

Park Hyatt, D.C. Trilateral Commission
March 29/93 Presentation

2nd EDIT - SHANKER'S OFFICE

March/93

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PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EDUCATION

The brilliant description that Marian Wright Edelman just gave you is the backdrop for what happens in our educational system in so many places. I'm going to divide my remarks into three parts: first, the problem; second, proposals for reform; and third, the prospects that some of these remedies will take hold.

The Problem: Very Poor Educational Achievement

You could have had a speaker today who would have given a rosy picture of what's happening in American education. It's possible to do that. There are many more youngsters remaining in school; there are many more going to colleges and universities. Handicapped youngsters are now in school and integrated with other youngsters, which was not true not so long ago. We have a relatively high dropout rate, but if one considers students who return to take various high-school equivalency examinations after that, the picture improves. All those things are true. However, that's another speaker. I think that the state of our educational system is very poor.

Most Americans hold that our schools are pretty good. Most of our youngsters, they note, are achieving academically; they are going on to colleges and universities. The problem, they argue, is in our big cities; the problem is minorities; the problem is poor people. Certainly the problems of those groups and areas are much greater. But,

as I hope to show in the next few minutes, poor educational achievement is a problem that takes in all of our youngsters and not just selected groups.

Before I turn to the evidence for this view, I should note that we have a highly decentralized education system in this country. There are 15,500 separate school districts. Each school district sets its own salary schedule and makes curriculum decisions. They all operate on local property tax bases and therefore some youngsters have very small amounts of money spent on their education, and other youngsters (if they live in wealthier districts) a lot more. We also have separate testing systems, so it's almost impossible to get a fix on student achievement nationally. However, for the last twenty years, our national government has been testing a large, nationally representative sample of students in reading, writing, mathematics, science and other fields -- the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

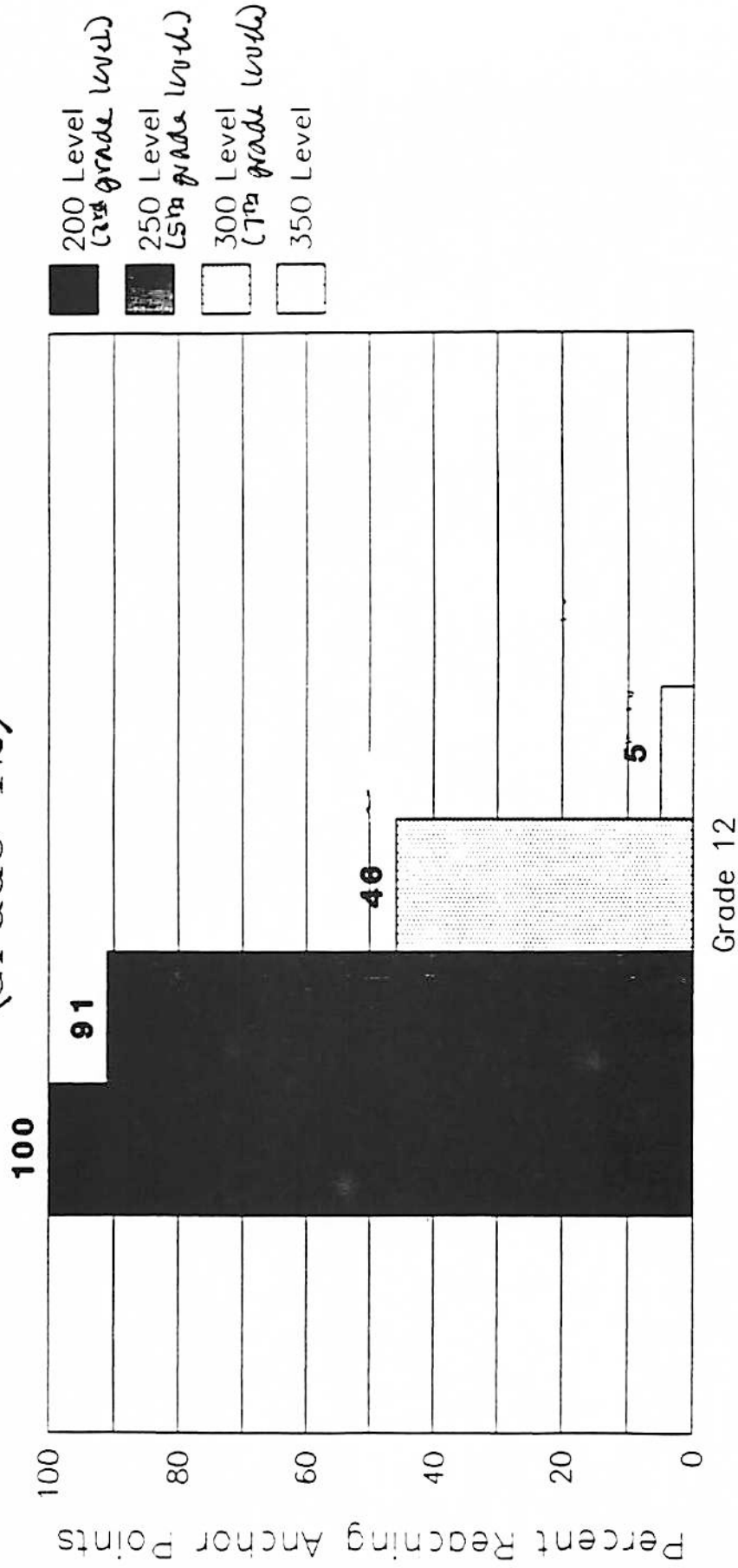
What you see in Chart 1 are the results of a recent NAEP in mathematics taken by youngsters who are about to graduate from high school (grade 12). One hundred percent of them can function at a basic level. So those who say we are graduating large numbers of students who can't even add, subtract, multiply and divide are wrong. Remember, however, that NAEP only tests those youngsters who are in school; 25 percent of students have dropped out, and some of that 25 percent may very well not be at that basic level.

Next we see that 91 percent of the students have reached what you could roughly call the 5th-grade level of achievement. However, only half have reached about the 7th-grade level. The disastrous number is the last one: Only 5 percent of the 75 percent who are about to

Chart 1

Mathematics Skills

Percentage of Students at or Above
Four Anchor PointsSM NAEP Mathematics Scale
(Grade 12)



Source: United States Department of Education,
National Assessment of Educational Progress, and
American Federation of Teachers.

graduate from high school have what, in most countries, would be considered enough mathematics proficiency to go on to college. Here we are talking about algebra, geometry, trigonometry, the ability to interpret a chart -- 5 percent of those who are in high school have reached that level. And yet about half of our high-school graduates are admitted to postsecondary schools.

For reading, that top level is reached by only 6 percent of the students. In writing -- what percentage of our youngsters who are graduating are able to write a really good letter or essay? Three percent.

Achievement is even lower among poor youngsters or minority youngsters, but what these national results essentially show is that youngsters who don't have the problems that Marian Wright Edelman was talking about, youngsters who have every advantage, youngsters who are among the most affluent who ever walked the face of the earth, are also not achieving in school.

These figures also imply that, since only 3-6 percent (depending on the subject) are graduating with what, in other countries, would be the required knowledge and skills to enter colleges and universities, about 90 percent of our youngsters who are admitted to colleges and universities here would not be admitted to colleges or universities in any other industrialized country. The fact that our students can get into college so easily is one of the reasons parents are not angry or mobilized about what's going on in education. They say, "The schools must be succeeding because my kids are going on to college." They don't entertain the notion that the reason their kids are going on to college is that, except for our elite colleges and universities, we basically

have an open enrollment higher-education system.

One of the many problems this creates is difficulty getting an adequate supply of quality teachers. If only 3-6 percent of our high-school seniors are in this internationally competitive college-entry category and very few of them go on to college to prepare to become teachers, the result is a massive problem in terms of ensuring a high-quality teaching force.

One of the proposals that is floating around to solve our crisis in education is very controversial and will be voted on in a referendum in the state of California soon. In a sense, it has to do with "privatizing" education: giving vouchers to public-school youngsters to be able to go to private schools. The belief behind this proposal is that private schools outperform public schools. But as the 1990 NAEP in math shows, private schools do a little worse than public schools in the top category -- 4 percent of their students are at that level compared to 5 percent for public schools. You could argue that this is because the dropout rate is greater in the public schools than in the private schools, but if you take that rate into account, private-school achievement in the top category is the same as public. ^A The private schools do somewhat better in the middle two categories. However, the differences are not great: 96 percent of private-school students reached about the 5th-grade level, compared to 90 percent of public-school students; 52 percent of private-school students reached about the 7th-grade level, compared to 45 percent of public-school students. What is even more striking is that the differences between private- and public-school achievement disappear when you compare students in the two sectors who are taking the same academic courses. (Unfortunately, many

public-school students are in non-academic tracks and don't take algebra, trigonometry and so forth.) So if we were to get all of our students into private schools, we would still have a major national problem. Vouchers or privatization of education is not the solution to our education crisis.

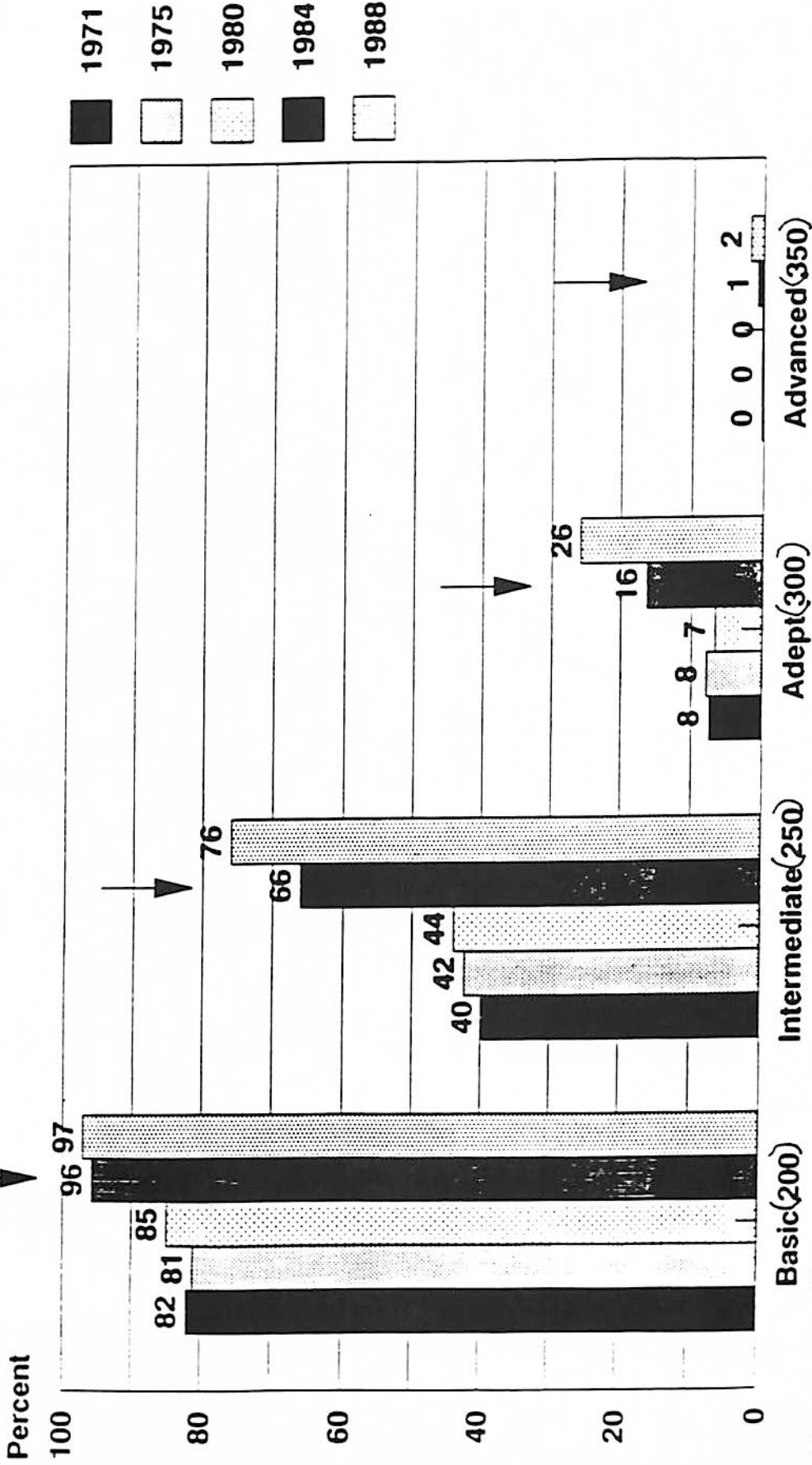
This conclusion gets underscored when you take into account the very different families that public- and private-school youngsters come from. About 14 percent of the public-school 12th graders tested by NAEP have parents who are high-school dropouts (and therefore likely to be poor) compared to about 7-8 percent of 12th graders in private schools. Likewise, about 50 percent more private-school youngsters than public-school youngsters have parents who are college graduates. In short, and despite what private-school choice advocates say, the students in public and private schools are not at all similar. The interesting thing is that, if you compare the achievement of public- and private-school youngsters whose parents have the same level of education, there is almost no difference. The private-school "advantage" in achievement is explained by private schools' far more advantaged student body. The sad fact is that, on average, student achievement is poor in both public and private schools.

Chart 2 gives us some good news. We hear a lot about how "throwing money" at problems doesn't make a difference. It does. We have had some modest efforts since the '60s to target money to poor youngsters and minority youngsters, and this chart gives us the results of those efforts from 1971 to 1988. In 1971, about 20 percent of black students were graduating without being able to count really -- add, subtract, multiply and divide simple numbers. That's been reduced from about 20

Chart 2

Reading Proficiency of Black Students

Percentages of 17-Year-Olds at Each Level



The Reading Report Card, 1971-88
NAEP January 1990
United States Department of Education

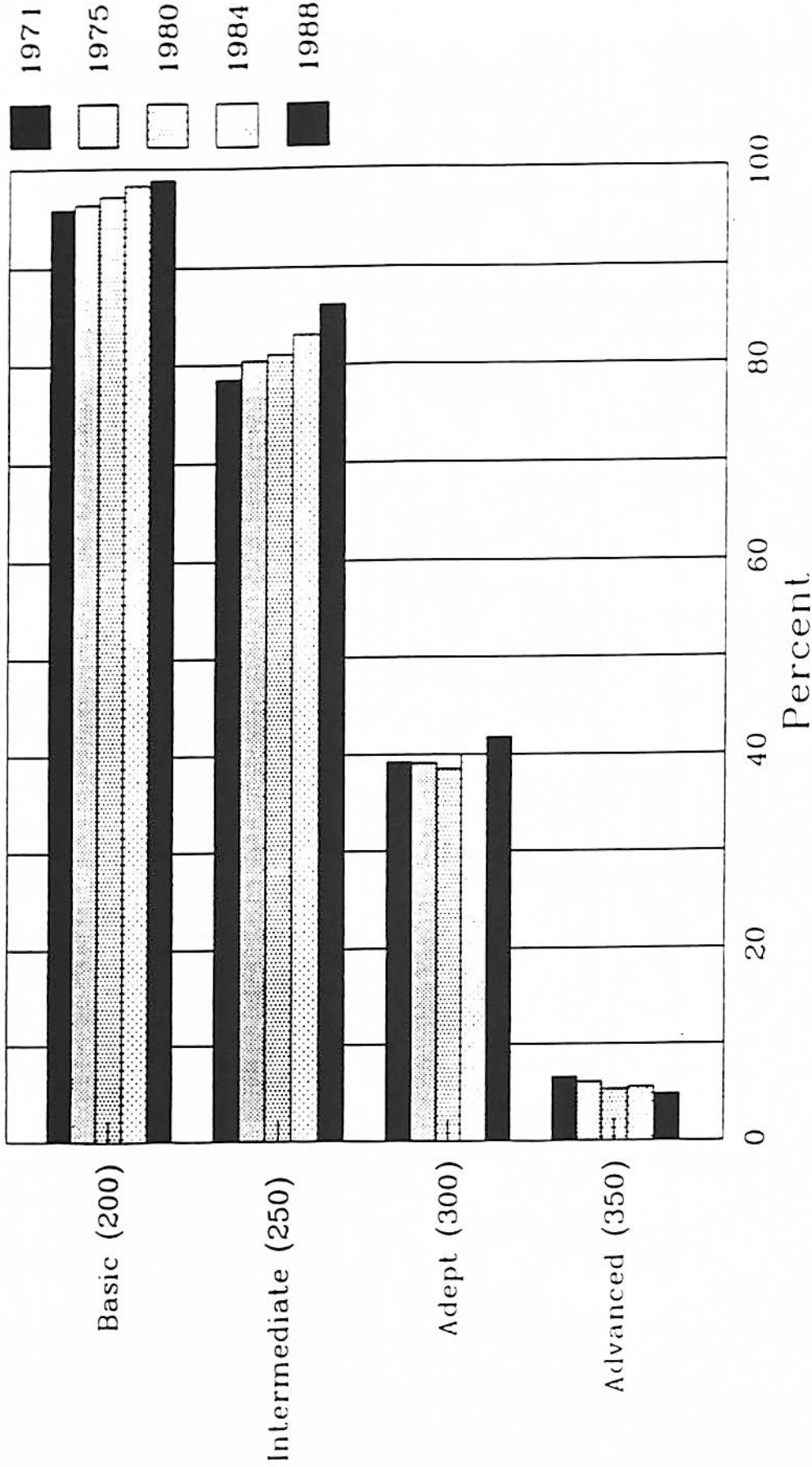
percent down to 3 percent. The increase in skills is even greater in the next category (about 5th-grade level ability to solve simple problems and use more complex math): from 40 percent in 1971 up to 76 percent in 1988. At every one of these levels, you notice that there is a story of remarkable progress.

But this is the only group of students who have shown major progress over the last 20 years. If you look at Chart 3, you'll find that from '71 to '88 -- now we're back to the entire population -- we have improved the percentages of youngsters attaining basic, intermediate and adept skills in reading. ("Basic" skill is the ability to comprehend specific information, like simple instructions on a box; "intermediate" is being able to search for specific information, interrelate ideas and make generalizations; and "adept" is being able to find, understand, summarize and explain relatively complex information.) Now, notice what happened at the top level ("advanced"). We've actually reduced the percentage of youngsters who are able to comprehend sophisticated and complicated material, over this period of time. We concentrated on the basics -- remember the "back to basics" movement -- and succeeded, but failed to keep two balls in the air at the same time. While we were improving basic skills, we stopped emphasizing the more difficult and more sophisticated.

How does all this compare to other countries? Of course, they don't give the same tests in other countries, but we can in general say that anyone who graduates from an academic secondary school and qualifies for college in western European countries and in Japan achieves at very high levels. Depending on the country, 16-30 percent of the youngsters in these other countries meet standards that are much higher than the

Chart 3

Reading Proficiency of All Students Percentages of 17-Year-Olds at Each Level



The Reading Report Card, 1971-88
NAEP January 1990
United States Department of Education

highest NAEP standards met by only 3-7 percent of our high-school seniors. Now that is a huge, huge gap in terms of achievement. There are other indicators that show that gap is also present for middle groups of students and for groups at the lower achievement end, as well. So that is a problem, and it's a very big one.

Proposals for Reform: Curriculum, Assessment, Rewards for Achievement

What do we do about the problem? In the ten years since the publication of the famous education reform report, A Nation at Risk, there have been all sorts of efforts, most of which were good. We've reduced the number of soft elective courses that students can take; we require them to take more academic courses. In many states, there is some testing of teachers before they are hired. There are minimum competency standards for students to meet before they graduate, which is part of what has caused some of the upward curves in the charts. But now there is a new strategy, and the new strategy essentially says, "Look, there are a lot of other countries around the world that are more successful; what are some of the things that all of them are doing that we don't do, and how can we move toward doing that?"

The first thing to notice is that in the United States there is no national curriculum. Each state has something that is often called a curriculum, but it is usually a big, fat book that says, "Here are our vague, abstract ideas about what students ought to learn, but essentially it's up to you teachers to figure out what this means and what you want to do." In other words, in the most mobile society that ever existed on the face of the earth, when a youngster moves from one teacher to another teacher, or from one school to another school, or

from one district to another district, no teacher can ever know what that youngster has been exposed to before. There is no continuity whatsoever.

Also, because there is no required curriculum, the teacher might look out on the kids and say, "Well, these poor youngsters, they probably can't do very much," and not give them very much. Individual, subjective expectations play a large role when you have an education system without set standards, where the teacher can't say, "Well, look, you must do this and I know you can do this, because all the other kids in the 5th grade in this country must do it, and they did it last year and the year before, and I know you can do it." Instead, the individual teacher has to negotiate standards with the students and with their parents and, of course, deal with his or her own expectations.

Moreover, if you don't know what the curriculum is, how do you train teachers? What are they going to be teaching? If there's a different curriculum in California and Texas and Wisconsin and Illinois and in each of the districts within the states, how does a teacher education program know what to do?

So the curriculum issue is central, but it's very delicate: How do you establish national curriculum when education is not a federal responsibility under our Constitution? The Federal Government is not going to mandate a curriculum -- it can't; it's not going to create one -- it can't; but it is going to establish, most likely, something like a national bureau of educational standards. It will encourage states and consortia of states to develop curricula frameworks. The job of this bureau would be to say, "The frameworks that you have set up are or are not rich enough, difficult enough, and do or do not correspond to

standards in other countries." It will be a kind of good housekeeping seal of approval; but it will be, under our system, a voluntary system in which states and localities buy in.

The second issue is assessment. The national government will probably now put up some money to create assessments that are more similar to those used in other countries -- related to the curriculum to see how well students are achieving. In the United States, we have our Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). But that's not an achievement test; it's an aptitude test. Imagine: We make youngsters go to school for 12 years but say to them that getting into college is not going to depend on what you've learned but on what your native aptitude is.

The third thing that distinguishes the United States from other countries is that our students do not work hard. One of the big reasons students learn more in other countries is that they work harder. If the student doesn't work -- that is, lots of homework, writing, rewriting -- a student isn't going to learn. They work in other countries because they can see that there are certain things they want that are connected to succeeding in school. You don't get into a college or university in another country unless you meet a certain standard. In the United States, youngsters say, "Well, everybody can go to college no matter how lousy his or her grades are. I don't have to work." In other countries, if youngsters achieve a certain standard, they can begin a career with a good company. In the United States, our bigger and better companies do not even hire 18-year-olds. They wait until they're 24, 25, 26. The net result is that youngsters who achieve well in high school see no reward for what they have done when they get out of school. They've got to run around and get the same generally poor jobs

as kids who did nothing in school. We simply must develop connections between effort and payoffs, direct connections which are visible to students and parents and teachers; hard work and achievement must result in something.

Chances for Reform

There are big difficulties in getting these things through. We are trying to move towards some sort of national curriculum frameworks at a time when radical forms of "multiculturalism" and other efforts to balkanize American education are breaking out. These two things play off against each other. It's going to be difficult to do.

As for some sort of national assessment system, we face all sorts of legal challenges that are unheard of in other countries. In Germany, if you fail the Abitur, you fail it, or in France, the Baccalaureat. In the United States, if you were to fail an exam and couldn't get into college because of this, then you would hire a lawyer. "How can you prove that getting this mark on the examination means that I won't be successful in college? You are depriving me of my right to get an education." The right to enter college has become an entitlement in the United States. If you are breathing when you are age 18 and you have a parent who can write the check, you have a right to enter most of our colleges and universities. There's general agreement that if everyone can enter college, then there is no motivation for hard work in K-12 education; it acts as a disincentive. But to turn around and say that we are going to change this is extremely difficult. Once things are opened up like this, everyone says, "Look, this is like trying to take Social Security away from people."

Of course, the net effect of virtual open enrollment in college is that the dropout rate in our colleges and universities is higher than it is in our high schools -- it's about 50 percent. The increase in costs in higher education are greater than in health care. We have had a larger and larger number of students enter colleges and universities to learn what they should have learned in junior high school or high school, then drop out of colleges and universities with a large debt and with no marketable skills. That is neither efficient nor equitable.

Finally, almost all these issues are complicated by the vast differences in terms of race and class within the United States. Whether it be the definition of a curriculum, the results of an assessment system or the results of a system that links either jobs or college entrance to achievement, the question is always, "What will be the different impact on different classes and races and nationalities within the country?" Therefore, there is a good deal of paralysis around these issues. Even when there is substantial agreement that we should move in one direction, there is also the fear that there would be disastrous racial or ethnic side effects if we moved that way. In the name of equity, we are preserving both inequity and mediocrity.