

THE *Excellence in Education* MOVEMENT

AN ADVENTIST RESPONSE

Nineteen eighty-three and 1984 may go down in the history of American education as “The Years of the Reports,” for during that time no fewer than eight educational reports of national significance were published. Even before these important education documents hit the presses, Mortimer Adler’s 1982 treatise, *The Paideia Proposal*, had

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urged the strengthening of American education through a one-track system for *all* students. These major studies were accompanied by dozens—even scores—of similar documents with a narrower state, regional, or subject matter focus.

The report that received the most attention from politicians and the media was *A Nation at Risk*, the report of then-Secretary of Education, Terrel H. Bell’s National Commission on Excellence in Education. *A Nation at Risk*, as the name implies,

By George P. Babcock

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deplored the lack of excellence in American public schools and proposed several recommendations to correct perceived deficiencies. Its publication precipitated a spasm of policy-making activity in state capitals and local school district board rooms.

As a series of reports followed *The Paideia Proposal* and *A Nation at Risk*, thoughtful parents, board members, and educators began to notice real differences in the messages and proposed solutions of the various studies. Everyone, of course, demanded excellence in the American school system, but the definitions of excellence varied widely. In addition recommendations for achieving the goals were anything but unanimous. Many were even contradictory.

The following summary of the nine major reports published during this period is quoted from the booklet entitled *Excellence in Our Schools: Making It Happen* prepared in 1984 by the American Association of School Administrators and the Far West Laboratory:

- *The Paideia Proposal*. Mortimer Adler's 1982 treatise advocates strengthening America's democratic institutions through a one-track, 12-year system of public schooling dedicated to a thorough general/liberal education for *all* students. Its three primary goals are (1) mental, moral, and spiritual growth and improvement; (2) effective enfranchised citizens in a healthy democracy; and (3) the capacity for every adult to earn a living in our advanced industrial economy. These goals would be accomplished by giving every student stimulating opportunities for (1) acquiring information and organized knowledge through didactic instruction and lecturing, (2) developing intellectual skills through

demonstration and coaching, and (3) enlarging his/her understanding and appreciation of values and human culture through Socratic dialog and discussion.

- *A Nation at Risk*. The product of many months of collecting testimony and reviewing documents addressing the quality of education in the United States, this report focuses primarily on the high school years. Its main concerns are adding rigor and raising standards in both teaching and learning. Many consider its emphasis on traditional academic curricula, teacher roles, and school structures as a strength. Others view it as a fundamental weakness. The report's recommendations fall into five categories: content, standards and expectations, time, teaching and leadership, and fiscal support. Its curriculum recommendations, "The Five New Basics," are identical to those advocated by the National Education Association's Committee of Ten in 1893,¹ and its concerns about textbook evaluation and quality are considered by many to be long overdue.

- *Making the Grade*. This report, produced by the Twentieth Century Fund, focuses on the legitimate and essential role of the Federal Government in supporting elementary and secondary education. It points out a number of areas in which enlightened Federal support is vital and also emphasizes the need for English language skills, seeing them as the key to educational success and full participation in adult society.

- *Academic Preparation for College*. This College Board publication is the outgrowth of a multiyear program called "Project Equality." The purpose of the project was to identify the essential competencies and knowledge required of college entrants. This report

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reflects a consensus of hundreds of academic specialists, teachers, guidance counselors, and admissions officers from all parts of the country. It documents in some detail seven major competencies needed for academic success in college and describes factual knowledge and understanding needed in six major areas of academic study. A significant message included in the report is that high school diplomas are inadequate indicators of preparation for college work; only documentation of skills and knowledge will suffice.

- *Action for Excellence.* This dynamic report came from a distinguished task force of state governors and major corporation officers who addressed the relationship between a strong national economy and the educational support needed to foster and sustain it. Organized by the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the task force stressed improvements in math, science, and technology, as well as effective school-business cooperation. The report borrows directly from *Academic Preparation for College* in defining an expanded version of "basic skills." Although its recommendations are often general and directed at state agencies and business leaders, the report does have implications for major changes in typical school operations.

- *A Study of High Schools.* This major study was headed by Theodore R.Sizer, former Dean of Harvard University Graduate School of Education, and cosponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASP). Sizer's perspective on needed change in high schools is more "radical" than that found in other reports. He draws attention to the limiting character of

the schools' time-bound structure and procedures and the damaging effect on curriculum, teaching, and learning that can result. Sizer's book, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American*

High School, was published by Houghton-Mifflin in 1984.

- *A Place Called School.* Published by McGraw-Hill in 1984, this report culminates John I. Goodlad's multiyear "Study of Schooling," begun in the mid-1970s and published in a long series of technical reports over the past several years. Its many recommendations are based on Goodlad's research in more than 1,000 classrooms and his long experience in working with schools to bring about change. Similar to Sizer's recommendations, Goodlad's reflect deep concern with the negative consequences of age-graded, time-structured instructional systems.

- *Educating Americans for the 21st Century.* This thorough, well-documented "plan of action for improving mathematics, science, and technology education for all American elementary and secondary students," was produced for the National Science Foundation by the National Science Board Commission on Precollege Education in Mathematics, Science, and Technology. Its recommendations naturally reflect curriculum, teaching, and improvement strategies in those particular areas. The report's reasoning about curriculum organization and teacher qualifications is sound and can be applied across the board to other instructional policies and procedures.

- *High School.* This Harper and Row publication was released by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in

(To page 45)

An Adventist Response (Continued from page 7)

September, 1983, following 30 months of work in 15 states. Its author, Ernest L. Boyer, the Foundation's president and former U.S. Commissioner of Education, stressed change that would strengthen teachers and teaching in high schools. Like Sizer and Goodlad, Boyer believes that to operate more effectively, high schools require clearly defined goals. He feels those goals should shape curriculum priorities (i.e., a "core curriculum"), essential student outcomes, and opportunities for teachers to grow professionally. Boyer makes extensive recommendations concerning the recruitment, training, and working conditions of teachers. He also emphasizes the crucial need to effectively teach thinking skills

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through language arts and writing.²

There seems to be general agreement that American education is in need of a definite boost. Educational analyst Paul Copperman, stated,

Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. For the first time in the history of our country,

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the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents.³

It has been rather conclusively shown that the *average graduate* of a generation ago had abilities in writing, speaking, and critical thinking that far surpass those of today's average graduate. On the positive side, the *average citizen* today is better educated than the average citizen of 35 years ago. In any case, there is ample reason to be generally concerned about the product being produced by the American school system.

The report, *A Nation at Risk*, stated,

We define "excellence" to mean several related things. At the level of the *individual learner*, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a *school or college* that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a *society* that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skills of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our nation's people and its schools and colleges must be committed to achieving excellence in all these senses.⁴

How do Seventh-day Adventist schools at all levels compare with the standards outlined in the various reports? What does the Adventist school system mean when it talks about "excellence in education"? How can Adventists strive to implement "excellence" in its fullest sense? How will we make "excellence" happen in SDA schools?

The above statement defining excellence quoted from *A Nation at Risk* can be and is endorsed by the SDA system; however, the philosophy of Adventist education has other dimensions that must be incorporated into our definition of excellence. Basic to the Adventist educational system are the twin concepts of integration of faith and learning so that we may truly

know and love our Creator; and that of education for service to our fellow humans.

God requires the training of the mental faculties. He designs that His servants shall possess more intelligence and clearer discernment than the worldling, and He is displeased with those who are too careless or

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too indolent to become efficient, well-informed workers. The Lord bids us love Him with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and with all the mind. This lays upon us the obligation of developing the intellect to its fullest capacity, that with all the mind we may know and love our Creator.

If placed under the control of His Spirit, the more thoroughly the intellect is cultivated, the more effectively it can be used in the service of God. The uneducated man who is consecrated to God and who longs to bless others can be, and is, used by the Lord in His service. But those who, with the same spirit of consecration, have had the benefit of a thorough education, can do a much more extensive work for Christ. They stand on vantage ground.⁵

It is the belief of this writer that the SDA educational system is also "at risk." Our schools and colleges display many of the same symptoms as American education in general. Perhaps the severity of the symptoms may be less in our schools, but surely we have much in common with American public education. In fact, the more we operate from the same humanities base as does public education, the more closely we will reflect its degenerating tendencies.

In order to make "excellence" happen in Adventist education the following suggestions might well be considered:

Church administrators must themselves believe in, support, and

promote Adventist schools. They must be willing to creatively find ways to finance the system. They must expect and insist that all church employees—particularly pastors—preach about, promote, and personally support this God-given system. It is vitally important that SDA employees' children be in Adventist schools, for actions speak louder than all the promotional sermons in the world.

Classroom teachers and school administrators at all levels must keep clearly in view the high calling to which they have dedicated themselves. The mission, the commitment, the end result must not be forgotten. They must regularly study the various counsels given this church regarding education to make certain that the God-centered philosophic base of our school system is being adhered to.

Curriculum committees should function at each level of organization to make sure that curricular offerings are relevant to the needs of the youth and are structured to naturally integrate learning with faith in God.

At the North American Division and union levels the systematic preparation of Adventist textbooks and materials in many subject areas should be continued. Indeed, efforts along this line should be accelerated.

Renewed emphasis must be given to attracting our more talented and intellectually gifted

youth into the teaching profession. If the more able students prepare themselves to become teachers, and if the teacher-training programs themselves are adequately stimulating, the quality of teaching in our schools will ultimately improve and pupils will be motivated toward excellence.

We must set as our goal the preparation of our youth to meet a soon-coming Saviour and the development of the talents of each one to their fullest extent. Attaining these goals requires that we as Adventist teachers expect and assist our students in working to the limits of their capabilities.

Classroom teachers and school administrators at all levels must keep clearly in view the high calling to which they have dedicated themselves.

In addition, we must reflect Jesus in all our interactions with students. We should expect and receive support from parents and constituents to make excellence in Adventist educational institutions a reality in every sense of the word.

It would be well to keep the following words continually before our young people:

Dear Youth, what is the aim and purpose of your life? Are you ambitious for educa-

tion that you may have a name and position in the world? Have you thoughts that you dare not express, that you may one day stand upon the summit of intellectual greatness. . . .? There is nothing wrong in these aspirations. . . . Aim high, and spare no pains to reach the standard.⁶

Our ministers . . . might have done tenfold more work intelligently had they cared to become intellectual giants.⁷

The truths of the divine word can be best appreciated by an intellectual Christian. Christ can be best glorified by those who serve Him intelligently.⁸

For Additional Reading, We Suggest . . .

Charting a Course: A Guide to the Excellence Movement in Education by Ian McNett. Commissioned and published by the Council for Basic Education, *Charting a Course* does what no other review of recent reports and recommendations on education has done: in one volume, it collects the pertinent observations of all the various reports on a series of topics central to basic education. The reports are quoted extensively, thereby giving the summaries the authenticity of the original documents. This thoughtful compilation of essential information is intended to serve as a busy person's reference work, in which specific recommendations can be cited and verified easily. □

FOOTNOTES

¹ Theodore R. Sizer, *A Review and Comment on The National Reports* (Reston, Virginia: National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1983), p. 2.

² Gary Marx and William G. Spady, *Excellence in Our Schools: Making It Happen* (San Francisco: A joint publication of the American Association of School Administrators and the Far West Laboratory, 1984), p. 7.

³ The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1941), p. 333.

⁶ _____, *Fundamentals of Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1923), p. 82.

⁷ _____, *Testimonies to Ministers* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1944), p. 194.

⁸ _____, *Counsels to Parents, Teachers, and Students* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1943), p. 361.

Start Your Own Commission on Excellence

“To use the new national reports on education to best advantage, form your own local commissions on educational excellence.” This is the advice of the National Committee for Citizens in Education. The national advocacy group will send free materials to interested persons who send a stamped, self-addressed business-size envelope to “Local Commissions on Educational Excellence,” National Committee for Citizens in Education, 410 Wilde Lake Village Green, Columbia, Maryland 21044.