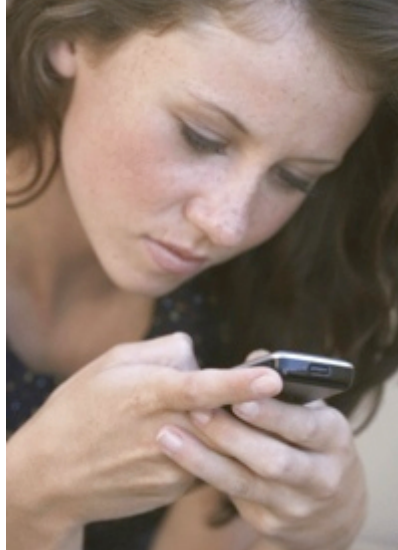




Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on April 17, 2012

Task Force Says Inadequate Education Threatens U.S. Prosperity, Security

"Educational failure puts the United States' future economic prosperity, global position, and physical safety at risk," according to the [report](#) of the Independent Task Force on U.S. Education Reform and National Security chaired by Joel I. Klein, former Chancellor of the New York City Department of Education and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The study warns that the country "will not be able to keep pace — much less lead — globally unless it moves to fix the problems it has allowed to fester for too long."



The report points to the results of the 2009 Program for International Student Assessment, which measures the performance of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics, and science every three years. U.S. students placed 14th in reading, 25th in math, and 17th in science in rankings of students in industrialized nations.

Other signs of trouble the study notes include the following:

- More than 25 percent of students fail to graduate from high school in four years; for African-American and Hispanic students, the number is approaching 40 percent.
- Only a quarter of U.S. students are proficient or better on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Citing a trend that has a bearing on the nation's ability to compete in global markets, the report notes a declining number of schools teach foreign languages and roughly eight in ten Americans speak only English.
- A recent report by ACT, the not-for-profit testing organization, (formerly American College Testing) found that only 22 percent of U.S. high school students met "college ready" standards in all of their core subjects; the figures are lower for African-American and Hispanic students.
- The College Board reported that even among college-bound seniors, only 43 percent met college-ready standards, meaning that more college students need to take remedial courses.

The report describes a lack of preparedness that poses a threat in five categories affecting national security: economic growth and competitiveness, physical safety, intellectual property, U.S. global awareness, and U.S. unity and cohesion. Too many young people are not employable in an increasingly high-skilled and global economy, and too many are not qualified to join the military because they are physically unfit, have criminal records, or have an inadequate level of education.

"Human capital will determine power in the current century, and the failure to produce that capital will undermine America's security," the report states. "Large, undereducated swaths of the population damage the ability of the United States to physically defend itself, protect its secure information, conduct diplomacy, and grow its economy."



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The Task Force recommends a number of steps, including a "national security readiness audit" to hold schools and educational policymakers accountable for results and raise public awareness. "There should be a coordinated, national effort to assess whether students are learning the skills and knowledge necessary to safeguard America's future security and prosperity. The results should be publicized to engage the American people in addressing problems and building on successes."

The report also urges an expansion of "Common Core State Standards, ensuring that students are mastering the skills and knowledge necessary to safeguard the country's national security." And it recommends "structural changes" to provide students with "good choices." In a somewhat vague statement of what those "structural changes" might accomplish, the report said: "Enhanced choice and competition, in an environment of equitable resource allocation, will fuel the innovation necessary to transform results."

In both its diagnosis and its prescriptions, the report, with its call for increased student achievement and accountability for educational policymakers, echoes in many ways the approach already encoded in the nation's No Child Left Behind Act. The law, a centerpiece of the domestic agenda of former President George W. Bush, was co-sponsored in the Senate by Republican Judd Gregg of New Hampshire and Democrat Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts and was passed with broad bipartisan support. Since then it has been widely criticized for what some believe is an overemphasis on testing. Critics on the political right have also objected to the act as a federal "meddling" in local schools, while those on the left have complained of inadequate funding for its implementation.

The study also echoes the findings of a much-heralded report that sounded the alarm on American educational deficiencies nearly 30 years ago. [A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for National Reform](#) was issued in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. It warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity" that posed a threat to the nation's security as well as its prosperity. It spoke of students unable to solve math problems or write a coherent essay, pointed to declining SAT scores, and described millions of Americans laboring under the handicap of either complete or functional illiteracy. In its most oft-quoted passage, the report sounded the alarm by saying:

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.

While the report showed a decline in student performance that coincided with a growing federal involvement in education, it nonetheless called for a national effort to require high educational standards and greater accountability. It came out nearly two decades after Congress had passed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, a feature of President Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" agenda. While the act bestowed federal funding on school districts throughout the nation, the funds have been tied increasingly over the years to a number of curricula requirements, including bilingual education, sex education, drug awareness, and other programs that some critics said took needed time and effort away from training students in reading, writing, math, science, and other academic skills.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan won the White House and the GOP won a new majority in the U.S. Senate when Republicans ran on a platform that called for, among other things, the abolition of a new cabinet-level Department of Education, carved out as a stand-alone department from the former Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, which then became Health and Human Services. While the pledge never resulted in a serious threat to the department's survival, spending priorities of the new administration



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left Reagan's Secretary of Education, Terrel Bell, uneasy over the future of federal funding for education.

"In an adroit bureaucratic move," wrote Michael Schaller in the 1994 book [Reckoning with Reagan](#), "the Education Secretary convened a blue-ribbon panel to assess the condition of American education." Reagan embraced the study as a White House initiative and endorsed the report, even to the point of having Commissioner Bell stand alongside him at appearances during the President's 1984 reelection campaign. "But soon after the election," Schaller noted, Bell was replaced at Education by William Bennett, who "muted calls for increased federal funding for public schools and emphasized, instead, discipline and teaching traditional morality."

Bennett also called for greater emphasis on traditional academic subjects and eliminating bilingual education, along with training in "values clarification" and building self-esteem. But the report effectively "muted" calls by conservative activists for a rollback of the federal role in education. While many professional educators panned the study for what they claimed was an overly pessimistic assessment of the performance of public schools, Albert Shanker, then president of the American Federation of Teachers, endorsed its recommendations. [Shanker](#) believed, his biographer Richard Kahlenberg told *USA Today* in 2008, that "if teachers wanted to become part of the reform movement," they must become "part of the solution." But he also saw the value the report had in deflating support for the education plank in the Republican platform. "Reagan had to back off the spending cuts for education," Kahlenberg said. "He continued to mouth rhetoric about vouchers and privatization, but it got no traction at all."

Wholly apart from vouchers and privatization, however, calls for abolishing the U.S. Department of Education have been based on a desire to maintain local control over public schools and the fact that the Constitution makes no mention of education and delegates no power to the federal government concerning schools. Education appears to be among the many numerous and indefinite matters left, in the words of the Tenth Amendment, "to the States, respectively, or to the people." That the American people and their elected officials might learn to recognize and respect the limits on government and guarantees of liberty defined by the Constitution of the United States appears to be no more a desire of the majority of Republicans and Democrats in Congress than it is for the Council on Foreign Relations or its Task Force on U.S. Education Reform and National Security.

Related article: [CFR's Plan to Improve Education: Change Nothing](#)



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