

2001

NOTES FOR MEETING ON THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF U.S. EDUCATION

I WOULD LIKE TO ACKNOWLEDGE AT THE OUTSET THAT THE UNITED STATES HAS REAL EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS--A DIRECT RESULT OF POVERTY AND THE FACT THAT OUR LOWEST-INCOME CHILDREN ARE RELEGATED TO THE MOST POORLY FUNDED SCHOOLS. HOWEVER, THE CURRENT RHETORIC ABOUT EDUCATION IS LARGELY INACCURATE AND IT IS COUNTERPRODUCTIVE TO ADDRESSING OUR MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEMS.

WHY DO OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS HAVE A POOR IMAGE?

THE PUBLIC RECEIVES A CONSTANT BARRAGE OF MISLEADING INFORMATION:

1. THE PUBLIC IS TOLD REPEATEDLY--INCLUDING BY AN EDUCATION DEPARTMENT TV COMMERCIAL--THAT WE RANK LAST IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS, WITHOUT ANY EXPLANATION OF THE FACT THAT THE TEST SCORE COMPARISONS ARE FLAWED AND DO NOT REFLECT THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM.

2. THE PUBLIC IS GIVEN THE IMPRESSION THAT TEST SCORES HAVE DECLINED WHEN, IN FACT, JUST THE REVERSE IS TRUE: SCORES HAVE GONE UP FOR ALL ETHNIC GROUPS.

3. THESE NEGATIVE REPORTS DID NOT BEGIN WITH A NATION AT RISK OR EVEN WITH THE INTERNATIONAL STUDIES. IN THE 1950s, WE RESPONDED TO SPUTNIK BY BLAMING THE SCHOOLS FOR OUR PERCEIVED INFERIORITY TO THE SOVIET UNION IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY.

4. POSITIVE FINDINGS, FOR EXAMPLE, THE INTERNATIONAL READING RESULTS AND A RECENT REPORT BY OECD ARE RARELY CITED.

5. OUR SCHOOLS ARE BLAMED FOR TEST SCORES THAT REFLECT BROADER SOCIETAL PROBLEMS--POVERTY, DRUGS, CRIME, TEENAGE PREGNANCY, FAMILY BREAKUP. HERBERT KIESLING (PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY) PUTS IT THIS WAY:

"... I FIND IT DIFFICULT TO FIND A REASON FOR THE UNREMITTING PESSIMISM ... OF ETS REPORTS. PART OF IT SURELY IS BECAUSE THE ETS INVESTIGATORS ARE APPALLED BY THE CONDITIONS FOUND FOR THE LOWEST THREE-TENTHS OF THE POPULATION ... . I WOULD NOT BLAME THEM FOR TELLING ANY NUMBER OF HORROR STORIES FOR THIS END OF THE DISTRIBUTION ALTHOUGH THEY MIGHT MENTION, JUST SOMEWHERE, THAT THIS MAY NOT BE PRIMARILY THE FAULT OF THE SCHOOLS. BUT WHY DO WE FAIL TO POINT OUT THE EXCELLENCE?"

KIESLING THEN GOES ON TO GIVE EXAMPLES FROM NAEP AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS AND THEN TO ASK WHY THE EMPHASIS IS ON NEGATIVE REPORTING. (SEE PAGE 191.)

6. THE PUBLIC IS GIVEN THE IMPRESSION THAT SCHOOLS ARE REponsible FOR PROBLEMS IN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION AND TRADE IMBALANCES. MANY EXCELLENT STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT ANY PROBLEMS IN THESE AREAS ARE DUE TO QUITE EXTRANEIOUS FACTORS--TRENDS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY,

GOVERNMENT POLICIES, AND BUSINESS PRACTICES.

7. JUST A FEW YEARS AGO, THE PUBLIC WAS TOLD OF IMMINENT SHORTAGES OF SCIENTISTS AND ENGINEERS, PREDICTED TO OCCUR IN THE 1990s--AGAIN DUE TO THE FAILURES OF OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM. WE HAVEN'T HEARD MUCH ABOUT THESE PREDICTED SHORTAGES NOW THAT WE ARE WELL INTO THE 1990s, PERHAPS BECAUSE NEW Ph.D.s ARE HAVING SUCH A TOUGH TIME FINDING JOBS.

8. THE PUBLIC BELIEVES THAT AS A NATION WE SPEND MORE ON THE EDUCATION OF POOR CHILDREN THAN ON AFFLUENT CHILDREN WHEN JUST THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE. PROGRAMS LIKE TITLE 1 ARE SEEN AS PART OF A PACKAGE OF BENEFITS--ALONG WITH WELFARE AND MEDICAL CARE--BESTOWED ON THE "UNDESERVING" POOR. THE CONVENTIONAL WISDOM IS THAT WE HAVE THROWN MONEY AT THE PROBLEM--THE BELL CURVE IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF THAT MYTH--WITH NO DISCERNABLE BENEFITS. WHEN WE COMBINE THIS MYTH WITH A MYTH I DISCUSSED EARLIER--THAT TEST SCORES HAVE DECLINED--THE PUBLIC HAS NO BASIS FOR SUPPORTING INCREASES IN EDUCATION FUNDING.

9. THE PUBLIC ALSO BELIEVES THAT MONEY DOESN'T MATTER (PERHAPS, A LEGACY OF THE COLEMAN REPORT), AT LEAST FOR POOR CHILDREN. THE RECENT, BETTER-DESIGNED STUDIES SHOW A SIGNIFICANT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FUNDING AND ACHIEVEMENT. BUT PERHAPS AFFLUENT PARENTS HAVE ALWAYS KNOWN THAT MONEY DOES MAKE A DIFFERENCE. IF THEY DIDN'T, WHY WOULD THEY SPENT \$12,000 PER YEAR TO SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO SIDWELL FRIENDS?

10. WHEN ALL OF THESE MISCONCEPTIONS ARE COMBINED WITH AN UNDERSTANDABLE CONCERN ABOUT SENDING CHILDREN TO SCHOOLS IN HIGH-CRIME NEIGHBORHOODS, IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT OUR PUBLIC SCHOOL SYSTEM IS AT RISK.

WHAT WORKS?

1. THERE IS NO MAGIC BULLET, AS SHOWN BY STUDIES OF "INNOVATIVE" SCHOOLS, PRIVATE TAKEOVERS, SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT, BACK TO BASICS, SCHOOL CHOICE, TESTING, AND JUST ABOUT EVERY OTHER "NEW" IDEA THAT HAS BEEN IN VOGUE OVER THE YEARS. TESTING (PARTICULARLY PERFORMANCE AND PORTFOLIO TESTS) IS THE CURRENT PANACEA. YET, A STUDY OF KENTUCKY'S TESTING PROGRAM, WHICH RELIES ON PERFORMANCE AND PORTFOLIO TESTS, FOUND THAT THE PROGRAM WAS SEVERELY FLAWED AND PRODUCED SPURIOUS TEST SCORE GAINS.

MANY INNOVATIONS, OF COURSE, HAVE BEEN BENEFICIAL TO THE STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THEM. BUT THEY DON'T ADDRESS THE BASIC PROBLEM --THE COMBINATION OF POVERTY AND MAJOR SCHOOL FINANCE INEQUITIES. THE IMPORTANT QUESTION, OF COURSE, IS WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT THESE PROBLEMS IN THE SHORT RUN WHEN THE COUNTRY IS GIVING EVEN LESS ATTENTION THAN USUAL TO EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND, INDEED, MOVING IN PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION.

FROM THE FEDERAL LEVEL, I WOULD GIVE PRIORITY TO THE LARGE

PROGRAMS--ESPECIALLY TITLE 1 AND STUDENT AID--THAT DIRECT FUNDS TO POOR CHILDREN. IN THE CASE OF TITLE 1, I WOULD RETAIN THE REGULATIONS THAT ENSURE THAT THE PROGRAMS REACH THE INTENDED RECIPIENTS AND DO NOT SUBSTITUTE FOR WHAT OTHERWISE WOULD BE SPENT (SEE, FOR EXAMPLE, THE MARTIN FELDSTEIN STUDY). I WOULD TRADE OFF THE REGULATIONS THAT DEAL WITH PROGRAMMATIC AND TESTING ISSUES WHICH ARE EXTREMELY BURDENSOME TO STATES AND SCHOOL DISTRICTS, INCREASE THE NEGATIVE IMAGE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, AND DO LITTLE TO IMPROVE EDUCATION. I ALSO WOULD TRADE OFF SMALLER PROGRAMS WHICH, IN MY VIEW, CANNOT MAKE A DENT ON THE NATION AS A WHOLE.

IN ADDITION, I BELIEVE FEDERAL OFFICIALS CAN MAKE AN IMPORTANT DIFFERENCE BY GIVING THE PUBLIC AN ACCURATE ACCOUNTING OF THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM--EVEN IF THE SOLUTIONS DO NOT APPEAR TO BE POLITICALLY CORRECT IN THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT.

IF I WERE A SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT, I WOULD TRY A NUMBER OF INNOVATIONS--ESPECIALLY SMALL SCHOOLS--KNOWING, HOWEVER, THAT THEY MAY IMPROVE MATTERS FOR SOME STUDENTS BUT CANNOT SOLVE THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS.

#### TRENDS IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

1. RECENT RAND STUDY BY DAVID GRISSMER ET AL--READING AND MATHEMATICS SCORES HAVE INCREASED FOR ALL RACIAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS.
2. NAEP SCORES--GENERALLY CONSTANT, WITH SOME INCREASES, PARTICULARLY FOR MINORITY STUDENTS. ALSO NOTE PROBLEM WITH DEFINITION OF CATEGORIES (SEE KIESLING'S ARTICLE).
3. GRE--MATHEMATICS SCORES ARE UP, VERBAL SCORES ARE CONSTANT.
4. SAT SCORES HAVE INCREASED FOR ALL ETHNIC GROUPS. DECLINES THAT DID OCCUR RESULTED FROM MORE STUDENTS TAKING THE TEST (FOR EXAMPLE, SEE DOC HOWE'S ARTICLE, "LET'S HAVE ANOTHER TEST SCORE DECLINE"). HIGH MATHEMATICS SCORERS: NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE (ABOVE 600-650) UP 50 PERCENT IN THE LAST DECADE--ABOUT THE SAME AS IN 1970-1971. HIGH VERBAL SCORERS: PROPORTION HAS REMAINED THE SAME IN THE LAST DECADE--LOWER THAN IN 1970-1971. (ACT SCORES THE REVERSE--SO MUCH FOR TEST RESULTS!) ALSO NOTE STATE RANKINGS ON SAT AND LETTER FROM RESIDENT OF AFFLUENT DISTRICT THAT MERGED WITH A LOW-INCOME AREA.
5. ADVANCED PLACEMENT TEST RESULTS ARE STABLE IN SPITE OF MANY MORE TEST TAKERS.
6. SCHOOL COMPLETION STATISTICS: IN 1940, 38 PERCENT OF 25 TO 29 YEAR-OLDS COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL; IN 1993, THE PROPORTION HAD INCREASED TO 88 PERCENT. IN 1940, FEWER THAN 6 PERCENT HAD GRADUATED FROM A FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE; IN 1993, THE PROPORTION HAD INCREASED TO 24 PERCENT. IN 1940, FEWER THAN 1 IN 4 BLACKS HAD COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL AND FEWER THAN 3 PERCENT HAD COMPLETED 4

YEARS OF COLLEGE. BY 1993, THOSE PROPORTIONS HAD INCREASED TO 83 PERCENT AND 13 PERCENT.

#### INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS

1. THREE MAJOR FLAWS--SAMPLING, POVERTY LEVELS, AND CURRICULUM.
2. SAMPLING--EXAMPLES OF REVERSALS BETWEEN HUNGARY AND ENGLAND, STEVENSON'S STUDY. ALSO, LANGUAGE GROUPS, EXCLUDING LOW-ACHIEVING STUDENTS AND SCHOOLS WITH SUB-STANDARD CURRICULA, TRACKING (SOMETIMES BEGINNING AT AGE 11), APPRENTICESHIPS, SPECIALIZATION IN ENGLAND, EXCLUDING "POLITICALLY INCORRECT" AREAS.
3. POVERTY--LARGE DIFFERENCES AMONG STATES IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS BASED ON POVERTY LEVELS.
4. CURRICULUM--STUDY BY IAN WESTBURY (UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS) ON U.S. AND JAPANESE COMPARISONS WHEN CURRICULUM IS HELD CONSTANT; ALSO EXAMPLES OF HOW ONE OR TWO TEST QUESTIONS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.
5. THESE PROBLEMS APPLY AS WELL WHEN TEST SCORES ARE USED TO COMPARE STATES, SCHOOL DISTRICTS, OR SCHOOLS--OR TO HOLD TEACHERS ACCOUNTABLE FOR TEST RESULTS. YET, THE SOLUTION TO OUR PERCEIVED PROBLEMS IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISONS IS TO GIVE MORE TESTS.