

CHESTER E. FINN, JR.

**WE MUST
TAKE CHARGE**

**OUR SCHOOLS
AND
OUR FUTURE**

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Our Schools and Our Future

Chester E. Finn, Jr.



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**For those great American teachers who beat the odds,
and the children whose lives they touch**

Acknowledgments

When Diane Ravitch and I launched the Educational Excellence Network almost a decade ago, we resolved to speak the truth about American education. In books, articles, speeches, conferences and seminars, as well as in the Network's monthly *News & Views*, we have striven to honor that commitment.

In the same spirit, this book is as honest as I can make it, notwithstanding that candor in this field is often unpopular and sometimes painful. These pages are the product of a quarter century's observation and participation in the enterprise of American education and—as will be evident—of mounting discontent with it and upwelling impatience at the fecklessness of our efforts to set it right.

Since leaving the U.S. Department of Education in late 1988, I have tried, initially in articles and addresses, to examine what has gone awry and why our “reforms” are accomplishing so little. Peter J. Dougherty, senior editor at The Free Press, heard one of those talks and suggested that perhaps a book lurked therein. Diane Ravitch nudged me in the same direction. So did my wife, Renu Virmani, whose professional field of cardio-vascular pathology is about as far distant as one can get but whose instincts about education (and about me) are keen indeed.

The small but terrific staff of the Educational Excellence Network kept the ship on course while I hunkered down in the hold with my laptop. Deputy director John P. Crisp, Jr. was a splendid helmsman during those months of heavy weather—as he has been before and since. Andrew Forsaith added to his regular duties the burden of serving as my chief research aide and, in his tireless, quiet way, proved indispensable to this project. Summer intern Mary C. Greenfield, a student at Barnard College, also pitched into the unromantic labors of a research assistant with rare perspicacity and dedication.

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That Renu, Arti and Alope have been through this before didn't make it much easier when "Dad's book" pressed against the pleasures and regimens of family life and, some weeks, practically removed Dad from sight. Rather than griping, however, they rooted for me, as well as freeing many hours by quietly hefting my parts of the household duties as well as their own. Never has an author had a more supportive and loving family.

In the back of my mind throughout this undertaking, as well as in a photograph on the shelf before my eyes, has been the image of my late mother, Phyllis Kessel Finn, who exemplified better than anyone I have known the character, temperament and values we yearn for all young Americans to acquire en route to adulthood, as well as the intellectual qualities we associate with a good education. If this book moves even a few adults to lead a few more girls and boys in those directions, it will do further honor to her memory.

December 1990

Introduction

Reform Is Not Enough

If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.

—Thomas Jefferson, 1816

The wide-body aircraft I boarded in Minneapolis that spring afternoon in 1990 was going on to Frankfurt after a stop in Boston. I intended to review my notes for the talk I was to give that evening near Copley Square, but some of those who had boarded for the long haul to Germany were already starting to party.

The quartet in the row behind me was hard to ignore, boisterous Yuppies downing Bloody Marys and regaling one another with plans for the good times they would have tooling around the Continent in the Mercedes they had reserved for their vacation. As I eavesdropped, this exchange ensued:

“Does it get earlier or later as we fly west?”

“I dunno. I never crossed the Pacific Ocean before.”

One of their pals eventually got things more or less straightened out, but it was evident that at least two of these cheerful, prosperous “thirty-somethings” had clambered onto the Frankfurt flight without the remotest notion of which direction they were headed or what ocean lay between them and the nearest autobahn.

Such ignorance caused them no apparent discomfort. These obviously weren’t things they needed to know to get through their European sojourn, much less their lives. Multiply their condition by tens of millions of people, however, and apply it to the forty-eight or fifty weeks a year most Americans aren’t on vacation, and it causes

grave malfunctions throughout the society. Eventually it causes individual hardship as well.

This book is about ignorance, about discomfort, and about education. I want it to alarm you, to rouse you to anger at our children's empty-headedness and the costs it levies on them and us. I hope that when you put this volume down, you will want to take action, beginning with the assertion of control over a system that to all intents and purposes now runs itself—and is fast running itself into the ground, carrying our future along with it. Despite all the talk of reform, despite the investment of tens of billions of extra dollars, public education in the United States is still a failure: It is to our society what the Soviet economy is to theirs.

The shortcomings of American education do not stem from malevolence—I've yet to meet a teacher or principal who wants anything but the best for children—or from some perverse love of ignorance. Rather, so far as I can tell, they arise from the maintenance of archaic practices (such as the abbreviated school year typical of an agrarian society), dysfunctional customs (such as the insistence that teachers be paid uniformly regardless of performance), and cumbersome governance arrangements (such as entrusting decisions to fifteen thousand local school boards at a time when the entire nation is imperiled) and from strongly held but sadly mistaken ideas and beliefs (such as the view that boosting a child's self-esteem is more important than ensuring that he or she acquires intellectual skills and knowledge).

Mindful that the sincere pursuit of a wrong conviction can do more damage than half-hearted devotion to a sound one, I contend that many of the ideas that animate American education are flawed and that carrying them out more efficiently won't improve—and could well worsen—our plight.

Because dubious notions thrive within the education profession, I mistrust reform schemes that seek to enhance only its power. This book is partly about power, to be sure, but most of the empowering we need has to do with parents, voters, and taxpayers; with community leaders and state officials; with businessmen and neighborhood associations; with grandparents, employers, working people, and ordinary citizens. It has to do with people like yourself—people who may not have realized the gravity of the problem, who didn't think it applied to them, or who never supposed they had a right to meddle in educational affairs.

We *all* have the right to meddle here, to turn ourselves into informed, demanding, persnickety consumers of perhaps the single

most valuable product of any society. The Europe-bound Yuppies on my flight, let's remember, would never settle for an ill-fitted suit, an overcooked salmon fillet, an out-of-tune car, or a shortage of hot water in the showers of their health club. They would make a fuss until the problem was solved. Yet they, and millions of other young Americans, have been nurtured on a diet of educational junk food. They bought an educational car that turned out to be a lemon. It is time we see it for what it is—and send it back to be fixed, however fundamental the reconstruction that's required. It is time, above all, to know that we have the right to do this—the right, the power, and the obligation.

If this sounds like another plea for “civilian control” of education, I mean it to. In fact, it's more like a call to arms. But that's just the beginning; mistaken ideas and harmful practices dwell outside the schools, too. We also have to gird ourselves for other changes: in our beliefs about how we are doing, in some of our cultural assumptions and institutional habits, perhaps above all in our sense of who is responsible for what.

Nor is this ambitious agenda confined to the troubled precincts of the inner cities. The passengers on that Frankfurt flight hailed from the great American middle class. Tens of thousands of schools in quiet towns and verdant suburbs are not doing half so well as their clients and proprietors suppose. Our average graduates, despite reasonably stable and comfortable surroundings, are sadly underprepared for the world they will inhabit.

Yet they and their parents may not know that. Family by family and school by school, most Americans think their own education is okay, even as they concede that the system as a whole is wanting. This schizophrenia may be the most pernicious problem of all.

That the nation is “at risk” is no news—we've been inundated for almost a decade by solemn declarations of this fact. Of late we've even heard it at international summit meetings and bilateral trade negotiations. Normally reticent Japanese officials, for example, have told their U.S. counterparts that if we really want to reduce our huge trade deficit with Tokyo, we're going to have to do something about our education system.¹ A panel of economists, including Nobel laureates Paul Samuelson and Milton Friedman, asked recently by Robert MacNeil if our confrontation with Iraq would pose an economic problem for the United States, downplayed the implications of this massive military action and instead described the education system as our real problem.

Perhaps we've heard it too often and are becoming inured. When

you live with a problem long enough, you start to take it for granted. The comedian Buddy Hackett says that until he moved out of his mother's house at the age of twenty-one he didn't realize there was such a thing as not having heartburn. It's difficult, after so many glum commentaries on American education, to believe it need not be this way. Yet, as I try to show in the chapters that follow, it could be very different. It doesn't always have to cause pain behind the breastbone.

We could live instead in a land where every young adult meets a high standard of skills and knowledge. Where we conduct our affairs on the basis of shared information and understanding. Where parents know how well their children and schools are doing. Where policy-makers decide what the goals are, expert educators select effective ways to reach them, and families choose the schools that work best for their daughters and sons. Where everyone engaged in education is accountable for the results—and rewarded accordingly. Where schools are good at what they do and aren't expected to do things they're not good at. Where teaching promotes reason, which oils the wheels of our democracy and fosters both stability and civility.

We could live in such a land. In these pages we will visit it—after negotiating the minefields and jungles that today keep us out. If we get a grip on our ideas about education and put better ones into practice, someday we will dwell there. When we do, societal heartburn will diminish along with individual discomfort.

A friend from New York recently recalled his first visit to Paris:

As I was roaming around the neighborhoods one Sunday evening, something struck me as odd. Little kids, eight and nine years old, were outdoors playing without the hawklike supervision we parents train on kids in New York. I was incredulous. Where were the drug dealers? The sex criminals? The drive-by gunmen? At first I was afraid for these little French kids, until I realized they were not threatened as they would have been in Manhattan. This was French society speaking, with its norms and values, its mores and customs. It occurred to me that *all* Parisians were the beneficiaries of the civility which kept these city streets safe.

All Americans, too, would benefit from an education system that produced informed citizens. (The streets would probably be safer also.) Education isn't just a service we obtain for our own daughters and sons and grandchildren. It is a public good, after defense perhaps our most important form of common provision and, in a sense, itself a defense against the ills that plague us at home. It has incalcula-

ble influence on the quality of our social relationships, the vitality of our culture, the strength of our economy, the comfort we feel in our communities and the wisdom of our government decisions. The better our education system, the better our public and private lives become. But reciprocity is called for. Institutions like schools don't just work for us. We have to struggle for them—and sometimes *with* them. We have to invest money, to be sure, but we also owe them our attention, our energy, and some of our passion. To be part of any society is to be engaged with its mechanisms of teaching and learning. To ensure the soundness of those mechanisms is to take a giant step toward realizing the society we dream of inhabiting. To take charge of education, therefore, is to take charge of our future—to look it in the eye without blinking.

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I



A Nation Still At Risk

After two centuries of progress, we are stagnant. . . . No modern nation can long afford to allow so many of its sons and daughters to emerge into adulthood ignorant and unskilled. The status quo is a guarantee of mediocrity, social decay and national decline.

—President George Bush, Charlottesville, Virginia, September 28, 1989

On the NBC television news one evening in late August 1990, Tom Brokaw interviewed a U.S. marine, perspiring in the Arabian desert where he had been sent as part of the American response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. What had he known about Saudi Arabia before getting there, the anchorman asked. "I never even knew it existed," the young serviceman replied with a grin.

Less than a year earlier, as totalitarian regimes crumbled in Eastern Europe, the *Washington Post* recounted the frustration of American high school teachers who were striving to impress on their students the significance of these events. Not many youngsters were interested; few found them noteworthy; fewer still possessed the background knowledge against which to interpret them. "They don't understand what communism is in the first place," observed one California teacher. "So when you say it's the death of communism, they don't know what you're talking about." In an honors government class in Texas, a pupil asked, "What is this talk of satellites? I'm confused. Are we talking about satellite dishes or what?"¹

Like the Yuppies en route to Germany, neither the sweating marine near the Persian Gulf nor the muddled students in our classrooms were perceptibly bothered by the gaps in their knowledge. They were as affable and easygoing as most of their age-mates, with the pleasant personalities, helpful dispositions, and laid-back tempera-

ments that often impress foreign visitors to our schools. Nor was anything wrong with their brains. People are born ignorant, but not stupid. These young people, like their peers in other lands, have the capacity to absorb, retain, and use great gobs of information. But theirs is an underutilized capacity. Their batteries have not been fully charged. Nobody has obliged them to learn much, and clearly they have not chosen to do so on their own. After eighteen or twenty years, mostly spent in school, there is much that they should know.

As the last decade of the millennium began, American education was choking on the mediocrity of which George Bush spoke in Charlottesville. For years we had been striving to improve it, and by the time he and the governors organized their education "summit" in late 1989, we were spending 29 percent more "real" dollars per pupil in our public schools than we had when he was first elected vice president. Yet we had little to show for this infusion of attention, energy, and money. Test scores were essentially flat. Graduation rates were up only a bit. The gauges that the National Commission on Excellence in Education considered when declaring us a "nation at risk" in 1983 had barely moved.

We cannot yet know whether the United States will whip itself into better shape during the 1990s. The stern regimen we need to set ourselves reaches far beyond the schools, and we may not have the self-discipline and stamina to stick with it. Even recognizing how flabby we've become has taken too long.

Yet the first step toward solving a problem is to acknowledge and define it. And it was in the 1980s, history will surely record, that Americans came to see that our education system was not serving the nation satisfactorily. It was also in the eighties that we changed the criteria by which such judgments are made.

For as long as anyone could remember, we had gauged the quality of schools by their facilities and resources, their programs and activities, the credentials of their teachers, the honors courses they offered, and the number of books on their library shelves. A good school was one with impressive plans, ample resources, an enthusiastic staff, and a lot going on. A good education was what happened to children in such a school.

That began to change as we came to see the miserly dividends we received from our investments. We keep boosting the resources, yet the children do not learn more. Indeed, by many measures they learn less. We observed that no reliable link joins inputs to outcomes. And we admitted that only outcomes truly matter.

Not a harmonious or uniform shift, it was messy and uneven