

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.

—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 ideologies 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 à 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

was chaired by W. Glenn Campbell, director of the Hoover Institution, 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 "centrist" 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

policies will simply lead to the reproduction of a blatantly inequitable social system.¹¹

"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.

—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

N.B.

indeed is one of the prime tasks for which robots are built²² 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.

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 nonexistent "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.

—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

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 whom 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 school-child."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