

Study indicates educational performance declining Is our nation at risk?

by Marsha Shewczyk

Problems affecting American education have recently been voiced by educators and observers of the educational process. Children, they are finding, are not meeting the standards necessary to become responsible citizens. Many children graduate from high school without having grasped the basics of reading and mathematics.

Concern for these problems has spurred the Secretary of Education on August 26, 1981 to create the National Commission of Excellence in Education. By April 1983, the committee had studied the problems, proposed solutions and completed a report entitled, "A Nation At Risk."

The report deals with the fact that educational attainments are much lower than is necessary to maintain a technological society competitive with other nations of the world. "Others are matching and surpassing our education attainments," the report states. This it is emphasized in the result of accepting mediocre educational performance.

The risk to the nation of letting educational performance decline have been outlined through analysis of academics in the schools. It has been found that international comparisons of student achievement, completed a decade ago, reveal that on 19 academic tests, American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times.

2.3 million American adults are functionally illiterate

Some 23,000,000 American adults are functionally illiterate by the simplest tests of everyday reading, writing and comprehension.

About 13 percent of all 17-year-olds in the United States can be considered functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youth may run as high as 40 percent.

Average achievement of high school students on most standardized tests is now lower than 26 years ago, when Sputnik was launched.

Over half the population of gifted students do not match their tested ability with comparable achievement in school.

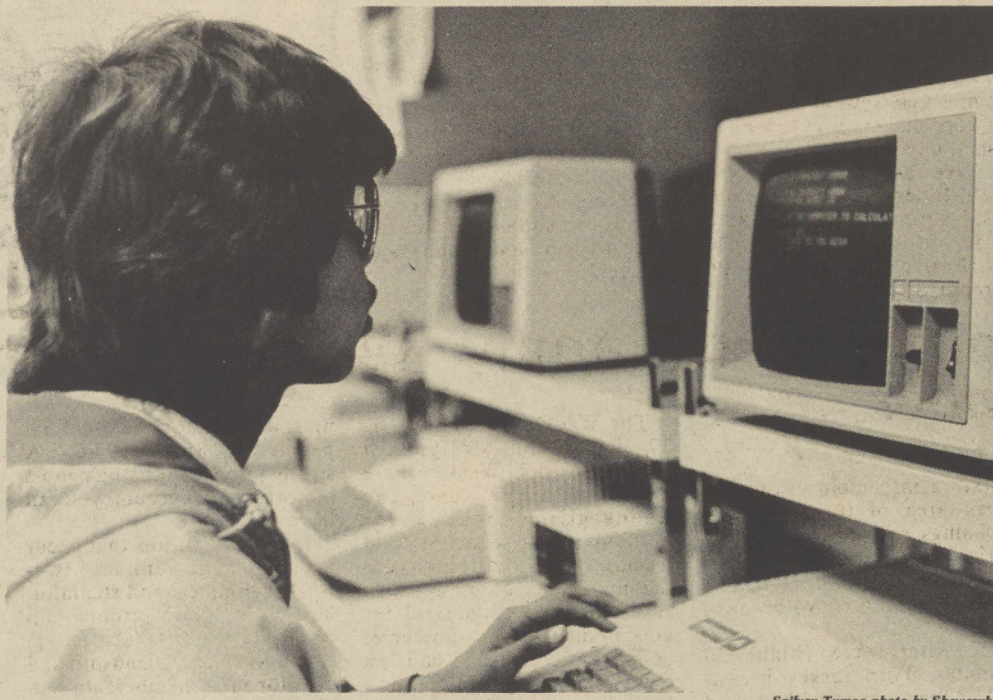
The College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Tests demonstrate a virtually unbroken decline from 1963 to 1980. Average verbal scores fell over 50 points and average mathematics scores dropped nearly 40 points.

College Board achievement tests also reveal consistent declines in recent years in such subjects as physics and English.

Both the number and proportion of students demonstrating superior achievement on the SATs have also dramatically declined.

Many 17-year-olds do not possess the "higher order" intellectual skills we should expect of them. Nearly 40 percent cannot draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay, and only one-third can solve a mathematics problem requiring several steps.

There was a steady decline in



Spilyay Tymoo photo by Shewczyk

COMPUTER LITERACY—High schools students gain knowledge in computers through use of the machines during the school day. Chip Calica utilizes this Apple IIe during a vocational educational class. Computer literacy is an essential aspect of education in keeping up with modern technology.

science achievement scores of American 17-year-olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973 and 1977.

Between 1975 and 1980, remedial mathematics courses in public four-year colleges increased by 72 percent and now constitute one-quarter of all mathematics courses taught in those institutions.

Average tested achievement of students graduating from college is also lower.

These deficiencies are very obvious in a nation demanding highly skilled workers in technological fields. It is feared that the new generation will be one of scientific and technologic illiteracy. It is predicted they will know less than their parent's generation.

Along with increasing knowledge in mathematics, reading and scientific skills the humanities must not be forgotten. They, too, are important to a well-rounded education and human being, the Nation at a Risk report points out.

"Our goal," according to the report, "must be to develop the talents of all to their fullest. Attaining that goal requires that we expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities. We should expect schools to have genuinely high standards rather than minimum ones, and parents to support and encourage their children to make the most of their talents and abilities."

Education has always been important to America, a cornerstone for America's development. But for 15 years, industrial productivity has declined. Citizens opinion pointed to declining educational performance to be responsible. The findings cite one or more reasons for that decline, some of which are: homogenized and diffused school curricula where students choose "general track" courses; few students complete courses in advanced mathematics; the amount of time spent on homework is very low; foreign language classes are seldom taken; 50 percent of the work required for graduation are electives.

Other reasons for declining education performance are: selectivity for colleges has declined; few experienced teachers and scholars are involved in writing textbooks; expenditures for textbooks have declined; time is not utilized well by students; not enough of the academically-able students are being attracted to teaching; there is a serious shortage of teachers in key factors; and, the professional working life of teachers is unacceptable.

The curriculum in the first eight grades should be designed to provide a sound base for study in those later years. "These years should foster an enthusiasm for learning and the development of the individual's gifts and talents," said the report.

Education has always been important to Americans

Recommendations for colleges and universities include the adoption of more rigorous and measurable standards and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct through higher admission standards.

To accomplish these educational tasks the

commission recommends more effective use of the school day, a longer school day or a lengthened school year.

The Commission recommends more effective use of the school day

Teachers should be required to meet high educational standards and demonstrate an aptitude for teaching. Salaries should be competitive. Career levels for teachers should be developed, non-school personnel resources should be employed for assistance and incentives, such as grants and loans, should be offered to teachers.

Citizens are asked to provide fiscal support to bring about these reforms. Educators and elected officials should be held responsible for providing leadership necessary to achieve these reforms.

In concluding the report, the commission writes a word to parents and students. To parents—"You know that you cannot confidently launch your children into today's world unless they are of strong character and well-educated in the use of language, science and mathematics. They must

possess a deep respect for intelligence, achievements, and learning, and the skills needed to use them; for setting goals; and for disciplined work. That respect must be accompanied by an intolerance for the shoddy and second-rate masquerading as 'good enough.'

"You have the right to demand for your children the best our schools and colleges can provide. Your vigilance and your refusal to be satisfied with less than the best are the imperative first step. By your right to a proper education for your children carries a double responsibility.

"As surely as you are your child's first and most influential teacher, your child's ideas about education and its significance begin with you. You must be a living example of what you expect your children to honor to emulate. Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your child's education. Above all exhibit a commitment to continued learning in your own life. Finally, help your children understand that excellence in education cannot be achieved without intellectual and moral integrity coupled with hard work and commitment. Children will look to their parents and teachers as models of such virtues."

To students—"You forfeit your chance for life at its fullest when you withhold your best effort in learning. When you give only the minimum to learning, you receive only the minimum in return.

"work with dedication"

"Even with your parents' best example and your teachers' best efforts, in the end, it is your work that determines how much and how well you learn. When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to create your future and control your destiny. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others. Take hold of your life, apply your gifts and talents, work with dedication and self-discipline. Have high expectations for yourself and convert every challenge into an opportunity."



Spilyay Tymoo photo by Shewczyk

For the student

Conference brought parents and teachers together to discuss each student's progress in school. Education involves more than just students and teachers. Parental help and support is also needed for a child's success. Warm Springs elementary parent speaks with kindergarten teacher Laura Fuentes.