

A NATION AT RISK REALLY OUGHT TO TAKE A FEW

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Almost 20 years ago, in April 1983, a distinguished panel of 18 citizens distributed “an open letter to the American people” entitled *A Nation at Risk*.^{*} This prestigious panel warned us “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.” Let’s face it, the panel had issued a pretty scary warning.

Yet, although in the ensuing years we have witnessed a number of well-intentioned efforts to reform U.S. schools, most of those reform initiatives have failed to yield genuinely substantial improvements in America’s schooling. In my view, the reason that our educational reform-efforts have been only moderately effective is obvious—we have not been suitably bold. Although we are, documentably, citizens of “a nation at risk,” we have not devoted adequate daring to the renovation of our education system. In short, we have failed to take sufficient risks.

Yet, risk-taking has always been a key component of our nation’s Zeitgeist, even though, for reasons of spelling and pronunciation, most sensible Americans avoid using the term, Zeitgeist. Think back to baseball’s Babe Ruth who first deliberately pointed to those far-away bleachers, then hit a home run to the very spot at which he had pointed. And recall President John F. Kennedy who daringly announced that we would be walking on the moon before the end of the decade. Clearly, both of those bigger-than-life Americans were consummate risk-takers. They risked and, of course, they succeeded! Well, that’s what American educators need to do without delay—embark on a no-holds-barred, high-risk campaign to hold back the “rising tide of mediocrity” threatening our nation’s future.

A NASA-Like Commitment

When President Kennedy promised the world that the U.S. would soon place a man on the moon, he set out to make good on that pledge by committing sufficient fiscal and human resources to a powerful national agency, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), whose designated mission was to get us to the moon and back. Well, it is time that we undertake bold, NASA-like risks to reform our nation’s schools. In the remainder of this analysis, therefore, I will describe the kinds of activities that would fall under the purview of a new, heavily funded agency I suggest be known as the National Risk Agency, that is, the NRA. Fortunately, in America, there are already many card-carrying NRA members who may, because of those three letters alone, be inclined to support any risk-related initiatives of a new governmental NRA.

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Moreover, the new agency can anticipate at least a modest amount of divine approval, if not active heavenly intervention, because the existing NRA is led by Moses.

We must learn to give the newly created National Risk Agency the same unswerving support to its nation-saving mission that, during World War II, we devoted to the Manhattan Project and its goal of creating a war-winning weapon.

A Massive, Multi-Faceted Strategy

The very first thing that the new NRA must do is design a *massive, multi-faceted strategy* to turn around our schools. Massive, multi-faceted strategies are inherently attractive because they are, by definition, both big and complicated. Moreover, by that label alone, we demonstrate that NRA's strategists will clearly be smart enough to be messing around with more than one facet at a time.

But NRA's massive, multi-faceted strategy to un-risk our nation must incorporate a host of educationally relevant things for the nation's educators to do. In the following paragraphs I will isolate a flock of facets that I believe NRA should address without delay. Each of these suggested facets, all by itself, might only make a modest impact on school improvement. In concert, however, their synergistic effect could be wondrous indeed. Such are the potential dividends of focused multifacetism.

It should be clear at the outset, however, that NRA must use students' test scores as the prime determiner of whether our schools are making suitable progress. Indeed, the nation's paltry test-scores were a dominant factor leading to the publication of *A Nation at Risk*. And, if the truth is to be told, in recent years American students have not been producing sparkling test performances on local, national, or international examinations. Thus, because students' test performances are so pivotal in determining whether our public schools are viewed as sparkling or sordid, I propose that the chief index of NRA's success must be the degree to which we see dramatic improvement in our students' scores on significant educational tests.

A Rousing Slogan

To galvanize widespread support for its avowed mission, of course, NRA must adopt a suitably motivating national campaign slogan. That slogan must succinctly embody NRA's *raison detre* while, at the same time, calling on the nation's educational community to take action. I encourage NRA officials to not only adopt and publicize the following slogan, but to make it a governing credo for their activities: "Test Scores—Up Yours!"

Happily, the slogan, "Test Scores—Up Yours!" is aimed not only at educators, but also at students themselves whose test scores, after all, must surely be upped!

Medicine for the Mind

One of the first facets of NRA's overall strategy should be to set up high-level, collaboration-engendering meetings with the leaders of our nation's pharmaceutical industry. The enlistment of the drug industry in a massive school-improvement strategy, happily, comes at a particularly propitious time for that industry. As anyone who watches even a modest amount of television these days will recognize, America's pharmaceutical folks are currently hard at work to alter the public's perception that they are in business only to make money. Stung by criticisms that their industry is gouging the public by charging far more for medicines than is truly necessary, U. S. pharmaceutical conglomerates have recently invested enormous sums of public-relations money in perception-altering video messages. These TV ads depict the industry not as a collection of money-grubbing profiteers but, rather, as a swell bunch of scientists who are diligently toiling in their laboratories to come up with medicines that will repair everyone's non-working parts.

We might see a TV ad, for example, depicting a smiling, older woman, happily playing with two charming children. She remarks, "I wouldn't be here today, having a wonderful time with my grandkids, if it were not for the benign and altruistic research activities of the nation's pharmaceutical firms. Those folks really care about families!"

Well, any industry that can stoop to such blatant image-enhancing television advertisements will surely welcome with open arms an opportunity to take part in one of NRA's patently patriotic school-reform initiatives. The specific goal of this initiative will be for the pharmaceutical industry to develop low-cost drugs that help students perform better cognitively. Some skeptics might claim that meaningful strides in such drug-related experimentation had already been taken by numerous private citizens during the 1960s. But such activities were obviously not carried out under the aegis of the pharmaceutical industry. The trick is for today's drug industry to carry out a commendable, governmentally sanctioned investigative program leading to the creation of a research-proven pill that, neither habit-forming nor necessarily to be taken with food, will help students function optimally during any cognitive examination. Although the name of this score-boosting drug will ultimately be determined collaboratively by officials of the NRA and the pharmaceutical industry, I suggest that we describe this new drug as "Testesterone."

Once Testesterone has been screened by the appropriate governmental narcotics officials, and produced in sufficient quantities, federal laws could quickly be enacted to install mandatory "reverse drug-testing" in our schools during the week immediately prior to the administration of any high-stakes test. Conventional drug-testing, of course, is usually aimed at identifying athletes who have, contrary to drug-related prohibitions, ingested a proscribed substance. The purpose of reverse drug-testing, as you might infer, would be to identify students who had failed to ingest sufficient quantities of their assigned score-boosting drugs. For such forgetful or recalcitrant children, a sufficient amount of medication would then be administered,

orally or intravenously, under restraint if requisite, in the school nurse's office. We want American children to be successful!

Gene-Jiggling

Another facet that simply must be addressed in NRA's overall game plan is that of genetic engineering. The strides made in recent years by the world's geneticists are almost unbelievable. Those strides must quickly be made to fall in step with our nation's educational risk-reduction efforts.

It will soon be possible not only to clone human beings, but also to particularize the cloning process so that specific embryos can, if desired, contain explicit, parent-determined DNA codes. Thus, if NRA's research-stimulation efforts in this genetic arena are successful, it seems certain that parents who wish to rely on any variation of artificial fertilization will soon have options aplenty open to them. If prospective parents want their children to be decisive winners in school, then this will require little more than a suitable double-helix selection on the part of those parents.

And, recalling that the whole thrust of NRA's strategy is to raise students' test scores, there is no reason that genetic researchers need foreclose their educationally relevant inquiries too soon. It may be possible, for example, that adequately funded experimental investigations will allow us to isolate those genetic factors linked not only to a student's overall test performance, but also to the student's mastery of particular content standards, that is, the specific skills and knowledge a given child should acquire in school. However, because these content standards vary so dramatically from state to state, and because American education has historically been a state's-rights enterprise, it would clearly be necessary for prospective parents to match a potential child's future academic proficiencies to the specific content standards of the state in which the parents plan to reside. This approach, of course, would provide an entirely new perspective on the meaning of "family planning."

The International Assessment Derby

During recent decades, wherever our nation's children have taken part in an international investigation of students' achievement, we invariably do not shine. On the contrary, it seems as though kids in every other nation, even those countries emerging into nation-hood only hours before the administration of an international exam, tend to knock U.S. kids for a loop. Our students consistently trail the students of way too many nations in these international assessment contests. And, in view of American citizens' seemingly constant quest for competitive success, it is particularly galling when they learn that the disadvantaged children of Burundi have decisively outscored all U.S. students in math, reading, and the geography of South Dakota.

Well, the obvious approach to remedying this situation is to boost our children's test scores—and NRA must be unabashedly committed to doing just that. However, a nation can clamber up the international assessment ladder in two ways, namely, by

raising its own nation's scores—or by lowering the scores of other nations. NRA must do both.

One straightforward way to make students' scores in other nations take a tumble is to install interventions that expose children of other countries to the same sort of mind-numbing experiences currently encountered by U.S. children. Immediately, therefore, we should undertake a massive lip-synching effort to make far more of America's television programming available throughout the world at little or no cost. Consider the negative effect on a student's test performance likely to take place subsequent to the student's viewing even a few hours of U.S. television. Thus, an immediate and profound score-lowering impact can be secured worldwide simply by having foreign children watch what our own children see on TV. Particularly apt to have an adverse cerebral impact are television's "reality" shows such as the myriad "survivor" programs widely shown on America's TV screens during 2001. Fortunately for U.S. children (and adults), few of these reality programs are still being broadcast, so the costs associated with their acquisition for foreign broadcasts will be minimal. All we need to do is get substantial quantities of this cognitively corrupting television programming in front of the world's children in languages that those children can comprehend.

Within a few years of our wholesale dissemination of such lip-synched TV programs, you can be assured that America will look loads better on international tests. We will have, quite certainly, "leveled the playing field." And who can be offended by such an even-handed pursuit of equity?

A Domestic Corollary

As just pointed out, one way to elevate a nation's ranking is to pull down the performance of those nations ranked higher. Well, while this tactic can work wonders in creating a more palatable picture of American students' performances on international tests, the same approach can also work right here at home.

When, on January 8, 2002 President Bush signed The No Child Left Behind Act, he was opening many of the nation's educators to the prospect that they would soon be regarded as failures. According to the new law, fully 100 percent of the nation's children must, based on statewide tests aligned with challenging content standards, be "proficient" or better in 12 years. That legislative aspiration, of course, positions scads of U.S. teachers and school administrators to look lousy when fully 100 percent of our children aren't deemed to be proficient in a dozen years.

One way of forestalling this perception of American educators' failure, of course, is deceptively straightforward. All we have to do is create statewide tests whose challenges have been meaningfully diminished. Levels of "proficiency" can be lowered to the point where success can be attained by all breathing children. This modest, but meaningful public-relations shift can be readily accomplished through the enactment of

new federal education legislation in 2002 called The No Child Too Damned Far Ahead Act. If nobody gets out in front, nobody is left behind!

Because we dare not allow any high-achieving students to make progress that might out-distance their age-mates, a key provision of this new law must be that any children whose test performances appear to be too high must be isolated in special school-rooms where any form of serious study is explicitly prohibited. A variety of computer-based games, cartoons, comic books, MTV, and similar innocuous products would be placed in those isolation rooms which, of course, would be fully equipped with separate boys and girls bathroom facilities. Indeed, from the start of school until its conclusion, all high-achieving children would be sealed off in these fun-filled but education-free rooms. It's hard to get too far ahead if the only cognitive demand a student faces each day centers on choices among genuinely inane options.

And, of course, a side-benefit of this student-isolation strategy would be the initiation of a new field of serious investigative inquiry. Although educational researchers have, for many years, been fascinated by the psychometric implications of "ceiling effect," they will soon be able to investigate the related, but heretofore unstudied, impact of "sealing effect."

An Athletic-Support Scenario

It is nearly impossible to watch any TV sports event these days without being pummeled by seemingly endless public service ads featuring well-known sports personalities. These professional athletes are seen on TV supporting the United Way and any number of similar charitable enterprises. Televised athletes also register their approval for fund-raising activities aimed at research related to a host of exotic diseases. Athletes, especially those who have achieved substantial public visibility, make marvelous role models.

The reason that popular athletes are used in television public-service ads or, indeed, in commercial advertisements, is obvious. When potential purchasers view their favorite superstar cavorting on TV while wearing a nifty pair of Nike shoes or appearing to be olfactory-astute while touting the virtues of a specific deodorant or bath soap, many viewers will then race to their local stores, possibly during the very next commercial, to purchase the product being endorsed by the athlete. We must find a way for NRA to enlist these stellar athletes in motivating our nation's youth to do better on tests.

One apparent obstacle facing NRA strategists, however, is that most of the athletes featured on TV sales-promotion ads are mature adults. And, because it is the youngsters of our nation whose test performances we must improve, these TV icons of athleticism may simply be unsuitable identification figures because, frankly, they will be regarded by students as "too old."

But, fortunately, there is a way of closing this seemingly insurmountable maturity gap. We see it embodied in the activities of the National Basketball Association (NBA) where, in recent years, the most highly drafted ballplayers have been taken directly from high school. The criterion of relevance is not a student's age, but only whether the student is sufficiently tall to be able to dunk without reliance on coffee and doughnuts. And, with the growing popularity of women's professional basketball, we can soon expect to see the recruitment of taller and taller, albeit younger and younger, girls.

Well, if professional basketball players are now being sought from today's high-schoolers, is it not likely that tomorrow's future stars will be recruited from junior high, or even earlier grades? This future scenario, of course, nicely circumvents the age-disparity identification problem currently facing NRA. In the years ahead, NRA can underwrite the creation of television commercials featuring super-star, yet super-young basketball players who are shown in heartwarming scenes focused on feverish, yet apparently satisfying, test-preparation activities.

A super-tall teenage boy, fresh out of junior high, can be shown spurning a post-game locker-room interview with an ESPN sportscaster because, in the words of the televised junior-high athlete, "I'm sorry, sir, but I'm busy studying. I know I may miss my high school senior prom, but I'm not going to miss my high school graduation exam!"

Just think of the motivational impact on our nation's youth when several instantly-rich sixth-graders inform youthful viewers that, "Test preparation is terrific!" (Here, NRA's athletic-support team would substitute the most currently sanctioned teenage term for "good," such synonyms as "swell," "gnarly," and "cool" having long since lost their appeal for today's young people.) Clearly, the nation's educational risk-reduction strategy must incorporate youthful athletic role models on TV, cereal boxes, and junk-food containers. Superstars can sell products; they can also sell the need for higher test scores.

Music and Hormones

The final two facets which must be incorporated in the National Risk Agency's full-range attempt to improve children's test scores revolve around (1) popular music and (2) "developmentally appropriate" sex. Both of these forces, if adroitly incorporated in NRA's overall strategy, can be remarkably potent.

Fortunately, music and sex can be surreptitiously coalesced into a carefully crafted music-based approach not too unlike currently popular teenage music. Think carefully about the music that today's young people enjoy. If one listens attentively to that music, and I have often attempted to do so, there are substantial segments of it that are, quite literally, incomprehensible.

And this, of course, is the reason that many messages in current teenage music must be regarded as developmentally appropriate. Although teenagers understand

what is being said in today's music, most verbal components of current teen music are simply uninterpretable to adults.

What NRA must undertake, therefore, is a major music-development effort intended to subtly suggest that high test scores will make a youngster not only as happy as a euphoric clam, but also quite sexually attractive. The idea is to capitalize on young people's hormonally controlled motivations by systematically infusing into teenagers' recorded music a series of messages, undetectable to adults, that meaningful test-preparation efforts can be an unparalleled sexual turn-on to others. Indeed, to preserve the species, test-prep should soon be perceived by the nation's youth as significant, yet societally approved, foreplay.

Once our nation's young people experience several years of this sometimes subtle, sometimes overpowering, musical advocacy of test-preparation (coupled with a melodic adoration of high test-scorers), it is almost a certainty that American children will regard educational assessment not as an obstacle but, rather, as a yellow-brick road to rapture.

Great Risks, Great Gains

Summing up, in the foregoing analysis I have proffered a medley of admittedly risky tactics to boost American students' test performances. Used in concert, these tactics can hold back the "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future." Dire threats call for large dollops of daring-do. A National Risk Agency, its facets functioning feverishly, can save us. As the ages have taught us, "nothing ventured, nothing gained!"