in the first recommendation of *A Nation at Risk*.⁹



UNITED METHODIST WOMEN’S ACTION NETWORK

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Research data issued by the Department of Education found that students enrolled in the \$6 billion Reading First Initiative are not reading any better than those who do not participate.¹⁰ Reading First makes grants to enhance elementary school reading performance. Grover J. Whitehurst, director of the Institute for Education Sciences, the Department of Education's research arm, said that Reading First 'doesn't end up helping children read.' He also stated, 'there is a greater emphasis on decoding skills and not enough emphasis, or maybe not correctly structured emphasis, on reading comprehension.'¹¹ Congressional critics have called Reading First a failure. Local educators such as Michele Goady, director of Reading First in Maryland, say 'we are having greater success with our beginning readers.'¹² Additionally, some data show that as a result of Reading First "more time is being spent by teachers on the various aspects of reading judged important by the federal reading panel."¹³

Wendy Puriefoy, CEO of the Public Education Network which works to impact schools in low-income communities, recently wrote: "Nearly 50 million of our nation's children attend public schools, yet...[we] have spent less time debating how these children are being educated than it takes to get a haircut or a facial."¹⁴ She referenced a poll released by Lake Research Partners which indicated that 94 percent of voters said high quality public schools were important to them.¹⁵ But she observed policymakers deserve "an unexcused absence" for their lack of responsiveness to education issues in need of attention.¹⁶ Ms. Puriefoy challenged policymakers to respond to her findings:

- * *Fifteen percent of our nation's schools are overcrowded. As a result, teachers say they spend an inordinate amount of time policing classrooms. Do you have a plan for relieving this overcrowding?*
- * *How will you ensure that children attend schools that are places of teaching and learning, not violence and crime?*
- * *Teacher recruitment, retention and quality are suffering. How will you work to make teaching a more attractive career?*
- * *A child who cannot read or do math at grade level has little hope of finishing high school. What will you do to make sure children master all subjects at grade level?*
- * *What will you do to persuade more adults to become more involved in the education of their community's children?¹⁷*



ACTION



What are you learning that our policymakers should know?

The U.S. Department of Education would like to hear what you think about your education experiences, how you think the public education system is serving America's children, and how they can partner to make sure all children receive a great education. To submit your thoughts visit the U.S. Department of Education's web site at <http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/risk25.html> or call them at 1-800-USA-LEARN (872-5327).

Attend a United Methodist Women's Division Public Education Training Event! The Women's Division will be holding two public education training events:

☞ **Racial Justice Issues in Public Education on Saturday October 25, 2008 in Dallas, Texas**

☞ **Community Organizing in Public Education on Saturday November 1, 2008 in Chicago, Illinois.**

For further information visit the Women's Division web site at www.umwmission.org or call (202) 488-5660.

The U.S. House Committee on Education and Labor has been reviewing comments on No Child Left Behind. Let your Representative know what you are learning about education through the Women's Division.

Join the Women's Division Public Education online community. Visit the Women's Division web site at www.umwmission.org

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¹ *A Nation at Risk*. Department of Education web site. <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html>

² Ibid.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Nation_at_Risk

⁴ Ravitch, Diane. *The Test of Time. Education Next*. Hoover Institution Press. Spring 2003; Volume 3, No. 2.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Nation_at_Risk

⁶ *US Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings Testifies Before House Appropriations Committee*. U.S. Department of Education Press Release, Feb. 26, 2008.

⁷ *A Stagnant Nation: Why American Students Are Still at Risk*. Strong American Schools. April 2008. <http://www.edm08.com/anationatrisk/>

⁸ Toppo, Greg. Rules to Require Uniform Graduation Report. *USA Today*, April 23, 2008; 6D.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Glod, Maria. Study Questions 'No Child' Act's Reading Plan: Lauded Program Fails to Improve Test Scores." *The Washington Post*. May 2, 2008; A01.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Zukerbrod, Nancy. Study: Bush administration's reading program hasn't helped. *The Associated Press*.

¹⁴ Puriefoy, Wendy. Missing in campaign '08: The education candidate. *USA Today Online*. <http://blogs.usatoday.com/oped/2008/02/missing-in-camp.html>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.