

SENATOR

Paul Tsongas Reports

Pressing to Reverse Educational Decline

Dear Friends,

This is a special edition of my newsletter. It is prompted by a report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education that spotlights an urgent issue facing our state and the rest of the country. The issue is the deteriorating quality of American education -- a downhill slide that imperils our economy.

The Commission's report is not the first to sound this warning. There have been other telling critiques of American education. One issued last year by the New England Board of Higher Education focuses on the diluted academic credentials of students entering our region's college and universities. Other studies have documented related aspects of our educational malaise.

But the Commission's terse, 36-page report deserves special attention. The Commission is composed of 18 distinguished educators and citizens appointed by Secretary of Education T.H. Bell. Its findings are remarkable not only for the prominence of those articulating them, but also for the starkly chilling tone in which they present them.

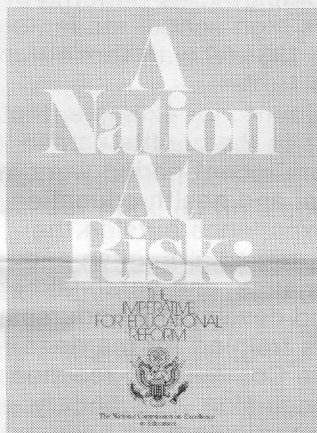
If we turn a deaf ear to these warnings, we will be making a grave mistake. Education is key to United States prospects for competing economically against Japan and Western Europe. Competing for markets in computer, laser and other high tech products and reinvigorating our basic industries will require a highly skilled workforce. By the same token, if Massachusetts lags behind North Carolina, Texas and other states where education is a top priority, our state will fall by the wayside.

Yet I am confident we can rise to the challenge. Recognizing the harsh but all too accurate realities outlined by the Commission is the essential first step.

And we must proceed from there to look for solutions. Many of the Commission's recommendations are eminently sensible. We should, for example, seriously consider tightening standards for high school graduation, raising teachers' salaries and lengthening the school day. Worthwhile reforms are already in place in some Massachusetts schools, and some business and citizens' groups are helping to bring them about. I applaud these efforts.

Many of you may have ideas for improving our educational system. I would ask you to help me assess your views by answering the questionnaire on page four of this newsletter. And I would urge you to join with me in working to raise education to a higher place on the nation's agenda.

Sincerely,

The United States must reverse the slide toward mediocrity in public education or risk undermining the country's economic security, a national commission has concluded. Senator Tsongas is publicizing the Commission's findings and recommendations as part of his initiative to spur improvements in Massachusetts education.

"Our society and its educational institutions," declares the recently published report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, "seems to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling, and of the high expectations and disciplined effort needed to attain them."

The 18-member Commission was appointed in August 1981 by Secretary of Education T.H. Bell and chaired by David Gardner, president-elect of the University of California. Its report is entitled "A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform."

The report notes that "learning is the indispensable investment" required for American success in this era of accelerating technological change and increasing worldwide economic competition.

This emphasis on education as the cornerstone of American industrial competitiveness parallels what Senator Tsongas has been saying in his efforts to build support in Congress for educational reforms.

In addition to his work in Congress, Senator Tsongas has taken the initiative in promoting partnerships between Massachusetts businesses and schools to work for excellence in education.

In its 36-page report, the National Commission on Excellence in Education recommended a variety of reforms. Among them:

- Tougher requirements for obtaining a high school diploma,

Please See Page Two

Pressing for Educational Reform

Continued From Page One

including four years of English; three years of math, science and social studies; and one-half year of computer science.

- More stringent standards for college admissions, standardized achievement tests at various levels of schooling, and an overhaul of textbooks.

- More rigorous attention to the basics, such as more homework in high school and firm and fair codes of student conduct that are enforced consistently, as well as possibly 7-hour school days and a 200-to-220-day school year.

- Higher salaries for teachers; an 11-month contract for teachers; an effective evaluation system to tie salary, promotions and tenure to teaching performance; and incentives to attract outstanding students to the teaching profession, particularly in those fields where critical shortages exist.

- Citizen involvement to support educational reforms.

In its critique of the current state of American education, the report speaks in blunt terms. It charges that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people."

"If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today," the report says, "we might well have viewed it as an act of war...We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament."

"More and more young people," the report adds, "emerge from high school ready neither for college nor for work. This predicament becomes more acute as the knowledge base continues its rapid expansion, the number of traditional jobs shrinks, and new jobs demand greater sophistication and

preparation."

Meanwhile, the report says, the picture is far different in countries such as Japan and West Germany -- competitors in the global marketplace. "We live," the report notes, "among determined, well-educated and strongly motivated competitors."

Aside from the economic repercussions, a deteriorating educational system also jeopardizes what the National Commission on Excellence in Education calls "the intellectual, moral and spiritual strengths of our people."

The pursuit of education, the Commission says, need not come

'More and more young people emerge from high school ready neither for college nor work.'

at the expense of fairness for all segments of the American population. Indeed, the Commission strongly implies that educational opportunity depends on a solid system of public education that will permit every student to develop his talents to the fullest.

One of the Commission's most disturbing findings concerns the watered-down curricula that many high school students have been studying. The Commission compared the patterns of courses high school students took in 1964-69 with those they took in 1976-81.

It found, for example, that 25 percent of the credits earned in the more recent period were in physical and health education, work experience outside the school, remedial English and mathematics, and personal service and development courses, such as training for marriage.

The Commission reached this conclusion: "Secondary school curricula have been homogenized, diluted, and diffused to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In



Senator Tsongas addresses parents at recent meeting in Lowell.

effect, we have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses."

And it cited these warning signals:

- Some 23 million American adults are functionally illiterate by tests of everyday reading, writing and comprehension.

- There was a steady decline in science achievement scores of U.S. 17-year-olds as measured by national assessments of science in 1969, 1973 and 1977.

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

During his eight and a half years in Congress, Senator Tsongas has been a strong supporter of education. He has been among those senators fighting attempts by the Reagan Administration to weaken such Federal programs as college loans for moderate-income families; National Science Foundation grants; special education for the handicapped; college work-study programs; and vocational education.

In recent months, he has been pushing for passage of the High Technology Morrill Act, a bill he authored to provide matching Federal grants for programs to upgrade education and training in math, science and other technological fields where deficiencies are the greatest and international competition is the keenest.

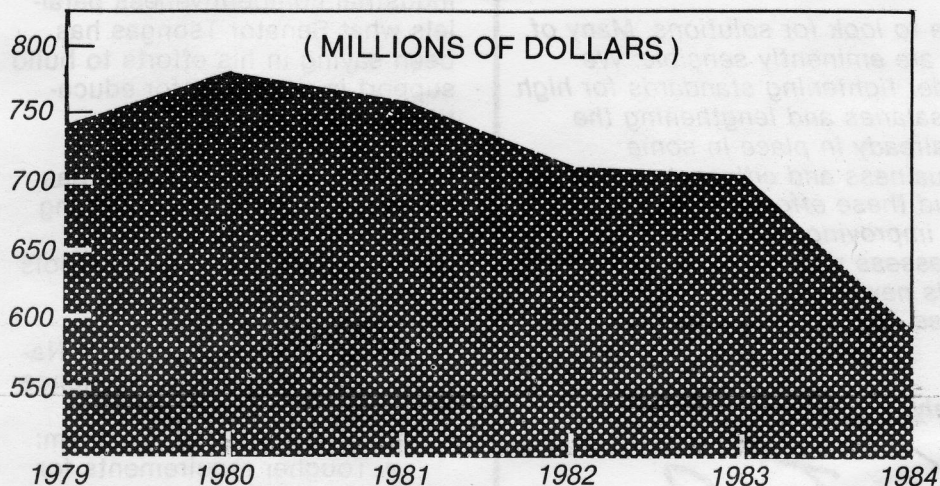


Chart shows decreasing Federal outlays for education since 1979 in inflation-adjusted dollars. Figure for 1984 is the Administration's request.

The Report of the National Commission on Education

Following are excerpts from the report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education:

Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world...We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur -- others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

*

History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when America's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of

'A rising tide of mediocrity threatens our very future as a nation. . .'

natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.

*

Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost.

*

The search for solutions to our educational problems must also include a commitment to life-long learning. The task of rebuilding our system of learning is enormous and must be properly understood and taken seriously: Although a million and a half new workers enter the economy each year from our schools and colleges, the adults working today will still make up about 75



For an update on education, Senator Tsongas consults with Carol Doherty, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association.

percent of the workforce in the year 2000. These workers, and new entrants into the workforce, will need further education and retraining if they -- and we as a Nation -- are to thrive and prosper.

*

If the tasks we set forth are initiated now and our recommendations are fully realized over the next several years, we can expect reform of our Nation's schools, colleges and universities. This would also reverse the current declining trend -- a trend that stems more from weakness of purpose, confusion of vision, underuse of talent, and lack of leadership, than from conditions beyond our control.

*

Evidence presented to the Commission demonstrates three disturbing facts about the use that American schools and students make of time: (1) compared to other nations, American students spend much less time on school work; (2) time spent in the classroom and on homework is often used ineffectively; and (3) schools are not doing enough to help students develop either the study skills required to use time well or the willingness to spend more time on school work.

*

The Commission found that not enough of the academically able students are being attracted to teaching; that teacher preparation programs need substantial improvement; that the professional working life of teachers is

The report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education is available for \$4.50 a copy from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. For fastest service, requests should contain the report's stock number, 065-000-00177-2, and its title, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform."

on the whole unacceptable; and that a serious shortage of teachers exists in key fields...Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students...The average salary after 12 years of teaching is only \$17,000 per year, and many teachers are required to supplement their income with part-time and summer employment.

*

The task of assuring the success of our recommendations does not fall to the schools and colleges alone. Obviously, faculty members and administrators, along with policymakers and the mass media, will play a crucial role in the reform of the educational system. But even more important is the role of parents and students, and to them we speak directly.

To parents: You have the right to demand for your children

'The task of rebuilding our system of learning is enormous and must be properly understood and taken seriously.'

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. But 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.

To students: You forfeit your chance for life at its fullest when you withhold your best effort in learning...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.

FROM:

Paul Tsongas
U.S.S.

Senator Paul Tsongas
392 Russell Building
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Please complete the questionnaire below, fold this page so as to leave Senator Tsongas' address showing, staple or tape together and mail. No postage is necessary. If your name or address is inaccurate or missing, please complete the blanks in the upper left-hand corner of this page. Thank you for sharing your views with Senator Tsongas.

1. Do you agree that the quality of American education is on the decline?
yes _____ no _____
2. Do you think public education can be improved?
yes _____ no _____
3. Do you support Federal assistance to private schools by means of tuition tax credits?
yes _____ no _____
4. Do you think businesses have a role to play in improving schools in their local communities?
yes _____ no _____
5. Do you believe you have a personal stake in the quality of public education?
yes _____ no _____
6. Do you think teachers' pay is in line with their professional experience and responsibility?
yes _____ no _____
7. Should teachers be required to take periodic examinations in their areas of expertise?
yes _____ no _____
8. Should students be required to take competency examinations at various stages in their education?
yes _____ no _____
9. Do you have school age children?
yes _____ no _____
10. If you have school age children, do they attend public school?
yes _____ no _____

United States Senate

OFFICE OF SENATOR TSONGAS
392 RUSSELL BUILDING
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20510

Paul Tsongas
U.S.S.

BLK. RT.

POSTMASTER:
DO NOT MARK ON OR ABOVE
THE LABEL — OCR.
ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED.