

# MEMORANDUM

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

TO: The Secretary

THRU: ES  
Assistant Secretary-Designate, OERI  
Acting Assistant Secretary, OERI

FROM: Acting Director, NIE

DATE: 30 May 1981

SUBJECT: Commission on Excellence in Education

At your request I have reviewed your paper on the Appointment of and Charge to the Commission and, with the help of NIE staff, have considered some of the questions you raised about how such a commission should operate. Don Senese, Dick Hays, and I have discussed your ideas in some detail. This memo sets forth our views thus far. It discusses the organization of the commission and presents recommendations for your consideration on the schedule and mode of operation for the commission, where it should be based and how it should be staffed.

You asked us to review and possibly rework your paper presenting the charge to the commission. This we have done. We have also considered the probable costs of a commission and submit, as an attachment to this memo, some notes on budget under two sets of assumptions about the size of the commission, its duration and staffing. The NIE staff has given some thought to substantive issues associated with excellence in education and notes on these issues are also attached.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMISSION

We envisage a commission with the following characteristics:

- Size: The commission should include 15 to 25 members, supported by a full time professional staff. While it is important for the commission to represent a range of views and diverse backgrounds and interests, it is also important for its organizational dynamics to limit membership to a manageable number. The possibility of having a small executive committee to provide effective leadership and direction to the staff is worth considering.
- Membership: Members should have national reputations and some influence over appropriate policy areas. Members should include representatives of state and local authorities, public and private institutions, government and private sectors, and a range of geographical areas, interests and views. Men and women of various ethnic groups should be represented.



- Independence: The commission will gain in stature and credibility to the degree that it is understood to be independent and objective. Once the members are named and the operational matters are in hand, the commission should have full independence in establishing its research agenda, overseeing research and testimony and issuing recommendations. The findings it submits to you should be clearly recognized as its own and not subject to review before publication. This will be an important factor in attracting top quality members to serve on the commission.
- Duration: In order to allow time to nominate and staff the commission, arrange for studies, hearings in various parts of the country and syntheses of studies and testimony, it would be realistic to allow two years from the time you announce the commission until completion of a final report. That implies completion of the commission's report by June, 1983. In order to produce information in a timely fashion, the commission could be charged to submit an interim report late in 1982.
- Consultation: The commission should consult widely, both within and outside the government, with both educators and those outside the education sector and in various regions of the country. The attached budget estimates assume four regional sessions of the commission to receive testimony.
- Staff Operation: The commission's research should be conducted primarily by a high quality staff selected by the commission. A modest amount of money should be set aside for outside research and consultants. The work implied in the charge to the commission would require a staff of 12 to 15 professionals, plus clerical and support staff.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS ON OPERATIONS

The following views on how the commission should operate are presented for your consideration. They could form the basis for your discussions with prospective members of the commission. They are not the sorts of things that should be included in the formal charge to the commission but might form part of its working assumptions.

- The commission should examine the subject of educational excellence at all levels. Although you indicated emphasis on the secondary and to some extent postsecondary levels, it is important, in our view, to consider the elementary level as well. This is where the foundation for excellence at higher levels is laid.
- The commission will need to establish fairly clear boundaries for itself in order to keep its task manageable. It will have to decide, for example, whether to consider vocational and occupational education or exclude this from its scope.
- It should view its objective as providing objective information and recommendations on educational quality and ways of improving it, based upon the findings of research and experimentation as well as the wisdom of successful practitioners and concerned observers.



- In considering educational quality, it should take cognizance of the significant strengths and positive accomplishments of the American education system.
- It should consider quality of education in a realistic, current context, bearing in mind that two major goals—quality and equality—are being pursued simultaneously in American education and can be achieved.
- As a practical matter, we recognize a number of advantages in locating the commission at NIE. The Institute is already supporting several bodies of relevant research and has expertise that could be of use to the commission and its staff. It has well-established methods for commissioning papers and convening meetings of experts. It is experienced in using the excepted appointing authority, which would allow flexibility in staffing, and has a contracts unit familiar with the special nature of research procurement procedures. The Institute sponsors the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and the Department's Educational Library, all of which can be resources for the commission.
- A number of planning and preparatory activities need to begin immediately. It is important for you to appoint an acting Executive Director to coordinate and direct these activities as soon as possible. Don Senese will discuss this matter with you.
- It will be important to have a strong public information effort to make the commission known and understood. A careful plan needs to be developed for this. Don Senese will establish the appropriate contacts with the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs and her staff.

*Milton Goldberg*

Milton Goldberg

Attachments



APPOINTMENT OF AND CHARGE TO  
THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON EXCELLENCE  
IN EDUCATION

Whereas thirty percent of the population of the United States is involved in education as a full time endeavor (either as students or as employees) and nearly two hundred billion dollars are spent each year for public and private education; and

Whereas, despite the significant positive accomplishments of American education, there have been reports published by scholars indicating declines in the quality of certain important aspects of education; and

Whereas there have been numerous articles appearing in news magazines, journals, newspapers and other periodical literature that have focused public attention on what is alleged to be a lack of commitment to attaining excellence in student achievement in education across the nation; and

Whereas the quality and degree of excellence of education in the United States will largely shape the future destiny of the nation;

I, Terrel H. Bell, Secretary of Education, do therefore on this        day of June, 1981, appoint a National Commission on Excellence in Education. This Commission is charged with the study of excellence in American education at the elementary, secondary and postsecondary levels, with particular emphasis on examining the accomplishments of American education as well as the problems of and barriers to attaining greater levels of excellence.

The Commission will have the following responsibilities:

- (1) To review the literature and data on the quality of learning and teaching in elementary and secondary schools and in institutions of higher learning across the nation, with particular attention to issues of educational quality for teenage youth,
- (2) To study a representative sample of college admission standards and of secondary and postsecondary course requirements across the nation and to explore ways in which college entrance standards may help to enhance and encourage excellence in high school academic achievement,
- (3) To review elementary, secondary and college programs that are distinguished because of the quality of student accomplishments and to learn from this review the characteristics of programs and institutions that produce excellence,
- (4) To review the changes that have occurred in American education as well as events in the society during the past quarter century that have influenced educational achievement,
- (5) To hold hearings and to receive testimony and expert advice on actions that could be taken to attain higher levels of quality in schools and colleges,

- (6) To issue a report which describes the Commission's findings and offers practical recommendations for action to be taken by the American education community (leaders, governing boards, administrators, teachers, professors, legislators, and others with power to influence the quality of American education),
- (7) To complete this work within a period of two years from the date of this announcement.

T. H. Bell  
Secretary of Education



## Attachment 1

### Estimated Costs

#### National Commission on Excellence in Education

The following estimates assume the commission members themselves would serve without pay, except to be reimbursed for expenses. The commission would hold a total of seven plenary meetings, of which four would be in Washington. If committees of the commission are established, the costs of committee meetings could be traded off against the costs of one or more plenary sessions.

The estimates further assume four hearings to receive testimony, these to take place in representative localities around the country and to be attended by four commission members plus one staff person from Washington.

For purposes of calculation we assumed twenty commission members would attend each meeting.

With regard to duration, we assume that the commission would begin operation in the fourth quarter of FY 1981 with a portion of its staff in place, and would operate at full staff strength for all of FY 1982 and the first three quarters of FY 1983, completing its report in June, 1983.

We have assumed an average salary cost of \$36,000 per year for all staff, including professionals and support staff. This is sufficient to permit hiring high quality staff for a short term assignment. Two estimates are presented for staff salaries, one assuming a total of 12 staff; the other a total of 20. The latter reflects more accurately the work implied in the charge.

ESTIMATED COSTS

Costs of Commission Members

Salaries	-0-
Meeting costs (4 in D.C., 3 elsewhere)	
Travel	\$53,000
Per diem	20,000
Regional Hearings	
Travel	6,000
Per diem	2,700
Additional costs of members (telephone, typing, etc.)	<u>10,000</u>
	Subtotal \$91,700

<u>Costs of Staff</u>	<u>Low estimate (12)</u>	<u>High estimate (20)</u>
FY 1981 (4th quarter half staff in place)	\$54,000	90,000
FY 1982 (full year, full staff)	432,000	720,000
FY 1983 (3 quarters, full staff)	162,000	540,000
Subtotal	<u>648,000</u>	<u>1,350,000</u>

Travel to meetings and  
hearings outside D.C.

Travel	18,000
Per diem	<u>10,000</u>
Subtotal	28,000

Consultants and Commissioned Papers 150,000

Other Support Costs

Telephone	-0-
Equipment	-0-
Transcripts of hearings and sessions	17,000
Printing	<u>20,000</u>
Subtotal	34,000

Total Costs: High staff estimate \$1,653,000  
Low staff estimate 951,000



## Attachment 2

### RESEARCH ISSUES

The following notes on issues associated with educational quality highlight earlier papers on this subject that have been prepared for you. They are presented as background information that may be useful in preparing your speech to the National Press Club. They include:

#### Indicators of Qualitative Problems

- General decline in SAT scores, which may indicate problems in mastering complex skills such as reading comprehension, problem solving and reasoning.
- Declines in the number of SAT scores above 600, indicating problems at the top of the ability distribution.
- NAEP findings in recent years that indicate low absolute levels of knowledge and skills in such areas as civics knowledge. Findings indicate that teenage knowledge about civil rights guaranteed by the Constitution is declining. Teenage knowledge about democracy and politics, especially at the State and local levels, and teenage participation in political processes are also declining.
- NAEP findings on writing achievement that indicate problems with rhetorical skills, coherence, mechanics and syntax.
- Indications that students' skills in mathematics, science, and foreign languages might be declining.

Yet not all test results are negative. For example:

- A recent NAEP assessment of reading found that the overall reading performance level of 9-year-olds rose 3.9 percent from 1971 to 1980.
- The same NAEP assessment of reading found that the average performance of Black 9-year-olds rose by 9.9 percentage points from 1971 to 1980. The performance of Black 13-year-olds rose by 4.2 percent during the same time period.
- About 87 percent of America's 17-year-olds appear to be functionally literate and that percentage is growing.

#### School Organization and Structure

Research on effective schools has indicated certain school characteristics associated with educational quality. Important among these are:

- Strong administrative leadership by the school principal, especially in regard to instructional matters.
- A structured and orderly school environment.
- Teacher expectations that students can reach high levels of achievement.



- A classroom management system which increases students' time on academic tasks.
- A system for monitoring and assessing pupil performance which is tied to instructional objectives.

### Course Requirements

There has been a trend away from requiring students to take a certain number of courses in "hard" academic subjects. For example:

- Requirements for high school graduation in the areas of mathematics, sciences, history, and foreign languages have been reduced or eliminated in many districts.
- Few courses require students to write extensively or to meet high standards in written composition.
- Universities have also reduced their admissions requirements that students take certain numbers of course hours in fields such as mathematics and foreign languages at the secondary level.
- At the same time that college admission requirements and science course offerings have been reduced, the rapidly expanding role of science and technology in society increases the need for improvements in science and mathematics education. Science education is declining in spite of the increasing role of scientific and technical occupations in today's labor market.

As a result of the reduction in course requirements, students can devote more of their secondary schooling to non-academic courses or to survey courses. While interesting, these may not require hard intellectual work. The amount of time available within any secondary curriculum is limited. There are clear trade-offs between scope and diversity of offerings on one hand and rigorous intellectual training on the other.

### Academic Standards

Other factors contributing to poor quality are less stringent demands that students learn.

- Automatic promotion, grade inflation and reduced homework requirements are all subjects of criticism in this regard.
- The response to concerns over educational standards at the state level has frequently led to the establishment of minimum competency testing programs. While minimum competency requirements represent a more rigorous attitude toward student learning, some critics feel that emphasis on minimum competency discourages able students from aspiring to more than minimum achievement. In addition, the denial of high school diplomas via minimum competency tests has been challenged in the courts. Earlier-stage competency testing for grade level promotion and early diagnosis of learning problems is, however, a subject of continuing interest and a contributor to greater quality.



- The relative rigor of private schools compared with public schools—and indications that this may lead to better academic performance—has received attention recently as a result of publication of James Coleman's study for NCES. There is a renewed interest in identifying characteristics of both public and private schools which lead to high achievement.

### The Quality of Teaching

The debate over the quality of education has also focused on the quality of teaching. Recent data related to the basic academic skills of those entering and graduating from education programs are a cause for concern.

- The American College Testing aptitude test scores of college-bound high school seniors planning to enter education programs have declined significantly since 1970. Further, education major seniors in 1976 had the third lowest verbal and the second lowest math SAT scores of 16 fields of study.
- The decline in the demand for teachers, which has made it more difficult for education majors to obtain jobs, has driven many into other professional programs. Despite this decline in overall demand for teachers, there is an inadequate supply of well qualified mathematics and science teachers.
- Low public confidence, low salaries, and high stress and "burn-out" conditions are driving many teachers from the profession.
- More academically gifted women who would have entered education in the past now feel free to enter other professional programs such as business, pre-law and pre-medicine.
- The declining interest in the education major has caused many schools of education to lower their academic entrance and graduation requirements.
- There is an apparent mismatch between the knowledge, skills, behaviors and attitudes which are gained by teacher education students at institutions of higher education and what is needed to deal effectively with the realities of classrooms. Some observers feel that teachers do not have adequate clinical supervision and that the content of teacher education curricula is out-dated and has not kept pace with the research knowledge about how to improve educational practice.