A Closer Look at the Commission's Work

BY TOMMY TOMLINSON

Having concluded that public education was getting short shrift, President Reagan's first secretary of education, Terrel Bell, determined that the country needed a close examination of education quality and a better definition of its status. To that end, he created the National Commission on Excellence in Education. He appointed David Gardner, president of the University of Utah, to be chairman and chose Milton Goldberg, acting director of the National Institute of Education (NIE), to be the executive director.

To avoid later charges of partisanship, Bell gave both men free reign to identify and select members. They chose 17 commissioners representing diverse interests and backgrounds, including university presidents, leading academics, a Nobel laureate, public school administrators, the current high school teacher of the year (coincidentally, a member of the American Federation of Teachers), and state and community leaders.

Goldberg picked his staff from among the NIE workforce. Thirteen staff members were appointed to serve the commission—seven administrative/clerical support and six professional staff. Another 21 NIE staff members supplemented the core group to add their expertise on specific issues. In my case, I was a senior associate at NIE. As soon as I heard that Secretary Bell had created the commission, I called Goldberg and declared my interest in being a member of the staff. He asked me to be the director of research. In that role, I commissioned research reviews on a range of education issues, including curriculum, learning, motivation, and American educational history, among others.

The commission's scope was initially confined to the variables that were plausibly within control of schools, colleges, and universities. These initially included time on task, structure and content of the curriculum, and expectations or standards of learning. The commissioners quickly determined that teacher quality and administrative leadership, including political and fiscal support, were also critical determinants of excellence, and they were added. Issues such as income, race, and parental background were purposely excluded.

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As a first step, Goldberg drew up a series of symposia, panel discussions, and hearings to be held around the country on a variety of topics bearing on the quality and structure of American education; transcripts of the proceedings were provided to all commission members so they could increase their knowledge about the issues in primary and secondary education. Such presentations, coordinated by commission staffer Susan Traiman, also provided publicity for the commission's work and helped establish an audience in advance of *A Nation at Risk*'s April 1983 release.

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Leading scholars and other authorities in the field were chosen by commission staff to participate in these presentations and to prepare reports on selected topics. Thirty-one papers were commissioned, and together with the evidence from the symposia, hearings, and panel discussions, they composed the substantive background of the final report. The results of this effort were then circulated among the commissioners.

The next step was pulling all these pieces together and writing the report. The first draft was prepared by the principal staff writer, Jim Harvey, based on a combination of the commissioners' conclusions and recommendations, some final thoughts by the chair, David Gardner, and other salient findings. Shortly after the draft was sent to the commissioners, Commissioner Gerald Holton responded with the now famous preamble titled "A Nation at Risk." The staff received Holton's text by mail one morning, handwritten on the yellow pages of a lined tablet, just as he had written it on a plane to the West Coast. It was a page-turner unlike any we could have imagined. It was completely unanticipated, despite prior suggestions from Commissioner Glenn Seaborg that the report had to be a call to arms and feature the federal eagle on its cover. Seaborg contended that a report written in the standard academic style aimed at the usual audience of academics and educators would not do. He was right in his concern, but the commission staff members were completely caught off guard by Holton's rhetoric and, like proper social scientists, were frankly not sure it was an acceptable approach.

As it turned out, Holton's preamble was precisely what Seaborg had in mind. We had conceived a report along more or less conventional lines, one that summarized the import of the issue, the charge from the secretary of education, the sense of the research, and the substance of the symposia. It would be organized around the variables of content, expectations, time, teaching quality, and leadership. It would end with the commission's recommendations for change. But the addition of Holton's preamble set a much different tone.

Our charge was clear: we had to integrate the preamble with the substantive body of the text. While staff members did not write the famous introductory declaration, they did conceive and write the main text that described the principal conclusions, established the prime variables, and, with the advice and consent of the commissioners, set out the recommendations. One could say that the two approaches were complementary: the florid rhetoric of the introduction generated enormous public interest in an otherwise straightforward plan for reform.

A torrent of public interest and academic criticism followed the report's release. The commissioners and staff fanned out across the country to explain and expand on its findings, and promote interest in improving education at the primary and secondary level. One thing was certain: the nation had gotten the message, and people wanted a change for the better. Education was no longer the low man on the totem pole; indeed, not since Sputnik had its visibility been so high. The rest, as they say, is history. □